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- 27 Mary Ryan, *Introduction to Paul Claudel*, Cork: Cork University Press, 1951, pp. 6–7.
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- 29 J.-K. Huysmans, *The Oblate*, trans. Edward Perceval, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1924.
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- 31 Jay Bernstein, 'Art against Enlightenment' in Andrew Benjamin ed., *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, London: Routledge, 1989, p. 65.
- 32 René Latourelle, *Man and his problems in the light of Jesus Christ*, New York: Alba House, 1983, p. 171.
- 33 *ibid.*, pp. 157–215.
- 34 James A. Beckford, *Religion and Advanced Industrial Society*, London: Unwin Hyman, 1989.
- 35 George Steiner, *Real Presences*, London: Faber and Faber, 1989, p. 229.
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## Making the Connections: The global agenda of feminist theology

Dorothea McEwan and Myra Poole

What is the connection between the cross-cultural phenomenon of the gender subordination of women which has led to domestic violence, genital mutilation, Indian widow-burning, Chinese foot-binding etc., and, on the other hand, the contemporary 'received' Christian theological tradition on women? This was the fundamental question underlying the reflections and discussions at the 1989 Maryknoll Summer School on the 'Global Agenda of Feminist Theology'<sup>1</sup>

This is not a report on that Summer School; rather, it is a presentation

of ideas that emerged at it. The 65 participants were drawn from 20 countries and all continents, and were made up of single women, married women, single men, religious sisters and priests. They came from a variety of Christian faith commitments, though the majority were Catholics, and from a variety of academic backgrounds and life experience. From their perspective of involvement with grassroots organisations, local support groups and women church communities, they addressed themselves to many issues which face humankind, but primarily in order to integrate their conversion to Christian feminism into a global discernment on the position of women. They gathered at Maryknoll to look at developments in churches and societies and critique them from a feminist point of view, pointing to the areas where the holistic, inclusive and non-competitive aspects were missing.

Feminism stresses the need to recognise 'difference as a crucial strength', to quote Audre Lord<sup>2</sup>. If we do not do this, we will fall into the trap of patriarchy. The terms 'feminism' and 'patriarchy' are used to encapsulate different cultural and power systems, and 'patriarchy' is a system which is dividing and conquering, and doing this as a norm of control.

Feminists maintain that theology has to be theology of relations: 'We are part of a web of life so intricate as to be beyond our comprehension'<sup>3</sup>. In the words of Rosemary Radford Ruether, the feminist agenda in theology is a comprehensive agenda, indeed a universal one. It is 'manifesting itself in a multi-contextual phenomenon. Christian women from many cultural contexts ... are finding their own distinctive voice and perspective on feminist theology'<sup>4</sup>.

By 'feminism' we understand a new world view, 'a new way of seeing and acting, a critique of cultural assumptions in relation to gender, new possibilities of justice in society and inclusiveness, for women know what it means to be excluded.'<sup>5</sup> Feminism stands in contrast to patriarchy and sexism as a world-view or mindset.

Patriarchy is defined as 'a system in which a limited number of privileged males have power over women, children and males defined as lesser.'<sup>6</sup> Sun Ai Lee Park, from Korea, was even more specific: 'By patriarchy I mean all the social and ecclesiastical structures and systems which are male-centred and dominated by the masculine value system ... One cannot but become astonished and concerned with the invisible and powerful grip exercised by the forces of patriarchy—the androcentric power-orientation which puts men in power in the centre and excludes not only women but also the powerless in the periphery.'

Theologically patriarchy leads to a 'Theology of Domination'; specifically, at this juncture in time, a white male European theology of domination. A patriarchal family construct leads to a hierarchical view of society and church: 'Historically the church has come down to us caught in the dialectical tension of values expressive of God's reign and values expressive of life in the world.'<sup>7</sup> It is this secular world-view, stemming from Roman society rather than the gospel of Christ, that Christianity has to rid

itself of: to quote Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'the churches we have inherited have confused patriarchy with Christianity'<sup>8</sup>.

Feminis, then, is a comprehensive world-view that addresses all human experience and concerns men as well as women. We therefore need to claim and reclaim feminist values and virtues from a feminist theological, i.e. contextual, perspective, born of experience. What, though, does this mean for feminists in the most diverse cultures?

Important as the personal histories of women are, they have to be linked up by looking at the history of woman in society from the social structural perspective, to bring the reality of patriarchy into profile. 'If there is a common factor in the whole world it is that women share the injustice of being in second place, whether in the family or at work, in First or Third worlds and under all political and church systems': this was the experience of Rose-Dominic Trapasso, missionary and UN consultant on Women and Prostitution.

The failure of Liberation Theology to include the women's agenda was severely criticised at this Summer School. 'The fact that our liberation theologians still do not make women's oppression the subject of liberation analysis shows the degree to which patriarchal structures and clerical power has denied women's personhood,' Trapasso said. This denial cannot just be explained away economically.

The need to redefine church away from a handed-down androcentric revealed tradition and a clericalist mindset will lead to a new understanding of scripture, based on personal and communitarian experience. What the world needs is the power of community, of relationships, because broken relationship is sin. 'Revelation includes what is not said or written or handed down.'<sup>9</sup>

Numerous questions arose from this insight: 'Why do I—we—remain a member of the church?' 'Are we involved in a struggle for justice?' 'Which people and events enable us to work for a transformation from within?' The responses we here summarise under four headings, as four topics: women working towards personal autonomy; women and violence; First world and Third world women; women and church-as-institution.

#### *Women working towards personal autonomy*

Anne Nasimiyu sees feminism as 'a call to authentic Christian living'<sup>10</sup>. In the words of Adrienne Rich, it is a new kind of energy enabling women to develop their own creativity<sup>11</sup>. It is the effort by women to empower women, to affirm women and to mobilise them. On the other hand, as M. Giblin<sup>12</sup> stressed, 'I cannot be in solidarity with others if I am out of solidarity with myself'—or, put differently, from a T-shirt perspective, proudly worn by Rochelle Harper, an American Sister: 'Behind every successful woman is Herself.'

Feminism's basis in praxis was exemplified by the work to increase women's autonomy being done by social workers who were at the Summer School: for example, Francis Yasas and Dr Jessie Tellisnayak from India

(the former working for the UN, the latter coordinator of an institute<sup>13</sup> specialising in publishing small pamphlets for the education of poor women), and Rachel Ruwa from Kenya, who told the story of her own mother's struggle towards autonomy within her own cultural milieu.

Her mother had given birth to twins, a boy and a girl, and the family was very poor. In such a case it was the custom to let the boy child live and to expose the girl child to die in the heat of the sun. This case was compounded by the fact that the boy was physically weaker than the girl. Despite this it was the girl who was taken away, but the mother insisted that both be given an equal chance to live. After much haggling the mother's wish was granted. The girl brought in from the scorching sun—this was no other than Rachel herself.

Anne Nasimayu's research into the inculturation of the sacraments has led her to question deeply the effect of Christianity on indigenous cultures, and particularly the erosion of the dignity of African women. In the traditional setting, she said, women are found among the categories of religious leaders. 'The African religious ministerial roles were much more of a charismatic nature than of a clerical one.' Both female and male were and are recognised as worthy instruments 'through whom the Divine communicated with humanity and the people communicate with the Divine'. In accepting Christianity women lost their rights to function as religious leaders, namely as priests and prophets. Shawn Copeland, Afro-American systematic theologian at Yale, went one step further by putting the question: 'If one purchases hatred of women when accepting Christianity is it too high a price to pay?' Another high price, as Anne saw it, was the Christian contempt for polygamy: the lack of understanding that polygamy can in many instances be a source of economic security for women. Furthermore, because of the taboos that maintain the sexist status quo many educated women are now opting for single motherhood.

### *Women and violence*

Closely linked to the difficulties women have in finding autonomy is their exposure to violence. It is violence, not sex, that is the 'original sin'.

Women have only too often been portrayed within the 'received' Christian tradition as source of temptation to men, inferior in status and in need of chastisement—in mediaeval Canon Law wife-beating was permissible. The origin of this myth lies in the patriarchal interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2, which justifies the secondary position of woman. The Church Fathers, dominated by the thinking of Graeco-Roman philosophers, falsified the gospel message of the co-equal discipleship of women and men. The latest expression of this androcentric one-sided view in a major church document is to be found in the encyclical *Inter Insigniores* of 1976, which denied the priesthood to women.

It is hard to accept the deep implication of nearly all religions in the abuse of women. One of the reasons why a fundamentalist reading of the Bible is dangerous is because it leads to the acceptance of culturally defined

roles for women and men as being pre-ordained by God. Women are making the connections between violence against women and violence against the civil population—well illustrated by the high incidence of domestic violence in white South African society—and ‘between authoritarianism in the family and the historical persistence of dictatorial and military rule in church and state,’ to quote Trapasso.

Violence takes different forms in different cultures. ‘Countless numbers of women are physically abused by their husbands or raped by men whose macho self-image is beaten down by the merciless competition created within society and take vengeance against the female sex,’ Sun Ai Lee Park pointed out. Miniscule slippers of Chinese women, exhibited in the museum at Maryknoll, reminded participants of this particular form of gender torture used to reduce women’s mobility. Although that Chinese practice is now discontinued, today battered women everywhere have to suffer the degradation of having their clothes torn in order to reduce their mobility and to silence them. Trapasso said: ‘Machismo cripples all interpersonal relations just as much as the flipside of Machismo, the female cult of Marianismo, cripples relations.’

The continuance of the Indian custom of suttee was quoted in this context. Although prohibited by law, the economic advantages of female martyrdom outweigh the value of female life. One participant at Maryknoll related that only recently a young woman, upon the death of her husband, was forced onto the funeral pyre, against her will and under the influence of drugs, by the inhabitants of the very poor village where she lived. The villagers declared her a martyr and set up a shrine which attracts many pilgrims. Her glorification has led to considerable financial gain for a very poverty-stricken community.

Domestic violence is not, however, only a problem of the poor. ‘Women are more likely to be attacked in their homes than by nuclear war,’ said Dr Mayman-Park of New York’s Union Seminary. In most societies man beats wife, woman beats child; the abuser is not a sick psychopath but an ordinary person often well-known to the abused. It is not a case of ‘stranger-danger’ but of ‘friend-danger’. Ultimately violence hurts the oppressor more than the oppressed; Mary Chimbodza, Ecumenical Development Programme Officer from Zimbabwe, summed up the problem in the following way: ‘If you point your index finger at me, automatically three clenched fingers point back to you.’

### *First world and Third World women*

Violence against women may be world-wide, but no woman oppressed by poverty in the First world experiences poverty of the kind that can be found in the Third. ‘It is essential ... that Third world women be the primary spokespersons for the women’s agenda,’ said Ruether. ‘For black people the dominating patriarchy is racial. It is a racial hierarchy which includes women as well as men, that controls the material conditions of our lives,’ said minister Joy James.

These two thoughts permeated the discussion on the contextualisation of theology from a feminist perspective, clearly highlighting that it is impossible to speak of poverty as a universal abstract, as would classical theology, and that no perspective can be absolute. Through the international economic system women in Third world countries are gravely disadvantaged. Rural women in the Third world are exploited for and by the First world consumers. Women were the primary cultivators in low technology agricultural societies. With the coming of mass production of cash crops women's role in agriculture was eroded. The production of export crops, e.g. coffee, tea and cotton, was placed in the hands of men who had little previous knowledge of farming. 'But today,' said Nasimiyu, 'the men have taken over all cash generating crops and women are left to struggle to produce enough food to cope with the increasing demand for subsistence foods brought about by the growth of the population.'

The phenomenon of the drift into urban areas is well documented and well known. Unskilled women in an urban setting are often reduced to foraging for any saleable commodity, like paper and cardboard, as Liliana Ibieta, a journalist from Chile, graphically described. They go out very early in the morning to collect waste paper, which they sell to middlemen; their takings are very meagre and, of course, insecure. Children often go hungry and to quell hunger-pains resort to glue sniffing, which produces a dulling of the senses; when they forage for food in dustbins they cannot distinguish the rotting food from edible food and risk food poisoning and death.

Because of the political situation in countries such as Chile, the disappearance of men and women makes children orphans as well as pawns. A woman whose husband has disappeared has no focus for her grief and encounters numerous legal complications, as she cannot draw wages due to him or gain access to savings, documents etc. held in his name. Furthermore, women prisoners are less frequently visited than men prisoners. In short, under a repressive regime it is the women who suffer further oppression. Sun Ai Lee Park said: 'Very often women prisoners are sexually tortured by the police, and the wives and mothers of political prisoners suffer economically, morally and emotionally.'

For many women, to make a living prostitution is a way of life. It is a well-known world-wide cross-cultural phenomenon. 'The commoditisation of women's bodies takes place in nightclubs, massage parlours, private brothels and round military bases in many countries in Asia.... Towards the end of World War II the Japanese Colonial government forcibly mobilised 100,000 young Korean women to be sexually used by the Japanese soldiers. Most of these women died, while many of the survivors could not return to Korea because of sickness or a sense of shame. Militarism and war completely shattered the lives of these 100,000 innocent women. The Japanese state had said that without sex the soldiers could not fight, and that in order to win the war the sacrificing of these powerless women did not matter.'<sup>14</sup> Militarism and sexism are but two sides of the same coin—violence.<sup>15</sup>

Discussing how militarism and war were being financed inevitably

brought up the question of the massive Third world debt. Bethwe Mwaura, a Kenyan priest, pointed to the connection between domestic and international exploitation: the ultimate consequence of 'First world theft' is a crippled life or even death in the Third world. It was therefore imperative for feminist theologians to demand: 'Forget the debt!' Wanda Deifelt, a Lutheran pastor from Brazil, made a different connection. She said that the image of Christ on the cross reminded her of the reality in her country: a poor man killed by the system.

No matter how much and how long women work, they will still be exploited. 'Women have won the right to be overworked,' said Ruether. '... On the economic level poor women carry the double work-loads of homemaker/mother and a paid job. But they carry these double workloads under the most unfavourable conditions. They work in the most exploited sector of the labour force, reserved for minority and poor women. They suffer the lowest pay, the poorest working conditions.'

### *Women and church-as-institution*

And what has all this to say to the church?

Rose-Dominic Trapasso challenged in particular Religious Sisters to reflect on their experience within the church 'to make a critical distinction between the behind-the-scenes way women exercise influence and the exercise of real power monopolised by men.' 'Could it be,' she asked, 'that our situation as women, living within church structures, is, in reality, very similar to that of women with whom we are working and we fail to recognise that all of us have been deprived of real power? Women have to take the responsibility not to buy into patriarchy.'

Cardinal Hume claims that 'it is for the church to be in the forefront of the struggle for the rights and dignity of women.'<sup>16</sup> Are we really naming what is wrong in the church? For (to quote again Sun Ai Lee Park) 'the Catholic Church has represented a powerful impediment for change in socio-political structures... Women's role in the church is subordinated, service-orientated, without decision-making powers or participation in the sacraments.' The state is ahead of the church in dismantling sexist structures.

Have we contextualised this in the British situation? Why is the church colluding with interpretations which cripple women and what does it get out of it? Today we confront split-level Christianity. Jesus said: 'I am the Truth.' He did not say 'I am the tradition' (to quote from Irene Mahoney's play 'All that I Am'). Tradition has made women as women uncomfortable. Because women must be responsible for their own destiny women must look at the tradition critically and find out what allows them in the name of Truth to carry on. 'Jesus was talking to and living with women. He would annoy religious authorities today' — this is how Nicholas Vanes, a parish priest from Haiti, assessed present-day realities which do not tally with the gospel. Personal integrity leaves feminists no other choice but to critique those who perpetrate broken exclusive relationships and quote them as the norm. 'What life have we, if we do not have life together?' wrote T.S. Eliot. It was precisely

this inclusive view that was stressed at Maryknoll and seen as a model for future church.

The church-as-institution is lagging behind its own rhetoric and brief. The task of today is to create community through relationships and not through hierarchical models. Joan Chittister OSB, who has herself done so much to raise consciousness, gave her own perspective on the situation: 'It is the task of our generation to raise the questions; the leaders will come from the next.'

We therefore see ourselves as giving birth to hope; Rosemary Thielman from Seattle, stressing from her perspective as worker with homeless women the importance of self-empowerment and self-affirmation, put it like this: 'We are the ones we have been waiting for'. Feminist theology furnishes women with the tools to overcome the split between the private and the public, and to challenge the objectification of human beings. The goals of feminist theology must include the dismantling of present 'acceptable' forms of violence in the home and in contemporary global economic priorities—for women and men suffer hunger and thirst and struggle to survive. We all have to learn to live in the global community and our common concern must be to expand the space that we share; in this way we can shape our own destinies and cease being victims of systematic 'ungraced' structures.

The need for commitment to personhood and inclusiveness, social justice and local and global engagement, in line with the church's concern for full personhood and for the growth of grace, is the need of the hour everywhere. The sharing of experiences and insights based on many and different activities scattered around the world enabled those present for that month at Maryknoll to make the global connections and to discern and formulate at least some of the methods to overcome oppression. Churches (understood as institutions) which, while discerning the needs, avoid the conclusions to which this discernment leads, will have to listen to this new vision of feminist theology.

'Let the bad things go, let the good things come,' said Rachel Ruwa, quoting a Kenyan proverb and summarising the global task ahead.

- 1 'Working for a Better World'. Maryknoll, New York, 27 June—28 July 1989.
- 2 'The Master's Tools will never dismantle the Master's House', *Sister Outsider*, 1984, p. 112.
- 3 B. Harrison: 'The Power of Anger is the Work of Love', in *Making the Connections*, 1985, p. 16.
- 4 'Feminist Theology and Interclass/Interracial Solidarity', lecture, Maryknoll 1989, p. 1.
- 5 Kathleen O'Connor, Lecturer in Old Testament Studies, Maryknoll.
- 6 *ibid.*
- 7 *ibid.*
- 8 *Women-Church* 1985, p. 128.
- 9 Kathleen O'Connor.
- 10 Senior Lecturer in Systematic Theology, Kenyatta University, Nairobi.
- 11 Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institutionalisation*, Virago 1977.
- 12 Lecturer in Feminist Ethics, Maryknoll.
- 13 Women's Institute for New Awakening (WINA), Bangalore.
- 14 Sun Ai Lee Park.
- 15 cf. Dorothea McEwan, *Sexism and Militarism*, Fellowship of Reconciliation, London 1987.
- 16 'A Vast Canvas', *The Tablet*, 7 November 1987.