

Where Does the Wild Goose Fly To? Seeking a New Theology of Spirit for Feminist Theology

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Every day in the farm where I live the shrill scream of the wild geese flying overhead is heard. The cry is so strident as to make us stop our activities and ask, 'To where does the wild goose fly?' The well-known line from John's Gospel comes to mind: 'The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes...' (3.8) For the wild goose is an ancient Celtic symbol of the Holy Spirit—made popular in contemporary spirituality by the Iona Community in Scotland. The cry of the wild goose—and the sheer power of its wings—evokes a sense of the unknown, that wild transcendence and yearning for freedom which lifts us from our daily frustrations. And that is why faith in the Spirit seems to offer hope and renewed possibilities to a 'tired' tradition: it is certainly why Feminist Theology attempts to develop a Theology of Spirit as a means of redeeming the oppressive structures of patriarchal theology and Church.

A New Beginning

At first glance this would seem to be a straightforward activity. Already, for the last 20 years, systematic theology has been complaining of *Geistvergessenheit*—the almost total neglect of the Holy Spirit by mainstream churches. Slowly aware of its 'Christocentrism', it has become conscious that the almost exclusive focus on Christ has encouraged a static view of salvation as something 'accomplished for us in the past'. The focus had also fostered an authoritarian model of relating in the Church—which Dorothee Soelle called 'Christofascism'—since the male priest's claim to power as *alter Christus* seemed to legitimise a hierarchical style of government. God as a Trinity of persons-in-relation had been almost totally lost sight of.

But this awareness of Trinitarian theology as being both abstract and male-dominated stimulated theologians such as Jurgen Moltmann and Leonardo Boff to rediscover a theology of Trinity as rooted in relation, and deeply involved in bringing about justice in the world. Yet 'the relational Trinity' did not necessarily solve the difficulties of feminist theology, where the questions of gender and personhood within the Trinity were not tackled.

The most pungent feminist criticism of Trinitarian doctrine came from Mary Daly. The Trinity, she wrote, is responsible for injustice in our world. It is a most *Unholy* Trinity, responsible for rape, genocide and war.¹ In this critique —exaggerated, in many peoples' eyes—she embodied feminist difficulties with the Trinity as divinising *male* relationships, mirrored in turn by human male relationships which dominate structures and institutions in the world.

The focus here is not on a feminist theology of Trinity, (although, of course, if we speak of the Spirit, we speak of God, and hence the question is linked). Rather, as the wild goose flies with power and freedom, the question is how re-envisioning the role of the Holy Spirit may re-connect the Church with its scriptural roots with a liberating force for the world of today.

Clearing the Way—Identifying Stumbling-blocks.

Such an agenda is fraught with pit-falls for feminist theology. For 'Spirit language' has often been used in a harmful dualist manner. Granted that 'the Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak' sharply illustrates the continuing spiritual combat: but when women are identified with flesh, and men with spirit, the implications have been damaging for both. The life of the Spirit is seen to be more authentically male, and the link between women and all that is 'natural', bodily, physical and 'earthy' is interpreted as impediment to their attaining the heights of holiness. An even more serious implication is that the life of the Spirit—because 'pure Spirit' has no contact with matter—is that which directs us *away* from the earth, to focus on all that is heavenly. Thus the divine as immanent is distrusted in favour of the 'supernatural transcendent'. The more 'spiritual' we become, the more the material world ceases to be important for us. The immanent, concrete and particular become trivialised in favour of the universal and transcendent.

A third set of difficulties arises when we turn to the Holy Spirit as the female principle of God, as our Mother (even though the motive of such attempts has been honourable—to redress the masculine predominance in the Godhead). We *can* appropriately pray to the Spirit as our Mother, but on the basis of a theology which does not ascribe literal gender to God—except to Jesus. Some theologians—notably Yves Congar—have claimed that the importance of the Spirit, symbolised by the dove, is to bring gentler, 'feminine' qualities into the Trinity, perhaps to redress the balance of harsh Atonement doctrines:

The part played in our upbringing by the Holy Spirit is that of a mother—a mother who enables us to know our Father God and our brother, Jesus... The mother fashions her child's mind by her daily presence, 'a communication more of feeling than of intellect...'²

Similarly, Leonardo Boff³ saw an ontological link between the Holy Spirit and Mary, Mother of God, which was normative for all women.

For men, the ontological link with Christ was normative.

These kinds of identifications impede the Wild Goose on its flight to freedom! For to assume that there are 'feminine' qualities of nurturing, feeling and gentleness ignores the fact that *all* men and women need such qualities. It also presumes that God and Jesus could not also exhibit 'intimacy' and 'feeling': but this is clearly contrary to the evidence of Scripture! Was Jesus being 'feminine' when he wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19.41)? Or, rather, was he behaving as a man of integrity, full of compassion, whose wisdom cannot be separated into compartments of 'knowing' as opposed to 'feeling'?

Furthermore, on Leonardo Boff's view, female humanity would effectively be barred from full participation in the Incarnation, as women's essential link would not be with the humanity of Jesus—even though he is born from a human mother! And, finally, for women, receptivity to the Spirit's action, 'being impregnated by the Spirit', has frequently been used, not to inspire women on a flight to freedom, but to reinforce societal patterns of passivity and obedience. For all these reasons, the core to a new understanding of Spirit must no longer be sought exclusively in gender-specific ways.

Is Spirit-language really necessary?

One modern answer to the problem has been to dismiss Spirit-language as time-bound to another world-view which has long since disappeared. The very dualisms which I have been criticising are products of a Greek/Manichean, world-despising tradition, long outgrown. How can we engage in dialogue with our fellow human beings if we insist on language which has no roots in daily experience? In a secularised civilisation, built on empirical norms, Christians—it is argued—would do better to refer all Scriptural Spirit-language to 'the Spirit of Christ' or 'the Spirit of God' and stop trying to maintain a distinctive role and presence for 'the Holy Spirit'.

Such an argument has force: in response, I attempt a three-pronged approach. First, via a metaphor based on experience, as well as issuing from feminist philosophy; secondly, by an application of this to the scriptures, and, thirdly, in conclusion, by reflecting on its implications for the Church.

Spirit—the energy of connection

Feminism as a discourse focusses on liberation and transformation. Words like solidarity, mutuality, bonding, the process of becoming, empowering, enabling, re-membling and re-envisioning are essential to this discourse. But because these words are situated and have their origin within the language and consciousness of the very society to be changed, there is a real danger that what is achieved is merely a re-ordering of the same tired programmes and ideas. So Feminism seeks, as it were, to *crack open* the words, to reach what is suppressed, unarticulated,

excluded by the consciousness, values and chosen symbol system of today.

For no one denies that the prevailing outlook on the world is individualistic. (In Britain individualism is the explicit basis of the Conservative agenda. Even lip-service is no longer paid to egalitarianism.) Thus society, locked into its view of the lonely, separate self, the subject seeking to control its object, and basing its internal and external relations from within this consciousness, has evolved a discourse where 'good' is defined as what achieves success for the individual in terms of a prosperous life-style and the aesthetic pleasures which accompany it. 'Evil' is what prevents this—and the people whom society sees as a hindrance. Thus ethnic minorities are frequently scapegoated for 'causing' housing shortages and being a drain on resources. The poor and sick are treated as nuisances, and the unemployed as if their misfortunes could be solved solely by effort and hard work.

How can this discourse be cracked open—and the values which are excluded revealed? Only by replacing the discourse of separate individualism by the richer discourse of connection. Only by the discovery—which the Ecology Movement, the poets and mystics, the Systems Theorists, as well as some more adventurous branches of modern physics have been telling us for some time—that every living system of the Universe is interdependent and interconnected. If this is true on a basic biological level, then there are enormous implications for psychology, philosophy and spirituality. The human person becomes understood as 'the connected self', the 'self-in-relation', participating in the universal process of becoming. Our developmental theories would be re-envisioned: a child's growth to individuation would be better understood as occurring through empathy, first with the mother or carer, through a process of 'mutually empathic responsiveness'—and not as separation from the mother-figure. The process of 'responding-with-empathy' would be gradually extended as the child's world opened up. Hence the basic energy of all living systems would be seen as relational energy. It is the dynamism of connection, which drives to community, to justice-making, and which will crack open the restrictive discourses and allow the slow emergence of a new speech. The more deeply-rooted we understand our connectedness to be, the more will the realisation of inclusive community become the agenda for society.

The metaphor of connection highlights what Christian theology means by the 'Holy Spirit'. But, because the discourse of the Spirit has been 'tamed', 'domesticated', excluded and even suppressed through the centuries, the inbreaking of authentic freedom has been prohibited and the discourse of connection is now desperately needed to draw us back to the implications of Scripture. But these implications are interwoven with the insights of ecological wisdom, with the wisdom of the peoples on the margins, and, where appropriate, with the wisdom of secular Feminism. It is no accident that the challenge of the Spirit has never been to

transcend the boundaries restricting our visions of freedom.

In the beginning was the relation

Our understanding of God's ceaseless creative activity has been enriched with the evocative image of the Spirit of God hovering over the face of the earth and the surface of the deep (Genesis 1). But what has not yet been fully understood is that the creative Word is Divine only because it spills forth from the energy of connection and mutuality—to *anoint* and bring to birth that which is formless, unarticulated and chaotic, yet seeks living expression. Through the Spirit's relational energy mutuality is restored to the word. No longer is it the imperialist word of those in power, the word which persecutes and suppresses, and which dictates the limited economy of truth of the social contract. For the claim of the Word to have authority must be in the originality of the drive to communicate, to connect, to relate, to respond empathically, and to utter the 'I' whose truth is at the same time interconnected with the 'Thou'.

Hence it becomes clear that to rob people of the power of speech is to rob them of the basic possibility of relating and connecting. At worst, in extreme situations of imprisonment and torture, it is literally to 'uncreate' or 'unmake'—since the stated goal of torture is, literally, through the 'word' of endless interrogation to reduce the person to a state of non-being, where he or she is 'uncreated'. In less extreme situations, groups of marginalised people are robbed of speech, because their experience is excluded from official discourse—for example, the culture, story and chosen life-style of 'the Travelling People', the Gypsies.

Contemporary feminist spirituality has, as its chosen goal, the 'hearing into speech' (the phrase is that of the late Nelle Morton, an American theologian) of women—and other excluded groups—whose spiritual experience is 'formless', 'chaotic', and excluded from official discourse. It recognises, *through the Spirit*, the power of hearing and listening, necessary to bring people from the formless world of non-communication into the world of connection. As George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), the English novelist put it:

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life,
it would be like hearing the grass grow, and the squirrel's
heart-beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the
other side of silence.

Secondly, the key to discovering the link between the feminist search for authentic self-affirmation and the Holy Spirit as the energy of connection is found in the meaning of Spirit as breath of life, linking God and the human being in the mystery of life. As Psalm 51 puts it:

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a *new and right spirit within me*.
Cast me not away from your presence,

and take not *your Holy Spirit* away from me.
Restore me to the joy of salvation,
And uphold me with *a willing spirit!* (10—12)

Here God's Spirit is the energising of human life and growth as well as of all created living systems: 'When thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created; and thou renewest the face of the earth' (Ps. 104:30). But the connectedness which is important is the essential wholeness of bodily, sexual and psychological lives—and the implications of this for life in common. Thus genuine wisdom grows from appreciation of connectedness and the Spirit of wisdom is appropriately seen as the drive to *just* connection.

But it is also the passionate, raw, elemental energy of communion, conveyed better by Hebrew *ruah* than by Latin *Spiritus*. It is through encounter that the 'Ruah' of connection is manifest. The encounter with Angels is frequently the means of the Spirit driving to speech, as with Abraham when the meal with Angels outside his tent brought the revelation of Isaac's birth (Genesis 16). But the encounter which best expresses this is the Annunciation. This is not to revert to the cruder interpretation of Mary, the empty vessel, being impregnated by the Spirit, or to a patriarchal interpretation of Mary's role in redemption. It is to see in the Gabriel-Mary encounter of Luke 1:26—56 the energy of deepening connection, of mutuality and communion (with both historical and political dimensions), where Mary's silence was 'heard into' the speech of passionate response and then into an experience of community. Through the interpersonal encounter with Elizabeth the Annunciation-experience is shared and widened into the Magnificat, where God's prophetic action is seen as raising up the poor and marginalised. Similarly the Spirit 'anoints' into speech the stumbling, fearful, pain-filled words of the base-communities in many parts of the world today. But if the victims of rape and torture are ever to emerge from stricken silence, in the beginning must be the hearing and the listening (a far severer listening), before the elemental energy of communion can create bonds of community.

Thirdly, the Spirit anoints into speech the experiences and dimensions of human interconnection, lost or excluded by society. A familiar example of this would be the Charismatic Movement's emphasis on prophecy, spontaneity and joy in worship, and on the freedom to speak in tongues. But the words of Paul, 'But the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words' (Romans 8.26), suggest that the Spirit's work is to touch us at the core of our being, on the level of the archaic and instinctual, anointing into life the playful, the joyful and ecstatic aspects of our personalities. Womens' Studies demonstrate through such disciplines as philosophy, psychology, biology, art and history how the one-dimensional, male studies of humanity, together with the way society has used women as means of propagating the species, have hidden and distorted the full meaning of sexuality. Mythology shows

how, through fear of its power, successive societies have scapegoated onto women their fear of its wildness, irrationality and uncontrollability.

But the Spirit is also the *Revelation of connection*. This means that we can trust the power of connectedness to reveal new dimensions of human sexuality, some of which are drawn from women's experience, from the preservation and recovery of the Goddess traditions and from the many contemporary experiences of bonding. These manifest a range of experiences of sexual feeling through affection, through nurturing, through delighting without possessing, through *cherishing and communing*, in the mutuality of trusting, in touching and being touched. They go some way towards redeeming the Church's long history of despising the body in general, and women's bodies in particular.

Herein lies the beginning of new approaches to the understanding of good and evil which better capture the whole ambiguity of human living.

Becoming Church?

What could such a re-imagining say to Christian Church, to the gathering community of the People of God? First, that the unity of 'Spirit' and 'Church' is never to be presupposed. The Word which the Spirit makes flesh in every age anew cannot be assumed to be completely identical with institutional Church, with the 'order' of secular society, or with the wielders of institutional power. The vision of Church which the Spirit of Connection presents *cracks open* pre-existing notions of Church, seeking to make Christ's presence powerful today through our commitment to liberation and transformation.

Morris West's novel *The Clowns of God*⁴ imagined a prophetic Pope fleeing the Vatican, and predicting a nuclear catastrophe. He begins to gather around him a small group which for him becomes genuine Church. It includes a little mentally-handicapped girl, Judith, a hunchback who paints a beautiful 'cosmos' cup, a theologian (!) and a healer of stroke victims—who turns out to be the Christ figure, revealed in the breaking of bread. Similarly, the Spirit as today's energy for connectedness urges, first, that Church, seeking authenticity as 'gathering people of God', will be willing to decentre itself, and listen to the many discourses on its margins. It urges, secondly, that the word 'community' be used far more cautiously: rather, it will focus on the ethical challenge of such verbs as 'communing' and 'connecting', on justice-making, seeing the reality of Church where these are painfully brought to birth as part of the Shalom of God's Kingdom. Just as God put new flesh on the dry bones of Ezechiel's vision (ch. 37), the Spirit will 're-member' us—put new flesh on our bones—with new resources. if we listen ... listen again to the sound of the Wild Goose flying ... dream again of the dove that flew back to the Ark with the green twig in her mouth. This earth is our home, she told us. Out of devastation and brokenness she energises us to new connection. And that interconnecting with each other must be 'earthed' here in this planet as the dwelling of

God. The glory of God is the just and harmonious interconnecting of all living systems. The glory of God becomes tangible through the Church's taking up of her ethical responsibility as Tender of the Garden of Creation.

God as Spirit-Sophia brings today this new revelation, melting the artificial barriers, challenging categories of good and evil which separate and exclude, seeking the cracks in theological discourse through which streams the Word, restored to the full mutuality of God's creative intention. All power to the Wild Goose's wings!

- 1 *Beyond God the Father*. Boston. Beacon. 1973/1985.
- 2 *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, Vol 3, New York 1983, pp.161—2.
- 3 *The Maternal Face of God—the Feminine and its Religious Expression*, Harper and Row, 1987.
- 4 London. Hodder and Stoughton, 1981.

RESOURCES

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