The hermeneutics of feminism

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The threefold classification of feminism that follows I have used elsewhere. The first group, evangelical feminism, consists of those who hold to evangelical theology (such as the authority of Scripture and the sufficiency of Christ as Saviour) and argue for a non-hierarchical relation of full equality and reciprocity between man and woman. Secondly, Christian feminism includes those feminists who, while not evangelical, still work self-consciously from a commitment to the Christian faith, however they understand it. Our main focus will be here. Finally, religious feminism consists of feminists who do not identify with Christianity but whose beliefs nevertheless include a religious worldview. Naturally, there is a wide spectrum of opinion within each of these groups. Due to limited space, we can only focus on a few representatives and highlight broad tendencies.

The most significant work in this field has been done by Christian feminists such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Fiorenza, a Catholic biblical scholar, has developed feminist hermeneutical theory more rigorously than anyone else. Her book In memory of her (1983) is still the most important single contribution in the area. On the one hand, religious feminists such as Mary Daly and the witch starhawk, explicitly repudiate the Christian faith. Evangelical feminists, on the other hand, are clearly acting in response to pressures emanating from the broader movement.

Christian feminism

Advocacy stance

For feminists in general the arch villain is patriarchy, a social system ruled and determined by men, in which women are treated as secondary and so are defined purely in relation to the dominant male culture. The Western world is seen as thoroughly patriarchal due to the masterful influence of the Judo-Christo-Christian tradition. Fiorenza argues that the Bible and the history of theology are correspondingly marked by patriarchal bias. They are the products of the historical writers, written by men and reinforcing male prejudices. As such they are largely oppressive to women. Evidence of the prominent role of women in the earliest Christianity has been suppressed or marginalized. Because current biblical and theological scholarship is male-dominated it is incapable of seeing this oppressive situation and thereby correcting it. Only a feminist interpretative model can do justice to the historical reality of women’s leadership in early Christianity and thus integrate those texts which are redemptive and liberative for women into the overall picture. Fiorenza proceeds to explore Christian origins as a liberation struggle for Christian women within the patriarchal structures of Greco-Roman society.

Need for paradigm shift

Consequently, following Thomas S. Kuhn’s theories, Fiorenza argues that a paradigm shift is necessary, transforming andro-centric (and purportedly neutral, value-free) scholarship into human (engaged) scholarship. Fiorenza recognizes correctly that all interpretation is to a degree biased by the perspectives of the interpreter. However, she wants to make a virtue out of a necessity by a deliberate policy commitment to an advocacy stance, in this case one in favour of women. She argues that all theology is done with a bias either for or against the oppressed. Neutrality is impossible. The idea of the value-free neutrality of historical-critical scholarship is a myth. An initial question to ask is how far will this enable or prevent the reality of the texts and situations disclosing themselves. How far is Fiorenza critical of her own presuppositions? She does not think that her advocacy stance precludes critical reflection on her feminist position. Indeed, she maintains that biblical and theological interpretation has always taken an advocacy position without realizing it.

Authority and canon

Following from these initial suggestions, Fiorenza explicitly denies that the Bible is the revelatory canon for Christian feminism. After all, the Bible was written by men who lived in a strongly patriarchal culture, and who accepted and reinforced its norms. Elements of the Bible have in God’s name perpetuated violence, alienation and patriarchal subordination. Therefore, these elements cannot be authoritative. It is women’s struggle for liberation from patriarchal oppression that is the authority for women today. The locus of revelation is not the androcentric text but the life and ministry of Jesus and the movement called forth by him. Only those elements of the Bible that transcend patriarchy are of authority. A feminist theologian must question whether the historical man Jesus of Nazareth can be a model for contemporary women since feminist psychological liberation means freeing women from all male internalized norms and models.

Thus, in Fiorenza’s thinking it is the critical principles of the feminist movement that are of prime importance. Following her programme, the feminist will sit in judgment on the Bible. Whatever does not agree with her previously determined opinions will be rejected. As her fellow-feminist Lefty Russell puts it: .. it has become abundantly clear that the scriptures need liberation, not only from existing interpretations but also from the patriarchal bias of the texts themselves. The more we learn about feminist interpretation, the more we find ourselves asking, with Katherine Sakenfeld, “How can feminists use the Bible, if at all?”

Scripture, insofar as it is acceptable, becomes a rubber stamp for the autonomous feminism. As Margaret Farley argues, anything that contradicts feminist convictions cannot be accepted. No authentic revelation of truth can contradict feminist convictions. A divine imperative assigning inferior roles to women is ruled out.

Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite is even more emphatic. Scripture lies behind rape and battering of women, for the seeds of these lies lie in the subordinate position Scripture assigns to women. The household codes of Ephesians and Colossians are therefore a primary legitimation of wife abuse! Feminists must challenge them. At issue in Genesis 2:21-24 is the control over women’s bodies. In its conservative attachment to the patriarchal value system which Genesis 2 legitimates, the right to life movement is an attack on female autonomy, deliberately aiming to restrict women’s rights over their own bodies. For such feminists, the Bible is a source but not authoritative canon.
Gynocentrism
Since Scripture is perceived as severely flawed in this way, what hermeneutical principles do Christian feminists regard as of prime importance? According to Rosemary Radford Ruether human experience is the starting point and end of the interpretative process. As such, Ruether accepts the basic development of post-Enlightenment anthropocentric worldview. However, this approval is only general and formal. Historically, women's experience has been ignored and it is precisely women's experience that throws the entire history of interpretation into question. For Ruether, 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 redeemable. Theologically speaking, whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption.

This negative principle also implies the positive principle: what does promote the full humanity of women is of the Holy, it does reflect true relation to the divine.

Leitty Russell poses the question: are Jewish and Christian feminists to be faithful to Scripture or to their own integrity? She clearly perceives the direction feminist theology is heading. She attempts a resolution of the problem. She recognizes that no interpretation that reinforces patriarchal structures of domination would be acceptable for feminist interpretation. The Bible is essentially Chaldee; its theos is the "Lord of God" and think that everything we read is right. Instead the feminist paradigm is one of co-operation, partnership, community, a circle of interdependence in the shared story of God's love rather than doctrinal consensus. If the canon is deassembled it is no longer necessary to choose between Scripture and personal integrity? Russell has produced a superficially neat solution but only at the expense of cutting the connection between feminist theology to the historic Christian church. If the feminist paradigm abandons doctrinal consensus at the expense of co-operative partnership, what is left to identify the movement as Christian?

Hermeneutics of suspicion
In terms of the interpretation of the Bible and of Christian tradition, Finocenza argues that a hermeneutics of suspicion is necessary, since the texts are seen as thoroughly androcentric. Feminists must learn to read them in such a way as to discern the clues they may indirectly provide to the egalitarian reality of the early Christian movement. The feminist critical method will not rely solely on historical facts nor will it invent evidence but instead will engage in an imaginative reconstruction of historical reality. An act of intellectual recreation is necessary in historical reconstruction. Finocenza is true to her word. Much of her writing is indeed highly imaginative reconstruction, particularly in her use of an alleged conflict between the apostle Peter and Mary Magdalene which Peter won, thereby sending the church into its hierarchal incorrigible consensual captivity abortive in the feminist criticism principle before which everything is to be judged. As such, it is not the reality, the thing to be known (whether the Bible, God or Christ), but the personal commitments of the interpreter that assume critical and determinative significance. We recall how George Tyrrell described Adolf von Harnack gazing down the well of history to see at the bottom the reflection of a liberal bourgeois German face. How, in similar terms, can the exponent of a feminist advocacy stance fail to avoid seeing simply the reflection of a professional middle-class feminist?

Evaluation
1. In her thinking on the propriety of an advocacy stance, an assumption typical of feminist theology, Finocenza has some important things to say. The twentieth century has shown the post-Kantian ideal of value-free neutrality to be the myth that it is. We are not neutral observers external to reality. We are partly in the scene ourselves. The knower has an integral place in knowledge, as Polanyi has convincingly demonstrated. It is well that subtle biases in interpreters be recognized so that resultant distortions can more readily be seen. The gender of the theologian or biblical reader may well affect the interpretation. That should apply on a wider scale than the individual, too.

However, Christian feminists are saying more than that. The advocacy stance, instead of being a tool of interpretation, has become the dominating form. It is not that the feminist criticism principle before which everything is to be judged. As such, it is not the reality, the thing to be known (whether the Bible, God or Christ), but the personal commitments of the interpreter that assume critical and determinative significance. We recall how George Tyrrell described Adolf von Harnack gazing down the well of history to see at the bottom the reflection of a liberal bourgeois German face. How, in similar terms, can the exponent of a feminist advocacy stance fail to avoid seeing simply the reflection of a professional middle-class feminist?

2. In its explicit gynocentrism Christian feminist hermeneutics is open to all the common criticisms levelled at the anthropocentrism of the post-Enlightenment period. 'Know then thyself, presume not God to scan; the proper study of mankind is man', wrote Alexander Pope. Anthropocentrism represents an inversion of the creature's true position, which Christianity classically maintained is towards God, to glorify and enjoy him forever. Doubtless, there are many instances of anti-female prejudice in church and society that need correction. I am not defending past social systems and past attitudes to women any more than present or future ones. However, a hermeneutic so explicit in placing human beings in autonomy is in practice reversing the proper relationship between Creator and creature.

3. Christian feminism regards women's experience, not Holy Scripture, as the highest authority in all matters of faith, worldview and practice. The feminist critical principle as expounded by Finocenza makes the feminist theologian and the feminist community the criterion of truth. At very least, there is a serious
loss of prophetic capacity if the interpreter and the community become the highest judges. Who is to judge whether a statement in the Bible does or does not promote the full humanity of women? The feminist community, of course! Who is to judge whether the feminist community has departed from truth? Why, the feminist community, of course! Dare anyone name this idolatry?"

It is not without significance that Letty Russell, Ruether, Fiorenza and Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite all acknowledge that the Bible is against them. 23 Ruether declares that feminist theology must create for itself a new textual base. She recognizes that feminist theology cannot be done directly off the pages of a Christian Bible. 24 As Daphne Hampson argues, Holy Scripture and the feminism we have discussed are incompatible. 25

4. The impact of Christian feminism on various areas of theology, due to its basic hermeneutical principles, is fairly clear. The feminist critical principle involves a new anthropology. Since humanity is the image of God, such a reassessment entails a redefinition of God. Some new literatures have already taken this step, eliminating both sexist language and the use of the masculine pronoun in speaking of God. My article, mentioned above (n. 1), explores some factors relevant in the matter. Ruether suggests a new Christology, for Christ is not necessarily male. A male Christ distances women from full representation in the new humanity. The world today longs for a redemptrix, a Christ who can affirm womanhood. She asks about ways in which we need a woman's Christ. 26 Moreover, since victory has been written by men (the winners) so as to oppress women, Sheila Collins wants to replace history by her story. Thus, the feminist herstorian can overcome the imperialist of the historical event. 27 Since the cross and resurrection are historical events, we can assume that women will thereby be liberated from these too, or at least from the hopelessly male interpretation of them we find in the Bible. So much is evident when Collins herself maintains that the ancient mother goddesses are equal to Christ in their integrative and transformative powers. 28 At the time she wrote Collins was a director of Voluntary Services for the United Methodist Church (USA).

5. By basing so much freight on creative historical reconstructions, Fiorenza has opened Christian feminism to the charge that its historical scholarship is founded not on basis of evidence but of imagination. Fiorenza herself certainly sanctions a highly imaginative reconstrual of early Christian history in her adoption of a triphylal hermeneutic of the Godhead. The apostle Peter and Mary Magdalene that led to Peter assuming a prominence which Jesus had not given him and which consigned Mary Magdalene (Jesus' primary apostle) to the historical dustbin. 29 The basic issue is how far imaginative construals can be taken before the historical evidence we have is redefined as pure prejudiced propaganda.

6. A basic interpretative assumption of feminism is that male and female are virtually two separate creatures with interests and concerns diametrically opposed to one another and an irreconcilable conflict. While the differences between men and women are obvious and, indeed, in some senses more significant than has often been supposed in recent times, the Bible nevertheless indicates that the features human beings possess in common far outweigh the differences. Both male and female are defined as adam, man (Gn. 1:26-28). Male in the image of God. Both together fell into sin (Gn. 3:1f.). Both need salvation. Male and female are complementary, not competitive.

Religious feminism

Further afield from Christian feminism are those who have either abandoned Christianity as incorrigibly patriarchal or others who have never made any pretence at such an association. Mary Daly, a former Catholic, wrote a book entitled Beyond God the Father and, in a note to an article entitled 'Why speak about God?', remarked that now 'I use the term Goddess rather than the hopelessly male identified term God.' 30 The main features of religious feminism are the rejection of the male-female body, and Goddess worship that includes pantheistic worship of nature and witchcraft. The occult is prominent. Naomi R. Goldberg reflects on the importance of dreams and visions in the thought of Carl Jung. Dreams are sources of revelation, she claims. She herself has recourse to a spirit guide whom she calls 'the Australian pioneer', with whom she first came into contact during a stay in Jerusalem. She is also Jungian techniques. 31 Starhawk and Zsuzsanna E. Budapest (both witches) extol the earth-centred nature worship associated with the Goddess. Goddess religions symbolize the exorcism of the patriarchal policeman and the affirmation of the divine in women. In self-blessing, you affirm the divine you.' 32 As Carol P. Christ, citing a feminist play, puts it: 'I found God in myself and I loved her fiercely.' 33 With the use of astral energies, astral projection, trance states and expanded awareness advocated by Starhawk and evident in much religious feminism, we find ourselves in territory occupied by the New Age movement.

The point is this: these extremes differ from Christian feminism in degree but not in kind. Members of both groups contribute to common symposia. Differences, yet common ground, are acknowledged. From the feminist perspective the traditional assumptions of the Christian feminists not only lead in this direction, they positively require that this step be taken. Once the experience of women is made determinative, once the authority of Bible and church is abandoned due to alleged patriarchal bias, once God and Christ are to be redefined as 'not necessarily male', the door is open in hermeneutical history both to women's religion, to worship not of a male God who cannot relate to women but to a female god with whom women can be one.

Evangelical feminism

Finally, we move across the spectrum to evangelicals who have tried to address some of the existential concerns of the feminist movement. I have space only to refer to contributions by Mary Evans and Elaine Storkey. 34 These two works contain much helpful material. Evans writes as a biblical scholar and Storkey as a sociologist. Overall, they move in a very acceptable direction. However, there are a number of hermeneutical areas to which further attention should be given.

Firstly, both display selectivity in their use of theological models. Naturally, some selectivity is unavoidable. Reasons of space prevent everything being said at once. Again, judgments must be made about what is significant and what is less so. Despite this, I have yet to encounter serious consideration by evangelicals of some issues crucial to the feminist case. For instance, in her discussion of Genesis 1 and 2, Evans argues carefully for equality and complementarity between the sexes. In her discussion of the NT teaching, she considers the Pauline letters at length. Yet nowhere does she face the issue of why, if Eve was the first to take the forbidden fruit, the human race is nevertheless held accountable in the sin of Adam? This is more than simply an issue of exegesis. It concerns fundamental structures of Pauline theology, which impinge crucially on his Christology and soteriology. Historically, the church found the solution in the headship of Adam over the race (Eve included). Failure to discuss this matter makes the case for full reciprocity much more convincing. At the same time it is also weaker. The absence of a key Pauline theological model conditions the exegesis and conclusions.

Secondly, both build a vital and central part of their case on now disputed scholarship. In an article in 1954, Stephen Bede argued that 1 Corinthians 11:3 does not mean 'head or authority over but instead source or origin'. Thus, Bede understood Paul to say that the woman (Eve) simply originated from the man (Adam). In short, Paul was not stating that women are in any sense subordinate to men. Bede's claim was based on the use of the word in extra-biblical Greek. 35 However, with the technological explosion and resulting computerized access to vast mountains of linguistic data, these conclusions look tenuous. Both Evans and Storkey wrote before this new knowledge became available. We cannot hold them responsible. Working independently, Wayne Grudem and J.A. Fitzmeyer have both shown that in extra-biblical Greek kephale normally means head or authority over and does not mean 'source or origin', and that no number of appeals to the context can evade it. 36 This conclusion has also found support from Peter Cotterell and Max Turner. 37 This statement of Paul's is a major crux in the whole debate. The burden of proof must now rest squarely on the feminists.

Finally, evangelical feminists generally and Evans and Storkey in particular fail to set their arguments in what must be the widest and profoundest theological context. Is there anything [sic] more foundational than God, or more crucial for theology than the Trinity? As I have argued elsewhere, 38 God is the best light to view the relationship between man and woman. First, God created humanity and so that being human in internal unbroken fellowship. Man, in his image, is also a relational being consisting of male and female. Second, since God created all things his glory there can be no greater or
more appropriate theological or hermeneutical model. Consequently, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit live in unbroken unity and full equality of essence and status yet simultaneously an order exists expressed in sending and being sent, sending and proceeding (an order that cannot be reversed), so male and female live in full equality of essence and status yet not without a simultaneous order of authority and submission that must be seen in the context of the equality already described. Thus, feminist attempts at egalitarianism falter on the created reality of the human being and transgress the order God has given, which in turn is a created analogue of his own internal structure. On the other hand, patriarchal attempts at tyranny and domination also transgress man’s created reality and even more, the unity and equality of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The oppression of women is sin against women, men and God himself. We can find solutions neither in past nor present social systems, nor in future utopias. Only in God, who made us in his own image, do we find revealed the theological and hermeneutical ground of our being. Evangelical feminists as well as patriarchal traditionalists will do well to consider this.

"See my article, 'The Man–Woman Debate: Theological Comment', in The Westminster Theological Journal 52 (1990), pp. 65-78. The focus is on feminist theology since I am a theologian and these are theological journals.


"Ibid., pp. 377-379; idem, In Memory of Her, pp. 32-33.


"Ruether, Sexism, pp. 18-19.


"Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, pp. 68ff. On pp. 167-168, Fiorenza says that women’s actual contribution to the early Christian missionary movement is lost due to the scarcity of the sources and the androcentric bias of those that do exist. It must be rescued by the use of historical imagination and by filling out and contextualizing the fragmentary information we do have. The historical texts and information on the women’s movement at that time must not be taken as descriptive of the actual situation either. They are merely the tip of the iceberg and refer only to those women who have survived androcentric redactions and historical silence. Fiorenza appears to be saying that from what you have got, you read between the lines and what you have not got you make up yourself. On any other issue a procedure such as this would be laughed out of court and the professional integrity of the practitioner be irretrievably lost.

"Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, pp. 332f.; idem, 'Mary Magdalene: Apostle to the Apostles', UTS Journal (1975), pp. 22ff. Margaret A. Farley supports this approach too, for she claims that women have good reason to be suspicious of Scripture: Russell (ed.), Feminist Interpretation, p. 47.


"Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, pp. 97ff.

"Zikmund, in Russell (ed.), Feminist Interpretation, p. 29.

"Phyllis Trible sheds a rare ray of light in warning that feminism has its own potential for idolatry, in 'Postscript: Jottings on the Journey', in Russell (ed.), Feminist Interpretation, p. 148.

"Russell and Thistlethwaite in Russell (ed.), Feminist Interpretation, pp. 111, 137f., 96-107. Ruether, Sexism, p. 23, acknowledges that many aspects of the Bible are frankly to be set aside and rejected. Fiorenza, in McKim (ed.), A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics, p. 379, states that the Bible is not only a source of truth but also of violence and domination.


"Those disputing this statement should read Daphne Hampson, Theology and Feminism (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990). Hampson, who teaches theology at the University of St Andrews, charts her own spiritual pilgrimage from a devout Anglicanism and membership of the General Synod of the Church of England to her eventual repudiation of the Christian faith under the inherent logic of her feminist beliefs.


"Christ and Plaskow (eds), Woman spiriting, p. 71.

"Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, pp. 68ff.


"Naomi R. Goldenberg, 'Dreams and Fantasies as Sources of Revelation: Feminist Appropriation of Jung', in Christ and Plaskow (eds), Woman spiriting, pp. 219-237.


"These relations are mentioned in the Bible. The church recognized them in its trinitarian confession. They are not imposed on the Godhead but are part of the historic Christian faith. Note the significant passage in Karl Barth, CD 4/1, pp. 192-205."