

THEOLOGY AND IDENTITY

TRADITIONS, MOVEMENTS, AND POLITY
IN THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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Walter Rauschenbusch, *Selected Writings*, ed. Winthrop Hudson (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 132–33.

3. Charles Hartshorne, *Man's Vision of God* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), ix.

4. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Free Press, 1967), 192.

5. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1969), 241.

6. *Toward the Task of Sound Teaching in the United Church of Christ* (United Church of Christ Office for Church Life and Leadership, [1977], 4.

7. Philip Schaff, the great Mercersburg theologian who did so much to strengthen a high view of the church for his Reformed denomination, believed that "the actual church is a process . . . always looking and pressing for completion." Quoted in Louis H. Gunnemann, *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ: An Essay in the History of American Christianity* (New York and Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1977), 188.

8. Second and third stanzas of "God of Endless Life Unfolding." Copyright © Ruth C. Duck. Set to beautiful original music; available from Box 100, Cascade WI 53011. It may be sung to Beethoven's "Hymn to Joy," No. 13 in *United Church Hymnal*; No. 8 in the *Pilgrim Hymnal*; No. 21 in *The Hymnal*. Used by permission.

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FEMINIST THEOLOGY AND THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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Feminist theology appears to have come of age. One clear indication of that fact is the diversity of theological methods and agenda that currently bear that label. Gone are the days when one could claim with assurance to have addressed all of the significant works in the field, or when our internal insecurity about the emerging discipline demanded an uncritical echo from each woman engaged in the field. In fact, today the label "feminist theology" covers a range of perspectives from the post-Judeo-Christian position of a Mary Daly or spokeswomen for the "womanspirit" movements, to the "revisionist" position of many of us who know ourselves to be firmly rooted in some denomination of the biblical faith. Professionally, feminist theologians approach our task as anthropologists, psychologists, historians, ethicists, biblical scholars, ministers, and theologians.

In the midst of this diversity, it is clear that the United Church of Christ and other parts of the Christian church have been most directly influenced by those of us still in some fashion within the fold: the "Christian feminists."¹ Those of us who acknowledge such a label, however, are genuinely re-visioning and not simply tinkering with the tradition insofar as our own vision has been stretched by the more radical expressions of women's experience of the transcendent. (An analogy might be the way in which the radical statement of the black experience presented by Malcolm X has joined with the explicitly Christian perspective of Martin Luther King, Jr., to ground present-day expressions of black theology.²) To attempt a definition of feminist theology to give at least a minimal common ground, I would propose the following statement from Rosemary Radford 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 redemptive . . . [and] 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, it is the true nature of things, the authentic message of redemption and the message of redemptive community.³

What this means, first of all, is that feminist theology represents a critique of "patriarchy." By patriarchy we mean not merely a history in which men have been dominant and women subordinate. Instead, we use this term to summarize systems and attitudes of dominance that result in the structures and ideologies of racism, sexism, classism, and militarism. In the second place, our opposition to such systems of dominance is related to our sense that the image of God in which humankind was created (Gen. 1:27) and to which we are called (Matt. 5:43-48) gives us a quite different picture of the nature of power and the value of human beings. This God whom we have come to know at times in the midst of the traditional church and at times on its edges, draws us toward models of participation, mutuality, and solidarity with those most deeply hurt by the institutions and structures of this world. These models are the proper locus (what theologians of liberation call "praxis") of both Christian confession and Christian life.

Without pursuing further the complexities of feminist theology or spending time in retrospective consideration of the history of feminist theology (and, one might add, of feminists) in the United Church of Christ, let us consider directly the intersection of this movement with the current stress points in the theological task and vocation of the United Church of Christ.

PLURALISM

When the formerly voiceless find a voice, it should be no surprise that there is a backlog of things to be said that others may not ever have noticed. Again, to use an analogy, feminist theology is the "women's studies," "black studies," or "peace studies" part of the reform of a school curriculum, in which new priorities and agendas are introduced. As important as it is to begin to fill these significant gaps in the curriculum, such individual courses are finally no substitute for the integration of these concerns and perspectives into the rest of the curriculum. It is similarly appropriate to expect that the various theological movements included in this book will have something new to say to concerns at the very heart of the present theological ferment. We might

well find ourselves revisioning the very questions being asked about our theological identity.

One might think, for example, that the historic pluralism of the United Church of Christ would account for an openness to perspectives of feminist theologians. Indeed, that is the case. However, our style of pluralism as a denomination leads to what is often only an apparent openness. We welcome "add-ons," and as with barnacles on a ship, there is usually room for one more. Also like barnacles, however, these various add-ons rarely affect the core structure of the vessel or its course. We who are added on—in this case, feminist theologians—are taken along for the ride, but it may well not be the journey on which we intended to go. The experience of various caucuses and interest groups within the denomination has been one of overt hospitality, but often of minimal influence.⁴ The agenda of feminist theology challenges the very images of God at the core of our theology and worship, as well as the system of patriarchy by which our society and church are organized. The questions posed by feminist theology go to the very heart of the church's life. The prevalent style of pluralism may indeed muffle that voice in the very process of allowing it a place.

Feminist theology is at its heart contextual theology. Because of our affirmation of the importance of women's experience and the particularity of women's contexts, feminist theologians tend to be suspicious of any expression of "classical orthodoxy." Our style of theological reflection is often to begin not with the content of a particular doctrine or expression, but with questions about the circumstances that gave rise to it: political and social issues, social and economic context, and the social location of the principal actors or speakers. Not only do we regularly assume the historical and cultural relativity of expressions of classical orthodoxy, but we also recognize that what passes for orthodoxy now was originally highly controversial, and indeed the position only of the winners in disputes. Even while asking what made these positions persuasive, we would listen too for the other voices in the discussion, which also represented a portion of the community of faith.

ECUMENISM

The perspective of feminist theology similarly challenges the ecumenical involvements of the United Church of Christ, and prompts three affirmations. First, where there is a choice to be made between advocacy for justice and sensitivity to our ecumenical partners, a feminist perspective would tend to place priority on justice. For example, the issue of the ordination of women is reduced to little more than a footnote in the World Council of Churches statement on *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*

(1982), partly in the hope of broadening the consensus around the document. A feminist critique of that document would not accept such a rationale. A second affirmation is that a feminist critique recognizes the historical and cultural roots of the issues that have historically divided the church. In fact, it is precisely in their political vitality that their theological significance becomes clear. Again, we would find ourselves needing to listen to the various voices in the debates, not only to those of the winners in each of the resultant groups. The consequence of the feminist challenge is a more broadly "ecumenical" methodology, more fully attentive to the universal church in its diversity and to the wider *oikoumene*.

Finally, we hold out to the church the challenge of recognizing that the ecumenical "pie" is now being sliced in new ways around issues that are of theological significance at least equal to those that resulted in the historical divisions and unions. Instead of focusing on such issues as the nature of the Trinity or Christ's "presence" in the Eucharist, the ecumenical theological issues today tend to relate to the nature of the Christian life. Struggles around issues of racism, sexism, classism, and militarism, for example, have given birth to both new expressions of unity across historical divisions and new divisions within denominational and confessional families.

In the United Church of Christ the desire for unity and the reality of divisions and pluralism have recently sparked a call for "sound teaching" or "teaching consensus." The methodological suspicion of feminist theology becomes significant as it recalls us to fundamental questions of meaning and underlying authority for our theological reflection. From where does the definition of sound teaching come? And what are its assumptions about how one knows God and discerns the social consequences of such knowing and relatedness? What is the canon of sound teaching, and what interpretive keys allow us to move between various expressions of the faith?

LANGUAGE

Cutting across every theological issue that faces the church today is the problem of the language by which theology is expressed and by which the life of the church is carried forward. Inclusive language is clearly a concern of feminist theology insofar as it requires the reform of all language that excludes, diminishes, stereotypes, or otherwise hurts people because of their gender, racial or ethnic identity, social circumstances, or physical condition. In addition to the obvious concern with language referring to people, language referring to God and Christ is also at issue.

The biblical witness itself calls us to accountability on the issue of language. Faithfulness to the biblical story draws us into dimensions of inclusiveness which our human anxieties would lead us to shun, in response to a God whose passionate concern is always for the outcast and oppressed, and whose own vision of the covenant always transcends human envisioning of its limits. Inclusive language involves precisely the linguistic expression of that vocation. We learn about God in the Bible primarily from accounts of God's activity, and rarely in visual images. We do learn, however, that the biblical claim is of humankind in all its variety created in God's image, and not of God made in ours. Any human pretext for naming or invoking God is met with warning, and in fact early in Israel's history, the name of God written in the text ceased to be pronounced aloud (a decision underlying the common occurrence of the word LORD to refer to God in most English translations). In short, we learn from the Bible that faithfulness demands of us both a commitment to inclusiveness on the human plane, and great delicacy in our use of any names or images of God that are in danger of becoming literalized into idols of our own creation and control.⁵

The two dimensions of inclusiveness, namely, language referring to God or Christ and language referring to people, are in fact interrelated. The church has usually been very careful to affirm that God transcends all human categories, and also that such human qualities of Jesus of Nazareth as his Jewishness, his first-century setting, and his maleness are not essential to his being the Christ. What is essential in our confession of Jesus as Christ is in that specific human life we learn to know God, and also in that human life God and humankind are reconciled such that (as Paul affirms) "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39). However, it is not only what the church thinks and affirms at its best, but how it lives, which communicates its understanding of God. Just as some of the church's images and metaphors for God have a tendency toward literalization, and its christological confession of Jesus as the Christ lapses over into an idolizing of the man Jesus, so these human expressions and understandings become concretized in social structures and relationships. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott reflects on these all-too-human consequences of theological language when she summarizes her own experience of growing up in the church. "If God is always 'he' and imaged as Father, Husband, or Master, then human husbands, fathers, and employers are godlike in a way that wives, mothers, and employees are not. And the stage is set for exploitation."⁶ The church in its most careful theological reflection has of course not *intended* any such consequences. Human

fathers are not the models by which we are to understand the fatherhood of God. Nevertheless, in *practice* such connections are made in people's minds and psyches, and in the church and in the world in which we live.

If the preceding comments make clear the importance of attentiveness to language in the church's theology, liturgy, and other literature, it should be noted that the language of English translations of scripture must itself be reconsidered. Ambiguities in the task of translation, which can never be a simple literal rendering of the ancient languages if the resulting text is to be comprehensible, plus the importance of conveying as accurately as possible the *meaning* of the biblical witness (with its vocation to inclusiveness on the human plane and its delicacy in finding human referents to God), require that a fresh look be taken at the language in which the biblical stories are cast, lest the words and grammar themselves blunt the biblical vision. The mandate for such works as *An Inclusive-Language Lectionary*⁷ can thus be found within scripture itself, and it is confirmed in the church's vocation to faithfulness in our time and place.

CONCLUSION

The controversy that has centered on the issue of inclusive language is paradigmatic of the way in which the perspectives of feminist theology push the church and each of us to raise fundamental questions at the heart of the expression and discussion of our faith, and not simply to add a new social agenda or to include a new group in our pluralistic church. Indeed, taken to its logical limits, the critical consciousness of feminist theology might lead us out of the maze of discussions of the "ferment" or "tension" in the church, and enable us to affirm the primacy of our vocation as a "just peace church." By its focus on the critique of patriarchy, feminist theology participates with the church, and indeed can help to lead the church, in its struggle to discern the consequences of "knowing God" for a life of shalom (Isa. 11:6-9). By its contextual sensitivity, feminist theology can sustain that quest without giving in to the attempt to identify a new point of belief or practice which would claim to be the nonnegotiable bottom line of denominational identity. A posture more consistent with feminist theology is that of "proclamation" or "confession," rather than "discipline" or "orthodoxy." In keeping with our Statement of Faith, feminist theology can support the efforts of the church to find together "courage in the struggle for justice and peace," and to know God's "presence in trial and rejoicing." With the celebration of our diverse gifts, we can move together toward a fearless proclamation and embodiment of the gospel,

as we learn throughout the church more graciously to "hear each other into speech," as one theologian puts it,⁸ and live together toward wholeness in our common life.

NOTES

1. For an excellent anthology of writings by Christian feminists, see Judith L. Weidman, *Christian Feminism: Visions of a New Humanity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984).

2. See the discussion in James H. Cone, *For My People* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984).

3. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 18-19.

4. I am indebted to Yvonne Delk for this image and for her clarification of the experience of pluralism in the United Church of Christ.

5. See the Appendix in *An Inclusive-Language Lectionary*, copyright © 1986, 1987, 1988 by the Division of Education and Ministry of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Readings for Year A, Revised, 269-76; Readings for Year B, Revised, 247-54; Readings for Year C, Revised, 255-62. See also Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 1-29, 145-92; and Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *God the Father: Theology and Patriarchy in the Teaching of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 1-81.

6. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, "Sexist Language: The Problem and the Cure," in *Language and the Church: Articles and Designs for Workshops*, ed. Barbara A. Withers (New York: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., 1984), 14.

7. An exploration of issues of sexism in biblical language and of biblical translation begun in the early 1970s resulted in an Inclusive-Language Lectionary Committee appointed in 1980 by the Division of Education and Ministry of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. *An Inclusive-Language Lectionary* was the result.

8. Nelle Morton introduced me to the phrase and the practice of "hearing each other into speech."