As LDS women increasingly explore the feminist aspects of Mormon theology in the 1990s, it is helpful to understand the historical and contemporary movements in feminist theology in society as a whole.

TRENDS IN FEMINIST THEOLOGY

By Sheila Greeve Davaney

Women have always been present in religious movements, and they have invariably been active participants in the life of religious communities, shaping the character and direction of religious traditions. As worshippers, preachers, teachers, and transmitters of belief and ritual, women have played vital roles in the religions of the world. But, until recently, history has given little recognition to those roles and has recorded little of women's religious lives and activities. Moreover, while women have been central participants within religious traditions, their reflections about the nature of those traditions have been almost totally absent from the communities' self-interpretation, and their experiences have rarely been considered worthy of religious analysis or understanding. Thus, both historically and theologically, women have been essentially invisible.

In recent decades, in North America and Europe and now, increasingly, in the rest of the world, much of this is changing. Women are rejecting their invisible status and are claiming more public roles within religious communities and are insisting upon their right to share in the theological interpretations of their traditions. This last development can be seen most clearly in the emergence of the theological perspective known as feminist theology. This paper introduces this theological perspective and an attempt to locate it historically, and explains something of the current directions that are unfolding within it.

Let me, at the outset, state that there is no unified, singular feminist view of religion, nor is there a clear consensus about particular religious doctrines. While feminist theology had its origins in the women's movement and has, therefore, often reflected the white, middle-class, and Christian make-up of much of that movement; its proponents have always included a diverse set of women representing broad and even conflictual perspectives. Thus, from its beginnings, and in ever-greater ways now, feminist theology has been characterized by variety, creativity, and experimentation. I will outline some of the diverse options that are presently being articulated.

If uniformity and homogeneity are not characteristics of feminist theology, there exist nonetheless, real commonalities that shape the feminist theological discussion. One way of highlighting these commonalities is to trace the rise of feminist theological reflection.

THE ROOTS OF FEMINIST THEOLOGY

Feminist theology is rooted in what is known as the second wave of feminism that arose in the 1950s and 1960s. However, it has had deep resonance with the first women's movement of the nineteenth century. In 1895 and 1896, Eliz-
abeth Cady Stanton and other feminists published *The Woman's Bible*. This work presented the various biblical verses that referred to women and complemented these verses with feminist commentary. For a variety of reasons, this work was not well received, but it served the purpose of raising important issues with which women today still struggle. One of those issues is the recognition that religion has played a role in the oppression of women and that liberation from this oppression must entail the radical transformation of religion as well as other social and political realities.

A second issue that *The Woman's Bible* raised that remains a central topic on the current agenda of feminist theology was the importance of history, and in particular, the role the Bible and biblical religion played in shaping female identity. Both of these areas of concern—the relation of religion to oppression in general and the particular role of the Bible in determining women’s lives—continue to animate much discussion among feminists.

While the authors of *The Woman's Bible* raised critical questions concerning religion, many other early feminists positively linked their endeavors on behalf of women and other oppressed groups, especially blacks, to a religious vision. This anchoring of feminist commitments in the inherited traditions of Christianity and Judaism continues to ground the thought and action of many feminists today as they seek ways not only to engage their traditions critically, but also to garner from them resources to transform the condition and experience of women.

Both the critical challenge to religion and the positive appropriation of its resources continued to inform the feminist movement as it moved into the twentieth century. It was, however, only with the 1960 publication of an article by Valerie Saiving entitled “The Human Situation: A Feminine View” that women’s experience emerged as an explicit issue for theological reflection. Saiving suggested that much theology was primarily grounded in the analysis of male experience and that it neglected the female experience. She expounded this claim by an exploration of the then-current doctrines of sin and salvation, arguing that the widespread interpretations of sin as pride and the proposed redress of this hubris in terms of salvation, arguing that the widespread interpretations of sin as pride and the proposed redress of this hubris in terms of self-sacrifice and self-giving actually reflected the condition of men and did not adequately describe or respond to the situation of women. Saiving’s analysis pointed in the direction of what has become an enduring theme in feminist theology: the insight that theological positions, including both interpretations of the human and the divine, are deeply grounded in experience and, historically, the experience that has been the source for theological reflection has been male, excluding or negatively evaluating women’s experience. It has been precisely this absence of women’s experience as the data for theological reflection that feminist theology has sought to alter.

Feminist theology did not emerge full-blown in response to Saiving’s article. Instead, there was relative quiet on the theological scene for the next decade. However, other changes were taking place that would lead ineluctably to the emergence of an explicit feminist voice in theology. During this period, increasing numbers of women began to go to seminaries and schools of theology, and to enter graduate programs in religion, only to be met by an almost total absence of women faculty and continued resistance from the churches. Slowly, but with rising intensity, voices of protest began to be heard. Articles and books began to appear whose explicit focus was women. Two early feminist theologians who are still prominent today were Rosemary Radford Ruether and Mary Daly. Ruether, especially, linked her feminist concerns with the commitments of two other developing theologies—black theology and Latin American liberation thought—which were also challenging the hegemony of traditional white male theological reflection. All three movements, perhaps inevitably, were labeled non-theology and mere fads by the powerful white men who controlled the discipline of theology.

Feminist theology, at this formative stage, began with several central convictions and commitments. First, it argued that all theology is perspectival; that is, it grows out of and reflects particular social locations. As such, it is not, as it is often claimed to be, universal and neutral, but, in fact, is and always has been partial, relative, and laden with the values of its proponents. Feminist theologians did not deny this local character of theology for themselves but publicly declared that they were working out of a commitment to women and to the struggle to transform women’s lives. With this conviction of the perspectival, value-laden character of all theology and out of this commitment to women, feminist theologians began to rethink the basic ideas of God, Christ, human existence, and nature.

While it is impossible to detail all the work that went on during this first, mostly critical stage of feminist theology, I will highlight several of the central arguments. Much energy was devoted to the analysis of the Western idea of God. Here Mary Daly is the most important feminist thinker. With compelling insight, she unmasked the male character of the Jewish and Christian God. Moreover, she argued this was not just a question of male language. Rather, Daly insisted that the Western conception of God is not accidentally expressed in male language but is, instead, inherently and irrevocably male—that is, the attributes of omnipresence, omniscience, and, especially, omnipotence are male values that emerge out of and contribute to the maintenance of patriarchy. Put succinctly, as Daly stated in *Beyond God the Father*: “If God is male, then the male is God.”

There were other related theological doctrines that came under critical scrutiny during the 1970s and early 1980s. The ancient christological formulations were examined with special reference to Jesus’ maleness and to his advocacy and embodiment of an ethic of self-sacrificial love and the repercussions of these for women. The traditional and still prevalent understanding of human nature along a dualistic model in which males and females were essentially different and males were considered superior and females inferior, was also consistently challenged. And, finally, the traditional interpretations of nature and the body as lacking in inherent value, and as the possession of an essentially spiritual humanity to
use for its own purpose, were disputed and criticized. In each instance, feminist theologians insisted that there was an intimate connection between religious beliefs and theological interpretations and the oppression of women, and that the liberation of women entailed unmasking the unholy alliance between this oppression and religious traditions and the theologies that supported them.

CURRENT DIRECTIONS IN FEMINIST THEOLOGY

Much work was expended on this critical analysis, this theology of protest. But increasingly constructive alternatives also began to emerge and be developed. As alternatives have taken shape, along with these creative options, new tensions and conflicts have also surfaced. At this juncture, I will set forth several debates that are presently taking place within feminist theological circles. By examining them, we can discern the current directions of feminist theology and can see what is at stake in the options that are now on the scene.

Staying with the Christian Tradition

One ongoing debate revolves around the issue mentioned earlier of how to relate to our past. On the most fundamental level this dilemma has focused on the question of whether to stay or leave the inherited traditions of Judaism and Christianity. Not only has this question represented deep and painful personal choices for feminists, but it has also issued forth in a sometimes bitter and divisive public struggle with various women calling themselves, or being labeled by others, as "reformers" or "revolutionaries." In recent years, the debate has centered on the viability for women of God-talk versus the developing notions of the Goddess. The former group, those who remain, if uneasily, within the Christian and Jewish traditions, argue that the majority of women continue to abide in these religious communities because leaving would entail abandoning most women. They also insist that Christianity and Judaism, despite being implicated in the long history of the oppression of women, still contain rich resources for women in their struggle for liberation. Moreover, they argue that much talk about the Goddess is historically inaccurate and represents a kind of naive romanticism. And, finally, they suggest that Goddess religion essentially leaves out men and thus cannot function as an adequate emancipatory vision for all humans.

For their parts, the proponents of Goddess language for the divine and of a Goddess-centered spirituality argue that without a fundamental rejection of the traditional Western god, and the predominantly male-centered religious traditions that have oppressed women, women will never be able to value themselves fully and positively and will never be able to claim their female power and potential. Carol Christ has been, perhaps, the most articulate proponent of this position. She has eloquently argued that the symbol of the Goddess acknowledges female power and will as legitimate, and affirms the female body and life cycle that have been so thoroughly denigrated in male-centered religious traditions. In contrast to those who say leaving their inherited traditions signals an abandonment of one's sisters, Christ insists that the Goddess symbol embodies the value of women's bonds with one another. And, finally, for Christ and other proponents of Goddess language and spirituality, the Goddess is an important symbol for earth, for concrete, embodied life. Over against traditions that stressed the divine's utter transcendence of nature and the material realm, the Goddess proponents repeatedly emphasize the connection between the divine and the finite, the ever-changing world of nature, and they suggest that only such a vision will bring us
back from the threats of alienation from our bodies, of ecological disaster, and of nuclear destruction.

This ongoing debate has indeed been full of tension, but it has also contributed to the development of constructive alternatives for women. Increasingly, women who intellectually and existentially can no longer remain within Christianity or Judaism are finding a vibrant and growing Goddess-spirituality whose proponents are developing an ever more sophisticated theology. Those who continue to find intellectual and religious sustenance within Christianity and Judaism are, with ever greater force, articulating new interpretations of the divine that eschew the traditional doctrines, especially concerning God's proffered omnipotence, and that support female experience and the struggle for transformation.

How to Approach the Bible

While the discussions have raged about staying or leaving, there have also been differences among those women who have remained within Christianity and Judaism about how to relate to their pasts, especially that part of history, the Bible, that remains so powerful today. Early on, there was what I term the search for the pristine Bible. Many feminists insisted that either the Bible really was not patriarchal and, as such, not detrimental to women, but had only been misinterpreted and wrongly appropriated by males. Others took what might be called a "canon-within-the-canon" approach, that is, they acknowledged the male character of much of the Bible but insisted that the true core, the essential biblical message, was and is liberating to women. More recently, a different approach has emerged. While there are still proponents of the first two ways of conceiving of the Bible, increasingly I think feminist theologians are clearly stating that the biblical material is predominantly the product of male experience and perspective, that it is often anti-female, and that it has a long history of having been utilized to oppress women. As such, it must be thoroughly criticized. But, it also contains intimations of other more inclusive and just visions, and where that is true, such visions should be seen as resources for the creation of a new human society. Thus, for many Jewish and Christian women, the Bible has been demythologized and is no longer seen as the repository of unquestioned divine revelation, but as the deposit of human interpretations of God and of human life, and that, as such, it is an important human resource but no longer the final religious norm.

Third World Women and Women of Color

If the question of how to relate to inherited traditions, their central symbols, and their time-honored resources, has captured much of the consideration of feminist theologians, other issues are now vying for attention with these perennial concerns. A central issue is that of the relation of white women to women of color and, alternatively, First World women to Third World women. This issue first emerged for feminist theology as growing numbers of black women entered seminary along with their white counterparts, and they began to articulate a theological vision out of their already powerful location in the black church. It soon became clear that the vaulted "women's experience" to which so much feminist theology appealed really referred to white, middle class women's experience. In the women's movement in general, and with special force in theology, black women, including theologians such as Jacquelyn Grant, have asserted that, while much is shared in common between white women and women of color, much divides these groups. It is not at all clear that the divisions are not greater than the commonalities. Moreover, any real solidarity, black women argue, necessarily presupposes white women's willingness and capacity to acknowledge their racism and to repent of it.

Black women's voices are increasingly influencing theology, especially as they develop what is termed womanist theology. While committed to the liberation of women, womanist theology testifies to the distinctive experience of women of color and asserts that out of that unique history, shaped not only by sexism but also by racism and classism, come resources and insights that are different than those of white feminists and that in alliance with those of men of color, challenge many of the values, privileges, and goals of middle class feminism.

It has not only been black North American women who have challenged white feminists. Third World women, as they have explicitly entered into the formal theological discussion, have also raised profoundly troubling questions both to their male compatriots and to First World women, especially those who are white. Importantly, they have stressed cultural and class concerns and have detailed a different religious and social history than is articulated by their white North American colleagues. In particular, they have sought to analyze the interconnection of their oppression as women and the life-defeating poverty in which so many exist and have emphatically stated that their struggle on women's behalf is a struggle, in solidarity with their brothers, against unjust political and economic systems that perpetuate poverty and deny so many access to life's necessities.

Religious Pluralism

A VARIATION of this challenge by Third World women is being heard from non-Euro-American women living or studying in the United States. The theological reflection being done by these women is also giving new direction to feminist thought. Pluralism has been sounded as one of these themes. Many of these feminists grew up in cultures that offer much greater religious variety than the United States. This is especially true for Asian women who have heritages shaped by not only Christianity, but Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, and folk religion. By attending to this pluralism, these women are proposing that feminists must not conclude that they have to choose to live in only one tradition and reject all others, but they must learn to incorporate the valuable beliefs and rituals of many traditions in a vision adequate for today. These feminist theologians, such as Chinese theologian Kwok Pui-lan and...
Korean theologian Chung Hyun Kyung, are not calling for a simplistic syncretism but for the profound recognition that there are other histories than Western Christianity that offer ways of apprehending reality and leading meaningful lives.

While these women propose that we acknowledge the value of other traditions, they also suggest that we do not appropriate them or our own traditions uncritically, but apply norms that test the value and utility of religious beliefs in terms of how they affect women and provide for the creation and nourishment of humane life. Chung Hyun Kyung calls for a "survival-liberation-centered syncretism" and states that finally "life-giving power is the final criterion by which the validity of any religion is judged."

Thus, while deeply rooted in particular religious traditions, many women who come from cultural contexts characterized by religious diversity are more interested in how to learn from all the various traditions than in maintaining the superiority of their own tradition.

This norm of the "contribution to the struggle for life" resonates strongly with the claims of many North American feminist theologians, such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who are insisting that while the past, especially the Bible, may be a resource for present theological reflection, the critical norms of assessing theological claims finally reside in the present and, in particular, emerge from communities of struggle. Rather than existing unchanging in the past, our criteria of theological judgment should lie, as Pui-lan states, "in the praxes of the religious communities struggling for the liberation of humankind. All theologies must be judged as to how far they contribute to the liberation and humanization of the human community."

Thus, whether it is our own religious traditions or those of others that we are evaluating, the central measure is how they can contribute to a more adequate vision of life today.

The articulation of this approach by both North American feminists and their Third World sisters has resulted in a strong sense of the ambiguities of history and a determined commitment to give priority to those voices from history, especially of women, that have been ignored heretofore. While history is relativized, it is also broadened, offering new sources, often untraditional sources, such as songs, folk tales, poems, myths, and prayers, for the creation of religious visions. Though there are new gifts to be discovered there, most especially the stories of women who over the centuries persevered in the face of dehumanizing conditions, there is also the clear recognition that history is a tale full of losses, of beliefs and practices that did not give life but destroyed it, and that often women have themselves been implicated in the suffering and oppression of their sisters.

**Exile and Community**

A FINAL theme that recurs in the writings of Third World women, especially those residing in the United States, is that of exile. These women are separated from their land, cultural context, family, and, often, their primary religious communities. Being in exile highlights for them the importance of community, and separation from their natural networks of support and accountability points to the necessity of a global community of women who struggle, not only for advancement in their own narrow contexts, but who seek to improve the lives of women everywhere. By so doing, Third World women have reminded feminist theologians in the context of relative privilege in the United States that more is at stake than ordinations or faculty appointments or middle-class upward mobility; in much of the world the struggle on behalf of women is a life and death struggle against poverty, political repression, and age-old beliefs in women's inferiority. They challenge First World women to examine not only our own oppression but also our implication in the pain and suffering of women a world away.
THE FEMINIST THEOLOGICAL AGENDA FOR THE 1990S

I HAVE given an overview of some current trends in feminist theology. I have emphasized that there is a fair amount of diversity among feminist thinkers and that more rather than fewer options are coming on the scene. Despite this real diversity, an outline of feminist theology can be discerned. By way of closing, I will summarize what I take to be the feminist theological agenda for the 1990s.

First, I believe the call is for the creation of a constructive and substantive theology. While the critical theology of protest played a central role in the development of feminist theology, and while ongoing critical scrutiny of historical theological claims and contemporary male offerings is certainly required, the main task for feminist theologians must be the articulation of new visions that will contribute to the creation of more humane life for all persons and especially the most oppressed among us.

Second, this means that the loyalty of feminists must not be to the past but to the present and future generations. The past is ambiguous, offering gifts for the struggle and a legacy of loss and suffering. It should be viewed as such, instead of as a divinely sanctioned repository of unchanging truth.

Third, as feminists carry out their constructive agenda, a commitment to the poorest and most oppressed must be central. Without such commitment, feminist theology becomes a vehicle for the advancement of the few, at the expense of the majority of women.

Fourth, this entails a global perspective for the doing of feminist theology. While all theology is local, reflecting the experience of those who carry it out, feminist theology today must be done against the horizon of the broader world and within a global network of women working for change.

Fifth, as more and more women contribute to the creation of a feminist vision, greater diversity will appear and feminists must learn to attend to their differences and welcome the plurality of voices that are being raised. Feminists must unlearn their fear of difference and conflict and embrace the hope that, even out of their discord, new and richer possibilities will arise for them and the rest of humanity.

Sixth, feminist theology must not only give priority to the poorest and most oppressed among us, but also to the earth and the body. If the human community is to survive at all, our wasteful, plundering, and arrogant treatment of nature and its resources must be radically transformed. This entails, I think, a radical revisioning of humanity’s relation to nature and a thorough rejection of our assumption that we are the center of creation. Moreover, if we are to overcome the profound alienation to our bodies that characterizes so much of our experience, we will need to rethink what it means to be embodied, finite creatures who live out of the flesh and in deep independence with one another and the rest of the material world. This means, finally, that we must develop a theology and spirituality of sexuality.

Seventh, feminist theology must attend not only to the articulation of the heretofore ignored experience of women and to a reconceived relation between humankind and the earth, but also to the sustained effort to rethink theological ideas and to reconstruct central religious doctrines, such as God and Christ in a manner more adequate for today. This must take place, not only on the level of complex theological systems, but also on the level of concrete metaphor and image. As theologian Sallie McFague has pointed out, we have made progress in rethinking our abstract systems but, for the most part, continue to live out of outmoded, indeed dangerous, metaphors and images such as God envisioned as an omnipotent male.

Combined, these trends suggest a feminist theology that will be pluralistic, ecologically and bodily centered, focused toward the margins of society, and self-consciously constructive. It will claim its local and relative character and will, with hope and not a little fear, be about the creation of new world visions. I hope you will join us in this venture.

NOTES


3. See Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

4. Daly, Beyond God the Father, 19.

5. Daly, Beyond God the Father, 3.


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