

Daphne Hampson
Theology and
FEMINISM



SIGNPOSTS IN THEOLOGY

Theology and Feminism

Signposts in Theology

Theology and the Problem of Evil

Kenneth Surin

Theology and Feminism

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Theology and Philosophy

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John Milbank

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Daphne Hampson started her career as a historian and wrote her Oxford doctoral thesis on the response in Britain to the church conflict in Germany during the Third Reich. She followed this by a Harvard doctorate in systematic theology. Since 1977 she has been a lecturer in systematic theology at the University of St Andrews. In the late 1970s she took a leading part in the campaign to allow women to be ordained in the Anglican churches in Britain. Now designating herself as post-Christian, she believes Christianity and feminism to be incompatible and the Christian myth to be untrue, while wishing to find a way to conceptualize God that is in continuity with the western tradition. Having spent many years in the United States, most recently in 1988/89 as a visiting scholar at Harvard Divinity School, she has engaged deeply with the development of feminist theological thought. Daphne Hampson was the first President of the European Society of Women for Theology Research.

**For the members of the Quaker
Meeting, St Andrews, who have
during nine years cherished and
nourished me.**

PREFACE

My first editor for this book, Julia Mosse, gave me one instruction: it was to be user-friendly. I have accordingly divided the chapters into sections, each section being relatively self-contained. In some chapters, notably the Christology chapter, the middle sections could indeed have been placed in any order. But in general there is a progression of thought from one section to the next. The chapters likewise are reasonably self-contained, considering as they do different aspects of the interface between feminism and theology. But again there is a logical progression from one to the next. My hope is that a chapter, or a section, could be made the basis of a group or class discussion. My basic theme – namely that I do not think feminism and Christianity to be compatible – wends its way through the book. The last sections of the Methodology and Theology chapters discuss respectively the methodology of a post-Christian feminist position and what I believe the way forward to be.

I am aware of the fact that the Methodology chapter is the most difficult. It is placed at the beginning of the book because the argument pursued there is fundamental to the book and presupposed in what follows. It may however be that the general theological reader will find the Christology chapter the most accessible and the chapter on Concretion to follow naturally from this and clinch my argument, while the general feminist reader will certainly be most attracted to that on Anthropology. The Theology chapter indicates well the direction of my future work! I may hope that the Methodology chapter will subsequently be tackled, should it not have been read at the outset, for it is the contention of the book that it is in distinguishing between Christianity, a historical religion which necessarily makes reference to the past, and a religious position which is not so tied, that the hope for the future lies.

I should at the outset clarify my use of the words 'female', 'feminist'

and 'feminine'. 'Female' I use, as opposed to male, for the biological difference between men and women. 'Feminist' implies a certain set of views, which could be held by men but rarely are, about the equality of the sexes and the need for example for non-hierarchical relationships. Whether the fact that feminist views are likely to be held by people who are female owes solely to cultural conditioning, or there is a biological ground, is not something to which we can know the answer. The difference here between men and women would appear to be due in large part to cultural conditioning. But to state categorically that there can be no biological component would seem to be foolish. We do not know yet how male hormones (acting indeed before birth and the possibility of different socialization) may affect the male psyche. But that there might be a biological component does not lead me to conclude that men then should do what is 'natural' to them, for there must be a complementarity between the sexes. It makes me think that humanity is faced with a deeper problem than we knew. I use the word 'feminist', it should be noted, not as descriptive of how women always behave, but quite as much as prescriptive of a way in which I believe we all should behave. The word 'feminine' has for me wholly negative connotations. I use it to designate what it has been supposed by men, in a sexist society, that women should be. It is in this sense a cultural construct, and one which has been deeply harmful to women.

The bibliography is designed to help the reader to know where to turn for further reading. Therefore I have arranged the material under subject headings, rather than alphabetically. I list some works not mentioned in the text. A few works which happen to be mentioned in the text are omitted from the bibliography. I place the original date of publication in brackets at the end of a reference when this is of significance.

I have many people to thank for help and encouragement with this work. I must in particular make mention of my friends Helen Steven, Gillian Clark, Nicola Slee, Sarah Coakley and Patricia Richardson who have read the manuscript in whole or part. My mother, Joyce Hampson, has painstakingly read through the text and suggested many improvements. My editor at Basil Blackwell, Stephan Chambers, has taken a lively interest in the work. Kate Chapman, the desk editor at Blackwell, and Gillian Law, who copy-edited the book, have been unfailingly helpful. I dedicate the book to the group of my Quaker friends in St Andrews, Scotland. Though not a Quaker myself (and never likely to be) I have, in that meeting, found a source

of inspiration and strength which has allowed me to move into a new world the other side of leaving the church and Christianity. Without them I do not know how I should manage.

Daphne Hampson
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Introduction

Feminism represents a revolution. It is not in essence a demand that women should be allowed to join the male world on equal terms. It is a different view of the world. This must be of fundamental import for theology. For theology, as we have known it, has been the creation of men; indeed of men living within a patriarchal society. As women come into their own, theology will take a different shape.

In this introduction I shall consider the idea – which is likely to be held to be fantastic – that feminism represents the death-knell of Christianity as a viable religious option.¹ I do not say this lightly. I myself grew up within Christianity: it was fundamental to my whole outlook – so much so that I chose to study theology and wished, for twenty years, to be ordained. But I have in recent years had to extricate what it may mean to be a religious person from the particular expression of being religious which is Christianity, and to discard Christianity. It has not been easy. If one comes to conclude of Christianity, as I have, that it is neither true nor moral, one is faced with two alternatives. Either one becomes an atheist; which for me was not a serious possibility. Or one comes to reinterpret what one understands by being a religious person who loves God. It may be said by some that my problem was that I was a theologian. I should point out that it was in large part my training in theology which allowed me to find a way forward!

So it will be said that Christianity has weathered many a crisis: feminism is simply the latest. As the saying goes, Christianity is always adapting itself to something believable: it will do so again. It is conservative Christians who, together with more radical feminists, perceive that feminism represents not just one crisis among many. For the feminist challenge strikes at the heart of Christianity. Christianity, and Judaism, are religions which reflect a patriarchal world: God is represented as male, and in biblical religion men and

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women are often conceived to be differently placed both in relation to God and to one another. The religion of the Hebrew bible largely concerns the relation of a (male) God and His sons. In Christianity the basic symbol of the religion has been the trinity, the relation of Father and Son, through whom humanity is said to be taken up into God. Women may well not have much interest in this whole symbolic order.

So then it will be said that we cannot have such a sharp break with the past. We have to find a way to move forward from where we are. Human beings are social beings, shaped by their history. We cannot discard our Christian past. This is of course true if what is meant by such a statement is that our religion will be shaped by our western heritage. I myself certainly have no inclination to move outside that heritage; though, like others, I may find some things about other traditions helpful. But if what is meant is that we must needs go on living with the Christian myth, and interpreting the world through that pair of spectacles, then that is certainly not the case. That myth has rapidly been discarded by a large number of people, even in the last twenty years. Feminism will come to make it seem not only untrue but immoral. There have in our century been major discontinuities in other spheres of human thought and endeavour: in music, science or philosophy. There is no reason why there should not be discontinuity in religion.

Indeed it may well be the case that the revolutionary nature of our age makes a revolution in religion imperative if we are to remain in any sense religious. The need for a paradigm shift in religion has been with us for some time. Since the Enlightenment of the late eighteenth century it has been clear that there is a singularly ill fit between the basic axioms of Christianity and modern thought. Christianity proclaims a revelation in history, a revelation which makes for a particularity which is at odds with our knowledge of the constancy of nature or the fact that there are in history no interruptions from another order. It becomes difficult to believe that we are in God's particular providence, in the way in which this seemed feasible to those who drew maps of the world with Jerusalem at the centre, given that as we now know the world did not start in 4004 B.C. The scale has changed. Our knowledge today of other world religions has made the claims of Christianity increasingly untenable. The Christian religion becomes relativized. It comes to seem much more likely that the religious myth of the people of Israel, and the structure of

Christian theology, are simply the creation of one particular group of people, who interpreted the world from their perspective.

Now feminism has crowned the crisis. For feminists are saying that Christianity, and Judaism, have been patriarchal myths and that they have hurt women. Once there is a considerable group of people, born and bred within western religion, who turn upon it and declare it to be partial, then that myth is relativized with a vengeance. Feminists are of course making this challenge at a time when the truth of the myth is in any case disputed. Many cope with the crisis by saying that the myth of the religion is however, in its understanding of creation, sin, redemption and the eschaton, a 'true myth'. Those parts which seem non-essential, perhaps the virgin birth, they simply discard. But the feminist challenge makes it difficult to make the sideways move of saying that Christianity is symbolically true. For precisely the feminist contention is that symbols are powerful and may damage relationships.

The idea that Christianity may not be a force for good comes as a shock to many people. Surely, they say, women have only achieved the place which they occupy in society today in the west through the permeation of that society by Christianity. That may be true. Christianity, and Judaism also, have had a strong sense of the worth and dignity of each individual person – though we may note that women have not always been granted the status of those to whom such an ethic applied. But there is no reason why we should not retain these things: they are part of our western culture. The view however that Christian belief has been an unmitigated blessing has been shown by the feminist analysis of recent years to be far too simplistic. The fact that God has in the west been conceived as 'male', and the world of the bible has been considered to be normative for human relations, has served to legitimize the place which women have occupied in western culture and to thwart their striving for equality. To question the social order was to be disobedient to God.

Again it will be said that there have been previous occasions on which Christianity has had to come to terms with issues of human dignity and equality, and that it has done so successfully. The biblical message of love for the neighbour is fundamental, and passages seemingly hostile to women can come to be disregarded. Christianity will win through. Even in the more conservative churches women are beginning to play a greater role, even to be ordained. It will simply take time. To take a parallel example, in the nineteenth

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century the bible could be quoted to justify a use of slaves, provided humane. Now no one would do that. Indeed the principle of racial equality is increasingly coming to be recognized by everyone except a tiny minority in the Christian church. What is so different about the case of women?

But the challenge of feminism is not simply that women wish to gain an equal place with men in what is essentially a religion which is biased against them. The challenge of feminism is that women may want to express their understanding of God within a different thought structure. Certainly the masculine nature of Christianity, and equally of Judaism, is becoming increasingly problematic to a large number of women. Of course women want equality, and many still strive for equality within the Christian church. But the debate has moved on. While men (and some women) consider whether women can be full insiders within the church, women debate whether or not they want to be. Eleven years ago it was I who wrote the statement in favour of the ordination of women to the priesthood circulated to all members of the General Synod of the Church of England before the vote. Today finds me no longer Christian.

Many men will say that feminism is something which can be taken on board. Even conservatives will agree that, in the past, women have had a raw deal. But, say conservatives, Christianity allows for a dignified place for women. We must not confuse the masculine and the feminine: that would be to the detriment of each. What we desperately need in our world is the feminine. Women have an essential role to play. But women no longer (if they ever did) occupy the place which such men conceive the feminine to represent. Or else other men, of a more liberal disposition, say feminism is good, it will allow men in turn to discover a lost side of themselves. Men need to explore the ways in which they are loving and gentle, to allow themselves to cry or be weak. Our anima must complement our animus. But feminism is not in the first instance concerned with men discovering a lost side of themselves. It is about women coming into their own. This book is not essentially about men: it concerns women.

So it will be said that Christianity is a moral teaching for us to live by. We have in our present world the greatest need for the message which Christ proclaimed. Of course that is true. Nor is there any reason why we should discard that teaching, in so far as it is a part of our heritage and we continue to judge it to be good. But Christianity is not just a moral teaching. That would be humanism. Christianity is also a belief – if the salt is to retain its savour – in Christ.

Christianity proclaims the revelation of God in history, the belief in the uniqueness of Christ, and the inspiration of the literature which tells us of these things.

There lies the nub of the problem. For Christianity cannot discard this reference to a past period of human history. It must necessarily speak of God's act in Christ, and recite the literature which tells us of the tradition into which Jesus came. In other disciplines, philosophy, science or the social sciences, there is no necessary reference to the past. They may commence with the present, or where they believe truth to lie, drawing on the past only in so far as it still seems relevant. But Christianity is a religion of revelation with a necessary foot in history. It cannot lose that reference so long as it remains Christianity. And that reference is to a patriarchal history.

But, it will be asked, is there no way in which women and men can be enabled to go forward together? I would surely hope so. For this to be possible, however, it will be necessary that men should abandon a religion which reflects a patriarchal past, which gives them so much advantage and which in its symbol system is weighted against women. For how may women and men find a common spiritual future on the basis of a religion which reflects the lives of men and which leaves women distraught and angry outsiders? Whether men and women can find a common spiritual future depends on whether men are prepared to join women on the basis of equality. The decisive way in which men can do something to help at the moment is through giving up their power and being prepared to forgo the past. They cannot in any decisive way 'help' women. For women are not asking to be 'given' anything. They are asking to be allowed to determine their own lives. One gives people dignity and self-esteem by ceasing to dominate them and allowing them perfectly naturally to move into their future.

Religion may represent a last citadel for feminism. It is relatively easy to frame laws which declare woman to be an equal of man, or to give women the vote. It represents more of a disturbance to suggest that the laws or the political process may need to change if they are to accommodate women's needs and concerns as well as those of men. It constitutes a profound challenge to male thought that women should come to articulate how they view the world. Religion has represented that which encompasses our interpretation of our lives and our highest hopes. As women begin to name for themselves their ideals and aspirations, their understanding of what they mean by God and their beliefs about the nature of human relations, the

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religion of humanity may greatly shift. The revolution in religion will affect human society, for religion constitutes an underpinning of our lives.

Feminism is not going to disappear. That half of humanity should come into its own represents too deep a revolution. Feminism will come in time to shatter a picture of reality which came out of a patriarchal world. We find ourselves spiritually in a novel situation. The religion which we have known commences with Adam, the archetypal man, naming and thereby (in Hebrew thought) defining the essence of all living things – including the woman and her reality. The coming of age of women as feminists in theology consists in women beginning to undertake that process of naming for themselves. That, after four thousand years, constitutes a revolution.

NOTE

- 1 I am in this book specifically concerned with Christianity. Much that I say would also be true of Judaism, though my impression is that the way in which it is affected by feminism differs in some respects from the way in which Christianity is affected. I am moreover not qualified to comment on Judaism.