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Women's Spirituality in the Twentieth Century

An Exploration through Fiction

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Chapter 1
Introduction: Feminist Theologies

1. Feminist Theology and Feminist Literary Criticism

Women's fiction is frequently used by feminist and womanist theologians as an important resource to support their insights into women's spirituality. In this study I wish to reverse the process and employ the insights of feminist theologies to illuminate my reading of some twentieth-century women's fiction. Women's spirituality is a topic which has largely been neglected by feminist literary critics among whom the assumption often is that to be a feminist is to define oneself in opposition to any kind of religious orthodoxy. This secularism is evidenced, for instance, in the downplaying of spiritual themes in theorists such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva whose work is otherwise widely used by feminist literary critics.

Feminist literary criticism's neglect of spirituality is shared with secular feminism as a whole. In her article, 'Global Sisterhood or Wicked Stepsisters', Tina Beattie points out secular feminism's imperviousness to the significance of religion in many women's lives and to the role of religion in shaping Western thought. She describes the gap between sacred and secular as 'a taboo that continues to distort and restrict secular feminist scholarship'.[1] This study is one small attempt to throw a bridge across the gap between sacred and secular feminism.

In addition to their concentration on the secular at the expense of the sacred, feminist literary theorists have ignored feminist theology because it is often perceived to lag behind secular feminism. This is partly due to the conservative nature of the institutions in which some feminist theologians work, particularly in Germany. Certainly in 1999 when I attended a symposium in Germany on *Women and Religious*

1 Sawyer and Collier 1999: 124.

Discourse, I became aware of how carefully feminist theologians often have to tread in comparison with feminist literary critics. Since I belonged, then, to an English department in which a large proportion of the staff, both female and male, were involved in gender studies and feminist theory, it surprised me to discover how marginalised feminist theology still was within mainstream theology in contrast to the position of feminist literary theory in the academy.

Yet feminists ignore religion at their peril. Religion expresses our most deeply held beliefs and motivations and indeed it can be argued that there is a spiritual dimension even to secular feminism. Liberation, equal rights, concern for the environment, peace and justice, these could be said to be spiritual goals as much as political and economic. As Mary Daly puts it in *Beyond God the Father* (1974): 'The becoming of women implies universal human becoming. It has everything to do with the search for ultimate meaning and reality, which some would call God.'[2]

Moreover, secular feminism needs the insights of feminist theology because it needs to rethink fundamental images and myths about women, many of which originated in religion, and underpin masculinist thinking. Karen Armstrong argues in *The Gospel According to Woman* that in the West Christianity continues to influence even the most secular among us:

> Even those aspects of Western Society which may have entered a Post-Christian era are affected by Christianity, albeit unconsciously. We have not yet learned how to be entirely secular and continue to reproduce Christian patterns of thought and behaviour in secular ways.[3]

Luce Irigaray makes a similar point in *je, tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference* (1993):

> Many of us are under the impression that all we have to do is not enter a church, refuse to practise the sacraments, and never read the sacred texts in order to be free from the influence of religion on our lives [...] this does not solve the problem of how significant is the influence of religion upon culture. Thus we

2 Daly 1974: 6.
3 Armstrong 1986/1996: ix.

> are all imbued with the many Greek, Latin, Oriental, Jewish, and Christian traditions, at least, particularly through the art, philosophy and myths we live by, exchange, and perpetuate, often without our realising. The passage from one era to the next cannot be made simply by negating what already exists.[4]

Though feminism may begin with dissatisfaction over women's social and political roles, a spiritual dimension emerges when the 'reality' underlying those roles is interrogated, a reality underpinned by traditional myths and images of women. Feminist analysis of culture and society does only part of its job if it refuses to tackle religion.

To ignore or neglect the immense flowering of women's spirituality, particularly in the latter part of the twentieth century, both within and outside the churches is to cut oneself off from an important element in women's lives and one that is reflected in our literature. Lacking some analysis of the sacred, our picture of twentieth-century women's fiction is incomplete. This book aims to do no more than sketch out some preliminary areas of investigation. I have taken a deliberate decision to limit my study to prose fiction since I feel that an analysis of spirituality in twentieth-century women's poetry requires a separate study. Given the wealth of women's writing in the English language in the twentieth century I have had to be selective and some important women writers are omitted, for example, Doris Lessing, whose spiritual vision has been extensively commented on by Carol Christ, Judith Plaskow and Karen Armstrong.[5]

This chapter is intended simply as a brief introduction to some of the major developments in recent years in feminist theology with which literary critics may not be familiar. I am not a trained theologian and what follows is addressed to those in my own discipline, literature, rather than to theologians. I apologise in advance if the brief summaries I give of complex and sophisticated theologies do not do them justice. My intention has been to avoid, as far as possible, technical terms. There are links which can be drawn between feminist theology and other branches of theology. For instance, ordinary theology which values the insights of spirituality in people's lived experience has much resonance with feminist theology. Jeff

4 Irigaray 1993: 23.

5 Christ 1986; Plaskow 1980; Armstrong 1986.

Astley's definition of ordinary theology as 'an expression of a holistic, embodied faith' would be endorsed by many feminist theologians, though in practice his book takes very little account of feminist theology, devoting only two pages to the subject.[6] However these are links to be made by theologians rather than by literary critics and in my study I have kept the emphasis on feminist theology.

Nor is it my aim to survey feminist theology as a whole. Since most of my writers are writing out of a background of Western Christianity, this is the institutional religion which comes under scrutiny in this study, with occasional forays into Judaism and Native American spirituality. In the last two decades there has been such a flowering and diversity of feminist theology that, although the persistent conflation of feminist theology with *Christian* feminist theology remains problematic, there are grounds for regarding feminist theology as a global movement bringing women from very different cultures into dialogue.[7] In this book I have had, however, to omit detailed mention both of Asian feminist theology and of *mujerista* theology developed by Latina women theologians, in which much exciting work has been done, as this has not been relevant to the women writers on whom I have chosen to focus.

Feminist theology is a fluid field and indeed, since it bases itself on women's lived experience rather than unchanging metaphysical absolutes, it may always be so. It is certainly too early to provide a definitive assessment and in fact such an assessment would run counter to the feminist project of valuing diversity and fluidity. This introductory chapter claims to do no more, therefore, than sketch out some developments in feminist theology relevant to the following chapters.

6 See Astley 2002: 145.

7 For the intercultural nature of feminist theology, see Kwok Pui-Lan, 'Feminist Theology as Intercultural Discourse' in Parsons 2002: 23–39 but for a critique of feminist theology's lack of attention so far to religions other than Christianity, see Rita M. Gross, 'Feminist Theology as Theology of Religions', Parsons 2002: 60–78.

2. What is Feminist Theology?

Feminist theology is born out of women's experience. It is a new way of doing theology, not imprisoned by traditional disciplinary boundaries but rooted in women's praxis and concerned with the rights, dignity and economic and social liberation of women. It has resulted from the growth in female critical attention to religious texts written almost entirely, until the last few decades, by men. One of the questions women are asking is how do we weigh the literary inheritance of our religious pasts? How can we find a place in religious discourse for women?

Before the twentieth century there were women writers, notably Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich, who sought female images of the divine but what was lacking in their time was any possibility of a cultural critique of gender roles. By the nineteenth century, after the work of Mary Wollstonecraft and others, such a critique had started to become possible and American suffragists like Matilda Joslyn Gage in *Woman, Church, and State* (1893) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in *The Women's Bible* (1895) made thoroughgoing attacks on Christianity's sexism. These nineteenth-century beginnings of feminist theology remained largely dormant, however, until the 'second wave' feminism of the 1960s. In *Womanspirit Rising* (1979), Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow take as an early landmark in feminist theology Valerie Saiving's article, 'The Human Situation: A Feminine View' (1960). In this article, Saiving criticised Western theology for being male-centred and concentrating on sins and graces characteristic of male experience rather than female. She argued that an understanding of sin as pride, will to power and self-exaltation does not reflect the experiences of women whose sins may be more accurately described as triviality, distractability, dependence on others for self-definition, in other words, lack of self-esteem. Rather than exalting themselves, women are more liable to be guilty of self-