

MARJORIE PROCTER-SMITH

IN HER OWN RITE



CONSTRUCTING FEMINIST
LITURGICAL TRADITION

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In Her Own Rite:
Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

IN MEMORIAM

Marjorie Fredericks Procter

August 30, 1916–January 11, 1960

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this book is exploration. As a feminist and a student of liturgy and a teacher of worship, I have long been conscious of the cognitive dissonance between the commitments and values of the liturgical movement on the one hand and those of the feminist movement on the other. Feminist friends want to know “what’s a good feminist like you doing in a field like liturgical studies?” Colleagues in liturgical studies regard my interest in feminist thought as extrinsic or irrelevant to liturgical work. Although at times the dissonance has been subdued, of late I have been more and more aware of a need to bring, if not exactly harmony, at least an antiphonal, dialogical quality to the existence of these two important contemporary movements. This book has been brought into being by a desire to explore the possibilities of common ground and to identify areas of disagreement in order to begin a dialogue between feminism and liturgical studies.

The presupposition of this book is bold. It proceeds from what some will regard as an unwarranted assumption that such common ground exists and that dialogue is therefore possible. For me, no other position is feasible at present. By training and by personal inclination and conviction I am persuaded that the liturgical movement, at its best, has the potential for reforming the church of our day as dramatically as did the reformations of earlier centuries. I am convinced that such reformation is badly needed and will bear much fruit. On the other hand, I am always aware of the oppression of women in a patriarchal church and society. I am always aware that the world is not safe for women. Women are abused, achieve too little, and die too young. I am also aware of the church’s uneasy complicity in that suffering, and I am always appalled by the needlessness of it. I am convinced that the

feminist movement is causing a change of profound significance for the church's future. I am further convinced that to enable that movement is to hasten the church's healing and the healing of the church's witness to the world.

This bold assumption is not, however, merely an effort to relieve my own tensions over my discordant commitments. It is rather motivated by a desire to offer the gifts and insights of each movement to the other out of a twofold commitment to the church and to the women of the church. I am convinced that the combination of these two forces can initiate a profound change for the good in the church's identity and its mission, a change that must come if the church is to survive into the next century as a viable witness to the gospel. The reader must judge on the basis of what follows in the chapters of this book whether this assumption is warranted.

The contents are in some ways preliminary. Chapter 1 identifies some of the common ground that exists between feminism and the liturgical movement. The next chapter proposes a framework for taking up some of the basic issues which emerge and attempts to generate a feminist liturgical method for the purposes of interpretation. A valid liturgical method, it has been argued, must first attend to the function of liturgy, mindful that liturgy is rich and complex, and capable of expressing more than one meaning.¹ So I have identified what must surely be foundational to liturgical events in a Christian context: memory and imagination. A sound feminist method concerns itself with women's experience and with viewing a given subject or event through women's eyes. The resonances of these two actions, to remember and to imagine, are explored for women, who occupy a particular location in our society and in the church.

The following chapters, too, are exploratory and preliminary—or perhaps “primary” in the sense of “beginning.” I have identified the issues which seem to me to be most basic. Basic issues for the women's movement have been language about people and language and images for God (chapters 3 and 4). Feminists and liturgical scholars meet in mutual concern over the problem of the role of the Bible in liturgy and the nature of preaching (chapter 5).

Chapter 6 takes up what have been largely liturgical concerns, the sacraments of baptism and eucharist, in order to explore feminist liturgical perspectives on these formative Christian acts. The final chapter deals with developing feminist liturgical spirituality and addresses the relationship between liturgy and life from a feminist perspective.

Certainly much is left unaddressed by this book. The pressing and important question of ordination is set aside here, chiefly because it has generated such a large body of literature already that I am reluctant to add to it. The reader will perceive that the pages that follow assume full participation of women in liturgical presidency, and are less concerned with defending the practice in the abstract than with exploring its possibilities in connection with actual liturgical acts. But certainly there is room for much more reflection on the significance of women's liturgical presidency than is presently available. The same holds true for women as preachers. Related questions of leadership and authority also deserve further development.²

Especially important, and largely unexplored in these pages, is the recovery of women's liturgical history. A thorough reconsideration of women's liturgical roles and participation using feminist methods of retrieval and interpretation is called for. In particular, I am painfully aware of the absence in this study of serious invocation of our fore Sisters of the nineteenth-century women's movement, many of whom addressed some of the same questions that have motivated the writing of this book. I grieve over this gap in my education, and I am aware that if we knew our own history as women better, there would be less need to keep doing some of the same work over and over again.

Examples could be multiplied, and no doubt the reader will be able to supply a full list of unaddressed topics. But this is exactly as it should be. This book is preliminary in precisely this sense. If others find here directions, implications, and/or impulses for further work, this book will have achieved its purpose.

Although this book is a product of my own work, and I accept responsibility for its weaknesses as well as its strengths, I have been helped by many in the writing of it. Students in my classes at Perkins School of Theology have asked the right questions and

provoked me into asking yet more questions. The students in my class on Liturgy and Women's Experience at the Social Justice Institute in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, were prime movers in the writing of this book, since they knew I was going to write it before I did. In a way, it is really their book.

I am grateful to Davis Perkins, formerly of Abingdon Press, who responded to my proposal for this book with enthusiasm and support, and to Ulrike Guthrie, who has edited and shepherded the manuscript with grace and good will. Ann Ralston patiently typed and retyped the manuscript, corrected misspellings, and caught many errors.

My valued colleagues in the Feminist Liturgy Working Group of the North American Academy of Liturgy gave time, energy, constructive criticism, and enthusiasm to a discussion of the project. Carol Adams, Janet Walton, Mary Collins, Kathleen Hughes, and Teresa Mallott read and commented on early drafts with careful and critical eyes. Although I did not take all of their suggestions, the book is undoubtedly better for those I did take.

I am blessed with a generous and supportive family. Sterling Procter provided shelter and comforting food during the writing of several chapters. Jeremy Procter-Smith continues to model the kind of perseverance in the face of difficulty which is necessary not only to writing books but also to creating the kind of changes this book is about. George Procter-Smith is the true midwife of this book. He did proofreading and editing, but (more significantly) he literally made the writing of this book possible and the ideas in it believable by demonstrating what it means to be a woman-identified man.

This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother, a valiant woman.

Marjorie Procter-Smith
Perkins School of Theology
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Dallas, Texas
Saint Brigid's Day, 1989

CHAPTER ONE

“ARE THEY TRUE FOR US?”

Feminism and Christian Liturgy

In her poem “The Images,” Adrienne Rich laments the power of humanly created forms such as language, music, and art to disguise and to mystify oppression, to “reorganize victimization,” “translating violence into patterns so powerful and pure / we continually fail to ask are they true for us.”¹ It is this fundamental truth-question which motivates this beginning dialogue between feminist theology and liturgical theology.

Liturgy is certainly a humanly created form that is both powerful and pure. It is the result of a many-centuried process of encounter between God and human communities gathered together again and again in a particular but ever-changing historical context. Because liturgy is the evidence of this living process, it makes claims of truth. To be precise, the liturgy claims that when its work is being done, participants are engaging in a dialogue with God. The claim of encounter with God gives the liturgical event its power and its truth. Liturgical “truth,” then, is not at all an abstract or purely intellectual truth, but an engaged, embodied, and particular truth, a truth that cannot only be talked about, but must be done.

But now a new question must be asked of the liturgy and its claims to truth: is it true for us? Is liturgy one of the “forms created” indicted by Rich for their ability to “reorganize victimization”? Does the liturgy “translate violence” into beautiful forms, disguising its danger for women? The truth-question that Rich asks is also not abstract; it is a question about what is true *for us*, for women living in these times. And if the liturgy claims to reflect centuries of dialogue and

relationship between God and people, to what extent does it reflect the full participation of women in that dialogue and relationship? Or is our exclusion from the dialogue part of the process of our victimization? And if women have indeed been excluded from the dialogue, what will happen when we join it? That women intend to join the dialogue is evident on all sides. Theological discussions about scripture, tradition, history, and the fundamentals of the faith are slowly becoming discussions that are increasingly able to take account, at last, of women's experience, history, and lives. Women have begun to enter into that most foundational of theological dialogues, the liturgical one, as the publication of feminist liturgical resources and the ongoing discussion about the use of inclusive language in prayers and hymns demonstrate.

Our entry into this dialogue has been motivated by a sense of disaffection with traditional liturgy. Although the issue of inclusive language has received the greatest amount of public attention, the critique goes much deeper. Evident in many of the alternative liturgies produced by the feminist movement are a profound sense of betrayal by the church and grief for the loss of history and tradition. This sense of betrayal and loss is often expressed in the creation of litanies of names of women forgotten or misrepresented by traditional liturgies. We have entered this dialogue out of a desire to end the silence imposed on women in the church and on our traditions and our memories. What have we said? What have been our ~~contributions to the liturgical dialogue?~~

THE FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF PATRIARCHY

Feminists have pointed out ways in which the very nature of the dialogue has been shaped by the reality of patriarchal society and church. Defining patriarchy, as a male colleague once observed, is like a fish trying to define water. It is, he perceived, so much the natural environment in which we all live that it is almost impossible for us to see it. Yet if patriarchy is the water in which we live, then the water is toxic, especially

for women and for many men who are non-white, non-Western, or non-wealthy.

Patriarchy is a complex social structure built on the simple premise that only the free, propertied male is the citizen. Within such a structure, women, children, and slaves have no civil status of their own; such status as they do have is derived from that of the free male to whose household they belong. Terms such as father, husband, master, wife, son, daughter, and slave define patriarchal relationships within a patriarchal household. The father/husband/master, as the normative citizen, is “head” of this household. The traditional biblical concern for “the widow and the orphan” (where “fatherless” is a synonym for “orphan”) is a recognition by patriarchal society that the husbandless woman and fatherless child are entirely without power, status, or resources. They are dependent on the good will of society. The society on which they are dependent, of course, is the same one which has deprived them of independent status and means. Any aid that they receive from society thus must maintain their dependent status, since to alter the status of the woman or child would threaten patriarchal social structures themselves. The woman with no male “head” as father, husband, or master must remain anomalous in patriarchal society, an object of pity, scorn, or fear, or perhaps simply not seen, but never a person of status or identity.

Among men, status is distinguished by class, wealth, family connections, race, or profession. Thus some men rule not only over women and children, but also over men of lesser power and lower status. The result is a pyramidal structure with a few males at the top and the many with lesser or no status—women, children, and most men—at the bottom.]

Since the plausibility of such a social system is by no means self-evident, myriad means of maintenance and reinforcement are required to keep it in place. A foundational element in this effort is the idea of androcentrism. If the free male is the normative citizen in a patriarchal social/political system, the male human must be the normative human being in the accompanying system of ideas and values. If the male is the

normative human being, the measure of all things, the female must at best be derivative and secondary, at worst abnormal and dangerous or fearsome. The man is human; the woman must be "Other." Moreover, if the male human is the normative human, the existence of the female then must be explained and defined in terms that make her different from the male. Since in fact the physiological differences between male and female are minor, they must be magnified, emphasized, and made into the whole definition of woman. So the woman is defined by her childbearing function and sexuality. Female sexuality and maternity, as defined by patriarchy, are simultaneously sources of women's identities and signs of their inherent weaknesses, and are to be regarded with a measure of fear and revulsion by men and women alike. Women's own experiences of their sexuality and maternity, as perhaps including delight, awe, or joy, are excluded from the definition.

Androcentric reality is constructed and sustained by the subtle means of symbols and language. Language that reflects the assumption that the male is the norm, that "man" means "person" and "person" means "man," renders women invisible or marginal. Linguistically, women appear as exceptions or problems. Symbolically, women represent sexuality, maternity, and thus perhaps physicality, nature, and natural processes. The indifference of natural processes to patriarchal definitions and structure is defined as anarchy and thus something to be controlled and subdued, to be "mastered," as women, children, and lower-status men must be. Allowing only men into the public sphere has symbolic as well as political consequences. The male presence—voice, body, manner—becomes the "representative" and "public" person, a figure capable of bearing the weight of representing the human race or some smaller collectivity which includes, even if marginally, women and children. The female presence in the public sphere in anything other than a supportive role is rendered illegitimate. A female figure in an androcentric environment cannot bear the symbolic weight of representing the entire human race, in spite of the fact that women in reality do bear