RELIGION AND GENDER: THE CRITICAL AND CONSTRUCTIVE TASKS

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The relation between religion and gender is an exceptionally broad topic. I am going to approach the subject from the perspective of my own field, feminist theology. While this choice is partly a matter of my own competence and convenience, it is also an appropriate one because feminist theology first raised the issue of the relationship between religion and gender. Valerie Saiving's groundbreaking article "The Human Situation: A Feminine View" (published in 1960)[1] was the first piece in the second feminist wave to argue that gender matters in the field of religion.

Saiving's article focused on modern Protestant theologians' doctrines of sin and grace. She pointed out that while these doctrines claim to be formulated from a universal perspective, in fact, they are formulated from the perspective of male experience and thus are largely irrelevant to the experience of women. Over and above the specifics of Saiving's argument, its enduring contribution was the point that the sexual location of the theologian affects theological thought and that the overwhelming majority of theologians throughout history have been men.

Since Valerie Saiving's article was published twenty-eight years ago, feminist theology has clarified and elaborated the implications of gender for religion in relation to three major areas. First of all, feminist theology has addressed the distortion to religious systems produced by androcentrism--male-centeredness, or the male naming of reality. Noting the large number of horrific statements about women to be found in the literature of the Jewish and Christian tradition, feminist theologians have argued that they express not simply the eccentricity or misogyny of individuals within these traditions, but rather are linked to a systematic androcentrism in Judaism and Christianity. Second, not content to stop with male ideas about women, feminist theologians have also asked how historical thinking might be realigned if gender became a central category of analysis. They have moved, in other words, from male images of women, to recovery of a positive history of women within patriarchal traditions. Feminist theologians have looked both at "great women" within Judaism and Christianity and the ways they have contributed

to important male movements, and toward a more subversive view of women's history that tries to recover the lives of ordinary Jewish and Christian women in various periods. Third, and perhaps most importantly, feminist theologians have drawn attention to the importance of gender in constructive work. They have attempted to rethink central categories of religious thought and experience by incorporating women's experience into our understanding of religious life. I would like to illustrate these three areas of concern with examples from Jewish feminism.

Feminist Theology as Critique

Feminist theology is always critical theology. It exposes the distortions brought about in particular religious traditions by the assumption that maleness is normative. In Simone de Beauvoir's terms, men define what it means to be human, while women are defined over against the male as "other." Feminist theology begins with the androcentrism of tradition, not out of a theoretical conviction that this is a proper place to begin, but because of the real pain women experience in dealing with our subordination and marginalization. Feminist theology begins in experience. It begins with the experience of women longing to fulfill roles which were or are simply unavailable: the longing to be a rabbi, or a priest, or a minister. It begins with the sense of linguistic exclusion that arises when we pray to God and the God of our fathers, or talk about brothers in Christ, of Sons of God--the use of male language that systematically leaves women on the margins. For Jewish feminists pain at the androcentrism of tradition begins often with the legal disabilities that affect women's religious and communal roles: the fact that in traditional Judaism women are not counted in a minyan (the quorum of ten required for worship); the fact that traditionally (it is changing), women have been excluded from religious leadership within Judaism. The family laws within Judaism have had a devastating impact on women. For example, according to the Jewish law, only a man can write a bill of divorce. If a couple is civilly divorced, and the man refuses to give his wife a Jewish divorce, according to Jewish law, she can never remarry.

These experiences of exclusion become part of a theological analysis when women realize that such experiences are not sociological accidents, nor distractions from an authentic liberating core of tradition. The individual disabilities of women emerge out of a fundamentally androcentric understanding of reality. In other words, Christian women begin to think theologically when they connect individual negative statements about women with a whole set of hierarchical dualisms that pervade the Christian tradition: men over women, mind over body, God over the world, and so on. Similarly, Jewish feminists begin to think theologically when they realize that

the fundamental categories of Jewish thought--Torah, Israel, God--are formulated from a male perspective.

Torah within Judaism has many meanings. Its basic meaning is the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses, but it comes to include the whole of Jewish learning. However we define Torah, in its narrow or broad sense, the paradigm of the androcentrism of Torah lies at its very center. In Exodus 19, which describes the descent of God onto Sinai and the preparation of the Jewish community to enter into the covenant, Moses suddenly turns to the people and says "be ready on the third day--do not go near a woman" (Exodus 19:15). The specific issue at stake is the ritual impurity brought about by seminal emission. Moses, however, does not say, "Men and women do not go near each other." At the crucial moment of Jewish history, the community is addressed only through its male members. I do not believe Moses' words mean that women were absent from Sinai. Rather the significance of Moses' statement is that it demonstrates the neglect of women's history and experience. It is not women's history that has been passed down to us. Our view of women in Torah is filtered through male eyes and circumscribed by male concerns.

The flip side of the androcentrism of Torah is the androcentrism of Israel. The exclusion of women at the crucial point of entry into the covenant points to the subordinate status of women in the Jewish community. In fact, in the Bible, Israel is defined as male heads of household. Women are members of the community of Israel through membership in a particular patriarchal family. As daughters, as wives, their relationship to the community is mediated through particular men.

Finally, the exclusion of women's perspective from the Torah is reinforced and legitimated by the notion that Torah is the gift of a male deity. God himself legislates and defends patriarchy. In saying this, I refer to the overwhelming maleness of the imagery for God that we find both in the biblical and rabbinic traditions. The language and the images that we use to speak about God are taken from what we value. When we use particular images to speak of God, we are both saying something about God and underscoring the value of those qualities. When we say God is just, for example, we are both teaching ourselves something about God's nature and raising up the quality of justice as one to be emulated in our own lives. When we refer to God as male, we are legitimating and raising up male power as a model for the Jewish community and, therefore, our society.

This first task of feminist theology, of documenting the systematic androcentrism of particular religious traditions, is an extremely painful and difficult one. Not surprisingly, perhaps, this is where many women have simply turned their backs on the religions of their upbringing. Many women have either closed off the

religious side of themselves or decided not to struggle in contexts that seem stacked against women, and have moved to create some post-traditional religious contexts. Women's spirituality groups, for example, are emerging in many areas of the country, reflecting women's need for a woman-centered spirituality.

Reclaiming Women's History

Those of us who decide to work within our tradition, while we never complete the task of documenting the androcentrism of tradition, nevertheless often move on to a different place. Although we believe it is important to continue to name the ways in which religion has been distorted by sexism, we also affirm that this sexism is not the only reality. However women have been defined by a particular tradition, women have, in fact, been subjects and actors in Jewish and Christian history. Whenever we accept the male image of women as a reality--whenever we accept the "map" that Torah gives us as the territory--there is a sense in which we concur in the erasure of women from the historical record. When we accept patriarchal texts as giving us the totality of women's experience, we become collaborators in erasing the long history of women's struggles. Therefore, we need to move on to the second stage of feminist theology.

This second stage is in its beginnings and has proved tremendously exciting and empowering. As one feminist historian has put it, "to recover women's history, it is not sufficient simply to add women and stir." We cannot maintain traditional frameworks for understanding history and simply fit women in. We cannot construct the Talmudic period as we did in earlier times, only now also include Bruria. We cannot just mention several famous women reformers when we talk about the Reformation. We engage in a much more dramatic reconfiguration of religious history, asking, "What would this period look like, what would this movement look like, what would this text look like if we were to take women's experience seriously?"

A few examples of feminist approaches to Jewish history indicate the kinds of questions that have been asked. Archaeologist Carol Meyers has studied the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible) in order to reveal the changing patterns of male/female relations throughout the biblical period.[2] She argues that what the Bible offers is not an eternal and unchanging view of male/female relations, but rather a series of perspectives on male/female status and roles that shift with changing social, economic, and religious conditions. According to Meyers, archaeological research from the period of early Israelite settlement indicates that this period was one of both endemic disease and repeated plague. Precisely at the point that Israel would have needed a substantial population to enter into new territories and settle them, the population would have been continually threatened. She hypothesizes on the basis of

this evidence that women's contribution to child-bearing and agriculture would have been vital in this period. She suggests that if we assume that childbearing belongs to women and war to men, then economic contribution is the balancing factor, and women's crucial contribution to agriculture would have led to relative equality between men and women in the period of early settlement. It was only later with the monarchy, when women's economic contribution became less necessary, that we begin to see ideological justification of women's subordination within Judaism. What is important in Meyers' argument, more than any specific detail, is the notion that we need to look at the changing relation between the sexes in various periods of biblical history.

Bernadette Brooten, a New Testament scholar at Harvard, has written a very interesting book on the scriptural evidence for women's leadership in the ancient synagogue.[3] Brooten examines a whole series of inscriptions from the first to the sixth centuries that refer to women as president of the synagogue, mother of the synagogue, elder, leader, and the most enigmatic title, priestess. These titles have been known for a long time, but they have been interpreted by andocentric historians as honorary when applied to women. In other words, when a man is called president of the synagogue in ancient inscriptions, it means that he is president of the synagogue. When a woman is called president of the synagogue it means she is the wife of the president of the synagogue! In New Testament scholarship, when a man is called a deacon, it means that he is a deacon. When a woman is called a deacon, it means she is the wife of a deacon! Brooten counters this interpretation by pointing out that there is not a shred of internal evidence to support it. Quite the contrary. Sometimes the wives of male presidents of synagogues are named. In some cases where women are named presidents of synagogues, their husbands are named; and in other cases their husbands are not named, suggesting that probably the women were single. Brooten proposes that we shift the burden of proof. Unless we have clear evidence that when a woman is called the president of the synagogue it means something different from when a man is given the same title, we should suppose that women were presidents of synagogues in the ancient world. In other words, we cannot assume that our present sexual arrangement has always been the norm and simply project our own views into remote historical periods. It is not the case that the first woman president of a synagogue emerged in 1963, or whenever that particular date was. Brooten's work shows that women held such positions in the ancient world.

Unfortunately, much of the evidence concerning women's history has to be read between the lines of male documents. As we get to the modern period,

however, we begin to find material that actually comes from women's hands. Chava Weissler, a Judaica scholar at Lehigh, has been, for the last several years, studying the *tekhines*, a category of devotional literature for women coming from the early modern and modern period of Judaism.[4] She has used this literature to try to construct a picture of Eastern European women's spirituality. The *tekhines* present a complex picture of women's roles. In part, they conform to what we would expect of women's spirituality within Judaism. They give us a spirituality that is private and home-oriented. In contrast to the liturgy of the synagogue, which usually speaks in a communal voice, the *tekhines* are written in the first person, so that each woman speaks in her individual voice. The *tekhines* are often about daily things: a prayer for an angel to protect a child from illness, prayers said at the cemetery where women talk to their dead. Many of the *tekhines* revolve around the three commandments that are special to women: need for purification after a menstrual period, lighting candles, baking the hallah and taking a bit of the hallah dough. The *tekhines* do not simply delineate a separate sphere for women within Judaism, however, they also provide learning tools that give women access to aspects of the tradition that would otherwise be unavailable to them. Some of the *tekhines* clearly draw on early mystical materials and transform them. There is one very interesting *tekhine* on baking hallah, for example, in which the woman baking sees herself as the high priest making an offering in the temple. Thus women assimilate to themselves a major role within the Jewish tradition.

All material is significant, not simply because it supplies us with new information--although it is delightful to have this new information--but because it allows us to re-evaluate normative sources. For example, the titles and roles that Bernadette Brooten discusses are contemporary with the Mishnah, an important second century legal code that forms the basis of the Talmud. The Mishnah constructs a world in which women are "other." The fact that the Mishnah is divided into six orders, one of which is called "Women," reveals that women are a special category. There is no order of Mishnah called "Men," because the whole Mishnah is about men. The Mishnah is concerned with women only as they represent a problem for society. A woman leaving her father's house to marry or leaving her husband's house after a divorce is in a period of transition that is potentially disruptive to a stable and sacralized patriarchal order, and she must be brought back within the safety of that order. Where the Mishnah is the basis of the legal system, as it is in modern Orthodoxy, women's legal disabilities must be dealt with in the framework of a system that marginalizes women. For example, the Jewish community has long been concerned about women's right to divorce and the fate of a woman whose

husband will not divorce her. The solution to women's problems, however, has always been sought within the framework of a system that insists that divorce has to be male initiated. Once we know, however, that women were taking on leadership roles in the Jewish community precisely in the period that the Mishnah was written; and once we say that this evidence, too, is part of Torah, the world view of the Mishnah is relativized, and we have a different and richer history on the basis of which to think through solutions to contemporary problems. Feminist theology, in other words, challenges us to rethink the nature of Judaism--or Christianity--on the basis of inclusion of what have, up until this point, been excluded pieces.

The Constructive Task

If inclusion of women's experience has the power to shift our view of the past, it has even greater power to shift our view of the present and the future. I would like to return to the central categories of Torah, Israel, and God and suggest how they might begin to change when we reconceptualize them from the perspective of women's experience.

I. Torah. In expanding the scope of Jewish history, we already begin to change Torah. For essentially, Torah is Jewish memory as it lives on and shapes the present. Martin Buber has pointed out the tremendous importance of memory in Jewish life. The Jewish community, he says, is a community based on memory. The spiritual life of the Jewish people is part and parcel of our collective memory. For this reason there has never been any significant change in Jewish history that is not accompanied by a reshaping of memory. To give one small, but clarifying example, in Genesis 18, three angels come to Abraham's tent to tell him that he is going to have a child at the age of ninety-nine. Abraham runs to his fields and kills a kid and serves it to his angelic visitors with milk and whey. Those familiar with dietary laws will know that traditional Jews cannot have milk and meat together. The sages, reading this passage many centuries later, said that first Abraham served the angels milk and then he served them meat, a practice that the dietary laws permits. In so interpreting the text, they reconstructed the past according to the changing values and experience of the present.

In line with this age-old pattern of reinterpretation, the recovery of women's history and the entry of women into the Jewish community necessitates the reshaping of Jewish memory so that we begin to remember the history of Jewish women as part of Jewish history. Our understanding of Torah is partial. Torah gives us the God-wrestling of men within the Jewish community. What Jewish women heard at Sinai we have yet to discover. In recovering women's Torah, we use not just

historical scholarship, but also the important tool of midrash. To quote Monique Wittig:

> There was a time when you were not a slave, remember that you walked alone, full of laughter, You bathed bare-bellied. You say you have lost all recollection of it, Remember . . . you say that there are no words to describe this time, you say it does not exist. But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent.[5]

Midrash gives us the license to invent. The rabbinic reconstruction of history was not historiographical, but midrashic; the rabbis were not interested in what "truly happened." They were not looking for documents that could prove what Abraham really fed the angels. They were bringing their own history and experience to biblical texts and re-interpreting the Bible. They were asking their own questions and bringing the texts forward in light of those questions. The story of Lilith, for example, emerges from a discrepancy between the creation story as told in Genesis 1 and in Genesis 2. In Genesis 1, male and female are created simultaneously. In Genesis 2, Eve is created from Adam's rib. The rabbis, seeking to reconcile these two versions of creation, suggest that Adam had a first wife, Lilith, who was created at the same time as he. Lilith, however, was banished from the garden because she refused to be subordinated to Adam. In revenge, she became a demon who killed children. As women begin to do midrash on our own behalf, the rabbinic picture of Lilith changes. In the myth about Lilith that I wrote many years ago, Lilith is not a demon but rather a free woman who is called a demon by a partriarchal tradition that cannot deal with a woman claiming her own power.[6]

Thus lacking the record of women's experience at Sinai, through midrash, we create it. Granted, there is a difference between creating a modern midrash and finding inscriptions that refer to women presidents of synagogues. Midrash is solely an imaginative construction. Artifacts have an objective reality that confronts us and forces us to realign our thinking. Taken together, however, they begin to give us a Jewish memory in which women are fully present.

II. Israel. The commitment to unveiling women's experience as an integral part of Jewish history reflects also a new understanding of Israel. Traditionally, Israel has been defined as the male members of the community. Feminists have insisted on an understanding of Israel that includes women and men. The inequalities of women in Judaism have been at the center of the feminist critique. Feminists have insisted on equal access for women to the institutions and ceremonies of Jewish life. Theoretically, this insistence on equality seems very simple; it is only the practice that is difficult! But as one approaches the issue of equality a little more deeply, it proves more complicated than initially it appears.

First of all, the exclusion of Jewish women from public religious life is a spiritual one. While both public and private prayer have always been important in Judaism, the tradition has a definite bias on behalf of public prayer. Certain crucial prayers cannot be recited without a minyan (a quorum) because God is considered present in the midst of community in a different way from the way in which God is present among individuals. In one midrash, God is angry when God comes to a synagogue and does not find a minyan there. "Why, when I called, was there no one there?" It is almost as if, without the community, God does not recognize God's own people. The presence of God in community has also been very real in the experience of many feminists. Many women have come to feel that as we discover in feminist community our voices and our power as women, we also discover a connection to a grounding and sustaining power that is much greater than ourselves. The experience of being an agent in community has a transcendent reference. To quote Richard R. Niebuhr (out of context):

> It entails consciousness of liberation into the stream of life, a sense of collectiveness, a feeling of the union of one's own power with power and energy itself, and, finally, a sense of effectiveness and recognition as an agent in a human commonwealth that transcends the present.[7]

The feminist experience of connection with God in community has made it very clear to Jewish feminists that the exclusion of women from full participation in the public religious life of the Jewish community means exclusion from an important dimension of religious experience, apart from exclusion from this or that particular role.

Secondly, the inclusion of women with Judaism entails a new understanding of community, because Jewish feminists are asking for *equality of women.* This is exactly the same demand that Jews have always made on the wider society--a demand never entirely realized. We have wanted to be English or French or American as Jews. We have wanted to be full members of the community in our particularity as Jews. Yet again and again Jews have been told that our equality is contingent on our relinquishing our particularity. And this is exactly what the Jewish community tells Jewish women. Women have been offered equality within liberal Judaism if we will only reliquish our particularity as women. If we accept Judaism as it has been defined by the Reform movement at a given time, or the Conservative movement at a given time, we are welcome--welcome even to serve as rabbis in a male-defined tradition. If we want to bring our experience as women into the tradition, however, then our equality becomes much more complex and controversial. Then we must begin to grapple as a community with the whole issue of what it means to respect difference without hierarchalizing it. Then we must find ways of

conceptualizing difference that perceive it as enriching, without construing difference as more and less.

III. God. The attempt to articulate a new vision of community is linked in turn to the reconceptualization of the divine. Like traditional ways of dealing with difference, traditional images of God have been patterned on and reinforced a whole set of hierarchies. A very important aspect of the feminist project--not simply in religion but in every field--has been the attempt to redefine power, including divine power as empowerment rather than domination. The power of God is not something over us, but something in and around us. The power of God is a power that elicits our power and that we know and can fully enter into covenant with only when we experience ourselves as empowered. Issues of gender and power in images of God are partly connected and partly separate from each other. Jewish feminists, like feminists in other traditions, first experimented with God-language by changing the gender of God in liturgy, by referring to God as "she," as "a woman of war," as "queen of the universe," as "mother," or as any number of other female images. Such experiments are important because they force us to confront the fact that we have been worshipping maleness in worshipping God. Changes in images of God offer us positive images of female power. They open up our symbolic imaginations. But at the same time, such images make clear that it is possible to have a female deity who is also a dominating power over others.

Recent Jewish feminist liturgical experimentation has linked gender change to a changed conception of God. The challenge to Jewish feminism, as I see it, is to find images of God that clearly name the presence of God in community. A central experience, perhaps *the* central experience that Judaism and feminism share, is that it is in community with other human beings in history that we know God in a uniquely profound and significant way. Too often the images that are drawn from Jewish community that we use to conceptualize God are precisely those images of domination that appear in the liturgy. If what we name God is what we value, then it is important to find ways to name God as the ground of an empowered egalitarian community. In God as our friend, lover, companion, co-creator, we have a God who is with us in the midst of community, challenging us to create communities that will come closer and closer to ideals and norms of justice.

Feminist theologians have been claiming in many different ways that gender matters, and that there is an interpenetration of different layers of feminist discourse and concern. Criticism of patriarchal religion sets an initial agenda. It starts us on the path toward new ways of acting and thinking. Recovering a positive history of women provides resources on which to draw in the reconstruction of our

communities in the present. Both these stages are taken up and transformed as women become molders and shapers of a tradition that must change in the present to reflect our presence.

NOTES

1. Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, eds. *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), pp. 25-42.

2. See, e.g., Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

3. Bernadette Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogues* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982).

4. Chava Weissler, "The Traditional Piety of Askenazic Women," in Arthur Green, ed., *Jewish Spirituality: From the Sixteenth Century to the Present* (New York: Crossroads, 1987), pp. 245-75.

5. *Les Guereilleres* (New York: Avon, 1969), p. 89.

6. "The Coming of Lilith: Toward a Feminist Theology," in *Womanspirit Rising*, pp. 198-209.

7. *Experimental Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 101.