Talking Back: Feminist Theology and Education People for Others

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol30/iss1/27
Feminist Theology and Educating People for Others: A Personal Perspective

By Tim Wadkins

My wife and I have two young children. Zachary is four and Abigail is two. It is an understatement to say that they are different. I must admit we were very surprised that they seemed to have come out of the womb with stereotypical gender characteristics. It is not just that Zach likes Bob the Builder and Abby prefers little Dora. It is rather that they often see the same things and imagine them differently. Sometimes Abby likes to play with Zach’s toys, but unlike her brother, who delights to see them crash and pretend they are armed with weapons, she prefers to put little people in them who take trips, and, in two year old gibberish, have lively conversations. Watching my daughters I am constantly reminded that women, perhaps partly because of their experiences in the world and partly because they have different genetic wiring, tend to interpret reality through relational lenses that many men find difficult to wear.

It is commensurable that the quantitative rise of women as faculty, administrators and students was highlighted in the last issue of Conversations; particularly because right up until the mid twentieth century women were virtually absent from Jesuit institutions of higher learning. I was particularly struck by Barbara J. Busse’s essay on the need for listening to women and her point that ‘it is impossible to listen to those not present.’ Very true. Nevertheless, I was disappointed that the issue focused primarily on quantitative presence rather than qualitative influence. It said almost nothing about how the Jesuit educational enterprise has been affected by the voices and values of feminist scholars.

I am certainly not an authority on these affects. But I can speak autobiographically, as a man and as a theological historian at a Jesuit institution, about how feminist perspectives have fundamentally altered and continue to affect how I perceive the world, what I teach and write about, and even how I relate to my wife and children. If my story is even a small reflection of a larger narrative being played out at other Jesuit institutions, it strikes me that feminist perspectives have already and will continue to positively infiltrate, challenge, and reshape the way we undertake the task of educating men and women for others.

MINE is not some kind of Pauline conversion story, as though from the moment that I first encountered feminist theology I immediately shed the scales of patriarchal blindness. But if I...
have become more feminist, it did begin in a rather abrupt way. In 1988 I was a PhD candidate and an adjunct professor at Santa Clara University’s religious studies pro-
gram, hired to teach Introduction to Christian theology. Since I was an historian, I felt rather confident that I could survey the develop-
ment of ecclesiastical institutions, the ideas of prominent theolo-
gians, and major doctrinal contro-
versies, all of which were neatly laid out in such classics as Williston Walker’s History of the Christian Church (1938, now in 4th edition). Although I unconscionably imagined the Christian tradition, as, in the words of Robert Bellarmine, S.J., primarily “A Company of Men,” I was begin-
ing to be aware of the growing complaint by my women col-
leagues that such treatments left out the contributions of women. In deference to their concerns, I decided to add the recently pub-
ished Women and the Word, by Sandra Schneiders from the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley. This book is slender in pages but it was not slight in its jarring chal-
lenge to my naive assumptions about God, Creation, Christ, the Bible, and social reality!

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What particularly caught my attention was Schneiders’ analysis of the imagination in human con-
structions of reality and her point that patriarchy has been the major lens through which the West has imagined the world. Reality as we know it, says Schneiders, is not just an empirical given; it is rather a dynamic relationship between what actually exists and the way humans imagine or interpret it. Because of this, human perception of “the way things are” is greatly affected by experience, and expe-
riences are not static—they can change across cultures, between sexes, and over time as new insights replace old ones. Schneiders goes on to say that tra-
ditionally, the fundamental per-
ception of reality in Western histo-
ry was rooted in patriarchy, a mas-
culine power structure, believed to be created by and permanently fixed by the Divine male patriarch, as the way in which all relation-
ships were to be understood.

I was not completely numb to feminist concerns. I believed that women had been historically mar-
ginalized by men. I was beginning
to agree that that some parts of the Bible, especially the writings of St. Paul, were tainted by misog-
yny. But I had never pondered the extent to which the dominant-
subservient model derived from patriarchy had become the inter-
pretive basis for all relational sys-
tems in Western history: man over woman, parent over child, master over slave, clergy over pew-
ioner, teacher over student, cul-
ture over creation, empire over colony, etc. Nor had I ever con-
sidered the extent to which this model had been the basic interpretive principle within the Bible and Christian tradition, rendering God as a male father figure who enjoys absolute power over sub-
servient creation and persons, who bequeaths a son who is the male savior and model of true humanity, and who, in turn, places all males over females, and puts some males in charge of all lower ranks in the hierarchical order of society.

This insight, shared within the growing ranks of feminist the-
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ologists and liberation theologians at the time, became for me the beginning of what Schneiders would call "a therapy of the imagination," challenging, as it did, almost everything I took for granted within Christian history and theology. Since then my theological horizons have gradually expanded, often because of conversations and committee work with women colleagues, and often because of other feminist scholars — Rosemary Radford Reuther, Elizabeth Johnson, Sally McFague, Caroline Merchant, Caroline Walker Bynum, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, to name only a few. I have not always agreed with them. As with other interpretive grids, I think feminist theology sometimes fails to see complexity and reduces everything to the patriarchal construction of the world. Nevertheless, the fundamental insights of feminists about the pervasive, victimizing effects of patriarchy and their articulation of a more relational and egalitarian way of looking at the world have been the primary catalysts in my theological, ethical, and pedagogical development over the past two decades.

Because of feminist insights my attitudes about the way in which God relates to the world have changed. Far more than an aloof, often angry, transcendent father who dominates a subservient and neutered creation, I have begun to appreciate the feminist notion of a mother God who lives in organic unity with the world — a God who can be known sacramentally in and through and by the creation. This natural theology also has enabled me to face pressing ecological issues with more theological conviction. Can we easily cut up, dig up, bomb, and pour our waste into a world that embodies God? I have also begun, in the words of Marcus Borg, to see Jesus again for the first time. Far different than the traditional image of Jesus—the male savior who complements the status quo of male dominance — the Jesus of the synoptic gospels is a prophet who rages against the status quo, and, in doing so, models a different kind of masculinity. As Rosemary Reuther points out in her classic essay Care a Male Savior Save Women?, "Jesus proclaims an iconoclastic reversal of the system of religious status... The leaders of the religious establishment are blind guides and hypocrites. Instead the outcasts of society are able to hear the message of this prophet. The reversal of the social order doesn't just turn hierarchy upside down; it aims at a new reality in which hierarchy and dominance are overcome as principles of social relations."

Because of feminist insights my teaching has taken a different turn. My survey of the Western Christian tradition, for example, is now peppered with critical awareness that the "story" of Christianity was written by and about European white males and their institutions. My teaching now includes the underside of this portrait—those who were left out of the picture—the poor, women, and most people from the southern hemisphere. If, in my courses, I now de-center white men and the West, I have also begun to think that in the pedagogical process itself, the professor needs to be de-centered. Increasingly, I have opted for a style of teaching that could be termed experiential, where the professor is a leader in an otherwise egalitarian learning community and where students are often removed from the classroom and from an exclusive reliance on abstract ideas and immersed in situations where people actually practice religion.

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Finally, my understanding of what it means to be a man and a father has been stretched. Along with my wife, who is the primary feminist influence on my life, I am trying to raise our children to be "people for others" in attitude and deeds—as Christians who are committed to the world, who are shaped by egalitarian values of radical kindness, and who function as creative participants rather than consumers and competitors in a system of dominance. Not only is my teaching increasingly shaped by this emphasis, I want my son to learn that real men do not need to dominate and control everything they touch, that they can solve conflicts through the values of servant leadership modeled by Jesus, and that they do not have to employ their toys, pretend or real and dangerous, for preemptive strikes or as weapons of mass destruction.