

The Development of Feminist Theology: Becoming Increasingly Global and Interfaith

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The common image of feminism is that it is a modern western development. Feminist theology is seen as arising out of modern liberal Christianity in the West, especially the United States. The reality, however, is much more complex. Christian feminists would see a warrant for equality between men and women arising from the beginning of the Christian movement, in statements such as that of St. Paul, “there is neither male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus,” (Gal. 4:29). This vision has been rediscovered and reinterpreted again and again.

In 17th century England, religious movements, such as the Society of Friends (Quakers), reaffirmed the equality of women with men in Christ and gave women an equal role in ministry. Anglican women at that time agitated for equal access of women to high education. French women in the late 18th century struggled to include women in the “rights of man and the citizen.” In the United States women involved in the movement to abolish slavery, such as Angelina and Sarah Grimke and Lucretia Mott in the 1840s, insisted that God created women and men as equal partners in creation. Social relations in both the church and the state should be reformed to give women equal rights and roles. In 1848 these abolitionist feminists convened the first Women’s Rights Convention to rewrite the American Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights to include women equally.

Other cultures and religious traditions can also find women leaders in past centuries who contributed to creative literature and founded social movements. There have also been male teachers who have sought to modify the severity of women’s subordination and to affirm women’s rights as human beings. Feminist historians in many cultures, such as China, the Arab world and African indigenous traditions, are at work finding and reclaiming these earlier roots for women’s rights in their historical traditions.

With this background in mind I trace the development of feminist theology in the last forty-five years. I will start with one particular context of this development in

Christianity in the United States, but also demonstrate how within a decade feminist theology was becoming global and inter-religious. These developments quickly found a responsive cord in Asia, in Latin America and in Africa, and among Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu women. Parallel developments were also happening in Europe. Many budding feminists from the United States in the 1960s had been inspired by French feminists, such as Simone de Beauvoir, whose two volume work, The Second Sex, was published in 1949.

Thus I start my story in the east coast of the United States in the late 1960s, not because it is the only source of feminist theology, but because it is my own roots and also an important and influential part of the story. The rediscovery and new development of feminist theology in the US in this period was the fruit of two interacting movements, the civil rights movement and the feminist movement. Just as 19th century US women had been shaped by abolitionism, and then discovered women's liberation in the context of their struggle against slavery, so in the 1960s US women rediscovered feminism in the context of the struggle against anti-Black racism. Other liberation movements, such as the anti-war, anti-imperialist movements, the gay rights movement and the American Indian movement, also flowed from the civil rights movement in this period.

Feminism developed its theological expression primarily in Protestant theological seminaries of liberal denominations, such as Congregationalists, Methodists, Presbyterians and Lutherans, as these churches began to ordain women in growing numbers. Interestingly enough, Methodist and Presbyterian male church leaders had decided to ordain women before there was a feminist movement in their churches. Feminist theology developed as a response as women claimed this new role and possibility. As more and more women began to come to seminaries, aware that they could now be ordained, they began to demand women faculty and a feminist revision of the curriculum to respond to women's needs in theological education and the church. A feminist rereading of theology, Biblical Studies, church history, ethics, pastoral psychology and ethics began to emerge in theological schools. As these developments found their way into publications, such as my book, Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology (1983), they became resources for feminist religious studies in seminaries and colleges, as well as reading groups in churches.

The work of US feminist theologians, such as Elizabeth Fiorenza, Letty Russell and myself, quickly transcended US borders and were read in other continents. In Latin America feminism had its beginnings in the late 19th century in the struggle for women's suffrage. It was redeveloped in the 1970s, but was generally secular and hostile to the church. Christian women were engaged in liberation theology, but were steered away from feminism. Feminist theology in Latin America dawned as Christian women, whose critical consciousness was awakened by liberation theology, began to ask gender questions, and found resources to help them develop their own reflection from resources coming from the US and Europe.

The second major development in US feminist theology arose in the late 70s and 80s, as more and more women "of color," African-Americans, Asians, especially Koreans, Hispanics, began to take their place in American theological education. These women began to criticize the lack of racial consciousness in the feminist theology they found among their white teachers and fellow students. They rebelled against the tendency to speak as if "all women were alike," and shared a common experience of gender discrimination, "as women." Rather, the context of this experience came from middle class white female American Christians.

These women of "color" began to coin new names for their theological reflection in the context of their distinct female ethnic histories. African-Americans called themselves "womanists," and some Hispanics adopted the parallel term "mujeristas." Korean feminist drew from Korean minjung theology and began to speak of "women's han" to name their distinctive experiences of suffering in their society, and to talk of Korean women as the "minjung of the minjung."

Despite this critique by women seminarians of "color," it should not be supposed that leading Euro-American feminist theologians simply lacked sensitivity to race and class critique. Several such women, by then on the faculties of theological schools, such as myself, Letty Russell and Beverley Harrison, had come out of the civil rights movement, and had long spoken of the interconnection of class, race and gender hierarchies. Generally these teachers were well disposed to embrace the critiques coming from womanists, and other women of "color," and they promoted them as faculty.

A new generation of Black, Latina and Asian feminist began to take their place on theological faculties, and their writings became a part of the mandatory literature of American feminist theology. It was soon accepted that a socially progressive faculty should not simply have a few feminist women on the faculty, but these women should come from several ethnic groups, Euroamerican, African-American, Asian, Latina. The writings of these women, and their presence on the global lecture circuit, in turn, had their influence on the budding feminism in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

It follows then that very soon, by the late 70s and 80s, one began to see an international diversification of Christian feminist theologies in Latin America, Asia and Africa. Feminist theology generally arose in the circles of theologically educated women involved in liberation theology. These women were dismayed when their male colleagues resisted any incorporation of gender within their model of social analysis. Sparked by both secular feminist movements in their own societies and reading first world feminists, these third world women began to insist that male liberation theologians expand their social critique to include issues of women's oppression. They were not impressed when their male colleagues responded by claiming that feminism is a "first world bourgeois issue" and did not apply to third world women!

Third world Christian feminists began to insist at global meetings of liberation theologians that they needed their own women's organization to contextualize feminist theology for their regional contexts. Aided by the World Council of Churches that provided funding, they organized a Women's Commission within the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) and developed a series of meetings, first national, then continental and finally global, to discuss what feminist theology would mean for them in each of their regions. This series of meetings took place between 1985 and 1994. This Women's Commission continues to exist and to meet parallel to the more general meetings of EATWOT which the women also attend. Each of the three regions, Asia, Africa and Latin America, have worked to deepen their networks of communication, and to develop journals, conferences and publications for their region.

The Asian feminist theology region is aided by the preexistence of an all-Asian journal, In God's Image, founded by pioneering Korean Christian feminist, Sun Ai Lee-Park in 1980. Asian Christian feminists from the Philippines, Indonesia, Korea,

Taiwan, Japan, India, Australia and Malaysia contribute to and serve on the board of this journal, and different issues of the journal focus on both different topics and different regions of Asia. The journal is edited from the Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology (AWRC), presently located in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, which also organizes conferences and other publications. AWRC defines itself as "an organization of women and women's organizations in Asia engaged in promoting Asian women's theologizing."

Latin America also has an journal that draws articles from across the whole continent. It is Conspirando; a journal of "ecofeminism, spirituality and theology." This journal was founded in 1991 by a feminist collective based in Santiago de Chile. It publishes in Spanish four times a year and recently celebrated its 60th issue with a special edition called "Shared Wisdoms" that drew on fifty-two writers from across Latin America, as well as a few North Americans. The Conspirando collective also organizes occasional schools of feminist reflection, called "Shared Gardens" or "Schools of Ecofeminist Spirituality and Ethics," and well as book publications.

African feminist theology has developed a network across Africa called the "Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians," who have developed conferences and book publications. They are hampered, as are all third world networks, by the differences of language imposed by the various colonizers. In Africa this particularly means the gap between Anglo-phone and Franco-phone Africa, with the result that English-speaking Africa tends to be more organized. Recently the Circle has been focusing on conferences and publications about the relation of women, religion and HIV/AIDs in Africa, a disease which is devastating many African nations.

Feminist theological reflection is also happening I what has been called "fourth world" peoples, such as American and Australian Aborigines, Indian Dalit peoples, African-Caribbean and Brazilian peoples and Palestinians. It is not only developing world wide in a Christian context. Since the 70s it has also been expanding in Jewish, Muslim and Buddhist contexts. An interrelation of western and third world contexts is evident in these interfaith developments.

Jewish feminism began to develop in the 70s in dialogue with Christian feminism among US Jewish women, some of whom had been educated in Christian seminaries,

such as those of Yale and Harvard. The pioneering representative of this kind of Jewish feminist theology is Judith Plaskow, author of the 1980 classic, Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective. Jewish feminism often draws on practical concerns for an inclusive practice of Judaism. For example, Lynn Gottlieb's She who Dwells Within: A Feminist Vision of Renewed Judaism (1995) focuses on stories and liturgies that reflect Gottlieb's twenty years as a founding rabbi of Congregation Nahalat Shalom in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Another leading Jewish feminist, Marcia Falk, has rewritten the Jewish prayer book in inclusive Hebrew.

Jewish feminism also exists in Israel, but this is complicated by the fact that only Orthodox Judaism is officially recognized in Israel, in both its Sephardic and its Ashkenazi forms, and these are the most resistant forms of Judaism to feminism. Jewish feminism flourishes mainly in Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism, found dominantly in the United States. Many Israeli feminists work in universities more as anthropologists, sociologists or historians, seeking social justice for women in a Israeli society where organized Judaism plays a major political role, rather than doing feminist rabbinic commentary.

Buddhist feminism also has had its major development in the US, although there are increasing developments on the practical level among Buddhist feminists in countries such as Thailand, Taiwan and Korea. In the US many of the leading Buddhist feminists have been American converts, such as Rita Gross, originally a Lutheran, and then a practicing Jew, before becoming a Buddhist, and Sandy Boucher, who moved to Buddhism from post-Christian feminist therapy movements. Gross's 1993 book Buddhism after Patriarchy seeks to do for Buddhism what systematic feminist theological revisionism has done for Christianity, critiquing those traditions which made women secondary in theory and practice and vindicating the gender-inclusive potential of Buddhism. Sandy Boucher's Turning the Wheel: American Women Creating a New Buddhism (1988) documents the way American feminist converts are reshaping this ancient religion in the US context. She highlights some of the conflicts that have arisen around sexual abuse of women novices by male Buddhist teachers and the struggle for the full ordination and credentialing of women dharma teachers.

The ordination issue is important for Buddhist feminists in Asia. In the Theravada tradition in Thailand the lineage of women's ordination died out, while the Mahayana tradition through China preserved a lineage of women's ordination. In order to be ordained Thai women either need to go through the Mahayana tradition, unacceptable in Thailand, or else accept a secondary form of female monastic life lacking full ordination. Struggles to validate women's ordination have been an area of conflict in Thai Buddhism. In Korea and Taiwan, there are well organized orders of Buddhist nuns running schools and temples, several of whom have branches in the United States.

Turning to Islam, one notes that Muslim feminism is particularly volatile world wide, because it seeks to counteract the authority of strong and sometime violent anti-feminist Islamist fundamentalist movements. After the 9/11 bombings in the US in 2002 blamed on Islamist militants, there was renewed Islamophobia in the US, as well as in Europe. This has been partially counteracted by new Muslim-Christian dialogue. One expression of this is the growing insistence that faculties of religious studies in the US and Europe have an Islamic scholar. Some of these newly employed Muslim scholars in religious studies have been Muslim women with feminist sympathies.

Some Muslim feminists work explicitly to reread Qur'anic texts. One of these is Riffat Hassan, a Pakistani woman currently teaching in the US. Hassan has devoted her work to the rereading of the theological anthropology of gender in the Qur'an and the Islamic tradition. She has shown that Islam took over a subordinationist reading of women's place in creation from Christianity, but in the Qur'an itself the concept of Eve as Adam's rib is absent. Rather Adam and Eve are seen as created at the same time as equals.

Muslim feminists play a dual role toward the West and in relation to their own societies. Toward the West they seek to correct the bias of western culture which sees Islam as a retrograde religion hostile to modern humanism. Toward their own societies they seek to oppose the reading of Muslim tradition by Islamists who want to restore that they see as the original pure tradition in which women were totally subordinated and confined to the home. Muslim feminists hold out a vision of Islam as an egalitarian tradition that needs to be both rediscovered in its original potential and developed anew today.

In 2010 feminist theologies are both global and inter-religious. Although still influenced by the West, they have for several decades been seeking their own historical and cultural roots and development in their own distinct contexts across the many nations and regions of the world. They face opposition and backlash from fundamentalist movements, not only Islamic, but also Christian, Jewish, Buddhist and Hindu. But they also find many niches where they are flourishing, and developing new dimensions in both theory and practice.

On the practical level, women's ordination, equal leadership as teachers and feminist liturgy are important concerns. On the theoretical level many feminists seek to link feminist critique with major areas of conflict today. Among these areas of feminist reflection are the relation of male domination to the economic systems which cause a hierarchy of wealth and poverty, to war and violence and to the domination of nature and the ecological crisis.

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