

Feminism and Christian Ethics¹ 21

Currently a number of feminists in philosophy and religious studies as well as other academic disciplines have argued that policies, practices and doctrines assumed to be sex-neutral are in fact male-biased. Thus, Rosemary Reuther, reflecting on the development of theology in the Judeo-Christian tradition suggests that the long-term exclusion of women from leadership and theological education has rendered the “official theological culture” repressive to women and dismissive of women’s experience: “To begin to take women seriously,” she notes, “will involve a profound and radical transformation of our religions.”³ Such a project exists in tension with what is generally regarded as Christian orthodoxy and so, as Reuther suggests, challenges the assumptions and categories of traditional theology.

I shall argue that the only clearly objectionable aspects of Christianity from the point of view of a reasonable feminism are claims to the effect that men and women have different duties in virtue of gender alone. I shall suggest that revisionary projects including the promotion of inclusive language are questionable. Finally I shall argue that attempts to reconstruct Christian theology and restructure the church in order to accommodate a style of behavior, way of knowing and moral “voice” thought to be characteristic of women’s experience is detrimental to women’s interests.

A Different Voice?

Feminists, though at one in holding that women’s lot is in need of improvement, disagree about the sources and nature of women’s disadvantage and about the means by which matters may be put right. Further, as Alison Jaggar has noted, these political disagreements amongst feminists arise from divergent assumptions about human nature, about the nature of men and women respectively, and about the prerequisites for human flourishing. Traditionally most feminists, relying on a growing body of empirical data, have suggested that psychological differences between men and women are considerably less

¹ I am grateful to James Griffiss and Brian Johnson for their comments. I have also benefited from discussion by participants at the April 1993 meeting of SEAD at Virginia Theological Seminary and at the August 1994 San Diego Chapter meeting of the Catholic Fellowship where earlier versions of this paper were read.

² Rosemary Radford Ruether. “The Feminist Critique in Religious Studies” in Janet A. Kourany, James P. Sterba and Rosemarie Tong, eds., *Feminist Philosophies* (Englewood cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992), pp. 252-3.

marked and less significant than had popularly been assumed. Currently however a number of feminists hold that there are deeply-entrenched psychological differences between men and women which are either innate or due to early and irreversible emotional experiences between mother and child.

In this vein, Carol Gilligan in her flawed but highly influential study of moral development, *In A Different Voice*, suggests that while male gender identity is threatened by intimacy, female gender identity is threatened by separation hence bringing about women's alleged greater need, and capacity, for "connectedness," caring and relationships.⁴

Following Gilligan, a number of feminists have suggested that women possess a "different voice" and a characteristic way of knowing which male-dominated institutions have ignored or suppressed. This indeed seems to be Reuther's assumption and the basis for her suggestion that religious institutions, which have hitherto excluded women from positions of leadership and theological influence will have to undergo "radical transformation" in order to "take women seriously."

Gilligan's result and, more generally the thesis that there are profound and virtually unalterable psychological differences between men and women, is however highly conjectural and largely rejected by social scientists. So, citing numerous studies by sociologists and economists, social psychologist Carol Tavris in her recent critique of pop feminism and pop anti-feminism, *The Mismeasure of Woman*, suggests that what has popularly been identified as women's characteristic "voice" is in fact the voice of the social role women occupy and not an entrenched feature of the condition of being female as such. Discussing work which attempted to reproduce Gilligan's results, Tavris notes that "when subsequent research directly compared men's and women's reasoning about moral dilemmas, Gilligan's ideas have rarely been supported"

In study after study, men and women use *both* care-based reasoning...and justice-based reasoning...In study after study, researchers report no average differences in the kind of moral reasoning that men and women apply...These results confirm Gilligan's argument that people make moral decisions not only according to abstract principles of justice, but also according to principles of compassion and care. But they fail to support her notion that women have any special corner on that compassion...While her [Gilligan's] portrayal of general sex-linked life orientations is intuitively appealing...the research evidence at this point does not support such a generalized distinction.

Similar efforts to pin down differences between males and females in the value they place on 'autonomy' versus 'attachment' have been unsuccessful...Most

⁴Carol Gilligan. *In A Different Voice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.

of the other studies that have attempted to illuminate a difference between men and women in 'fear of closeness' have also failed.

Neither I nor any of these researchers is saying that men and women *express* their needs for intimacy and attachment or even for autonomy and self-development, in the same way...the point here is that differences in style and expression must not be confused with differences in male and female nature, or capacity, or personality traits...

Research has also cast doubt on Gilligan's argument that women develop ways of thinking and relating to others that are embedded in their psyches...Let's examine the popular use of Gilligan's theory to explain why women seem to be more 'people-oriented' than 'task-oriented' at work...In the 1970s, the sociologist and business consultant Rosabeth Moss Kanter, in studies of men and women in corporations, showed conclusively the *conditions of employment, not qualities of the individual*, determine what most people value about their work. That is, women and men who are in dead-end, low-paying, unstimulating jobs tend to focus on the aspects of the job that are, by default, the most pleasurable: namely relationships with others.⁵

Similar results have been obtained by Arrow and other economists studying absenteeism and quit behavior of men and women and the role of feedback effects in perpetuating statistical discrimination.⁶ Statistical discrimination occurs when employers exclude women from responsible positions because of statistical differences in absenteeism and job turnover between men and women which suggest that women, on the average, "invest" less in work than their male counterparts. Data concerning male and female behavior in the labor force over the past two decades however consistently indicate that male/female differences in absenteeism, quit behavior and the like are explained by differences in the kind of jobs men and women do. Women in prestigious, well-paid jobs with scope for advancement behave like their male counterparts. Nevertheless employers, reluctant to undertake the perceived risk of hiring women for such positions, have traditionally restricted them to boring, dead-end jobs where lack of commitment can do little harm and, in so doing, have perpetuated the vicious circle or "feedback effect" which occurs when women don't invest in work because employers don't invest in women and employers don't invest in women because women don't invest in work. Arguably, women's plight is thus not the result of "male oppression" but rather the product of an evil net of practices and institutions which promote vicious circles and lock men and women into sex roles that are detrimental to the interests of both.

These and numerous other studies suggest that behavior which many feminists, as

⁵Carol Tavris. *The Mismeasure of Woman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), pp. 85-88

⁶vide e.g. Kenneth Arrow, "The Economic Dimensions of Occupational Segregation: Comment I" in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1 No. 3, Pt. 2 (Spring 1976): pp. 233-37 and Francine D. Blau and Lawrence M. Kahn, "Race and Sex Difference in Quits by Young Workers" in *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 34, No. 4 (July 1981): pp. 563-77.

well as others, regard as deeply entrenched features of female gender are in fact products of the social and economic roles that women occupy, characterized by relative powerlessness. Tavis suggests that it is not the case that the power elite is imbued with a characteristically male ethos because of its exclusion of women; rather, she argues, the ethos characteristic of power elites is *regarded* as “male” because women are typically excluded from power elites. Thus contrary to the virtual commonplace echoed by Reuther that women’s entry into male enclaves will transform traditionally male institutions, Tavis’ account predicts that women’s admission to male preserves will transform women--as, manifestly, it already has begun to do.

It is of course open to feminists of Gilligan’s ilk to respond that women who have succeeded in playing the male game have “sold out” in order to enter male territory and even to chide them for failing in their responsibility to bring a distinctively feminine sensibility to traditionally male institutions. It is however hard to see what favors this interpretation of the data or why we should impose this burden on largely unwilling women. Rosemary Reuther’s remarks about the “official theological culture” are therefore open to dispute resting as they do upon controversial assumptions about the distinctive character of women’s experience prior to their professional and social roles which, allegedly, the official theological culture fails to recognize.

I believe that Tavis’s objections to Gilligan are decisive. I shall argue therefore that Reuther is wrong: the official theological culture, except insofar as it embodies claims which explicitly promote sex roles, does not have to change in order to accommodate women.

This is not to say either that the Church as an institution is perfectly hospitable to women. Religious groups have traditionally cited biblical texts in support of sex roles and until recently women were excluded from a range of positions within the church where, even now, in spite of dramatic changes and ongoing efforts, bias persists. Moreover, it is not to suggest that feminist theologians have nothing to say to the church: feminists within the church have repeatedly stressed the theme which arguably is at the heart of the Christian ethic, namely the obligation to relieve oppression, to liberate victims of unjust domination and to promote policies which benefit those who are least well off--an old commandment.

The status quo is not ideal and the position of women in the church is in need of improvement. Nevertheless it is important to avoid basing a feminist critique of Christian theology and of the Church as an institution on the uncritical acceptance of popular but

highly conjectural accounts of gender and gender differences.

To determine what policy the Church ought to pursue in order to improve women's position we need to adopt a working account of what can reasonably be understood as feminist goals and to consider ways in which the Church has furthered or set back these goals. I shall therefore discuss three sorts of policies and theological commitments which have been called into question for alleged sexism and consider whether they in fact are inconsistent with what I shall call "essential feminism," a core of doctrine which all feminists, regardless of their differences, accept.

Essential Feminism

While feminists disagree on a variety of issues, all feminists and, I suspect, many men and women who would not call themselves feminists, agree that men and women ought to have the same options open to them at the same costs and with the same attendant risks. In other words, they hold that the playing field should be level. It is this commitment to the desirability of a truly level male/female playing field that appears to be what, in spite of all disagreements amongst feminists, is essential to feminism and can in this respect be called "minimal" or "essential feminism."

We can understand the notion of a "level playing field" by considering the costs, benefits and risks that rational choosers take into account when they deliberate about which course of action to pursue from amongst a number of options. Rational choosers compare the net utility which attaches to each anticipated outcome (where "utility" is understood as pleasure or desire-satisfaction) that is, the result of subtracting the cost of the outcome from the benefits it yields, and the likelihood of success, that is the probability that a given course of action will actually bring about the desired result. So for example when I decided to go to graduate school in hopes of eventually getting an academic job I considered the utility of an academic career, the benefits of high job satisfaction, prestige and autonomy, less the cost of long term student poverty and severe restrictions on my choice of venue; I also weighed the risks, specifically the (im)probability that I would eventually get an academic job in a vastly over-crowded job market.

The playing field is level for two agents when, for each choice available to them, the probability of success and the costs of the desired outcome are the same. Of course, the playing field is *never* level and for all practical purposes never can be. Feminists however hold that the on-the-average costs and risks to men and women for pursuing a given course

of action should, insofar as possible, be leveled so that the costs and risks of pursuing a given course of action should not be greater for one person than for another *just because* that person is a woman, or a man. In particular, feminists hold that it should not only be possible for a woman to get a “man’s job”--it should not be harder for her just because she is a woman and that, more generally, the costs of pursuing a course of action should not be different for men and women. A woman should not, for example, have to invest more in education or training, work harder or sacrifice marriage and children to work at a traditionally male occupation. Naturally anyone committed to the doctrine of the level playing field affirms that the same goes for men. Ideally, men should have equal access to traditionally female roles, both in the labor force and in the home.

The major difference between feminists and, I suspect, most who reject feminism is in their assessment of what constitutes a level playing field and what may legitimately be done to facilitate leveling. So currently it is common to hear the complaint, from those who oppose feminist policies, that the playing field is already level, if not, as a consequence of affirmative action policies, tilted in women’s favor.

This is in fact false. In spite of official equal opportunity policies and the elimination of “protective” legislation limiting women’s options in the labor force, discrimination persists. At the low end of the playing field, in non-professional positions, sex segregation remains almost complete: blue collar skilled trades, auto mechanics, plumbing, locksmithing, and the like are *de facto* virtually closed to women; women are excluded from sales positions in most computer and electronics stores; women cannot get work as gardeners, exterminators, mobile carpet cleaners or handymen; women cannot get work painting houses, selling cars or repairing appliances. Lower class women by and large remain locked into traditional pink collar jobs: clerical work, waitressing, cashiering and child care. Moreover the women’s movement, dominated by upper-middle class white women, has done little to address sex-segregation in this segment of the labor market ⁷.

Even in professional and managerial positions however women continue to confront both glass ceilings and glass walls. Customs and assumptions which channel men and women into different directions are so entrenched that few people are aware of them, and old habits die hard. The cumulative effect of many small, individually innocuous acts by which

⁷Thus while my university maintains a vigorous affirmative action program for faculty and administrative positions, it has consistently refused to establish even a minimal program for staff positions

men and women are treated differently, push men and women into different directions.

Finally, conditions outside the labor market affect women's options. Women continue to bear the primary responsibility for child care, housework and the business of running the household. Again, this is no one's fault. Few men or women realize the extent of the work that women typically do in the home, which is not limited to visible chores but consists just as importantly in management and organization. Nevertheless, these responsibilities occupy women's time and energy and constitute a "second shift" for most women which may affect women's choices in the labor market.

If this is correct then the playing field is far from level. First, women making career choices do not face the same odds for most courses of action as their male counterparts. Discrimination in hiring and promotion acts as a filter which makes it more difficult for women to achieve results comparable to those available to their male counterparts so that fewer women succeed in doing so.⁸ Secondly, the costs of achieving a given result are typically higher for women than for men. So, for example, for a given position, women are often required to have credentials that are not demanded of their male counterparts.⁹

Now it remains controversial whether the playing field is in fact as skewed as I have suggested. Conservative critics of feminism read the facts I have cited differently. They suggest that men and women have the same options at the same costs and risks but come to make their decisions with different initial preferences. In particular they suggest that women because they wish to invest more in child care, trade off job satisfaction and advancement in the labor force for non-market time. It is not within the scope of this discussion to adjudicate between this hypothesis and the feminist explanation of the facts of sex segregation in the labor force though empirical data strongly favor the feminist explanation. Suffice it to say that feminism as I shall understand it is the normative doctrine that the

⁸vide Margaret Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982. Rossiter discusses the paradoxically detrimental effect of Marie Curie's highly publicized tour of the United States on the prospects of women scientists in America--what Rossiter calls "the Madame Curie Effect." The success of Curie was taken to show that "all doors were open" for women and, hence, that the failure of women to enter the sciences in large numbers or to achieve prominence in scientific professions showed that, apart from a few "exceptions," like Marie Curie, women were not suited to scientific work.

The Madame Curie effect is a familiar one, insofar as the success of exceptional members of disadvantaged groups, including racial and ethnic minorities as well as women, has been cited to support prevailing prejudices about the incompetence or laziness of most members of those groups. ⁹Rossiter notes, for example, that while Madame Curie's boosters proclaimed that all doors were open for women, the American Chemical Society would admit any university trained male who worked as a chemist, female candidates were required to have earned doctorates. Less formally, at every level in the profession, women had, on the average, better academic credentials than their male counterparts.

playing field *should* be level combined with the empirical hypothesis that it currently is not.

The Utilitarian Case for Feminism

The level playing metaphor can be somewhat misleading because essential feminism does not only concern the elimination of “vertical” sex segregation, but the elimination of “horizontal” sex segregation. The problem, as a feminist sees it, is not only (or, I should say, primarily) that men by and large occupy positions of greater power and prestige than women, in the labor force and in society at large, but simply that they occupy *different* positions. It is not just that women still find it difficult to enter some of the better traditionally male occupations; even more so it is the fact that women do not have a crack at the *bad* men’s jobs.

In part the feminist concern with eliminating glass walls as well as glass ceilings is motivated by the fact that “separate is inherently unequal.” In business, for example, heavily female middle-management areas in public relations and personnel are peripheral and employees in these areas do not have career ladders to the highest echelons of management: glass walls, which restrict women to these areas, support glass ceilings. Nevertheless, even where covert inequalities are not at stake, *difference in and of itself* is objectionable. If, for example, a pizza parlor, employing student labor, restricts women to waitressing and men to delivery, even if neither job is more prestigious, better paid, or more likely to put a worker in line for promotion, that division of labor is in and of itself objectionable.

Why? Because on any reasonable hypothesis about individual differences in preferences, the preferences of men and women overlap. Some women are likely to prefer pizza delivery to waitressing and some men most likely prefer waiting tables to delivering pizzas. In a pizza parlor where all men deliver pizzas and all women wait tables, the desires of men and women whose preferences are “inappropriate” will be frustrated. All other things being equal, a pizza parlor where both men and women have a choice of both jobs will be a happier pizza parlor than one in which tasks are assigned according to gender.

More generally, a state of affairs in which the playing field is level will, *ceteris paribus*, generate more desire-satisfaction or “utility” than one in which the costs and risks of gender-inappropriate behavior are cranked up to such a high pitch that most men and women are, to all intents and purposes, restricted to choices deemed appropriate to their sex. Once again, what’s sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. The problem with sex roles,

as understood here, is not primarily that they result in men being better off but that they result in men and women being *differently* off and so less able to obtain the outcomes that are most likely to maximize utility.

The justification for feminism assumed here is utilitarian: a policy is desirable to the extent that it maximizes utility, understood as pleasure or desire-satisfaction, over the population and the hypothesis suggested here is that, as a matter of empirical fact, given what men and women are like, a level playing field *ceteris paribus* maximizes utility.

Critics may object to the version of feminism proposed here on normative and on empirical grounds. A critic may object to the Utilitarian backing for feminism thus understood, the normative assumption, or he may object to the empirical assumption that, all other things being equal, a level playing field is most conducive to the maximization of utility.

How would the first sort of objection go? It might be argued that the hedonic consequences which attach to policies of action do not matter or, at the very least, are not decisive from the moral point of view. Men and women simply have different duties. Doing one's duty may not make a person happy and universal dutifulness may not maximize utility but Kant never said it was going to be easy. To the hard-core deontologist who digs in on this line there is no satisfactory response. He appeals to his intuitions, the Utilitarian appeals to his, and no further argument is possible.

Most critics of the minimal version of feminism I have suggested however dispute the empirical assumption rather than the Utilitarian underpinnings. They suggest either that, due to substantial innate psychological differences between men and women, or due to the difference in social roles which men and women occupy, "equality" is not likely to make men or women happy. This sort of objection has both a feminist and anti-feminist (or sociobiological) version, though sometimes it is not entirely clear which version is being put forth.

According to the sociobiological version of the objection, the on-the-average psychological differences between men and women are so great that there would be little gain in utility if sex roles were eliminated. Furthermore, the argument runs, the benefits of eliminating sex roles in order to accommodate a few malcontents will be outweighed by the social costs. So Steven Goldberg in *The Inevitability of Patriarchy* argues that men's gushing testosterone gives them an aggression advantage which enables them to monopolize

all high-prestige non-child-related positions in the social order.¹⁰ Consequently, Goldberg argues, unless women are prevented from seeking these positions through the imposition of sex roles, most women, who are doomed to failure, will suffer frustration. More generally, he suggests, women's entry into traditionally male areas would be disruptive and the insecurity of living in a society where there were too many choices available would not offset the relatively slight gain in utility that would result from accommodating a few men and women with atypical preferences.

These arguments are relatively easy to dismiss on empirical grounds. There is simply no evidence that the on-the-average differences between men and women are as great as Goldberg suggests. Moreover, the undesirable consequences of lifting a number of restrictions on women's options which a number of writers predicted, for example, the dire consequences they foresaw if women were allowed into the military, have simply never occurred.

Feminist objections to the level playing field version of feminism by contrast appeal to the indisputable truth that, however innately similar men and women may be, there are differences in the social roles which men and women occupy which render mere equality detrimental to women's interests. So, for example, it is often noted that guaranteeing women equal treatment on the job fails to compensate for their extra burdens off the job, for the second shift and for child care responsibilities which most men will not undertake.¹¹

This however assumes a severely restricted account of equality. A truly level playing field takes in the whole scope of human endeavor both on the job and in the home. A state of affairs in which women continue to bear the major burden of housework and child care is not a level playing field in the requisite sense.

There is however an additional worry. It is not clear what is meant by "equality" or what counts as a level playing field. Too often arrangements in which women were at a great disadvantage were thought to be strictly egalitarian. So, for example, it is often assumed that the mere elimination of laws and official policies barring women from certain occupations levels the playing field when in fact the persistence of informal and covert discriminatory practices, the double shift and other non-market factors render the playing field far from level. Critics of the level-playing-field feminism worry, with good reason, that in the absence

¹⁰Steven Goldberg. *The Inevitability of Patriarchy*. New York: William Morrow & Company, 1973.

¹¹Mary Ann Mason, "The Equality Trap" *Working Mother*, September 1988.

of clear criteria for equality, adherents are simply promoting the status quo in which women's options are *de facto* limited and sex segregation remains the norm in spite of an official policy of gender-blindness.

Nevertheless, even if we have no clear criteria for equality, it is easy enough to see when it is lacking. Our inability to provide a systematic theoretical account of the notion does not prevent us from formulating public policy in the interests of greater equality. We can, therefore, bracket the theoretical question of what constitutes equality.

Sex roles harm both men and women to the extent that they restrict the options which are *de facto* available to individuals of both sexes. Arguably they are especially disadvantageous to women because the options readily available to women are inherently less desirable than those available to men at the same costs. On the account proposed here then feminism at its core is simply the doctrine that one's gender should not affect the costs or risks of pursuing a given outcome. Institutions, including the church and what Reuther calls the "official theological culture" are objectionable to the extent that they impede the achievement of this goal.

Three Grades of Sexist Involvement

Feminist theologians challenge many assumptions and categories of traditional theology on the grounds that they perpetuate and promote women's disadvantageous position both within the Church as an institution and in the larger society. To see whether their challenge is warranted from the perspective of feminism on the minimalist, Utilitarian interpretation proposed above, we need to ascertain whether the doctrines and practices which feminist theologians have questioned undermine the project of leveling the male/female playing field either within the church or within the larger society.

Broadly speaking there are three elements of the Christian tradition which have troubled feminist theologians: (1) explicit references to differences in behavior required of men and women, for example, Paul's injunction to women to remain silent in church; (2) male imagery, language and symbolism, including a range of practices from the familiar representation of God as father and king to the use of the generic "he"; (3) a picture of the world and of human nature which, while making no explicit reference to gender, some feminists view as inherently "patriarchal."

(1) Now it seems clear that, insofar as feminists are committed to the desirability of a level playing field, the doctrine that men and women, in virtue of gender alone ought to

play different roles in the family, the church or the social order, is incompatible with even the minimalist interpretation of feminism. Given the overlap in the abilities, character traits and preferences of men and women, a social order in which all roles are equally available to men and women will be *ceteris paribus* more efficient and more conducive to human happiness than one in which men and women are restricted to roles on the basis of gender, where individuals who are not suited to their assigned roles suffer frustration.

Similarly, within the church, if women--or men--are excluded from any role or position within the institution the church will lose the contribution of individuals whose gift are suited to roles from which they have been excluded. Moreover, because the church is a voluntary organization, such individuals are unlikely to become involved in the church. It seems likely that the church as an institution at the local level tends to be more socially conservative and more sex-segregated than the larger society in part because it is a voluntary organization: individuals who cannot or will not operate within the existing parameters of the institution are more likely leave the organization or become inactive than to work for change, so the *status quo* tends to perpetuate itself, a process akin to natural selection.

(2) It is not however clear that masculine imagery, references to God as “Father” and “Son” and by means of the masculine pronoun, are objectionable because, crudely, little or no utility hangs on the use of such terminology and it seems unlikely that it inclines people to treat men and women differently in other respects where significant amounts of utility are at stake.

We cannot, of course, rule out *a priori* the possibility that such language affects the way in which men and women behave or how they view themselves and one another since, manifestly, language shapes thought and affects overt behavior. Benjamin Lee Whorf, who popularized this hypothesis was moved to explore the ways in which language affects cognitive processes and non-linguistic behaviors when, as a fire insurance inspector for Hartford Life, he discovered that workers were less likely to exercise appropriate caution when hazardous materials were labeled “flammable” than when they were described as “flamable.” Although workers knew that the terms were synonymous, Whorf hypothesized, that the “in-” prefix, which in English typically conveys negation, affected their behavior. Analogously, it could be that the use of the masculine pronoun to refer to God, and the imagery of Fatherhood and Kingship, colors the the way in which men and women view themselves and one another, and affects non-linguistic behavior, even where

language users affirm that gendered language and imagery referring to God is “metaphorical.”

It is, however, an empirical question whether it in fact *is* so. Whorf conjectured that workers handling hazardous materials were thrown by an anomalous English particle because he discovered a striking statistical result. By contrast, there does not seem to be any similarly striking empirical evidence to suggest that exclusively or predominantly masculine religious imagery, however it arose, promotes social arrangements which detrimental to women’s interests. Indeed, Ross Shepard Kraemer, summarizing her study of women’s religions in the ancient world notes that

ironically, it seems that myths which are the most gynocentric come out of ancient Greece, a society that is widely agreed to have been the most repressive and misogynist of Western antiquity...[while] the most androcentric myths, those of God the father and Jesus the son, end up licensing the most equality for women, at least in theory, and occasionally even in practice.¹²

It is an empirical question, and one which has not yet been answered, whether the wide-spread use of female-identified religious language and imagery is in fact likely to improve women’s position, whether, for example, it is likely in and of itself to narrow the male-female wage gap, to promote the establishment of adequate, affordable child care, or to make it easier for women to get jobs in traditionally male-identified fields. This is among the questions that would have to be addressed in assessing the desirability of promoting more “inclusive” religious language and imagery.

In addition to determining the benefits of using such language and imagery it is also important assess the costs of *introducing* the practice. Sometimes the benefits of a practice are not sufficient to offset the start-up costs. Consider, for example, the Dvorak keyboard, an alphanumeric arrangement that makes typing marginally more efficient than the standard QWERTY arrangement with which most typists are familiar. The costs of changing over to Dvorak far outweigh the relatively small benefits. Even assuming an adequate word processor that would allow a typist to use the Dvorak system, the time he would be required to devote to learning the system, if indeed he could learn it adequately after years of QWERTY, the effort, and the confusion would likely far outweigh any benefits he might obtain once he had learnt it.

Similarly, it might be that while inclusive language and imagery is desirable in and of itself, the cost of attempts to introduce it are so great as to outweigh its benefits. Again it

¹²Ross Shepard Kraemer. *Her Share of the Blessings*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 208.

is an empirical question what the likely effects of promoting such language and imagery are and how likely they are. The most significant adverse affect of promoting inclusive language and imagery seem to me to be the investment of energy in a fundamentally symbolic issue, on which little utility rides, which diffuses feminist energies better spent in tackling substantive issues, trivializes women's concerns and further widens the gulf between professional theologians and other members of the church, most of whom have little sympathy with projects of linguistic revision and find the fuss over what they regard as inconsequential issues puzzling.

Of course symbolic gestures are compatible with substantive change and sometimes, indeed, help to initiate it. When Rosa Parks, symbolically, refused to get to the back of the bus, she helped set off a chain of events that had a profound effect on the social and economic condition of blacks for years to come. In other cases however symbolic gestures and "tokenism" can be ineffectual or positively counterproductive. It is an empirical question what the results of attempts to introduce more inclusive language and imagery are likely to be, whether the project is more likely to increase awareness of women's disadvantageous position or to persuade them that women "don't have any *real* problems" to worry about, whether it will empower women or distract them, whether it will be an impetus for social and economic change or a substitute for it.

In any case, to assess the merit of proposals to revise religious language and imagery in a more inclusive direction, we need to determine whether doing so is likely to produce sufficiently beneficial results to outweigh the costs. My guess is that it is not, and that like the QWERTY keyboard the costs of revision--including the financial cost of revising and printing documents--is too great to warrant a change.

(3) Related to concerns about explicitly masculine language and imagery is the worry that even language, imagery, doctrine and practice which is *prima facie* gender neutral may in fact be implicitly male-biased. Some feminist theologians have suggested that the traditional Judeo-Christian picture of human nature and the place of persons within the natural order is inherently patriarchal.

I take the following passages to be representative of this critique:

Some central convictions are shared at least by large groups of feminists. Most fundamental, perhaps, is the conviction that women are fully human and are to be valued as such...not to be mistaken for the view that women are human, though

derivatively and partially so...Further, feminist consciousness recognizes the importance of women's own experience as a way to understanding; it takes seriously the essential embodiment of human persons; it opens to an ecological view of the value of all nature and the context of the whole of the universe; it affirms a mode of collaboration as the primary mode for human interaction...They function, moreover, to ground a strategy of commitment to the well-being of women, to counter whatever biases perpetuate gender inequalities and structural barriers to human mutuality.¹³

The Bible needs to be liberated from its captivity to one-sided white, middle-class, male interpretation. It needs liberation from privatized and spiritualized interpretations that avoid God's concern for justice, human wholeness and ecological responsibility; it needs liberation from abstract, doctrinal interpretations that remove the biblical narrative from its concrete social and political context in order to change it into timeless truth.¹⁴

These passages touch upon several themes which a number of feminists in philosophy and religious studies have invoked in their critiques of theology and philosophy, particularly philosophy in the analytic tradition. The feminist theses which may be teased from these passages are as follows:

- (i) The view that men alone are, in some sense, fully (or perhaps, better, paradigmatically) human ought to be rejected.
- (ii) Women's experience is inherently different from men's experience and provides a distinctive "way of knowing."
- (iii) Collaboration is the primary and ideal form of human interaction.
- (iv) Persons are essentially embodied therefore dualisms, whether metaphysical or normative, ought to be rejected.
- (v) Humans are fully immersed in the ecological web of nature and should not regard the non-human world as a mere means to human ends, to be shaped to suit human purposes, subdued or dominated.
- (vi) Traditional epistemologies are to be rejected in favor of a "materialist theory of knowledge" explaining the connection between systems of ideas and the life circumstances of those who produce them, in particular, Biblical texts should be viewed as embedded within a concrete social and political context.

Of these theses, (i) is so obvious as to require no justification. The doctrine that women are, in some sense, only partially or non-paradigmatically human derives from Aristotle's *a priori* biology according to which women are "misbegotten males," conceived when the process of generation the process of generation goes awry. It should be obvious why feminists of every sort should find this antique doctrine objectionable. Fortunately no scientifically literate person takes this view seriously.

¹³Margaret A. Farley. "Feminist Consciousness and the Interpretation of Scripture" in Letty M. Russell, ed. *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) pp. 41-51, p. 45

¹⁴Letty M. Russell, "Introduction," in Letty M. Russell, ed. *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) p. 12

(ii) is the “different voice” thesis, found in Gilligan’s work and in a growing body of philosophical literature concerning what is generally called “feminist epistemology.” As we have seen, insofar as Gilligan’s claims about male/female differences are sufficiently clear to be testable they have been shown to be largely inaccurate. As for “feminist epistemology,” there is by no means a consensus that the non-foundationalist, anti-realist theories of knowledge which have been characterized as “feminist” are correct. More importantly, regardless of the merits of these accounts, the suggestion that they are “feminist” is highly conjectural and has never been either elucidated or defended adequately.¹⁵

The thesis that women speak in a different moral “voice” and engage in a characteristic “woman’s way of knowing” has widespread appeal because it lends intellectual respectability to the ancient view that “men and women think differently.” It is, however, questionable at best; moreover, it seems highly unlikely that the popular acceptance of this view benefits women.¹⁶ It is therefore surprising that many feminists should currently find this view congenial.

It is even more puzzling why (iii) - (vi) are taken to be feminist doctrines at all since none explicitly invoke gender. On further examination however we can see that (iii) - (vi) come from Gilligan and such feminist psychoanalysts as Nancy Chodorow and Jean Baker Miller who hold that, as a consequence of early development through which girls stay attached to their mothers while boys, in order to develop a male identity, must separate, women seek out connection while men are frightened of attachment and seek independence. “The basic feminine sense of self,” Chodorow writes, “is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate”¹⁷ On this account women are seek connection to other persons, to the body and to the natural world in a way that men do not hence, presumably, the feminist motivation for (iii) - (vi) which affirm “connectedness” to other persons and to nature. As noted however, empirical evidence suggests that

¹⁵For additional discussion and references see my essay “The Market for Feminist Epistemology” and others in the forthcoming *Monist* issue, “Feminist Epistemology: Pro and Con” edited by Susan Haack.

¹⁶For a discussion of the costs of feminist epistemology see “The Market for Feminist Epistemology.” Among the most significant costs is the popular acceptance of doctrines about women’s concrete, person-oriented, empowerment directed management styles by management consultants and personnel directors cited to support shunting female employees into traditional pink-collar ghettos within, what is nominally, management—in particular public relations and personnel which largely lack career ladders to the upper echelons of the corporate hierarchy.

¹⁷Chodorow, as quoted by Tavis, p. 81.

psychological differences thought to be rooted in biology or early development are in fact the product of the difference in social roles that men and women play.

In addition to speculative psychology, anthropological speculations regarding the existence of primitive matriarchies which were entertained during the 19th century and revived by contemporary “ecofeminists” have been cited in support of (iii) - (v). According to the conjectures of ecofeminists, social organization in these matriarchal cultures was egalitarian; men and women lived at peace with one another and in harmony with nature. The widespread appeal of such myths seems to have led a number of feminist theologians and philosophers to identify hierarchic forms of social organization, dualism (Cartesian and otherwise), the belief in progress and commitment to the advance of technology as a means for dominating and subduing nature as inherently “patriarchal.”

Once again, however, there is no hard evidence to indicate that the matriarchal societies imagined by ecofeminists really existed or that hierarchy, dualism, or the project of subordinating nature to human interests by means of technology are either alien to women’s sensibilities or inimical to women’s interests. Again, these anthropological conjectures, to the extent that they are empirically testable have not been substantiated and so do not provide any compelling reason why feminists should accept (iii) - (v).¹⁸

More importantly, despite highly speculative accounts of primitive matriarchy, historically women appear to have done better in communities where the body, the family and the material world were regarded as suspect or positively evil. Thus, in his account of sexual practices and sex roles in the ancient world, Richard Posner suggests that women were better off in early Christian communities, whose members were more distrustful of the body and material nature than pagans, than in Greek society generally.

Despite its fulminations against woman the temptress and the devil’s helper, Christianity seems to have been, on balance, more solicitous of women’s interests than the pagan religions had been. By praising celibacy, the Church gave women other options besides marriage...In forbidding divorce, the Church protected married women from being cast off by husbands who had tired of them--and losing their children in the process, since, under both Greek and Roman law, in the event of divorce the children remained with their father. And by insisting that marriage should be consensual--that a man or woman should be free to reject the family’s choice of mate--the Church not only promoted companionate marriage but made indissoluble marriage more tolerable.¹⁹

Women did still better in communities which were even more hostile to the body

¹⁸See Tavis’ account of “the search for the feminist Eden,” pp. 71-79.

¹⁹Posner, pp. 45, 47

and to natural, mutualistic relationships than the Church at large such as monastic movements within the church and gnostic communities without. Thus Ross Shepard Kraemer in her history of women's religious practice in the ancient world notes grudgingly that dualistic cosmologies benefited women:

The specific belief systems that provided women in antiquity with autonomy and alternatives are enormously problematic. Ascetic and monastic women from the Therapeutics to Thecla to the desert mothers found it necessary to repudiate the body and its female associations, becoming both male both in theory and in aspects of appearance in order to achieve self-determination. Splitting the body from the soul, dualist cosmologies such as those advocated by gnostics frequently provided women with alternatives denied them by those (men) who insisted on the integral connection of body and spirit. Conversely, cosmologies that value embodiment seem then to need to constrain and confine women as a necessary corollary.²⁰

Historically, women have been attracted to movements that have been antinomian, gnostic, individualistic and distrustful of both sexuality and of the body. In *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, a history of "revolutionary millenarians and mystical anarchists of the Middle Ages," for example, Norman Cohn documents the participation of women in such movements as the highly individualistic, anarchistic and dualistic heresy of the Free Spirit. More recent religious movements founded by women have rejected sexuality and denigrated materiality. These include, notably, the celibate Shaker sect as well as Christian Science and Theosophy, both based on the assumption that material reality is, in some sense, "unreal." More generally, it has been just those religious groups that were the most distrustful of materiality, the Quakers, for example, where women first exercised leadership roles; by contrast, within Christianity, it has been those traditions which are the most sacramental and "incarnational," and to that extent, the most "materialistic"--the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Anglican Churches--which have been slowest to accept women in leadership roles.

In short, "cultural feminism," broadly understood as a commitment to (ii) - (vi) is not a well-supported scientific theory with which the Church has to come to terms--as in the past it has had to come to terms with Copernican astronomy and Darwin's theory of evolution. A growing body of evidence suggests that it is rather a "scientific fiction," a

²⁰Kraemer, p. 208. It should be noted that neither Posner nor Kraemer is sympathetic to Christianity thus Kraemer writes:

Those preoccupied with Christianity might do well to reflect on the differences between a religion whose central myth is that of the separation and ultimate reunion of mother and daughter beloved of one another, and that of a religion whose central myth is of a father who requires the painful sacrificial death of his only son.

package of highly conjectural claims with little empirical basis which has nevertheless become widely accepted by the educated public.²¹

In addition to being false, by itself a disrecommendation, the main tenets of culture feminism do not seem to have been particularly beneficial to women. Currently a number of scholars and popular writers concerned with women's role in business and the professions have expressed growing concern that the widespread, unsubstantiated assumption that women possess a distinctive "way of knowing" and display characteristic "management styles" has been detrimental to women's interests in the workplace. So, for example, the author of a popular journalistic account of women executives' achievements in her introduction cautions readers aspiring to emulate them to "beware of 'experts' on working women"

The legitimization of the notion of the schizophrenic working woman, torn between career and kids--or what we call 'safe sexism' practiced by so-called experts on the workplace--has probably done more to sully the positive image of women in business than any backward attitude manifested by a male manager...

The practitioners of 'safe sexism' whether in the form of management consultants or advice-book authors, also defame women by legitimizing the notion of women as the second sex; that they have a distinct 'management style' that emphasizes 'nurturing,' 'building consensus,' and 'empowerment' while men are better at being leaders.

Not surprisingly, it's this very simple-minded stereotyping of women that has relegated them to the soft, fluffy pink ghettos of human resources and public

²¹For a discussion of scientific fictions see, e.g. Diane E. Eyer, *Mother-Infant Bonding: A Scientific Fiction* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992). Eyer traces research intended to establish the existence of the phenomenon of mother-infant bonding among humans. She notes that, in spite of failure to establish the existence of this phenomenon which caused researchers to abandon the research as fundamentally misconceived, the doctrine that human mothers and infants "bonded" was promulgated by medical personnel and childbirth educators and accepted as scientific fact by the general public. The myth of bonding, she suggests, perpetuates itself because it serves current social and institutional interests. Writes Eyer, "The research on bonding was inspired by the popular belief that women, one and all, are inherently suited for motherhood. This belief coincided with a number of institutional goals, including the needs of the psychological and medical professions...New mothers, whether feminist or traditional, also embraced the ideology of motherhood at a time when their sex role was being challenged. Bonding promised insurance against the psychological damage that might be caused by women's increasing involvement in work outside the home." [pp. 1-2]

Arguably cultural feminism, as represented by Gilligan and others, has similar appeal. It places high value on the traits associated with femininity and upon the roles women play, which many women feel as affirming, without seriously challenging gender stereotypes or the perpetuation of sex roles. So Tavis notes, "Gilligan clearly struck a nerve: Thousands of women have seen themselves in her book...One reason for this enthusiasm, I believe, is that Gilligan and others finally recognized and validated the long-disparaged, unpaid work that women do: the work of day-to-day caring for children, the work of keeping extended families together with calls, letters and gifts, the work of worrying about everyone's feelings, the work of monitoring relationships to make sure they are going well...It was encouraging and life affirming to read that intimacy and an ethic of care are as valuable as, indeed more valuable than, typical male aloofness and men's ethic of justice." [Tavis, p. 82]

relations instead of being put in charge of running factories, leading sales teams, and heading up mergers and acquisitions departments.²² The benign falsehood that women as a group had special gifts to offer in business, in the professions and in the church helped women gain an entrée but also lent legitimacy to the creation of pink-collar ghettos in business and the professions. Within the church, popular assumptions about women's special capacity for empathy and nurturing were exploited to make a case for the inclusion of women in ministry. At this same time however they exacerbated the tendency to channel women into support and sympathy work rather than leadership and administration.

Currently within the church, most people are happy to see theologically trained women active in parish education programs and women deacons involved in social service work. Most are supportive of women priests engaged in pastoral care, counseling and hospital visiting as assistants in parishes or in special ministries. But many still resist the appointment of women to leadership roles. As a recent report on the recruitment of applicants for ministry in the church notes

In Episcopal seminaries in 1992-93, women made up 44% of full-time students pursuing the M.Div. degree, the normal ordination track. Nevertheless...[a]fter nearly two decades of permitting the ordination of women, about 12% of today's priests are female. Anecdotal evidence suggests that women are far less likely than men to be considered seriously for senior level positions of employment. Women make up fewer than 6% of all rectors and vicars.²³

While the relatively recent entry of women into the professional pipeline may account in part for the relative scarcity of women in senior positions, it seems likely that women are at an additional disadvantage in applying for these positions because of the wide-spread view that women are naturally suited to the pastoral, nurturing aspects of ministry rather than the hard-nosed business of running a parish. Moreover if, as the same report suggests, groups in the church concerned with recruiting applicants for ministry "now realize their attempt to build a more vigorous mission implies that they should...seek greater number of people who are more action-oriented, even at the expense of some pastoral, nurturing qualities" gender stereotypes which culture feminists and their sympathizers within the church have, in many cases, actively promoted will put women at a

²²Jane White. *A Few Good Women*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992), p. 26

²³*Recruiting for Leadership in Ministry: Challenges and Hopes*. A Report to the Episcopal Church by a Committee of the Board for Theological Education, The Episcopal church Center, New York, in connection with Canon III. 2. Section 3 approved by the 1991 General Convention, drafted by Kent D. Fairfield, December 1, 1993.

even greater disadvantage.

Even if, however, nurturance and related pastoral qualities were highly valued and sought after, the expectation that women should play a distinctively feminine role within the church would still harm women who were not suited to this role and deprive the church of their gifts. The goal of feminism understood in the minimalist sense, essential feminism, is not to prove in the teeth of any and all evidence that men and women are really exactly the same. It is rather to bring it about that men and women have the same options at the same costs and risks, so that each individual has the best possible chance to pursue the activities, occupation and way of life that best suit him, and contribute what he is best able to give, in order that utility may abound.

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