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0521462819 - Feminism and Christian Ethics - Susan Frank Parsons

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Feminists are aware of the diversity of thinking within their own tradition, and of the different approaches to moral questions in which that is manifest. This book seeks to describe and analyse that diversity by distinguishing three distinct paradigms of moral reasoning to be found within feminism. Using the writings of feminists themselves, the major strengths and weaknesses of each theory are considered, so that creative dialogue between them can be encouraged. Three common themes are drawn out of these paradigms, and are discussed in depth in the second part of the book. These themes are also on the agenda of new developments in philosophical and Christian ethics: namely the search for an appropriate universalism, the possibility of a redemptive community, and the development of a new humanism. Feminists may be encouraged, through this account of their considerable scholarship in ethical thinking, to contribute to these new developments with their special concern for the lives and the fulfilment of women.

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FEMINISM
AND CHRISTIAN
ETHICS

NEW STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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In recent years the study of Christian ethics has become an integral part of mainstream theological studies. The reasons for this are not hard to detect. It has become a more widely held view that Christian ethics is actually central to Christian theology as a whole. Theologians increasingly have had to ask what contemporary relevance their discipline has in a context where religious belief is on the wane, and whether Christian ethics (that is, an ethics based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ) has anything to say in a multi-faceted and complex secular society. There is now no shortage of books on most substantive moral issues, written from a wide variety of theological positions. However, what is lacking are books within Christian ethics which are taken at all seriously by those engaged in the wider secular debate. Too few are methodologically substantial; too few have an informed knowledge of parallel discussions in philosophy or the social sciences. This series attempts to remedy the situation. The aims of *New Studies in Christian Ethics* will therefore be twofold. First, to engage centrally with the secular moral debate at the highest possible intellectual level; second, to demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate – either in moral substance, or in terms of underlying moral justifications. It is hoped that the series as a whole will make a substantial contribution to the discipline.

A list of titles in the series is provided at the end of the book.

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FEMINISM AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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Nottingham*



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY, 10011-4211, USA
 10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1996

First published 1996

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Parsons, Susan Frank.

Feminism and Christian Ethics/Susan Frank Parsons.

p. cm. – (New Studies in Christian Ethics)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 46281 9 (hardback). – ISBN 0 521 46820 5 (paperback)

1. Christian ethics. 2. Feminist ethics. 3. Feminist theology.

I. Title. II. Series.

BJ1278.F45P37 1996

241'.082-dc20 95-13211 CIP

ISBN 0 521 46281 9 hardback

ISBN 0 521 46820 5 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2004

Cambridge University Press

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General editor's preface

This is the eighth book in the series *New Studies in Christian Ethics*. It seeks to analyse in detail the increasingly complex relationship of feminism to Christian ethics. There can be little doubt that such an analysis is much needed.

The complexity is caused in large measure by the development of different, and sometimes opposing, approaches within feminism. A decade ago it might have been possible to ignore differences amongst feminists – although even then this would probably have been a mistake. Today such differences will be obvious to many. They are differences that divide both secular and religious feminists. If those on the fringe of feminist debates within theology once tended to regard them monolithically, today and especially after the publication of Ann Loades' very helpful *Feminist Theology: A Reader* (SPCK, 1990), they have less excuse. Simplifications in this area are manifestly inappropriate.

The great merit of Susan Parsons' work is that it brings real philosophical clarity to this complex subject without oversimplifying it. Her main focus is upon women writers who identify themselves as feminist – some of them secular or humanist and others explicitly Christian. She argues that they can be analysed in terms of three broad paradigms. The first of these paradigms, which she terms 'liberalism', is the one most obviously derived from the Enlightenment. On its basis many of the early feminists argued for equality of rights and respect. Rational individualism and a stress upon personal autonomy could be applied as much to women as they could to men. The second paradigm, which she terms 'social constructionism',

derives from the rise of the social sciences, and especially Marxism, in the nineteenth century. Within this paradigm feminists are more concerned with patriarchal social structures than with individual autonomous rationality. The third paradigm, termed simply 'naturalism', focuses instead upon differences between men and women arising from their different biologies or natures.

Parsons argues that Christian feminists, like their secular colleagues, can be located in any of these paradigms. Indeed some, like Rosemary Radcliffe Ruether, have shifted over the years from one paradigm to another. This is an important insight which helps to explain some of the differences and tensions within Christian feminism. The tensions between individualism, structuralism, and biology cut across disciplines, including Christian feminism, and cannot easily be resolved.

These three paradigms provide the overall shape for this book. Each paradigm is outlined and then criticised in detail. The liberal paradigm has come under increasing attack from the ascendant postmodernists. The social constructionist paradigm has introduced a degree of relativism which sometimes seems to endanger the whole feminist project. The naturalist paradigm has found little agreement amongst feminists about what really constitutes 'female nature'. Yet together they do suggest that the feminist project itself points in certain (albeit still unresolved) directions. In the final part of her book Parsons seeks to unpack these. Three she finds particularly important – the quest for an appropriate universalism, the search for redemptive communities which are not blemished by patriarchy, and the hope for a new vision of humanity. In all three she argues that Christian theology has something distinctive and crucial to contribute.

There are many points of contact between this book and others in the series. Parsons makes direct use of both Lisa Cahill and Jean Porter. Their books for the series – *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics* and *Moral Action and Christian Ethics* respectively – make many complementary points. Kieran Cronin's *Rights and Christian Ethics* and Ian McDonald's *Biblical Interpretation and Christian Ethics* also offer overall analyses of their subjects

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which bring similar clarity to otherwise complex issues. Finally many of her conclusions about communities and the misuse of power compare usefully with James Mackey's *Power and Christian Ethics*.

This is an important critical analysis of a subject of major importance.

ROBIN GILL

Preface

This book traces a journey through feminism and Christian ethics which has been very much my own. I remember so clearly thinking, in my early feminist awareness, that really, if we would all simply obey Kant's categorical imperative and treat women as ends-in-themselves, the matter, as far as ethical inquiry was concerned, could be closed. Making this claim, however, far from settling things, seemed to open a gate into entire areas of inquiry that had not yet been touched. To undertake a closer exploration of the territory that then lay before me has been to enter places of great turmoil, in which whatever one says is offensive, of great confusion, in which it is difficult to get one's bearings, and yet of great potential, in which we might be able to discover something better to say. I have thus lived through each of the ways of feminist thinking sketched here, and have found, within each movement and writer, insights to value and criticisms to bear. What I offer here is both a description of that journey so far, with significant markers along the way, and an anticipation of what now seem to me to be the threads that will guide our steps into the future, even as we weave them in our continuing debates. This journey has been for me a theological investigation of great importance, and I share with so many feminists a conviction that the matter of the divine is intimately bound up with the understanding of our humanness. That feminism and Christian ethics might engage in this work together seems the obvious, but nevertheless essential, conclusion.

I would like to thank those who have especially stirred my theological thinking in times past, whose critical minds and

generous spirits have in so many ways nourished my self. I am grateful to my teachers in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Depauw University, particularly Russell Compton, who first awoke my interest in ethics, Robert Newton, and John Eigenbrodt. Their teaching will always be exemplary to me, and the community of scholars which they sought to build up was the most creative context in which to learn critical reasoning. My tutor at Durham University, John Heywood Thomas, was a patient guide to my doctoral research, and continues to challenge my thinking as a good friend. I am also grateful both to my colleagues in the Department of Religion at Trinity College, Hartford, with whom I shared such a very happy four years from 1971 to 1975, and to my women colleagues there, with whom early feminist ideas and frameworks of thinking began to be formed.

There are special thanks to be given to those who have helped in the reading of this book, to Tim Jenkins, Ann Morley, and John Heywood Thomas, who read and commented upon some of the early parts of the text, and to Eric Forshaw, Rosi Jarvis, Pauline Mulligan, and Barbara and Michael Taylor, who have so kindly read it all, and offered me their advice. Discussions of women's writing with Barbara have been especially thought-provoking, while Michael has been a much-valued colleague and a keen partner in theological debate. Pauline held my hand throughout the whole project, feeding me with provocative bits of theological sense and nonsense, without which the outcome of my work would have been so much poorer. My thanks to Gillian Maude for her helpful work as copy editor, and to Rosi for her great care in proof reading. All of them have contributed in special ways to this book, for which I thank them most sincerely. I alone must now be responsible for the result.

To be honest, I have not found the task of writing an easy one. Speaking to a word processor is not my natural form of communication, and I have at times found the enforced solitude uncomfortable. I have been hugely supported by the students and staff of the East Midlands Ministry Training Course, by Ted O'Neil and Vanessa Johnson, who kept the

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office running so smoothly, and by the Council of the Course, who kindly granted me a study leave during which so much of the reading and preparation could be done. My neighbours and friends have been patient with my extended absence from their good company. My husband, Mark, has been my true companion throughout this work, and our son, Andrew, says he expects no more bad moods or moaning, now that this is finished.

Lastly, I thank my parents, within whose home I first cut my theological teeth, in a context of Christian faithfulness to tradition and inspiration for what might yet be true. Most especially, this book is dedicated to my mother, Wilma Alice Sedoris Frank. She would not like to be called a feminist of any kind whatsoever. Yet, she has lived much of her life on an edge that has been too narrow for others to accompany her, and it is only in my own growing up that I have begun to grasp something of her inner struggles. My sensitivities to the quality of women's lives, and my awareness of the spiritual potential which they hold, has been nurtured, even across the miles, in her embrace. I now believe that, 'It is impossible to ask a woman to be holy . . . as long as she is unable to recognize the potential holiness of her own mother.'¹ This book is an expression of a mother's love, returned to her with great affection.

¹ The reference is to Luce Irigaray: 'Equal to Whom?' in *differences*, a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies, 1:2, p. 72.