Part one

The shape of feminist theology

1 The emergence of Christian feminist theology

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In this chapter, I will trace the emergence and development of feminist theology in Christianity. I start by asking what counts as feminism, what counts as feminist theology, and what social and cultural conditions allow it to emerge. Feminist theology is not just women doing theology, for women have done theology that does not question the masculinist paradigms of theology. Nor is feminist theology simply the affirmation of 'feminine' themes in theology. What has been called 'feminine' in Western thought has been constructed to complement the construction of masculinity. Thus, the adding of feminine to masculine themes in theology mostly enforces the dominant gender paradigm.

Feminism is a critical stance that challenges the patriarchal gender paradigm that associates males with human characteristics defined as superior and dominant (rationality, power) and females with those defined as inferior and auxiliary (intuition, passivity). Most feminists reconstruct the gender paradigm in order to include women in full and equal humanity. A few feminists reverse it, making females morally superior and males prone to evil, revalorising traditional male and female traits.[1] Very few feminists have been consistently female-dominant in their views; more often there has been a mix of egalitarian and feminine superiority themes. I take the egalitarian impulse of feminism to be the normative stance, but recognise the reversal patterns as part of the difficulty of imagining a new paradigm of gender relations which is not based on hierarchy of values.

Feminist theology takes feminist critique and reconstruction of gender paradigms into the theological realm. They question patterns of theology that justify male dominance and female subordination, such as exclusive male language for God, the view that males are more like God than females, that only males can represent God as leaders in church and society, or that women are created by God to be subordinate to males and thus sin by rejecting this subordination.

Feminist theologians also seek to reconstruct the basic theological symbols of God, humanity, male and female, creation, sin and redemption, and the church, in order to define these symbols in a gender-inclusive and egalitarian way. In so doing they become theologians, not simply critics of the dominant theology. Feminist theologians engage in this critique by reclaiming nascent egalitarian and positive female themes in the Christian tradition and developing them in new ways to apply to gender relations such as: female symbols for God (the Wisdom tradition); humanity, male and female, both created in God's image (Genesis 1^{27}); the distinction of male and female overcome in Christ in a new inclusive humanity of redemption (Galatians 3^{28}); and both males and females called to prophecy (Acts 2^{17}). But the mere presence of such themes in the tradition does not constitute a feminist reading of them. For the latter to come about, certain cultural and social conditions are necessary. There needs to be a new stance towards knowledge that recognises that symbols, including theological symbols, are socially constructed, rather than eternally and unchangeably disclosed from beyond. Those in power construct cultural symbols to validate their own power and the subjugation of women; social relations, such as class, race, and gender, are not eternally given by God as the 'order of creation', but are social constructs, and, as such, can be changed.

These cultural shifts of consciousness about the nature of truth and knowledge depend on certain social conditions. Women must gain education and agency in some social institutions that enable them to gain a voice. Women's claims of cultural agency must be organised as a movement or community of discourse that supports women's (and men's) critique of the dominant gender paradigm. Women must gain education and agency in the church as those allowed to learn, speak, and be heard as theologians.

These cultural and social conditions did not exist adequately (they still do not exist fully) until the late 1960s. Liberal and Marxist critiques of ideology and society had been somewhat assimilated into modern culture, and women gained some access to theological education, teaching, and ministry in some theological schools and churches. Hence the major emergence of feminist theology dates from the late 1960s. However, feminist theology was not born *ex nihilo*. Some of the conditions for feminist theology also existed in earlier eras. Women in these earlier eras made some beginnings of a critique and reconstruction of sexist paradigms in religion.

Among many female spiritual writers of the Middle Ages, such as Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich, one finds women able to gain some theological education, to claim and be accepted by some other women and men as producers of theological writing, teachers, and preachers. One

finds in their writing affirmations of positive female symbols, particularly drawing on the Wisdom imagery for God, and women's spiritual equality of soul in redemption.[2] What is lacking is a culture that can critique the dominant paradigm and imagine changes of social relations between the genders.

In the Renaissance and Reformation eras from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, one finds a few writers that apply the Protestant critique of the medieval church, and the humanistic claims to a critical rereading of theological texts, to gender relations. Most of Reformation and humanist critique was used to re-enforce traditional gender roles. Among those who spoke from the new humanistic education to claim a fuller humanity for women is Christine de Pizan, an Italian writing in France between 1390 and 1429. In the context of current debates about women's 'nature' as good or evil, Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* defended women's capacity for virtue against misogynist diatribes by churchmen and poets.[3]

Another proto-feminist humanist is the German Agrippa von Nettesheim. His 1529 essay 'On the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex' mixed defences of women's equality with claims to their moral superiority. Most notably, Agrippa declared that the subjugated state of women is not based on either their natural inferiority or the will of God, but simply is due to male 'tyranny' and will to power over women.[4] But these proto-feminist voices remain isolated and do not become a movement or influential community of discourse.

Seventeenth-century England saw something closer to a movement of feminist discourse arising from two sources in different social contexts: radical, apocalyptic Christianity among the popular classes, and humanism among the leisure class elite. The first type of feminist theology is exemplified by Margaret Fell and the Quaker movement. Fell's 1666 essay, 'Women's Preaching Justified according to the Scriptures', reconstructed New Testament Christianity to claim women's agency as preachers. For Fell, women's public preaching is not simply allowed by Christ, but is the foundational condition for the birth of the church as a movement of redemption.[5]

The second type of feminism is found in a figure such as the Anglican humanist, Mary Astell. Her 1694 book, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, argues for equality of education for women as a precondition of their equality in soul development in this life and the life to come.[6] Both these expressions of seventeenth-century English feminism reflect the emergence of small communities of discourse that counter the dominant culture. They can be seen as the first *movement* of feminist theology. But they remained marginalised because women were still so totally excluded from the dominant church,

educational, and cultural institutions. That gender relations could be reconstructed legally, politically, and economically was still mostly inconceivable.

Revolutionary liberalism and socialism in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries mostly used their arguments against the hegemony of the aristocracy and the capitalist class to re-enforce male domination. But they gave new tools to some women to apply to gender relations. A few social critics in France, England, and the United States, Olympe de Gouge, Mary Wollstonecraft, Abigail Adams, and Frances Wright,[7] sought to apply liberal and socialist principles to changed social organisation to allow women's equality in a new society.

In the mid-nineteenth century, these calls for gender equality become an organised movement seeking women's property rights, higher education, civil and political rights. In the United States, feminism arose in conjunction with the abolitionist movement against slavery. In this context, one finds some of the first systematic efforts to challenge the sexist paradigms of Christian theology that upheld the ideology of male domination. Key figures in this American development of nineteenth-century feminist theology are Sarah Grimke ('Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women', 1837), Lucretia Mott (Sermons, 1840–79), and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (especially *The Women's Bible*, 1895).[8]

Both Grimke and Mott built on the Quaker tradition that had allowed women's preaching and ministry since the seventeenth century. They based their theological critique on their interpretation of the equality of the sexes in the image of God, arguing that this represents God's original intent for social equality. This, they claim, has been wrongly betrayed by male dominance. Sexism is a sin against women and God, distorting God's intention for creation. Equality between the sexes must go beyond personal relations to social reconstruction, redeeming society and restoring creation. Stanton takes a more radical view of the Scriptures, seeing them not simply as misread by later sexist theology, but as themselves a product of sexism. In her *Women's Bible*, Stanton attacks the Bible itself as sexist, and envisions a feminist theology and ethic emancipated from it.

The 'first wave' of feminism of the 1840s–1920s resulted in a partial emancipation of women. Women were allowed access to higher education, property rights, and the vote in the United States. Similar developments took place in liberalised societies elsewhere, such as in England. But these changes were absorbed into ongoing ways of enforcing gender hierarchy, based particularly on sexual division of labour. The nineteenth century beginnings of feminist theology as part of an organised feminist movement was largely forgotten, overwhelmed by a social gospel that re-enforced the

male family wage and women's domestication and then the neo-orthodox renewal of classical patriarchal Christianity. It remained until the late 1960s, with a renewed feminist movement in the United States, for feminist theology to be reborn and to discover its earlier predecessors.

The late 1960s in the USA represented a conjunction of two developments that supported the emergence of a more fully developed feminist theology. First, the civil rights and anti-war movements brought a wide-ranging critique of racial, class and militarist patterns that defined American society. Initially these movements ignored gender and re-enforced male dominance on the Left. Feminism emerged from two sources: liberal white women in education, government, and the professions seeking fuller inclusion of women in these institutions; and women of the Left stung by the sexist chauvinism of leftist men. This second group of women shaped a radical feminism that envisioned transformed social and sexual relations, including heterosexual dominance.[9]

Secondly, women in the Christian churches, particularly in liberal Protestantism, had been gradually acquiring access to theological education and ministry from the late nineteenth century: Congregationalists (1853), Unitarians, Universalists, Methodist Protestants (1870–80s). This development flowered from 1955 to 1975 with a number of mainline Protestant denominations approving women's ordination: mainline Methodists and Northern Presbyterians (1956), Lutherans (1965), Episcopalians (1975).

By the 1970s, the opening of ordination to women brought increasing numbers of women students into theological schools. More and more women earned doctoral degrees in theological fields and entered teaching faculties. Feminist theology for the first time gained an institutional basis in Christian theological education. The growing presence of women as students, ministers, and teachers in churches meant that feminism had to be translated into feminist theology. Women in these teaching and ministerial roles had to engage in critique and reconstruction of a tradition that had historically excluded them and justified their exclusion theologically, in order to mandate their own new inclusion and leadership.

Yet these developments among liberal Protestants do not explain the prominence of Catholic women among the American feminist theologians: Mary Daly, Rosemary Ruether, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza[10] who begin their feminist theological work in the late 1960s to mid-1970s, to be followed by a number of others, such as Margaret Farley, Mary Jo Weaver, Elizabeth Johnson, and Susan Ross.[11] The emergence of Catholic women as equal participants in feminist theology reflects another conjunction of movements in the mid-1960s, namely the Second Vatican Council and the

eager reception of Vatican II reform among a wing of American Catholics. Progressive Catholic nuns adopted a feminist critique of the church and applied it to the renewal of their religious communities.

A new ecumenism between Catholics and Protestants allowed many Catholic women to gain a critical theological education at liberal Protestant strongholds, such as Princeton, Yale, Harvard, Union, and Chicago theological schools, and to shape careers in theological education at Protestant schools or at university departments of religion. A few found a base in liberalised Catholic universities, such as Fordham and Notre Dame, and the Jesuit seminaries (although at the end of the twentieth century their careers there are under threat due to the new effort of the Vatican and American Catholic bishops to reassert control over Catholic theological education).[12]

Ironically the very intransigence of the Roman Catholic Church toward women's aspirations for equality in the church may have spurred theological energy, while liberal Protestantism's openness to women in ordained ministry lessened the challenge. While Protestant women poured into theological education between 1970 and 2000, becoming 40–60 per cent of the students in the theological schools of these denominations, much of their energy was drawn off into the pastoral ministry, often in low-paid positions with long hours of work, leaving little time for theological reflection and writing.

Catholic women, lacking this outlet and rebuffed by official church seminaries, attended instead interdenominational theological schools, such as those mentioned above. The Vatican's defence of women's exclusion from ordination on grounds of theological anthropology (i.e. women cannot image Christ, and are not, by their very nature as female, ordainable) spurred the need for Catholic women to examine and critique the theological rationales for these arguments. The Catholic Women's Ordination Conference that arose in 1975 took conscious aim at the theology and scriptural exegesis of the Vatican position.[13]

By 1982, some American Catholics were becoming disenchanted with the prospects of being ordained in such a clerical system. They began to shape the 'women–church movement' as free liturgical communities for the nurture of feminist spirituality, worship, and social service. For Catholic feminist theologians, such as Rosemary Ruether and Mary Hunt, these autonomous feminist liturgical communities also became venues for the imagining of more radical feminist theology and liturgy.[14]

Ordained Protestant women needed to conform their ministries within largely unchanged communities of patriarchal religious discourse. These limitations meant that the women–church idea soon spread to Protestant

women as well. Some Protestant feminist theologians and pastors began to shape feminist liturgical communities, to supplement the limitations of their work in official churches. In the 1990s, Protestant feminist theologians, such as Letty Russell and Rebecca Chopp, were situating their ecclesiology in the context of the idea of women–church.[15]

American women theologians emerged as feminist theologians through various life histories and contexts. Several pioneer feminist theologians were educated in a pre-feminist context and then transformed their own thought by the inclusion of feminist critique. For example, Mary Daly began her educational journey in the late 1950s through a desire to be fully accepted in doctoral work in Catholic scholastic philosophy. Rebuffed in this quest, she moved to Europe where she attained a doctorate in Catholic theology and then a second one in Catholic philosophy at the University of Fribourg.[16]

In Europe, Daly was influenced by reading the feminist philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir. Returning to teach at Jesuit Boston College in 1968 (where she has remained throughout her career until her ouster in 1999),[17] she became increasingly radicalised by her application of feminist critique to an intransigent church. This drew Daly from feminist reform to a radical rejection of Christianity and all patriarchal cultures, and an effort to think of feminist spirituality outside of and against 'phallocratic' discourse, a development somewhat parallel to French feminists, such as Irigaray.[18]

Rosemary Ruether, as a Catholic growing up in an ecumenical context, and Letty Russell as a Presbyterian followed somewhat parallel paths. Both were deeply shaped by participation in the Civil Rights and Anti-War movements of the 1960s: Ruether through work in the Delta Ministry in Mississippi in 1965 and teaching at Howard University School of Religion, á black Protestant Divinity School (1965–76), and Russell through working as a minister in the innovative East Harlem Protestant parish in the same period. Both developed their first theological reflections in the context of a liberation theology critical of class and race oppression, and then expanded and transformed this paradigm through feminism in the early 1970s.

Other important American feminist theologians of this first generation are Sallie McFague and Beverly Harrison. Trained in neo-orthodoxy, McFague pioneered work in epistemological questions of theological language. Beginning in 1982, she developed a series of books that translated this inquiry into feminist and ecological terms.[19] Ethicist Beverly Harrison situated her work in class, race, and gender terms in the early 1970s. Harrison's teaching has been crucial to the training of a second generation of feminist theologians and ethicists at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.[20]

Carter Heyward was one such feminist theologian to emerge under Harrison's tutelage. An Episcopalian, Heyward shaped her theological identity in the 1970s in the struggle for women's ordination in that church, justifying her own participation in the first wave of 'illegal' ordinations in her 1975 book, *A Priest Forever*. Her 1980 doctoral dissertation, published under the title, *The Redemption of God,* pioneered a feminist view of God as the matrix of 'right relation', decisively challenging the traditional male, transcendental view of deity. Heyward was also the first feminist theologian to begin to write explicitly as a lesbian. Through her work and that of other lesbian feminists, such as Mary Hunt, the critique of 'heterosexism' has become an additional optic for viewing the patterns of sexism in Christian theology.[21]

By the late 1970s and early 80s, enough feminist theologians were established on teaching faculties of theological schools that the new generation of students could study and write their dissertations out of a feminist paradigm, rather than having to invent that paradigm over against a theology that ignored gender issues, as had been the case with the pioneer writers of the early 1970s. Feminist theology was becoming an established part of the discourse of American theological schools. By the 1990s, liberal theological schools had five to ten women scholars across theological fields and even more conservative schools employed some women faculty.

Feminists from evangelical churches have also sought to develop their distinctive theological voice. Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty pioneered an evangelical approach to women's liberation in their 1986 volume, *All We're Meant to Be*. Evangelical feminists eschew a radical critique of the Bible and affirm its adequacy for women's emancipation from sexism in church and society. The magazine, *Daughters of Sarah*, and the Evangelical Women's Caucus (both discontinued) for a while nurtured feminist readings of Christianity that held on to more traditional views of biblical authority.

American feminist theology was also diversifying as African American, Hispanic, and Asian women entered theological schools. Many found their feminist theological teachers oblivious to racial differences in women's experiences, just as the earlier generation had found their male teachers oblivious to gender differences. Yet the roots of many feminist theologians in the Civil Rights struggle made them ready to hear such questions. African American, Hispanic, and Asian women began to gain their distinctive theological voices.

African American women claimed the name of 'Womanism' for their theological perspective, rooted in the conjunction of sexism and racism in American society. Delores Williams, Jacquelyn Grant, Katie Cannon, Emilie

Townes, Linda Thomas, Marcia Riggs, Cheryl Gilkes, Shawn Copeland, Karen Baker-Fletcher, and Jamie Phelps are among this emerging generation of womanist theologians.[22] Hispanic women, such as Ada María Isasi-Díaz, also began to claim their theological voice out of their cultural context, coining the name 'Mujerista' theologians.[23]

Many Hispanic and Asian women are immigrants or visitors who remain 'cross-border' theologians. Some Hispanic feminists, such as Mexican Maria Pilar Aquino teaching in San Diego, identify more with the networks of feminist theologians in Latin America. Aquino calls herself a Latina Feminist, rather than a Mujerista theologian.[24] Asian women, such as Kwok Pui-lan and Chung Hyun Khung, received their theological training and are presently teaching in the USA, but speak more from their Asian contexts in Hong Kong and Korea.[25]

American women from other religious traditions have also begun to find their feminist voice. Judith Plaskow pioneered Jewish feminist theology with her 1990 book *Standing Again at Sinai*. Buddhist women, particularly American converts, began to examine both the religious practice and the teachings of Buddhism from a feminist perspective. Rita Gross' 1993 *Buddhism after Patriarchy* is the pioneering text for a feminist reading of Buddhism. Some feminists who began in Christian theological studies concluded that patriarchy is too deeply entrenched in this tradition to be capable of feminist transformation. Carol Christ has been a major voice for American religious feminists who have turned to Wiccan or neo-pagan spirituality for sustenance.[26]

In the 1900s, American feminist theology increasingly reflects both American cultural diversity and many new dimensions of social concerns. The ecological crisis has reshaped the way feminists look at human–nature relations, causing many feminist theologians to write from an 'ecofeminist' perspective. Ruether and Daly had such concerns already in the early 1970s,[27] and McFague has reshaped her theological work to situate it in the human–nature relation. Epistemological questions, often sparked by postmodern challenges, have also become an important area of feminist theological discourse.[28]

Feminist theological writing has proliferated, with more and more specialised work in all fields, such as Hebrew Scripture, New Testament, church history, ethics, pastoral psychology, preaching and worship, as well as systematic theology. These are no longer confined to a feminist 'ghetto' in professional theology, but are found in most areas of inquiry. Yet the hostility of many churches to feminist questions has widened the gap between church and academy. More and more women are coming to theological