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Are Women Full Participants in Theological Education, Church, and Society?

Greetings from many men and women in our country! In the United States, many people believe that the struggle for justice is for bread and freedom—and also for poetry and music. In this spirit, many women today are writing music about the struggle. This music is sometimes designated "women's music"—or "feminist music." This morning I'll sing a little of one of these feminist songs, because it represents a great many women who are working for justice in the U.S. This song is by Holly Near. Please sing with me!

Michele Peña Herrera
Nalvia Rosa Meña Alvarado
Cecilia Castro Salvadores
Ida Amelia Almarza—

Hay una mujer desaparecida
Hay una mujer desaparecida
En Chile, en Chile, en Chile—

And the junta knows. . .
Where they are hiding her. . . .
She's dying. . .
Hay una mujer desaparecida.[1]

In this presentation, I speak as a woman priest, a professor of theology, and a feminist theologian of liberation—about the situation of women in the U.S.—especially in church and seminary, women of different races and cultures. With my friends here from the U.S., I believe that we ought to speak Spanish when we are in a Spanish-speaking country—thus, I'm very sorry because my Spanish is not good and we'd be here all day if I tried to speak more than a short introduction in Spanish.

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[1] "Hay una mujer desaparecida" was written and first performed by Holly Near. Near's performance was recorded by Redwood Records (P.O. Box 996, Uriah, CA 95482), on album, *Imagine My Surprise! An Album of Songs About Women's Lives*, 1978.

The issue of women's full participation in the church and throughout U.S. society has become increasingly important to many of us. At the same time, during the last ten to fifteen years, many feminists have realized increasingly how complex the pursuit of justice for women is in our society. Let me say here at the outset that many of the same basic social issues and political forces are at work in relation to the lives of Jewish and other U.S. women who are not Christians (Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists, and others, including the growing group of women who identify themselves as postchristian). But this morning, while I will be referring to issues and forces which affect all U.S. women, I will be focusing my attention on some of the particular concerns of Christian women. I will be doing so, as I noted in Spanish, as someone whose own work and roots are embedded deeply in the soil of a Christian feminist liberation commitment.

The question which was assigned to Dora Valentin and me was: "Are women full participants in theological education, church, and society?" The simple answer to this question is "No." Women are not full participants in the society of the United States, in the Christian church in the United States, nor in the theological seminaries in our country. Moreover, the situation just noted is getting worse. Single black women with children continue to be the poorest of the poor in the United States. Under the Reagan Administration, women have been the hardest hit by the cutbacks in food stamps, welfare benefits, legal aid and child care. Women are still the last hired and the first fired throughout the society. Women still make fifty-nine cents to every dollar made by men. Violence against women and children is on the rise in the United States. Public violence against gay men and lesbians, who are also victims of sexual stereotyping and prejudice, is also on the increase. Increasingly in the United States, it is difficult to be a woman who takes herself seriously and enjoys herself as a creative and intelligent member of the human family. It is difficult, in fact, to be a man or a woman who takes women seriously as valuable participants in society.

The early women's movement in the United States dissipated with the passage of suffrage in 1920. The current wave of the women's movement is, I think, less likely to disappear. In part, this is because we have not yet gotten the Equal Rights Amendment passed through Congress and the states.More importantly, the feminist movement becomes more tenacious as we are radicalized in our goals, our vision, and our strategies. We are not interested in the status quo's accommodation of women. We are committed to changing the status quo. We seek power—creative, shared power—not the competitive dominating power of patriarchy.

As women have begun to come into our power, as the movement for justice for women has grown, so too of course has grown the countermovement's resistance to women's power. Feminists have been targeted

as the most subversive force in the United States society today. Both the political and the religious right, which work neatly in concert these days, have noted that if feminist goals are achieved, the society as we know it will have been transformed, revolutionized. This is true. The so-called Radical Right is correct in this observation that feminism is a revolutionary movement. It may seem ironic that feminists ourselves seldom speak of our *revolution.* Perhaps we are frightened of owning and proclaiming our power as women? I would suggest that to the extent that we, as women of different races and cultures and religions and classes in the United States, fail to proclaim and celebrate our womanpower, the effectiveness of our movement for justice for all women and men will be diminished.

At this point a brief survey of the situation of women in seminaries in the United States is in order. Social data is, as you know, indispensable to any adequate theological work or understanding. Between 1970 and 1982, the number of women in theological education in the United States increased by 222%. In most mainline Protestant seminaries today, women constitute 40 to 50% of the student body. In some, the figure may be as low as 25% and others as high as 70%. Among Protestants, there are reasons for this increase: more denominations today are ordaining more women. There are more women faculty in seminaries, as more women graduate with Ph.D.s in theological disciplines. Seminaries show greater interest now in women students, as seminary men seem to have reached a "plateau of ambivalence" about church-related professions.

At the same time, deployment of women in church related positions is an enormous problem and is getting worse with the increasing number of seminary graduates. The first job, if it is in a parish, may be reasonably easy for many women to locate. But there is little mobility except for the so-called "exceptional" few. Many of us have been in seminary teaching long enough to have watched time and again our most gifted female graduates blossom in parish ministry for their first several years and then, in the next several years, begin to wilt. This happens because they cannot move on to other work places in which their considerable expertise and experience would be honored, and because the questions they have begun raising about how to work as self-respecting women *and* as Christians are not taken seriously by their supervisors, bishops, and others who have authority over them.

In the Episcopal Church, the large majority of women who are happy in their work as parish priests are either just beginning (in their first five years), or they have made a peace, more often than not an uneasy peace, with the patriarchal church. Frequently these women have adapted themselves to working in situations in which justice-making is simply not a priority.

Similarly, women teachers in seminaries tend even now, along with racial-ethnic minority males, to be located at the bottom of the professional hierarchy. White women and Black men find themselves going in and out of a revolving professional door. There are still too few Black women in seminary teaching to have produced much of a pattern in this regard. In the mainline seminaries, both Protestant and Catholic, Anglo and northern European males hold tenaciously onto their power and their prerogative to run the seminaries as they desire and to perpetuate their understandings of God, the church, and the world. This means that Hispanic men and women, and Asian men and women, share with Afro-Americans and white women the lower rungs of the professional ladder.

What is alarming is how few women of any race or ethnic group, and how few racial/ethnic males in U.S. seminaries, realize the extent to which white men of Anglo and northern European heritage continue to set the theological agenda for *all* people of all races and ethnic groups. And so it is that most Black theologians and most female theologians of whatever race continue to teach the theologies of such noted white male scholars as Jürgen Moltman and Bernard Lonergan, with more seriousness than they approach the works of a James Cone, Gustavo Gutiérrez, or Rosemary Ruether.

We have discovered in U.S. seminaries that it pays to take Euro-American males and their theologies more seriously than those of the rest of the theological community. Only insofar as we pay homage to the great white fathers do we have a chance of succeeding in the profession of our choice if we are theological educators. Even those of us whose reputations have been built, to a large extent, on our resistance to the white male ecclesiastical academy, must pay our dues to the theological legacy of white men in order to survive in the churches and seminaries. The dues of which I speak are not simply paying lip service to the white men who have gone before us. We are required to give over at least a little bit of our hearts and souls and minds, and most surely our bodies, our energy and our life blood, to perpetuate the religion of those men who have ruled the nations and the peoples of the earth.

Whether we're dealing with women students, women professors, women in parish ministry, or women in the larger society, there is one pattern which has emerged full force among women in the United States, as it has also among Black, Hispanic, and other racial/ethnic males: The more clearly a white woman or a Black, Hispanic, or Asian man or woman conforms to the values and expectations established by the white male ruling class in church and society, the more likely this person is to be able to secure a job or other sign of acceptance in church and society. Those white propertied males who have constructed society, church, and God in their image are clear that they do not intend to have their values, theologies, or attitudes seriously challenged by any people

who are unwilling to conform to the standards established as right and good for the proper ordering of the social world.

The significance of feminism for the churches and the seminaries is not merely to increase the number of women who hold leadership positions or participate in these institutions. Feminism, in a more fundamental way, has to do with the shaping of new values for our common life. The revolutionary character of feminism, as an ideology and as a political movement, is steeped in a transformation of values that is born out of struggle and identification with oppressed people. A feminist commitment implies a willingness to stand up and be counted on behalf of those who suffer oppression. Feminism involves a commitment to making justice—or right, mutual, reciprocal relation—normative in our faith as well as in our common social life in society.[2]

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[2] Feminist theological resources in the United States include Evelyn T. Beck, ed., *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone, 1982); Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979); Linda Clark, Marian Rowan and Eleanor Walker, *Image-Breaking, Image-Building: A Handbook for Creative Worship with Women in Christian Tradition* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1981); Cornwall Collective, *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Feminist Alternatives in Theological Education!* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1980); Mary Daly, *Beyond God Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation!* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973); Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981; Vintage, 1983); Sarah Bentley Doeby, ed., *Women's Liberation and The Church: The New Demand For Freedom in The Life of The Christian Church* (New York: Association Press, 1970); Zillah R. Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* (New York: Longman, 1981); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins (New York: Crossroad, 1983); Marie M. Fortune, Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1983); Renny Golden and Sheila D. Collins, *Struggle of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979); Jacquelyn Grant, "Black Theology and the Black Woman," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979,* eds. Gayraud Wilmore and James H. Cone (Maryknoll,, New York: Orbis, 1979); Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics,* ed. Carol Robb (Boston: Beacon, 1985); Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Our Right To Choose: Toward a New Ethic of Abortion* (Boston: Beacon, 1983); Carter Heyward , *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984); Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982); Bell Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981); Gloria Hull, Patricia Scott, and Barbara Smith, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (Old Westbury, New York: Feminist Press, 1981); Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching* God (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1937; repr. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1969); Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone, 1981); Nelle K. Morton, *The Journey is Home* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1985); Pauli Murray, "Black Theology and Feminist Theology: A Comparative View," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979,* eds.

So deeply do feminist liberation theologians value justice as right relation that we perceive it to be the image of God, who is Godself the source and resource of justice. Our deity does not sit at the top of a pyramid of social control, giving laws or pushing buttons. She is our friend and sister. He is our brother, a wellspring of courage, confidence, and visions. He moves the struggle. She is with us. He is the source and resource of our power to co-create with him, as with one another, a more just and compassionate world and church.

In the United States, many of our colleagues ask why feminist theologians seem also to profess non-hierarchical theologies. Feminism has to do with how power is abused, used, shared, hoarded, or generated. It has to do with whether power is creative or destructive in our world. Those who seek to control others, rather than to befriend them, are not serving the common good. People who seek to tell others what is best for them, rather than joining others in discovering what may be best for us all, are not interested in justice or right relation. Those who always speak, and seldom listen, do not speak in the name of the One who is love. People who seek to control, dominate, and manipulate the created order—persons and other natural resources—perpetuate the image of a god whom they have made in their image as the Master of Control, the One at the Top, the Archetype of Imperialism. Feminist liberation theologians do not believe that we can reconcile our work for justice, mutuality, and common resources with a faith in a First Principle of Control and Domination. Kings, Lords, and Masters—even benevolent ones—do

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Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (New York; Orbis, 1979); James B. Nelson, *Between Two Gardens: Reflections on Sexuality and Religious Experience* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1983); James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978); Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1980); Rosemary R. Ruether, New Women/New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation (New York: Seabury Press, 1975); Rosemary R. Ruether, *Sexism and Godtalk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston; Beacon Press, 1983; Letty M. Russell, *Becoming Human* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979); Letty M. Russell, *Growth in Partnership* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981); Letha Scanzoni and Virginia R. Mollenkott, *Is The Homosexual My Neighbor? Another Christian View* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978); Dorothhee Solle, with Shirley C. Gloyes, *To Work and to Love: A Theology of Creation (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984);* Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Metaphor for the Contemporary Church* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1983); Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982); Judith C. Weidman, ed., *Christian Feminism: Visions of a New Humanity* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983); Sharon Welch, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1985); Dominga Maria Zapata, "The Role of The Hispanic Woman in the Church," in *New Catholic World* 223 (July/August 1980): 172-174.

not embody or represent a social order in which all women and men are brothers and sisters.

The feminist movement is a political movement on behalf of shared resources, common good, justice for all people. It is this understanding of feminism as a movement on behalf of all men and women (and on behalf of the created order itself) which informed the recent project undertaken by seven female theological educators in the United States: Beverly Harrison and I were among the seven, which included two Black women, one Hispanic woman, and four white women. In our recently published book[3] we set out to explore the significance of the feminist movement for Christian ministry and for theological education in Christian seminaries. Here is what we said about feminism:

> Zillah Eisenstein, Angela Davis, and other contemporary feminists discuss the rise of the women's movement in the context of an Enlightened, liberal society run by white men with economic power. It is in this context that feminism's history is morally muddled. On the one hand, the U.S. feminist movement that began in the mid-19th century, was predominantly, though not exclusively, a white middle-and upper-strata women's movement. It was also a vital abolitionist force, the chief spokeswomen for women's rights and abolition being frequently the same people, such as the Grimke sisters and Sojourner Truth. On the other hand, as the feminist movement grew and began to divide into different groups on the basis of philosophy and/or strategy, some of the most vocal proponents of women's suffrage were white women who had turned their backs on black men and women in an attempt to salvage "women's rights" (read: *white* women's rights).
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> Contemporary feminism has inherited both the courage of the feminist abolitionists and the racism of the white women who sold out black people in a futile attempt to climb the ladders of success put in place by white men of privilege.
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> Mudflower believes that feminism, to be worth anything at all good, must be rooted even more deeply in the soil of abolition. Only then can black women, other racial/ethnic women, and Anglo-Northern European women in the United States, act together to rid this society of white supremacy, gender injustice, and economic suffering in their various racial/ethnic and class based communities.[4]

The writers of *God's Fierce Whimsy* conclude its first chapter on feminism with the following statement:

> The vast majority of the poor in the world are people of color and, of those, the majority are women and children—people who are put down because they are people of color; done in because they are poor; kept under because they are women and children. A commitment to women's well-being that does not take into account the complexity of women's oppression is not, to our understanding, a feminist commitment. An analysis of sexism that is not also an assessment of racism, ethnic prejudice, and economic injustice is not, in our opinion, a feminist analysis.[5]

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[3] The Mud Flower Collective, *God's Fierce Whimsy: Christian Feminism and Theological Education* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1985).

[4] Ibid., 10-11.

[5] Ibid, 33-34.

As a liberation movement, feminism in the United States was initiated and sustained by an intense commitment to the value and well-being of all women and all men who live in the margins of society. If there is a common theme which runs through the work of U.S. feminists, it is our commitment to work toward the empowerment of all people to live as subjects of our own lives. One of the most critical learnings for many of us during the past decade has been that, as we search for the historical roots of womens' subjugation to men, we become increasingly aware that these roots are tightly intertwined with those of white racial supremacy, economic subjugation, national imperialism, and contempt for gay men and lesbians. We begin to see that sexism, racism, classism, imperialism and heterosexism often have the same economic, religious and political causes and effects.

It is important to note here in Cuba that among the charges leveled at U.S. feminists is that we are *communists*. This charge is derived from the recognition by the more conservative citizenry in our country that feminist women and men value and believe in the common good, the well-being of all persons, especially those who have been marginalized historically and are poor or otherwise dispossessed. "Communist" becomes shorthand, in the minds of these private-enterprising men and women, for all people who are committed to justice for *all*.

Another favorite charge aimed at feminist women in the United States is that we are all *lesbians*. The fact is, some of us are, and some of us aren't. Feminist women should realize the extent to which it is considered "unnatural" in patriarchal society for anyone to deeply value and respect women. To really love someone is to really respect and deeply value that person. Over the years, and particularly in the context of the contemporary feminist movement, "lesbian" has become a term for those women who deeply value and respect other women. At some time or another, *every* feminist woman in *every* patriarchal society and *every* country of the world is bound to be perceived as lesbian. We feminists might as well get used to it. As we learn how to say "thank you" when people call us lesbians, we will have learned something about our power as women in society. We also will be shaping a powerful political strategy.

I have gone on at some length about feminism, because, in the United States today, it is an important and complex phenomenon—and because I believe it is critical to our work here together in Cuba this week. Certainly every U.S. woman in this room today is a feminist liberation theologian. I suspect that all of us who are here this week from the United States would agree that the feminist movement in our country is a focus of significant political interest and tension precisely because it harbors such revolutionary possibility.

In closing, let me say a few words about what many Christian feminists mean by "Christian." In the United States, Christianity is no less

controversial a phenomenon than feminism. I assume that everyone in this room understands Christianity to be a historical religion founded by friends and followers of Jesus of Nazareth and, furthermore, that everyone here believes that Christianity is a justice movement. We may not all agree on what else Christianity is or on the finer theological nuances of how, for example, we understand the authority of Jesus. But we agree, I suspect that when we refer to ourselves as "Christians," we are signalling our historical lines of continuity with the commitment of the early Jesus movement to working in faith toward the creation of a just and humane world in which all creatures can live as sisters and brothers in mutual respect, which is the heart of love itself.

I believe it is accurate to suggest that, among Christian feminist liberation theologians, Christianity provides the faith perspective for feminism as a political movement and ideology. Ernesto Cardenal of Nicaragua speaks of himself as *both* a Christian *and* a revolutionary. Together with ten other U.S. citizens, most of them Christian seminarians, I was in Nicaragua late last year and had several chances to meet with Ernesto Cardenal. He was eloquent in his testimony that, while Christianity has shaped his commitment to the revolutionary process in his nation, the revolutionary process in recent years has offered him the substance of his Christian witness. Cardenal articulates a vision of both *spiritual* witness and *revolutionary* commitment that is being shaped and shared also by Christian feminist liberation theologians—and by other feminist liberation theologians, such as Jewish feminist theologians—in the United States. Our religion and our politics, our spirituality and our way of being in society, go hand in hand. A commitment to justice is a commitment to justice, whether it is Christian, Jewish, humanist, socialist, communist . . . Just as many people in Nicaragua have moved beyond simply the goal of Marxist-Christian dialogue, feminist liberation theologians in the United States have moved beyond our earlier perception of embracing a religion that is conversant with our politics—as if either we or our social world could be divided neatly between the sacred and the secular.

Even as I speak, I realize that the political situation in Cuba, and therefore the context of the church in Cuba, is different from that of the church in Nicaragua. Certainly the relationship between the church and the state in the United States is different from that in either Cuba or Nicaragua. But Christian feminist theologians in the United States, together with such Christian leaders as the Cardenal brothers, and many of the courageous leaders of the church in Cuba, hold in common our experience and understanding of a faith that has bolstered our belief in justice and, conversely, our commitment to justice for all people as the heart of our faith. However imperfectly, we are living witnesses to a faith that the Christian and the revolutionary are one and the same in

this world and that God's eternal purpose is for justice to flow like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. So be it.