

Is Theological Education Captive of/ Critic of/Enhancer of the Respective Cultures in which it is Rooted?

A Definition of Feminism: Feminism is a Critique of Culture in Light of Misogyny

A case will be made in this presentation for the viewpoint that feminism is a means to free theological education from cultural captivity, to provide a vehicle for theological education to sustain a critique of the larger culture, and also to enable theological education done from a feminist perspective to contribute to the creative enhancement of the culture. It is essential, therefore, if feminism is to bear this much freight in the discussion, to define it carefully at the outset.

The definition noted above was penned by Phyllis Tribble, a North American feminist and professor of Old Testament. Amongst her several well-known works is *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* in which she states, "By feminism I do not mean a narrow focus upon women, but rather a critique of culture in light of misogyny. This critique affects the issues of race and class, psychology, ecology, and human sexuality.¹ Beverly Harrison has extended the insight that feminism takes on the task of ideology critique. She contrasts the "hard" feminism of this genre, i.e., a feminism that deals with a broadbased and comprehensive analysis of the interlocking patterns of racism, classism and sexism, with "soft" feminism. Soft feminism is defined as culturally captive to capitalist values. Its goals are equal pay for equal work, increased day care, job training, etc. Soft feminism provides little cultural critique and seeks to integrate women into the existing system to share "a bigger piece of the pie."²

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¹ Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 7.

² In the discussion following this presentation, Sharon Welch objected to the phallic language of "hard" and "soft" used in Harrison's definition. Some alternative such as "critically conscious" and "liberal" might be more descriptive terminology.

A "soft" or liberal feminist approach to theological education promotes increased admission of women to seminary, a general gloss of inclusive language over some liturgies in chapel, one or two courses on "Women and Ministry" and "Feminist Theology" in the peripheral curriculum. In addition, within the understood parameters of "academic freedom," faculty are urged to include one or two women and black authors on their reading lists. Increased hiring of women in local churches is promoted by the placement office.

Theological education done from a "hard" or "critically conscious" feminist perspective provides both an extended and integrated critique throughout the curriculum of the interconnections between racism, classism and sexism. The structure of the curriculum is altered to reflect the insights of sociology of knowledge approaches to teaching and learning. Liberation perspectives on theology and ethics are not peripheral but central to the course of studies.

Language Shapes Reality

In Cuba as elsewhere in the world the issue of inclusive language is a subject of intense debate in the churches. During my participation on the Inclusive Language Lectionary Committee (ILL) of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States I have come to recognize that what is named in language is shaped by that naming. Further, I have learned that linguistic change can create new realities. Certainly, it is also true that experience gives rise to naming. Neither is a oneway street. Naming that is divorced from experience, or even denied in experience, results in false consciousness. In a political vein, false naming is the tactic of the "liar" society that Gustavo Gutiérrez has described. The technique of misinformation is employed by many repressive governments to diffuse social protests. Liberation results from the naming which offers insight into the structure of reality.

Paulo Freire taught thousands to read in Brazil by teaching them to picture and accurately name their situation. When the farm workers described their grain warehouses which contained two different sized stacks of grain, the larger reserved for the owner, the smaller for the village to share, Freire and his literacy workers taught the word "inequality." Farm workers quickly learned to "see" their situation for the first time. In the same way, in the inclusive lectionary project, women are no longer falsely labeled men. In hearing themselves named in scripture, women see what was previously hidden from them, that they too are created in the image of God.

Spanish is an even more difficult language than English in which to make inclusive language changes. Spanish has a gender based grammar. Thus, practically, many of the solutions proposed by the ILL are of no

use in Spanish. For example, "son" is translated in the ILL as "child." In Spanish, child is either *niño* or *niña*, with a male or female ending. Unsurprisingly, the general word for child is *niño* and takes the male ending. The same is true for friend, *amigo* or *amiga*.

While gender and sex are not the same category, to use gender as a grammatical structure is to make gender a metaphor for difference. Gender based grammars dispose the language and hence thought toward sexual dualism.

Thus, to address inclusivity for languages which have gender based grammars is a very far-reaching task. To avoid the excessive awkwardness of always referring to *amigo y amiga* (though I understand from reading his speeches that Fidel Castro is always careful to do just that), Spanish speaking peoples could add an undefined ending, such as "e" or "ey" to their lexicons. Thus *amigo* or *amiga* would become simply "friend", *amige* or *amigey*.

Inclusive language is not a simple matter of sprinkling a few polite references to "the divine" in one's liturgies. It is a long-range and far-reaching call for systematic change in the way a culture chooses to name reality. As such, inclusive language work in theological education is a profound critique of culture and stands greatly to enhance culture in the direction of greater inclusivity.

Theological Education Must Integrate Theological Categories

Many of the critics of the *Inclusive Language Lectionary* styled themselves "scholarly," enjoining the committee to make a more "objective" translation of scripture. These critics betray a certain understanding of knowledge as a discrete and transcendent entity uncontaminated by contact with particular contexts. As Jurgen Habermas has pointed out, however, knowledge is constituted by interest, that is to say, what we know is directed by concerns which are located in particular contexts.

It is instructive to examine so-called "objective" and "scholarly" translations of the Bible (in English there have been close to a hundred translations of scripture since 1900) and observe the patriarchal bias of many of the translations. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza gives a good example of this bias in contrasting the following translations:

1 Cor. 11:3 in a word-by-word literal translation reads:

However, I want you [plural] to know that the head of every man is the Christ, however, a head of woman is the man, however, head of the Christ is the God.

The *Revised Standard Version* translation reads:

I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of the woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.

The *New English Bible* renders the verse as follows:

But I wish you to understand that while every man has Christ for his head, woman's head is man as Christ's head is God.

The *Living Letters* reads:

But there is one matter I want to remind you about: that a wife is responsible to her husband, her husband is responsible to Christ, and Christ is responsible to God.

And finally the *Good News for Modern Man* really brings out the good news for modern males:

But I want you to understand that Christ is supreme over every man, the husband is supreme over his wife, and God is supreme over Christ.

By dropping the definite article before Christ and God the translators have smoothed out the text theologically while, at the same time, interpreting it in terms of patriarchal hierarchy.³

Where do we find resources to help theological education become more critically conscious? Feminism is one such resource. Feminists have learned that knowledge is not discrete, it is not free floating and unconnected to specific contexts. This is not to say that the only knowledge available to human beings is wholly subjective. On the contrary, it is the subject-object split which is under critique. Knowledge rooted in a particular context is valid. What has changed is that a critical consciousness has emerged out of that rootedness. It is acknowledged and embraced.

In the theological curriculum these epistemological insights should be reflected in at least three ways. Theological education must begin to join theological categories and cease to separate theological inquiry into hermetically sealed disciplines. As Ann Wilson Schaef points out in *Women's Reality, An Emerging Female System in the White Male Society*,⁴ women have sought a way of learning that self-consciously searches for connections. Beverly Harrison's new book is accurately entitled *Making the Connections*.⁵ In addition, theological education should include political and strategic work.

Theological Education Must Include Political Work

It is a well-worn axiom of the contemporary women's movement that the personal is the political. Women have discerned through sharing their individual experiences of patriarchy, especially in that most private of spheres, the home, that their lives have a strikingly similar pattern.

³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad Press, 1983), 46.

⁴ Ann Wilson Schaef, *Women's Reality: An Emerging Female System in the White Male Society* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1981).

⁵ Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed., Carol Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

They find that their personal experiences are not unique, but are shaped by social, political, and economic forces in the public realm. There is no public/private split. Our private lives are lived by public patterns.

Religion in American culture holds very much the same position as women. It has been relegated to the private sphere.⁶ Ministers who engage in social action are told to leave the public business of politics alone and return to their "proper" sphere, managing the private spiritual lives of believers. This is perhaps one of the single most powerful forces operating to prevent concerted political action by the churches. Theological education which seeks to provide a critique of culture must address this deeply rooted division between the public and the private world.

Theological Education Must Include Strategic Work

While understanding the public/private split is key, the point, as Marx said, is not to understand the world but to change it. Liberal theological education has often offered study of social action, but has rarely taught the skills necessary for taking direct action.

At the seminary where I teach, we have begun to address this concern in a required course for all entering students entitled "Public Ministry." One of the goals of the course is to challenge the preponderance of Clinical Pastoral Education as the sole model for theological education. The CPE model, if relied upon exclusively, tends to teach clergy that the only valid approach to social problems is to shut the door to their offices and focus on the personal (despair) to the exclusion of the political (despair over chronic unemployment due to economic policies).

This one course will not suffice to change North American theological education and render it capable of a broad critique of the culture. It is one example, however, of the kind of changes that need to be made in the curriculum for effective change to occur. I invite reactions to this type of curricular change from our Cuban colleagues.

⁶ Cf. Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Avon, 1977).