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Atonement and Feminism

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Feminists in theology journey together from very diverse philosophical, theological and ecclesiastical cultures. What unites them *en route* is the conviction that there must be an alternative to the patriarchal language of dominance and subordination which has shaped and negated the lives of women throughout history. In particular, the theology of the Church must not be used to maintain structural barriers of gender, race and class which triply oppress the poorest and most racially disadvantaged of our world. Yet in the pursuit of an alternative the travellers become more scattered, pitching their tents at very different stopping places. For some feminists the redemptive vision may be actualised through our living more effectively as the body of Christ. It can be realized as we work to reclaim the image of God in our male-female humanity, allowing the effects of Christ's death and resurrection to shape our relationships, and recovering the depths of biblical meaning in our articulation of the faith. For others this might involve the deconstruction of much exegesis hitherto accepted as the norm. A radical rereading of the New Testament will draw those involved into greater inclusiveness and empowerment and enable Christians to see the effectiveness of Christ's atoning work in areas not previously envisaged. Women in particular will no longer be excluded by texts which deny their full participation in the *good news* of the kingdom, but both Scripture and history can be reclaimed.

For more radical feminists however, and most especially those who regard themselves as post-Christian, all these are vain longings and the journey cannot end here. There is no future in reclamation of the Bible, whether of its metaphors, or its stories. Nor is there hope in recalling accounts of creation, Christology, or doctrines of atonement. For all of these are precisely what we need to be liberated from. It is indeed in the very categories of the cross and salvation that women have lost their souls.

From most feminist perspectives debates about soteriology are largely sterile. They are part of a theological process which is not only barren but fossilised: the sad remains of a patriarchal past whose very closedness has cut itself off from any redemptive future. Whether the debate focuses on Irenaeus and sees salvific work as that through which the image of God can be restored to corrupted human beings, or on Anselm and views atonement in a juridical-legal mode, or on the Protestant Reformers and a doctrine of penal substitution, it makes no difference to the critical feminist. These and all other

traditional formulations embody concepts of God and of humanity which are reductionist and dangerous. The suggestion that such concepts are found in Scripture would be given short shrift. For there is no one-to-one correlation between the biblical narrative and the theology of the Church. What comes in between are centuries of male interpretation and representation. Consequently behind most traditional interpretations of atonement are ideas and implications which, feminists argue, fundamentally distort the meaning and identity of women. These concepts testify not to truth but to a perversion.

The relevant question for such thinkers therefore is not 'What traditional doctrine of the atonement can be most successfully adapted to a feminist consciousness?' but rather '(Can) feminists accept an atonement doctrine at all, in view of the disastrous consequences this has had for women?'[1] It is to this question, and the various ways in which feminists have responded to it that I want to address my contribution.

The concept of God

From the outset the key problem for many feminist critics is the concept of God. The problem is much greater than the issue of linguistic non-inclusiveness. The allegation is not only that God is presented in male language and images but, more significantly, that everything about God is gendered. The very attributes of divinity which undergird traditional theologising ring with strongly 'male' categories: authoritative power, absolute autonomy, self-sufficiency, independence, separateness. This is a God who needs no one, and who is limited by nothing, a 'disembodied sovereignty'. He controls all right to ethical attribution, for what he wills is by definition right. He is utterly unaccountable.

Seen from this perspective atonement language takes these images even further. It employs symbols which reinforce the image of God as a vengeful, mirthless, wrathful, dominating male deity, demanding payment for the fact that he has been disobeyed, and sentencing his only son to a violent death. Concepts like expiation, blood-sacrifice, condemnation, guilt-offering have led writers such as post-Christian theologian Mary Daly, to dismiss the 'gospel' as sadomasochistic. Her spine-chilling summary of Christianity as 'a necrophilic religion centering around a dead man on a cross'[2] finds a solemn echo now in the writings of many more women.

The claim is made that rather than being grounded in divine revelation, ideas about God are ominously close to psychological preoccupations that are normal to the western male psyche. The research of such well-respected cultural psychologists as Carol Gilligan and Nancy Chodorow, neither of them with any particular axe to grind against Christianity, is often quoted to substantiate this.[3] Their findings have long supported the now familiar

1 Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, SPCK, London 1989, p 110.

2 A fuller discussion is found in Mary Daly, *Gynaecology*, Beacon, Boston 1978, pp 79ff.

3 See for example, Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice; Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Harvard University Press, Harvard 1982, Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psycho-analysis and the Sociology of Gender*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1978.

observations that we are socialised into different 'gender cultures'. Men, far more than women, live in an experiential world of separateness, individuality, autonomy, and hierarchy. It is men who traditionally wield authority, legalise violence and separate 'rationality' from emotions, whereas most women's orientation to life involves greater connectedness, less hierarchy, and a deeper integration between their internal and external lives. That is why, with their less atomistic sense of self, and mode of personal involvement with others, many women increasingly find traditional ideas of God to be alienating. One student, observing how far the western conception of God is shaped from characteristics she disliked when she found them in human beings, remarked, 'Now I understand why I have no use for such a God'.[4] One scholar goes further, asserting that the God who has been handed down from the Bible through theology is 'modelled on an absolutised version of the dominant male ego'.[5]

This view of God does not change substantially when he is disclosed as 'Our Father'. The image of a paternalistic deity, refusing to allow his children their autonomy and independence from his excessive 'thou shalt nots' is one which is rejected by many feminists. For them, far too many earthly fathers have taken their cue from the heavenly one, and demanded obedience, allegiance, and self-giving from their children, especially their daughters. Many women's experience of paternal tyranny, whether that of incest, violence or verbal abuse, does not provide a good basis for drawing close to a divinity who has the same gender characteristics. At best, having God as perpetual daddy means that women never fully come of age.

Problems with the concept of God the Father are well rehearsed and have been part of feminist discourse for more than two decades. Many have alerted the Church to the limitations of human discourse, and to the dangers of reifying metaphors.[6] Feminists have been able to relate to a parent-God without appropriating male symbolism. But problems with the Son are more difficult, for the Son is unmistakably male. And he is central to any Christian atonement doctrine, however much traditional theologians might argue about the soteriological details. Consequently, the layers of assumptions which feminists detect about the Christ/ Man Saviour pose, even for some of the faithful, deep and almost insoluble problems.

First there is again the problem of dependency. Some take Calter Heyward's point that the notion of saviour is too close to the notion of 'hero' which absolves people (especially men) from taking responsibility for their own wrongs. It encourages us to dump our guilt or our powerlessness on to someone else.[7] For many feminists, growth into maturity is not possible if we constantly have to accept dependency on a male hero figure. There is a need

4 Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism*, Blackwell, Oxford 1990, p 152.

5 Rosemary Radford Ruether in her review of Daphne Hampson, *Feminism and Theology*, in the *The Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol, X (1990), p 392.

6 See Gail Ramshaw, 'The Gender of God' in *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, ed. Anne Loades, SPCK, London 1990.

7 Carter Heyward, 'Must Jesus be a Holy Terror?' in *Our Passion for Justice*, Pilgrim Press, 1984. See also *Touching our Strength.The Erotic as Power and the Love of God*, San Francisco 1989 for her development of a lesbian theology.

for ownership and resolution of what is wrong in our own lives.

Secondly and more importantly there is the 'scandal of particularity'. By investing all credence in a specific historical male as the incarnate and atoning God, Christianity ensures that a large majority of human beings are excluded from the process of identification and acceptance. The category of 'outsider' is large, and includes those who have never even heard the Christian story of atonement. The issue does not stay academic. Non-acceptance by dominant power groups in society has produced such terrifying social and political implications as the violation of indigenous peoples, the genocide of holocaust, and the barbarism of ethnic cleansing which have dominated the world stage. But for feminism, it is not only the Hindu, Muslim, Jew, Sikh or unbeliever who suffers in this scandal of particularity. All women are affected. Even if they accept the Christian belief structure they are outsiders because they are non-male. For Christ's maleness, when added to the maleness of the Father becomes a formidable, gendered power-force at the very centre of the cosmos. On this issue alone Carol Christ challenges Christianity to 'show that the core symbolism of Father and Son do not have the effect of reinforcing and legitimating male power and female submission.'[8]

Linked with this is the issue of what it means to be saved, and from what. Feminists who have grappled with stories of injustice and pain ask whether women need to be saved less from themselves than from the oppression of others. This raises the inevitable question, first posed by Ruether: 'Can a male saviour actually save women?'[9] Twenty years ago Maly Daly had already given her own unequivocal response: 'a patriarchal divinity and His Son are exactly not able to save us from the horrors of a patriarchal world'.[10] Even for those feminists who still describe themselves as Christian, there is a problem with the relationship between the maleness of Christ and his redeeming qualities: is the redeemer role *intrinsically* male? In the long debate over the ordination of women, opponents of women priests have vehemently affirmed that it is (thus incidently backing the stance of the post-Christian feminist over those feminists who want to stay within the Church). They identify Christ's redeeming power so functionally with his maleness that it is seen as impossible for women ontologically to represent Christ. But that deposits a nagging doubt. For, as the title of a lecture by Ruether also asks, *If a woman cannot represent Christ can Christ be said to represent women?*[11] If Christ's humanity is only second to his sexuality, and if redemption is essentially linked with maleness there is indeed a problem for the efficacy of atonement.

A fourth problem is with 'how' the Son atones. Within feminism there is particular unease with the notion of the sacrificial victim, not only because it reinforces the idea of God as vindictive and punitive, but because it echoes (and idealizes) women's suffering. It is unnervingly close to what many

8 Carol Christ 'The New Feminist Theology: A Review of the literature', *Religious Studies Review*, vol. 3 no 4 (1977), p 205.
9 In Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk*, SCM, London 1983.
10 Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, Women's Press, 1986.
11 Ruether's lecture to Heythrop College, London, June 1986.

women have experienced throughout the centuries; cruelty, humiliation, brutalising, torture and violence. Their pain and silent suffering in cultures throughout the globe seems to be played out in a glorifying celebration at the heart of Christianity. Consequently the argument is that far from bringing liberation, 'identifying with the sufferings of Jesus on the Cross, held up as essential for redemption, has contributed to woman remaining transfixed as victim and scapegoat in society.'[12] Scapegoating, it is suggested, does not produce saintliness in the 'sinner' or sympathy for the scapegoat, but rather self-righteousness and intolerance. The process leaves women anchored in their own victim status which is justified and romanticised as identification with the Saviour.

Many feminists have pointed out how the qualities that Christianity despises and endorses *both* affect women in a damaging way. For Mary Daly this is yet another indication of its misogyny: 'It is significant that it is not only the *negative* qualities of a victim that have been projected upon women: the propensity for being temptresses, the evil and matter-bound 'nature' of the female, the alleged shallowness of mind, weakness of will and hyper-emotionality. The qualities that Christianity *idealizes*, especially for women, are also those of a victim, sacrificial love, passive acceptance of suffering, humility, meekness, etc. Since these are the qualities idealized in Jesus 'who died for our sins', his functioning as a model reinforces the scapegoat syndrome for women'[13] Those women who would reject Daly's conclusions still have a problem with the notion of sacrifice and scapegoat, and many would look for other readings of atonement which they feel are less dangerous for women.

The doctrine of man

The need of atonement for humanity is a central part of traditional Christian faith because of its belief in the destructive power of sin. But feminism alleges that both the doctrines of humanity and of sin have also been misappropriated by patriarchy. Many writers suggest that there has never been a full doctrine of humanity in Christian theology, but only a doctrine of *man*, where women are presented as a subordinate to, or dependent of the male. In any traditional reading of Christian history the male has been the norm, and women have been offered to us through the clouded lens of male eyes, and male attitudes. This has meant not only that different values have been ascribed to the sexes, but that women have been fundamentally misunderstood. They have been stereotyped as the 'sexual', the gullible, the errant, the weak, whilst men have been seen as the 'rational', the decisive, the strong component of humanity. Even women's sexuality itself has somehow been seen as blameworthy, and needing to be punished. This is the message not only behind early ramblings of Church Fathers ('woman is a temple built over a sewer'[14]) but behind the destructive and dehumanising pornography, rape and sexual violence evidenced in so many contemporary societies.

12 Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, p 118.
13 Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, p 77.
14 Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies*.

Although the Church has always included both men and women in its universal category of sinners, for the feminists there is little doubt that their comparative sin has been evaluated differently. Much of male sin has been seen as 'giving in' to women (the sin of Adam was to listen to Eve, the sin of Ahab was to follow Jezebel's gods, the sin of Samson was to give too much freedom to Delilah, the sin of Solomon was to be led away by women's sexual allure and so on). The message which has implictly undergirded much theology is that women are to blame, they are inherently sinful. And this has been reinforced by both language and symbols especially within traditional Catholicism. A male Christ needs to die because of the sin of a woman[15] and male priests re-enact the sacrifice as they too are caught up in the need to atone for the evil of womankind. The only exception to this category is the a-sexual, perpetually virginal, and sinless Mary, Mother of God, who inspires other women to follow her example.[16] No wonder therefore that the safest course for the Church to take has been to deny woman any means by which she can cause any further havoc. Curtailing the sexuality, the freedom and the influence of women keeps the manhole on all the corruption and dangers that lurk in the sewer.

These analyses of the alleged assumptions and implications contained within much Christian theology (whether that theology emanates from catholic, liberal or evangelical commitments) has contributed to the departure from the Church of many now 'post-Christian' feminists. For them, the traditional ideas, language, symbols and trappings of atonement theories are beyond redemption. These embodiments of theology misread and 'dismember' the experiences of women, keeping them voiceless, and excluded. These ideas cannot be deconstructed and replaced by a different reading of the text or of history because they are instrinsic to Christian belief. Without these concepts Christianity is no longer Christian. But the Christian story they tell is one which offers no future to more than half of humanity. [17]

Even amongst those feminists who have not departed from what they hold to be a Christian faith there remains much ambivalence with regard to a theology of salvation and atonement. For most of them it is true that this theology locks us into a view of women, a view of God, of Christ and of the future, all of which are bleak. The whole issue of atonement seems to be distilled into one focal symbol: the cross of Christ. Yet the crucial question remains: 'if the central symbol of Christianity contains within it a message which keeps women impaled on that cross, with societal approval, what message of resurrected hope and redemption can it bring?' [18]

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15 As in the much-quoted Tertullian statement: 'You are the devil's gateway. It was because of you Christ had to die.'

16 For reading around this point see Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Religion and Sexism. Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Tradition*, New York 1974; Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex*, Beacon, Boston 1985; Ursula King ed., *Women in the World's Religions Past and Present*, Paragon House, 1987; Karen Armstrong, *The Gospel According to Woman*, Doubleday, 1986.

17 See for example Daphne Hampson's critique of Phyllis Trible and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza in *On Theology and Feminism* , pp 32- 41.

18 Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*.

Towards a faithful response

I recognize that in presenting as faithfully as I can the passion behind feminist anxiety over atonement theories I have made a rod for my own back. As a woman who observes and participates in the outworking of doctrine in the life of the Church I have my own reservations about the alarming *doubles entendres* that we manage to convey. And as one who listens to women's pains, and exclusions I also accept much of what is said about the impositions of a patriarchal Christianity upon our God-given freedom. Along with many others I have experienced in my own life and work the blindness of reiterated dogma as it is used to restrict, cower and bully into submission. I have met 'theologians' (admittedly very odd ones) who have told me of their intense spiritual pleasure at seeing paintings of tortured women and the stimulation of linking their sufferings with Christ. I have been in on 'christian' debates and heard that women can no more represent Christ than can a dog, or a meat pie, and have listened to biblical exegesis by renowned preachers where women come off badly in even the most affirming passage. It is a solemn task to respond to the feminist critique of atonement theories, because the issues are not ones of academic theology but of living, experiential faith.

There is of course gross hyperbole in much of the post-Christian position. Neither Mary Daly nor Daphne Hampson are noted for their understatement. Daly's allegations are excessive and melodramatic and provide a crudely lopsided account of Christian history. Few Christian feminists show sympathy for her distortions of Christology, or her presentation of women as 'the innocents'. Some object to the cruel way she has turned 'the Christian cross into a torture instrument for women'[19], or her re-reading of the biblical narrative (the annunciation becomes a 'cosmic rape scene'). Her delight in pushing blasphemy as far as it will go in her desire to shock, humiliate and ridicule ultimately empties her analysis of serious engagement with the views of those who disagree.

But whatever the extravagances the issues remain and need to be addressed. And these concluding responses to questions about God, Christ, male power and the Cross must begin with an acknowledgement. Feminist theology challenges us to show that the central message of the atonement can be lived out in redemptive and life-giving communities, where we do not rely upon power, manipulation, or force, but where the Spirit of God can work peace and reconciliation in our lives. Unless it takes that challenge seriously the rest of the Church has no basis for dismissing these sceptics.

We must concede that there has been a grave imbalance in how we have represented God, even in the assumptions we have brought to the biblical text. It is interesting for example to ask why the *authority of God the Father* has been far more prominent in the church over the centuries than the *relationality of God the Trinity*, when this is a foundational biblical notion. When that same emphasis has been carried into our doctrine of atonement we have often focused exclusively on an authoritative and punitive model. Yet the atonement is multilayered and multi-faceted and its meaning cannot be exhausted

19 Ibid., p 16.

in one model. We need to develop an emphasis which has been there in evangelical theology from the earliest times, that at its heart atonement speaks about the deep *relationality* of God. It is about the union and communion of the Godhead, the self-giving and other-loving of the Trinity. It presents a God who is not isolationist and distant but a God who is at heart communal, empathetic and vulnerable, a God intrinsically involved with every aspect of the creation through commitment and care. God as community can identify with us in our lostness, mourn the sin which cuts us off from each other and from God, and draw us out of isolation into the overwhelming power of relational love.

To see God fundamentally as a *relationship*, rather than a 'disembodied sovereignty' means that the human beings who are created male and female in the image of God are also relational in their very personhood. This emphasis alone has transformed parts of the Church in recent years, as the reality of being *body* together, *members* of one another, *interdependent* with each other, knowing *mutuality* in relationship has brought new life, deeper compassion and a greater longing for justice between people. Whatever Hampson and others may claim, it is not autonomy towards which Christian women are striving, but reciprocity and acceptance. A bid for autonomy will always fail because we hit the brick wall of our own ontological being: our created dependence on God for our very human identity. But to share mutual respect, gifting, loving, vulnerability and pain is very close to the calling of the New Testament Church and is there in the longings of much feminism today.

Our emphasis on *relationality* therefore helps us to retrieve rather than lose our Christology. And it helps us to see that many of the problems for the opponents of women in leadership, as well as for feminists, lie not in the person or life of Christ, but in a theological confusion about his maleness. At the centre of the relationship between the particular Jesus of Nazareth and the Christ of all history and eternity is the story of the Incarnation, the amazing extension of the relationship already within the Trinity to a new relationship of identification with humankind. The Word made flesh came among us, living as one of us, subject to our sorrows, joys and tragedies. The Word of the Trinity came as a Jewish, first century male brought up as a Galilean carpenter. This Christ was God and therefore it is not only his life and death on earth, but his cosmic, redemptive power, his giving and forgiving love, which confront us, remake us and go with us into eternity. We remember that love in his own love-feast, the commemoration of atonement, the sharing and celebration of his body as we draw strength to be Christ's healing and reconciling presence in the world today.

That is why it is so odd, indeed intrusive in this celebration, to focus on one aspect of the particularity of the human Jesus, namely his maleness, (though not of course his Jewishness, his skin colour, his role as carpenter or his location in the first century). To make that maleness pivotal in Christ's redemptive work, even allowing it to define what it means to be God is a confusion which has had enormously damaging repercussions. It has conveyed the idea that male power and God's grace are somehow intrinsically

connected, and has confused representing Christ (in his mercy, love and grace), and being a representation of Christ (like him in his maleness).

The tension between God's power and Christ's suffering is also one which must be re-evaluated by the relational theology of the Trinity. For God's power is not tyrannical, autocratic power, and those who in the Church take a male authoritarian model of leadership do so in rejection of all that the New Testament teaches us. The power of the Godhead is manifested in the multiple narratives of Scriptures: in the Father yearning for relationship and celebrating the return of the estranged, in the Christ suffering human betrayal and staying silent before his accusers, in the Spirit, convicting, comforting, playful and anointing. God's way of power is not that of force, manipulation, or vindictiveness, but of freedom, gentleness and hope. God's power is one of self-emptying, and weakness, for the suffering of Christ and the power of God are the same.

And that is the fundamental message of the Cross. As one feminist Christian puts it: 'The cross does not justify suffering and the cross does not deny it. There is no way to forget or erase the connection between love and suffering when the cross symbolises the power of God. Suffering is a by-product of love.'[20] That is why the figure of the crucified Christ is seen as an ally for liberation theologians, and for many who suffer at the hands of power-brokers. Although much of feminist criticism focuses on the vicarious scapegoating of women, and the justification of women's pain because their suffering identifies with that of Christ, the biblical message offers us the opposite viewpoint. It is that *Christ's suffering identifies with ours*. There is no idealization of pain and brutality, only a sharing of what that pain means. In my own experience of working with women who are survivors of abuse it is sometimes only in the reaching out towards a God who has suffered violation that the healing process begins. Only a God who knows what it is to be human and defiled can bring salvation and healing for those whose bodies know the same.

There is one other issue which feminist critics may easily forget. The Cross does not have the last word. Whatever picture of atonement that symbol might present, the suffering Christ does not stay as sacrificial victim. For death is swallowed up in victory. Resurrection brings new life, new hope and new unity in relationship. At the heart of atonement there is the promise of a redemptive future. We do not have to stay defeated with the past, but are called to build one another up, to honour one another, to share the love of God together. And this too must be part of women's story.

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20 Sally B. Purvis, *The Power of the Cross*, Abingdon Press, 1993, p 89.