

Feminism and Education. The Feminist Theology

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Résumé : Cet article essaie de mettre en évidence la liaison entre féminisme et christianisme, et aussi en quelle mesure les idées féministes et appartenant à la théologie féministe peuvent édifier les consciences, pour servir une cause noble. La théologie féministe conteste les paradigmes religieux traditionnels, en essayant d'éliminer la « masculinité » de la théologie chrétienne.

Mots-clés : féminité, féminisme, éducation, christianisme, théologie

The present article has as a primary aim to evince the connection between feminism and Christian education, or to put it differently, between feminism and Christianity. When talking about religion, mention is made implicitly about religious education, but what connection may there be between feminism and theology? Is there a feminist theology at the level of a "feminist" Christian religion in whose spirit young women could be educated in the Western free and civilised world?

In fact, theology has an important word to say on the issue of the woman's role in church and society and the necessity of fair equitable rapports between men and women. The author of these pages does not wish to provide justification for theological feminism, but aims at discussing several coordinates of theological feminism, several of its most relevant facets, and attempts at the same time to explore the extent to which it may be a consistent ingredient of the spiritual food that each youth, or more precisely young woman, receives in school.

So, what is feminism? Or theological feminism? And what ideas does it put forward?

Feminism, in general, is a doctrine promoting women's affirmation in the world, as well as the elimination of any type of discrimination, and the equality of men and women at all levels. A series of works on feminist topics have been published in Romanian. Here are some titles: Laura Grunberg, *(R)evoluții în sociologia feministă. Repere teoretice, contexte românești* [(R)evolutions in Feminist Sociology. Theoretical benchmarks, Romanian contexts], Polirom Publishing House, 2003; Mihaela Miroiu, *Gândul umbrei. Abordări feministe în filosofia contemporană* [The Thought of the Shadow. Feminist Approaches in Contemporary Philosophy], 1995; Mihaela Miroiu, *Drumul către autonomie. Teorii politice feministe* [The Road to Autonomy. Feminist Political Theories], Polirom, 2004; Ștefan Mihăilescu, *Din istoria feminismului românesc. Studiu și antologie de texte* [From the History of Romanian Feminism. Study and Text Anthology] (1929-1948), Polirom, 2006, etc.

Feminism means gender identity, as well as political, cultural, religious and economic militantism. It attempts to be a revolution in mentality. Our assertions are not necessarily laudatory or critical, but instead they want to impartially detect something of the profile of an ideological movement, a "philosophy" existing as such. The connection between feminism and religion (theology) (more often than not less friendly and more conflictual!), between feminism and education cannot be surprising as long as an extremely vast literature indicates the multiple connections that are possible between feminism and the other realities in the realm of human existence: feminism and modern philosophy, feminism and postfeminism, feminism and (cultural) consumerism, feminism and motherhood (this is maybe what should have been placed first, viz. the motherhood dilemma!), feminism and ecology (ecofeminism as fight against dominance and oppression¹), feminism and economy, feminism and contemporary art, feminism and criminal law, feminism and modernism, feminism and political philosophy, feminism and the media, feminism and social justice in education, feminism and its myths, feminism and...

"It would not be overstating the case to say that feminism has been one of the most far-reaching movements this century, whose influence has been felt in every area of social, political and cultural life worldwide. Indeed, feminism has achieved the dubious distinction of becoming an utterly familiar part of our cultural landscape. We all know, or think we know,

what feminism means, and we all, to a greater or lesser extent, pay it lip-service. Yet for most people, it appears, feminism remains something 'out there' rather than an internalised, actualised belief; a view promoted by a number of recent highly publicised surveys, which appear to show that few women are now willing to explicitly identify themselves as feminist"².

Feminism means women's liberation, change of social status, free access to leadership positions, on an equal footing with men. But it seems that racial prejudice in point of politics is easier to overcome than the bias against women. The best argument is to be seen on the American continent, at the beginning of the 21st century. "Together with sex, drugs and rock'n' roll, feminism sprang into life in the late sixties and seventies attracting acres of media attention and generating a tremendous energy that translated into real change in many women's lives. But the roots of 'women's liberation', as it came to be known at that time, can be traced back to the late eighteenth century when the revolutionary zeal in France began to influence writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft whose *Vindication of the Rights of Women* is seen as the foundation of modern feminism. It's been a long, slow haul with many fits and starts but the achievements of the last two hundred years have revolutionised the lives of women. Some commentators have suggested that we now live in a post-feminist world where women have achieved equality with men and so there is no longer a need for a women's movement. This seems a little hard to swallow given that, even in the Western world where campaigns for equality have been strongest, the average wage for women is still less than average male earnings. Despite some notable advances for women in the political arena, there has still been no serious female contender for the American Presidency or for the premiership of many other countries. Maybe when half the world's leaders are women we can say that feminism's work is over"³.

Feminism keeps close to politics, it is politics itself, but it also keeps close to theology. What can actually be meant by feminist theology? What is the identity of the feminist discourse in Christian theology?

There is one (of many!) interesting books in the field: Susan Frank Parsons (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004. In this collection of studies, the first part deals with *The shape of feminist theology*, and the second part treats about *The themes of feminist theology*. The Preface contains the following: "Amongst the more energetic and enthusiastic forms of theology that emerged during the latter half of the twentieth century, feminist theology took up its place to become one of the prominent ways in which women have found theological voice and have allowed the wisdom of faith to be rooted in their lives. While its provenance is located in the Western Christian tradition, its bearing formed by the philosophical assumptions and political ideals of the Enlightenment, feminist theology has become something of a common discourse entered into by women of other faith and intellectual inheritance. Its now universal vocabulary of the rights of women, of the dignity and value of women's lives, of the urgency for their economic and social liberation, and of the prospect for human fulfillment within creation, has become one of the primary means both of communication between women, and of assertion of their status in global politics and in the church"⁴.

A feminist theology does not merely mean a theology made by women. Theological feminism wishes to be a challenge of the traditional manner of defining the rapports between men and women, and between people and God. "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"⁵.

Feminist theology wishes to reshape the traditional theological paradigms, the main religious symbols, the entire traditional and God-related discourse, the creation of man and

woman, the discourse on sin and redemption, the woman's place in church, viewing all these more like social constructs; feminist theology militates at the same time for the unlimited access of women to the ministry.

Feminism has a long history, according to Rosemary Radford Ruether when referring to the emergence of feminist theology: the roots of theological feminism stretch out in the past as far as the 15th century, when Christine de Pizan evinced the capacity of the ladies to lead a truly virtuous life. And one more thing on this issue: it is not only women that made the apology of women, as the German proto-feminist humanist Agrippa von Nettesheim militated in the first half of the 16th century for the equality of men and women, evincing the latter's physical and moral superiority in relation to the former. First of all physical, or better said, *aesthetic*. "The creation accounts of both Genesis 1 and 2 are turned to the advantage of women. The superior beauty of woman is demonstrated by her greater closeness to God than men can claim. Her physical beauty — described in painstaking detail — is indicative also of spiritual beauty. God has made nothing in the world more beautiful, which is why all love women. This claim is illustrated from both classical and biblical sources. The many virtues of women also point to their superiority; these are modesty, purity, primary role in procreation, piety and compassion, greater capacity for sex, positive qualities of pregnancy and menstruation, ability to conceive without a male, superior eloquence. Not only does Scripture confirm these virtues, but Scripture also proves, by contrast, that original sin came through Adam, not Eve. Christ took the form of a male because it was men who needed redeeming. But Christ chose to be born of a woman without a man; and he appeared first to women after his resurrection"⁶.

The physical and physiological superiority of women tally with their moral superiority: in fact, the former determines the latter. "The arguments for the superiority of female virtue, drawn from various sources, are only apparently fantastic. Their underlying theme is that women are more modest than men: their long hair conceals shameful body parts, women do not need to touch these body parts when they urinate, these parts do not protrude in women as they do in men, women are loath to expose their body parts to a male physician and have been known to choose death rather than to do so, women float face down in water when drowned, their heads (the supreme part of the human body) are never bald, they secrete menses from the lower parts of their bodies while male secretions are from the face, they are always clean after one washing (while men continue to dirty the water no matter how many times they wash and change the water), and when they fall they fall on their backs and not on their faces"⁷.

Feminist discourse is an intercultural discourse. Feminist theology represents a global movement bringing together women with different histories and cultures but with the common purpose of challenging what would constitute the patriarchal teachings and practices of the Christian church. Feminist discourse has imposed itself in the globalisation era and has to face the challenges of this time. "In celebrating cultural diversity among women and in lifting every voice, women of faith should not lose sight of the new challenges brought about by the age of globalisation and transnationalism. For today, the politics of cultural difference is no more fought only in terms of Third World/First World, black/white, national/global, or racial minority/majority. Women in every part of the world are faced with the impacts of global capitalism and transnationalism that seek to incorporate all sectors of the global economy into their logic of commodification and to assume a homogenisation of global culture, especially through the mass media and the information superhighway. Religious reflection and theological analysis must not be seen as separate domains with their own practices, immune from the global processes of economic restructuring and social and cultural formation. Embedded in the cultural politics of global capitalism, feminist theologians must articulate an alternative vision of cultural resistance, contestation, and difference, as well as solidarity among women"⁸.

Feminist theology may be treated as philosophy of religion and as theology of religions, as dogmatic theology and a new manner of Biblical interpretation. The questions are often more important than the answers, and in order to grasp the vastness of the dogmatic feminist discourse only one will suffice, viz.: “Can a male saviour save women?”. The answer may be affirmative only if Christ is seen as “the form of a new humanity, male and female”⁹. Theological feminism means theological modernism, a fruit of the Enlightenment. And the theologians closely observing the Bible cannot but refuse such a feminist point of view that confines the Christian theological discourse only to the sphere of this ephemeral world: “Feminist dogmatic theology has agreed with the distinctly modern declaration that the realm of human affairs, historically conceived, is the beginning and end-point of our reflection and action. Accordingly, God is only to be found active and approachable here. Feminist theologians have called it the besetting arrogance of theology to posit the existence of some other realm than this one, and then to give man privileged access to the knowledge of it”¹⁰.

Let us proceed to covering several topics dear to feminist theology. Is there a feminist approach to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity? To Christology? Definitely yes. But it is not commendable from beginning to end. Theological modernism means atheism, let us say fearlessly. The entire theology cannot be regarded through the perspective of the notions of man and woman. “If one no longer wishes or can say that God became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, and no longer addresses prayers to Jesus as the Christ, then the Trinity becomes superfluous and even appears as androcentrism at its worst, reinscribing in prayer a divinisation of the male sex”¹¹. Theological feminism has directly attacked the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and Biblical Christology. Feminist theology would rather talk about the female *Sophia* than the male *Logos*, stripping Christology of its potential male connotations: the female authors of books on feminist theology are terrified by anything that may suggest the maleness of God. But Janet Martin Soskice believes that it is precisely the doctrine of the Holy Trinity that “preserves the otherness of God – that is, it frees us from the gross anthropocentrism which is ever a threat in religion. The triune God is not male. (I shall return shortly to the language of fatherhood and sonship.) Even though God became incarnate in the man, Jesus Christ. God is not a creature at all, far less a male creature. The baptismal formula contains its own self-subversion – we are baptised ‘in the Name’ (singular) of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and not ‘in the names’ (plural) of two men and a mysterious third. ‘Father’ and ‘Son’ in the Trinitarian rubrics are not biological offices, and nor are they positions in a hierarchy”¹². And even if the Bible overtly states that God is Spirit, certain female authors state that divinity is female, rejecting Christianity in favour of old Paganism: under the influence of ecological reasons, they prefer talking about Gaia to talking about God, rejecting the Christian theism in favour of the old Pantheist vision.

Feminist theology is also extremely concerned with the ecclesiological field, as the involvement of women in church life, more precisely the limitations of this involvement, have not been free from any contention or dispute. Female authors especially refer to the beginning of the church when women, they assess, would have played an active important role in the life of Christian communities, in worship and ministry, in education and pastoral care. In this sense, feminist theology wishes to restore what was once, the initial state of things. “The issue of women’s ordination, linked of course to historical concerns, has been the focus of much feminist theological attention, particularly by Roman Catholics. But, even for those traditions which do ordain women (and some have only made this decision within the last thirty years), the question arises as to the relationship of ordination to church structure and polity. Should women seek ordination alongside their male colleagues? Or should they push to change church structures so that ministry is less hierarchical?”¹³

And what would be the implications of all these states of fact? “The implications of all these developments are vast. A new theology of church and community, worship and sacrament challenges the power of the established tradition as church communities experience women’s leadership and women’s ritual and sacramental power”¹⁴.

The feminist cause is a just cause, when seen as fight against sexual discrimination, and schoolchildren may take note of the feminist cause and women's endeavours of bettering their life in society. But at the same time, if feminist theology attempts to "rewrite" the basic doctrines of Christianity from a modern or pagan standpoint, our reservations to this side of feminism have to be complete. Not all that is old should be abandoned, and not all that is new should be embraced. The truth demands to be preserved, theological conservatism is not wrong. On the contrary. And this is assessed as theological feminism more often than not stands for theological liberalism.

Notes

- [1] "Feminist environmentalism begins with noticing similarities and connections between forms and instances of human oppression, including the oppression of women, and the degradation of nature. A central position rounding ecofeminism is the belief that values, notions of reality, and social practices are related, and that forms of oppression and domination, however historically and culturally distinct, are interlocked and enmeshed. It follows that our strategies – both theoretical and practical – for resisting oppressions must attend to these connections" (Chris J. Cuomo, *Feminism and Ecological Communities. An Ethic of Flourishing*, London-New York, Routledge, 1998, p. 1).
- [2] Sarah Gamble (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, London-New York, Routledge, 2001, p. vii.
- [3] Susan Osborne, *Feminism*, Harpenden, Herts, Pocket Essentials, 2001, p. 7.
- [4] *Op. cit.*, p. xiii.
- [5] *Ibid.*, p. 3. The feminist discourse in theology, critical discourse, is varied: "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" (*ibid.*).
- [6] Henricus Cornelius Agrippa, *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex*, trans. Albert Rabil, Jr., Chicago-London, The University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 13.
- [7] *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- [8] Susan Frank Parsons (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 24.
- [9] *Ibid.*, p. 118.
- [10] *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- [11] *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- [12] *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- [13] *Ibid.*, pp. 224-225. "Within those traditions that continue to ordain only men, the question is how women can continue to worship in liturgical settings that are male dominated, where lectionary readings fail to reflect women's contributions, where language for God and humanity is overwhelmingly male. And in those traditions that do ordain women, the question is how women ministers can contribute to the transformation of Christianity within church structures which have been, and continue to be, dominated by a male elite. Despite the ordination of women in many mainstream Protestant traditions, and despite the Roman Catholic magisterium's declaration that the issue of women's ordination is *closed*, such questions regarding women's ministries and church structures continue to surface" (*ibid.*, p. 225).
- [14] *Ibid.*, p. 226.

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