

CAN OUR CREEDS SPEAK A GENDERED TRUTH? A FEMINIST READING OF THE NICENE CREED AND THE BELHAR CONFESSION

Piet Naude
Christian Studies and Ethics
University of Port Elizabeth

Abstract

In a short methodological note on the complex array of feminist theological viewpoints, it is argued that the focus on language (metaphors) and its relation to reality is a common concern for most feminists. Whereas much creative reinterpretation or the biblical text has been accomplished by feminist scholars, very little attention has been given to the liberation potential of secondary texts such as the creeds and confessions. An feminist reading of the Nicene creed and the Belhar confession shows the ambiguity of both texts: they share the dominant androcentric metaphors of the canon and tradition, but are at the same time open to surprisingly inclusivist meaning. Further work needs to be done, but these texts challenge the church to address the question of inclusivist liturgical practices. The aim of this paper is to explore the potential of the Nicene Creed (381 AD) and the Belhar Confession (1986AD) "to speak a gendered truth"¹ i.e. their openness toward a feminist hermeneutic and re-reading. I will proceed in two parts: The first is a short methodological orientation on feminist scholarship, and the second is an actual attempt at a feminist interpretation of the two texts under discussion.

1. Part one: A short methodological note

Christian feminist scholarship has matured in recent years and represents a complex array of approaches that may be "modelled" in quite a variety of different ways. Traditionally, Christian feminism has been categorised as radical (revolutionary), reformist and womanist.²

Radical feminists represent those scholars who view the Judeo-Christian canon itself, the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of its interpretation, as well as its institutional form in the church as irredeemably androcentric, and in principle and practice oppressive toward women. This led to attempts to develop an alternative religious framework to set up a paradigm of text, interpretation and institutions liberating to women. Well-known exponents of this paradigm are Mary Daly, Naomi Goldenburg and Carol Christ.³

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1. The idea of a truth shaped by the perspective of gender, is in principle not a novel idea. It could be construed as involving the same procedure as the construction of a truth from the perspective of for example race or class or disability or culture. In recent South African scholarship it emerged in relation to an analysis of "truth" as sought by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. See Van Schalkwyk's penetrating article, *A gendered truth* (1999) and also De Gruchy who states that one of the difficulties "...in getting at the truth had to do with the male-dominated structure of the Commission and the fact that the majority of those who appear before the TRC were black women" (2002:157).
 2. There are more such "categories" for example socialist feminists who strongly relate sexist and classist oppression, or the differentiation between exclusive and inclusive feminism. For an orientation from a South African source, read Landman (1984). In my brief orientation no further refinement is pursued.
 3. See McFague (1982:156-158) and Walker (1989) for a discussion and literature.

Reformist feminists⁴ agree on the androcentric nature of the canon, its interpretation and ecclesial practices flowing from such male-dominated views, but agree that a careful feminist re-reading of the canonical text yields sufficient potential to accept its liberating power for both men and women.

The *womanist* movement⁵ within feminism may be described as an attempt by African-American and African theologians to emphasise the particular oppressive structures under which black (generically speaking) women suffer. According to them this warrants a distinctive voice, complementing “Western” feminism, but drawing specific attention to the racist and classist dimensions attached to and supported by sexism in church and society.

Recently a second interesting “modelling” of feminism emerged that takes various epistemological⁶ presuppositions as point of departure. A threefold distinction is then proposed:

Feminist *empiricism* presupposes a form of positivist epistemology where empirical observation of sexism in church and society is the basis for a feminist critique that implicitly accepts the possibility of an Archimedes point from which objectivity and truth are constructed. Feminist *standpoint epistemology* is more open to the cultural conditioning of knowledge – including “feminist” knowledge. It sets the androcentric and feminist constructions up as opposing views with the latter as the more liberative option because it represents an “oppressed” truth.

Feminist *postmodernism* (post-structuralism) points out that empiricism presupposes an impossible “outsider” viewpoint, and standpoint theories – whilst rejecting andropocentrism as one “universalism” – introduces feminism as another universalism, therewith retaining a form of modernist meta-narrative that grows from a so-called “common or universal woman’s experience” that is oblivious to the complexities and paradoxes of so-called “women” experiences. In the light of this criticism, post-modern feminism, following Lyotard,⁷ rejects the possibility of meta-narratives and a rationality posited on a subject-object dualism that only accepts discursive forms as valid expressions of truth. By contrast, for post-modern feminists, truth is much more pluralistic and fragile, speaking in a multiplicity of voices like lesbian, African, Western and Eastern, assuming different approaches like Marxist, structuralist, phenomenological, and moving beyond the boundaries of Christianity to include important inter-religious voices from, for example, Judaism and Islam.

This is not an essay in feminist methodology. The preceding paragraphs have the intention to illustrate the complexity of a notion like “gendered truth” in the title of this

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4. This group is probably the biggest and is represented by authors such as Letty Russell, Sallie McFague, Rosemary Radford Reuther (all USA), Catharina Halkes (The Netherlands) and Elisabeth Motmann-Wendel (Germany). In South Africa, the work of Denise Ackermann (Practical Theology), Christina Landman (Church History and recently Pastoral Theology), Annalet van Schalkwyk (Missiology) and Elna Mouton (New Testament) could all be seen as attempts to a reformist reinterpretation of Scripture and the androcentric tradition.
 5. The volume edited by Ursula King: *Feminist theology from the Third World* (1994) gives an interesting overview of some womanist approaches. For a specific theological and hermeneutical orientation, see the contributions of Oduyoye and Ackermann in Maimela and Konig (eds.) 1998:349-372. Well known other representatives of this group are Dolores Williams, Katie Cannon and bell hooks (deliberate small letters).
 6. Epistemological typologies are often used in philosophy of science or research methodology discussions. See for example Babbie and Mouton (2001:19-46) who work with positivism, phenomenology and critical-emancipatory approaches. The specific application to feminist theory was developed by Pamela Sue Anderson to whom I was introduced via the excellent Masters thesis of JA Trisk (Trisk 2002: 4ff). At the time of writing this paper, I did not have access to Anderson’s original work.
 7. See Lyotard’s classical exposition in *The postmodern condition*.

paper. To avoid methodological paralysis, a few remarks are necessary to frame the work attempted in part two below:

Despite different approaches and contrasting epistemologies, *one could safely assert that much of feminist scholarship is focused on language and its constitutive relation to reality*. And although this variety of views have an obvious effect on how language itself is understood, one could posit that feminism made a decisive contribution to Christian theology by showing the powerful relation between religious language (metaphors) and ecclesial-societal realities. Although expressed differently by for example existentialism and structuralism, it is accepted that reality is itself language-ated with the consequence that a great deal of feminist hermeneutics is iconoclastic in nature: For radical feminism it means the rejection of androcentric metaphors and the creation of an alternative symbolic world; for reformists and womanists it means the transformation of metaphors and an archaeology of the construction of meaning in existing canonical texts.

Whereas much creative work has been done on the canon, *the creeds and confessions have not yet received as much attention*. The reasons are simple: The canon (although itself contested) is the founding document of the Christian church and the obvious site of hermeneutical struggle for a feminist reinterpretation. The creeds and confessions are secondary expressions of the church's insight at a particular point in time and directed at particular heresies primarily (though not exclusively) relevant to that time. The creeds like Nicea, Athanasius and the Apostolicum are indeed ecumenical in nature, but still not universally accepted nor liturgically practised in the same way in different traditions. Confessions like Augsburg, Belgica, Barmen and Belhar are strongly tradition-bound and seen as a specific expression of the Protestant tradition.

It is thus natural for feminist scholarship to focus on the canon. As this paper attempts to illustrate, creeds and confessions speak the truth of the apostolic faith at a specific time and thus become part of the church's tradition. They are therefore important texts – often cited personally or in community – that require close scrutiny from a feminist perspective. It would be strange to develop a critical feminist reading of the canon, but allow the liturgical texts of the church their assumed androcentric freedom!

This shifts the hermeneutical struggle from the canon to these secondary texts. And for the purposes of this paper, the question rises from a reformist hermeneutical view: If we accept the voice of the church at a specific moment in history, but already know the androcentric bias of the church through the ages, do these texts yield potential to speak a “gendered truth”? Are they able to liberate us from sexist and related forms of androcentric oppression? The answer will only be found in a close reading of the texts from a feminist perspective.⁸

2. Part two: Reading Nicea and Belhar

2.1 The choice of texts

The reader may rightly ask: Why these two texts?

The choice for the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed arises from the primordial ecumenical significance of the Nicene creed in early and contemporary church history as recently exemplified in the WCC project on *Confessing the one faith* (see WCC 1991). The choice for Belhar arises from its crucial significance in the theological struggle against

8. As a male reader I am obviously limited in my abilities to construct a feminist perspective. However, I consider myself a Christian feminist in the sense that I attempt to be sensitive to sexism, resist forms of male domination in church and society, and believe the gospel is an inclusive message of liberation.

apartheid in South Africa and its growing ecumenical⁹ significance as a clear confession of faith for our time.

In a recent paper (Naude 2003a), I dealt with the history and textual construction of these two documents extensively and provided full bibliographical detail of a selection of the most important work on Nicea and Belhar. Suffice to say: Nicea was an attempt to address a complex set of heresies, but was initially motivated by Arian ideas¹⁰ about the relation between God and a subordinate Second Person in the Trinity, and later by the so-called pneumatomachians in their denial of the Godhead of the Spirit. In three sections it consequently focuses on the *unity* of the Father, Son and Spirit (with confessions about the church, baptism, resurrection and the world to come included under the latter).¹¹

Belhar grew from a history¹² of the church struggle against apartheid which culminated in the *status confessionis* declared by the LWF (1977) and WARC (1982). The text¹³ is divided into five parts: After an introductory statement on the Trinity and the church, the three middle articles deal with unity, reconciliation and justice respectively, followed by a statement that the church is called to confess and do all these things even in the face persecution.

2.2 A feminist perspective on Nicea

Considering its early date in the history of the church, the Greco-Roman culture from which it sprang, the fact that delegates (bishops) to Nicea / Constantinople excluded women, and considering the political motives of the emperor, one would expect the language of Nicea to reflect an androcentric bias. And indeed: the dominant androcentric and “dominion” metaphors of the canon are the main ones employed to express the unity in God and the relation amongst Persons of the Trinity: God is called “*Father*”¹⁴, “*the Almighty*”; Jesus is called “*Lord*”, “*the only Son of God*”, “*of one Being with the Father*” and as “*seated at the right hand of the Father*” whence he will return as judge to establish his kingdom that will have no end. The Spirit is called “*Lord*”, “*who proceeds from the Father*” and “*Who, with the Father and the Son, is worshipped and glorified*”.

Does this mean the text is irredeemably sexist? Below I seek to show that Nicea indeed has the potential to speak the truth in a more inclusive way:

God

In the article on the God, God is metaphorically depicted as “*Father*” and “*Almighty*”, but God’s creative work is clearly inclusive of all reality: “*maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen*”. Thus, despite the androcentric bias in naming God, God’s work

9. See Naude (2003) for the reception of Belhar in the ecumenical church and its relation to recent ecumenical developments.

10. See Ritter (1978) for an in-depth discussion of Arianism.

11. For the Greek text and authorised English translation, see WCC (1991:10-12).

12. This history has been extensively analysed in a paper dealing with the close link between Belhar and antecedent church witnesses like the Cottesloe Declaration (1960), The Message to the People of South Africa (1968) and others (Naude 2002a).

13. For the English version and excellent essays, see Cloete and Smit (1984). The subdivisions of the text in the discussion below is my own to make easy reference possible.

14. “God is Spirit and has no gender. The Father is revealed as the Father of the Son, but ‘Father’ and ‘Son’ are metaphors. Scripture uses motherly metaphors for God as well. But God is not a mother in the sense that the world or humankind is generated from a divine womb or is an extension of God’s own being”. This quotation from the Presbyterian Church’s *Draft Confession of Faith* (2003) is *in nuce* an explanation of some of the interpretative issues involved here.

encompasses all reality in spatial sense (“*heaven and earth*”) but also in ontological sense (“*all that is*”), including empirical and non-empirical realities (“*seen and unseen*”).

If we accept that God’s character is derived from God’s work in creation and salvation, the inclusivity of God’s creative acts is clearly “violated” by the exclusive, biased metaphors used to name God. Seen from its context, Nicea had no cultural or feminist theological sensitivity toward “naming God” as we have today, so that its article on God speaks in paradoxical terms about God’s inclusive work, but bearing an exclusivist Name. Or, interpreted more favourably, Nicea corrects/complements its androcentric bias in naming God with a remarkable inclusive statement on the creative acts of God, thereby leaving room for all of reality and all persons to be included in God’s creative and continued providential acts.

Jesus Christ

The article on the Second Person equally shows potential for an inclusivist interpretation. Three points seem relevant:

First: The mediation of Jesus Christ in creation – inclusively described in the article on God – is expressed clearly in its relation to Christ: “*Through him all things were made*”. Christ, in fact, is the One through which the inclusive spatial, ontological and (non-) empirical reality was brought into being, again superseding a closed, androcentric understanding of “the only Son of God”.

Second: Nicea has in this article a remarkable *pro nobis*-character. Why would Christ do all these things? It was “*For us all and for our salvation*” (*di’ hemas tous anthropous kai dia ten hemeteran sooterian*), and “*For our sake*” (*huper humoon*) that Christ was crucified and suffered under Pontius Pilate. The Greek link between “*hemas*” and “*anthroopos*” clearly indicates an inclusive humankind on whose behalf the whole of Christ’s life and work is interpreted and confessed. Although caught up in the exclusive “we” of the original Nicene formulation, both its intention of being a confession for the one, holy, catholic church, and its generic inclusion of all mankind in the cited formulations, sets the creed free to speak “*for us all*” – men and women in one church.

Third: I am quite aware that the article on “*the Virgin Mary*” might be constructed as depicting women as subservient and allowing them to be oppressed in silence. Nevertheless, the whole purpose of God’s act of salvation in Christ is expressed in two powerful statements, namely that for us all “*he came down from heaven*”. This is followed by the manner in which this was made possible, i.e. “*by the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made human*” (generically understood from “*enanthroopesanvta*”). Just as Christ mediated an inclusive, encompassing creation, Mary mediated God’s inclusive salvation (“*For us all*” and “*For our sake*”). That she could only do in and through her womanhood and physical motherhood. But the latter – far from being a merely a sexist, oppressive state – made possible and affirmed an inclusive salvation far beyond the dualism of man / woman and including whoever wishes to claim salvation in faith and profess: “*For us all...Christ became incarnate from the Virgin Mary.*”

Holy Spirit

The article on the Holy Spirit leaves at least two options open for a potentially inclusivist interpretation:

First: The magnificent description of the Spirit as *zoo-poiou*, giver of life (or the One who makes alive) is clearly open for such reinterpretation: If read in its creation sense, all life finds its origin in God's inclusive creation which is mediated through Christ, and now finds its life, its breath (see *ruah* in the Old Testament) from the Holy Spirit. If read in the sense of "enliven" (making alive that which is spiritually dead) the strong cluster of birth-metaphors come to the fore, linking the new life in the Spirit to being reborn of the Spirit. As in the description of God, we find an ambiguity here: "*Life-Giver*" is juxta-positioned by naming the Spirit "*the Lord*" which is normally uncomfortably accepted as a "dominion-metaphor" (McFague) by feminists. If one keeps the heresy and political context in mind from which the church spoke in Nicea, the *kurios* is understandable – even unavoidable. Nonetheless – probably beyond the intentions of the original authors – a feminist reading could find comfort in believing the Spirit as *Life-Giver*, a metaphor with a strong maternal and inclusivist ring to it.

Second: The Spirit, Nicea teaches, is the One "*who has spoken through the Prophets*". The prophetic tradition of the Old Testament was undoubtedly androcentric, despite a few examples to the contrary and the potential to interpret the prophetic tradition from an alternative perspective. Embedded in this tradition that found its way into the New Testament, is the eschatological vision that a time will come when God's Spirit is showered upon all people, so that sons and daughters can act as prophets; so that old and young people will see visions and dream dreams. It is significant that this vision – expressed *in nuce* by Joel (2:28-32) and repeated by Peter to interpret the Pentecost (Acts 2:14ff) – is a powerfully inclusivist vision where gender (sexism) and age (ageism) is transcended in God's pneumatological community. This community is filled with the Spirit – exactly the One, according to Nicea, "*who has spoken through the prophets*" – and who keeps on calling us all into the prophetic community where women and men are free to speak "about the great things that God has done" (Acts 2:12).

Church

The nature of this community is described in the article on the church in which unity (one church against divisions of gender, culture and class) and catholicity (inclusive generality) stand in the foreground, despite sexist and exclusivist practices up to this day. We enter this community through "*one baptism*", through which all receive forgiveness of sins (including the sins of sexism). There is further the inclusive eschatological expectation of resurrection (based on no bias but God's fair judgement) and the life of the age to come (a time when all dualisms or other forms of divisions will be transcended because God will be everything in everyone).

Provisional conclusion

More interpretative work needs to be done. But if the church is sensitive to the potential of the Nicene creed to address all forms of oppression – including sexism – and back that up with liberating liturgical practices, it might be possible for women and men (and for that matter old and young, rich and poor, literate and illiterate) to co-confess with the apostolic church through the ages. This we will do whilst taking into consideration the ambiguity of the text with both its limitations and potentialities to speak a liberating word beyond its own time, and become the confession of the whole faith community.

The acid test is who the confessing "we" of the Nicene does or could include.

2.3 A feminist perspective on the Belhar confession

Let us look at the potential of Belhar for a liberative, feminist reading by focusing on the three middle articles regarding unity, reconciliation and justice.

Unity

It is clear from the rejection-statements of the unity article, that Belhar, true to its history and context, has the racial and cultural divisions of the church in mind in its positive declaration of the church's unity. In Belhar's time, the danger was not perceived as sexism or gender discrimination, and thus no explicit rejection thereof is found in the text. But the text has just too many explicit statements about an inclusive unity to be disregarded:

See for example 2.3 that claims that *"this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered"*. It then clearly opens up an inclusive interpretation by saying *"...anything ("alles" could also be "everything") which threatens this unity may have no place in the church of Christ and should therefore be resisted"*. This finds echo in 2.4 where the community of believers is called upon to *"fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity"* as differences amongst people (language, culture, background) and their gifts are – due to Christ's reconciliation – *"...opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God"*.

Although the gender issue is not specified – and this is a pity – the text is clear in its *intention to resist all forms and causes of disunity* in the one church of Christ.

Reconciliation

This article is even stronger in its focus on racial non-reconciliation as emerges from 3.3 (*"forced separation of people on racial grounds"*, echoed in 3.4) and the rejection statement about *"the forced separation of people on the grounds of race or colour"*. But these references are embedded in more inclusive and general views on the church as salt and light, as peacemakers and as eschatological community that witnesses through word and deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness reigns (see 3.1). This is followed by the confession of God's reconciling power through God's *"life-giving Word and Spirit"* that overcame *"irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity"* that enables God's people to live as example of a reconciled community in the world (see 3.2).

The fact that these fundamental expressions of God's reconciliation finds application in one specific area of human life (race and culture) in no way precludes its application to other forms of irreconciliation like gender oppression. The same could be confessed about gender conflict and androcentric prejudices, namely: *"that any teaching which is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness, and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling power of the gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine"* (see 3.4).

Justice

There is no doubt that Belhar's true potential for an encompassing liberation lies in this article (whilst keeping in mind the close relation amongst the articles). The reason is that this article transcends the narrower application to race and culture evident in the former articles (and to be explained from Belhar's context). Although God is named via sexist metaphors, God is described *"as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace amongst people"*. How does God achieve this? By being *"...in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged"* (*"verontregte"* in the original Afrikaans). The exam-

ples in this passage – drawn from Scripture and the Lukan focus on the poor – explicitly mentions the widow and the orphans twice!

I am aware that even this should not be read as specifically gender-sensitive, but generically as symbol for all those who are without legal recourse and legitimate voice in society. But the fact of the matter remains: even in patriarchal societies, the message of a faultless religion before God (James 1:27) is to stand by the orphans and widowers in their suffering. This surely opens the possibility to extend the categories of wronged peoples to include women (and children, and other voiceless ones who are physically poor or in other ways socially marginalised and shunned).

This is reinforced as the church is called to witness against “*any form of injustice*” (4.2) and against “*all the powerful and the privileged that selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others*” (4.3). The rejection clause ending article 4 is equally emphatic and inclusive of “*any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine that is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel*” (my emphases to illustrate a wider application).

The concluding article 5 is a source of encouragement for all who struggle against gender injustice: “*The Church is called to confess and do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence*”. I can see no reason why “*authorities and human laws*” – apart from referring to the socio-political order – could not also include ecclesial authorities, ordinances and practices that continue to contradict both a confession and presumed commitment to gender equality in the church.

Provisional conclusion

In this way, Belhar, despite its limitations in terms of narrow focus and sexist theological metaphors, can indeed be a powerful tool to proclaim the church’s true unity, God’s encompassing reconciliation and gendered justice in society.

3. Conclusion

This paper has argued that, despite a complex array of feminist approaches, the crucial battle for language is a common concern amongst Christian feminist theologians. In line with a feminist re-interpretation of the canon, it was argued that important secondary texts like creeds and confessions warrant the same critical reading to explore their liberative potential. *A cursory reading of the Nicene creed and the Belhar confession points to an ambiguity in both texts: the presence of traditional androcentric metaphors for the Trinity is in subtle ways “redeemed” by inclusivist language and references that show the potential for an emerging gendered truth.*

Whether documents like these are in actual fact confessed by all – specifically by marginalised women – will not depend on a hermeneutic alone, but on the liturgical practices and rearrangement of institutional power relations in the church itself.

We still have a long way to go.

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