

A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON THEOLOGY WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO BLACK FEMINIST THEOLOGY

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Abstract

Feminist theology is defined in the broader context of feminism. A review of how theology was practised in the past is given in order to highlight the exclusion of women in any serious theological endeavour. Feminist theology emerges as women's plea for recognition as full and equal human beings in the practice of theology. The situation of black women is portrayed. In conclusion, a proposed black/African feminist reading of the Bible is presented as one of the possible ways of liberating black/African women theologically.

1. Introduction

Feminists argue that all people, irrespective of sex, race, creed or class have a right and a responsibility to actualize themselves to their fullest potential (Jakubiak & Murphy 1987:165). A feminist perspective aims at correcting the prejudice found in our academic disciplines through uncovering and questioning the hidden assumptions about man and woman that have shaped standard academic subjects. This perspective arises from the feeling of oppression and subordination of women by men. This domination of women by men is an old, persistent form of the subjection of one human being to a permanent position of inferiority due to sex (Russel 1974: 29).

Feminist theology which is an aspect of feminism, also arises out of an experience of oppression in society. A search for salvation is interpreted as a journey towards freedom, a process of self-liberation based on the light of hope in God's promise (Moltmann-Wendel & Moltmann 1974:13; Russel 1974:21). In this paper, an attempt will be made (though not in an exhaustive way) to present a black/African feminist perspective on theology.

2. The exclusion of women in theology

A review of the practice of theology in the past, and even today, shows that women have been neglected and even excluded from the practice of theology.

In Christianity and Judaism, for example, women have been excluded from religious leadership roles and have thus ultimately been excluded from advanced professional education which would prepare them for clerical and teaching roles in the same traditions. In Rabbinic Judaism, for example, a man who taught his daughter the Torah was supposed to be cursed. In Israel (see also in traditional African societies) education for girls was restricted to household chores (Ruether 1981: 52; King 1987: 42). Against the background of this Jewish culture's influence on women, the words of Paul in 1 Timothy 2:12 become clearer:

I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men, she is to keep silent. (RSV).

This exclusion of women from participating in any serious theological practice would have effects on how theology would be practised. As can be expected, male perspectives and experiences became institutionalized norms that dominated and subordinated the experiences of women (ICRSA 1992: 97-98). In this regard Ruether (1981: 53) argues:

In addition, the public theological culture is defined by men, not only in the absence of, but against women. Theology not only assumed male standards of normative humanity, but is filled with an ideological bias that defines women as secondary and inferior members of the human species.

This exclusion of women from engaging in any serious theological exercise was not only restricted to the religions of Christianity and Judaism. Hinduism was also no exception. Some conservative Jainas, in this religion, will not make room for women ascetics for they believe that women will never be saved until they become reborn as men (King 1987: 39).

As she defines this exclusion of women, Daly (1975: 87) contends:

In contrast to their modern counterparts, women in the early centuries of the Christian era and, in fact, throughout all of the Christian era - had a girlhood of strict seclusion and of minimal education which prepared them for the life of mindless subordinates. This was followed by an early marriage which effectively cut them off for the rest of their lives from the possibility of autonomous action. Valued chiefly for their reproductive organs, which also inspired horror, and despised for their ignorance, they were denied full personhood. Their inferiority was a fact; it appeared to be 'natural'.

This exclusion of women from theology was sometimes viewed as part of the divine law, a reflection thus, of God's intention. It was also based on the belief that women are more susceptible to sin/corruption. As a result of this

male bias, Jewish and Christian theology produces a symbolic universe rooted in the patriarchal hierarchy of male over female: God (the great patriarch) over the earth/creation (depicted by female images) Christ (Groom) to the Church (Bride) (Ruether 1987:54; King 1987:36; Daly 1975:62-63).

The preceding background (though in a nutshell) leaves no doubt that women participated little (though mostly through men) or were entirely excluded from the practice of theology and hence a need arose for a feminist perspective on theology for according to Moltmann-Wendel & Moltmann, J (1974:14) if women's cries are heeded, men, like other humans, can attain a complete and full humanness.

3. Feminist Theology

The question of women and their involvement in religion is the single most significant and radical question for the present time, precisely because it has to do with religion and it affects all people. The issue is even more important because religion concerns the deepest and most ultimate (final) aspects of human life (individually and collectively; Doyle 1974: 15).

Feminist theology is pursued by women who are searching for their liberation by rejecting oppressive and sexist religious traditions which render them socially, ecclesiastically and personally inferior just because of their sex (Russel 1974: 18-19). Feminist theology in the sense of women viewing themselves and their roles in life in a radically new light due to the liberating effect of the gospel, can be traced back to the New Testament period (Kretzschmar 1990:37-51). Since then, people like the Abbess Hilda of Whitby (614-680), the Quakers, Mary Fisher and Elizabeth Williams (c 1653) and Lady Huntington are among a few examples of Christian women who stood against the clerical and male biases of their times (cf Malcom 1983:87:133 in Kretzschmar 1991:108).

Therefore, twentieth century feminist theology is not something totally new. Throughout the centuries, women such as those just mentioned have sought ways of enabling the church and society to discontinue sinful patterns of sexist thought, behaviour and structures (Kretzschmar 1991: 108).

According to feminist theologians, this male dominance and female subordination has its roots, not in the original design of God for his creation, but in human disobedience and dislocation. Service to Christ, it is argued; is a call to be God's instruments, not a call to subservience; a call to join hands in working with others, not to superiority. The experience of many women is that service which perpetuates dependency is not service at all (Russel 1974: 29, 31).

4. Black Feminist Theology

4.1 Introduction

In as far as black feminist theology is concerned, though one would align oneself with Bam (1992:365-366) that women in South Africa should develop a feminist theology in which all South African women irrespective of race would participate because they are committed to becoming a non-racial society, I would still see a need that each racial group, apart from the general practice of feminist theology, focuses specifically on its own race for more specialisation and moreover for its different cultural (socio-political and socio-economic) background.

I would therefore align myself strongly with Gordon (1987:15) even though she speaks about black American women (I note that this also holds for South African black women) that though both black and white women have suffered a common experience which is gender-specific, the overall oppression of non-white women has been of a distinctively different nature from that of white women. According to Jordaan (1987:43):

... no white woman knows the augmented tensions of racial oppression.

Women studies, Gordon argues, seldom give attention to the extent to which white women have benefited from the oppression of black women or how they actively participated in racism.

Black women, according to Gordon, are the victims of a trilogy of oppression: Racism, sexism and economic oppression. Commenting on these factors she argues:

Indeed, most often, these three oppressive forces impact upon black women simultaneously with a relentlessness that leaves them drained of both creativity and vision (1987:15; see also Bennet as quoted by Mandew (1991:122).

Kretzschmar (1991:113) holds the same idea as that of Gordon when she argues that black women in South Africa suffer a triple burden of oppression due to their class, their race and their gender.

I would therefore argue that the practice of Black Feminist Theology in South Africa is most urgent and should be more intensified (in view of the new South Africa) even more than that of feminist theology as such.

A Black Feminist Theology thus arises out of a feeling of oppression (particularly racial and gender-oriented) of black women. In this regard, Russel (1974:27) argues that a black feminist theologian in South Africa, just like any Third World woman, would first and foremost wish to be freed from the double disadvantage caused by, firstly racism and, secondly sexism, contending that human rights cannot be divided. A Black Feminist Theology views a black woman as a full human being created in God's image (Gn 1:28) irrespective of her race and sex. Just like feminist theology, as academic

discipline, Black Feminist Theology strives for the equality of all human beings. Before an elaboration on the black feminist reading of the Bible can be made, it will be worthwhile to portray the position or situation of black/African women in brief.

4.2 A black/African woman in perspective

The introductory section of this paper has attempted to show that all women (despite their race) have been excluded from any serious practice of theology. It also became notable that women's struggle for liberation against sexist oppressive structures had already been prevalent in New Testament times. Therefore, it can be indicated that women's oppression is as old as humankind.

The practice of sexist domination, unlike other forms of expression, is mostly experienced in family settings. It is in the family that people learn that the male's role is to work in the community and to provide economically for the family while the female's role is to provide the emotional warmth under the economic role of the male. In this context, the relationship of 'superior-inferior' or 'master-slave' is first learned and also accepted to be 'natural'.

Even though individuals are loved and looked after in families, they are at the same time taught that this love is not as significant as having power to dominate others. Family life as a result, becomes a context for severe suffering and pain for it is characterised, among other things, by power struggles and coercive authoritarian rule (Hooks 1984:36-37).

According to Moltmann-Wendel (1978:55), society's traditions have also been prejudiced by the division of powers or roles according to which the world has been controlled for many years. She further argues:

According to this division of powers it is man who governs, rules and shapes. Woman conceives, bears and is responsible for home and children. Her 'nature' urges this role on her, and this 'conception of nature' holds woman in invisible bonds even in highly developed industrial nations.

The above quotations reveal that the woman (including African/black women) in society is seen solely as a other in the family. It has clearly been pointed out that the family has been one of the structures that has been used by males worldwide to oppress women. A traditional African family was no exception to this. In an African family, the father is the normative head. As head he must be followed when walking, knelt down to, and served the best food (Kayongo-Male & Oyango 1984:26). This headship of husbands in families could have far-reaching implications for the decision-making in a family. The husband would obviously always have the final say in decision-making.

The information in the preceding lines indicates that the suffering/oppression of black women should be seen in relation to the oppression of women world wide. However, black women in South Africa, even more than white women,

have suffered exclusion from significant spheres of society (politics, economy, theology, etc) and have always ranked the lowest on the ladder. These women, just like black American women, have an overall social status which is lower than that of any other group. The title of Hull et al's book is applicable to them:

All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, but Some of Us are Brave (cf Gordon 1978:55).

The condition of black women is the worst when compared to those of other oppressed groups (white women and black men). The latter can act as oppressor and be oppressed. While black men may be victimised by racism, sexism allows them to exploit and oppress (black) women. Likewise, white women may be victimised by sexism but racism allows them to exploit as well as oppress black people (Hooks 1984:14-15).

From all corners of the African continent, women have been crying for economic improvement and educational opportunities. Though some women have as a result of this outcry achieved remarkable positions in their societies, a greater portion of these women are still practising subsistence farming in the rural areas (Njoku 1980: 11). Some of these women become employed elsewhere as domestic workers or farm workers. These poor work conditions normally arise from the poor educational opportunities provided for them. It is an indisputable fact that both domestic workers and farm workers are the most oppressed and exploited of all the working groups in South Africa. These workers do not have any minimum wage, and they are not protected by any laws (William 1990:25).

For more information about these women, the reader is referred to the book of Lawson entitled: *Working women in South Africa*. Preston-White (1986:164-182) as quoted by William (1990:28) refers to these domestic workers as 'trapped workers' who are enmeshed in a situation of immense exploitation. The latter is evident in, amongst others, low wages, lack of paid holidays, lack of workers' rights.

Under these conditions, such women remain slaves for almost their whole lives (at work she is the slave or 'girl' of 'Madam', and at home the slave of the husband).

It is ironic that even in the church the position of the black woman is no better. According to Jordaan (1987:43), black South African women form 60% of church members, but are referred to as weaker, subordinate and non-thinking people by their own menfolk. These women may raise funds but may not determine how the funds will be spent.

In this regard, Ramodibe (1988:17) as quoted by Mandew (1991:126) maintains:

This church, the male-dominated church, wants women but does not need them. Women are wanted because they are workers (cleaning the church, making cakes, fund-raising, etc) for the comfort of men. Men

are like Pharaoh, who wanted the children of Israel as slaves but did not need them as people.

The preceding portrayal of a black woman shows the urgent need for a theology that would liberate her completely, a theology that would recognize, to use the words of Jordan (1987:44), 'the wholeness of black humanness'.

4.3 An African/Black feminist reading of the Bible

The history of how women and particularly black women have been oppressed in almost all spheres of their lives has already been outlined.

She has suffered from exclusion in almost all significant areas of life (including theology, or the church) just because of her sex. Religion (particularly the Christian religion), it was noted, contributed significantly to the suppression and low esteem of women. The latter state of affairs is unfortunate because the Church of all the other institutions was supposed to be the light, and to emulate the example of her Lord, Jesus. The church, however, legitimised sexism, racism and classism through hierarchical ecclesiastical structures and doctrinal teachings (Russel 1974:70; see also Shrock's article on 'The Suppression of Women by Religion').

Unfortunately, the church appears to be the last institution in society to listen as well as to respond to its own gospel mandate for living in a new age:

to proclaim the good news to the poor, ...to proclaim release to the captives ...and to set at liberty those who are oppressed (Russel 1974:7).

With regard to the black Church, black women suffer double oppression (particularly in white controlled churches), both from whites, but mostly from black men (see Ramodibe 1988:16) as quoted by Mandew (1991:124). Hence the same author continues to question whether Black Theology is not just another form of theology aimed at perpetuating the oppression of women. It is high time that the church, and society at large, should heed the oppressed voices of the feminist theologians, and in particular the black feminist theologians, and give due regard to their even worse state of oppression.

A brief look at the following Bible passages will highlight, I believe, the urgency of listening to the cries of black feminist theologians:

In Genesis 1:26-28, both male and female were created in the image of God and hence both of them are equal human beings before him, equal irrespective of race or gender. Both, and not only man, were given the mandate to have dominion over the earth and to fill it (Jordaan 1987:43; Ward Gasque 1988:1-2).

In the past, and even today, the subjection of women to men has been regarded as God-ordained by the unfortunate misinterpretation of Genesis 3:16. Note is not taken, however, of the fact that this submission of woman to man comes as a result of God's punishment of woman after the Fall. It

was, however, not so in the beginning. According to Ward Gasque (1988:2) there is not even a hint in the narrative of Genesis that woman is in any way subordinate to man prior to the Fall.

In her portrayal of the images of women in the Old Testament, Bird (1974:41) shows the various roles and estimations of women in the Old Testament. Among these she mentions what she calls 'heroines' or 'villainesses' like Sarah, Deborah, Ruth, Esther, Jezebel, Delilah and proceeds to argue:

Some may also perceive in the background the indistinct shapes of a host of unnamed mothers, who, silent and unacknowledged, bear all the endless genealogies of males.

As she comments on the image of women in the Book of Proverbs, she maintains that in this book, women are not chattel, nor are they simply sexual objects, but they are persons with intelligence or will, they can (from the male's perspective shown here) either break a man or make him.

As has already been pointed out, it is ironic that the Church (both black and white) fails to emulate the example of her Master, Jesus Christ, who broke against the Jewish tradition with its low view of women. A few examples will suffice in this regard: Jesus had women followers, rabbis did not. He talked with women in public, a practice of which the rabbis did not approve. On the questions of divorce, women were regarded by him as men's equal (cf Mark 10:11; Ward Gasque 1988:2; Moltmann-Wendel 1978:14; Trevett 1983:83), hence no wonder that they were the first at the Cradle and also the last at the Cross! They had never known a man like this one, a prophet who never nagged them or patronised them. From him there was no act or sermon that derived its pungency from female perversity. From his words and deeds nobody could guess that there was anything 'funny' about woman's nature (Russel 1974:34-35).

Space will not allow us to reflect on the significant role women played in the life of the early Church and also in Paul's ministry. Paul, in some of his letters (though there are marks of his own personal struggles to overcome the prejudices of his own time) made important contributions towards a new understanding of women (see particularly Gal 3:28). The latter affirms the equality of both man and woman in Christ (Kretzschmar 1990:44-45; Ward Gasque 1988:9). According to Kretzschmar (1990:43) there has been a tendency to interpret the abovementioned text in futuristic terms: That in the future kingdom of Christ there will be no Jew or Gentile, slave or master, male or female. All will be one in Christ. Kretzschmar rejects this interpretation on the grounds that the text under discussion forms part of Paul's discussion on the practical implications of the gospel (for example the question of circumcision) with regard to the relation between Jews and Gentiles. Therefore, it only makes sense that if Paul rejected the discrimination between Jews and Gentiles (note his condemnation of Peter's racist attitudes) it follows that the other two couplets dealing with the

distinctions of class and gender cannot be understood as future (heavenly) possibilities.

Russel (1974:46-47), commenting on this equality of men and women in Christ, believes that if this is accepted it may neutralise the heated argument rife in our churches today regarding the ordination of women. In the Roman Catholic Church, for example, the canon law decrees that women are unfit matter for ordination. This, according to Ruether (1981:54), implies that if a woman is to be ordained as minister, it would be tantamount to ordaining a monkey or an ox. The experience of Reverend R Jordaan is noteworthy: As a student at the Federal Theological Seminary (supposed to be the most progressive and black orientated theological school in SA) when she served Communion some men would not participate in it. To 'add insult to injury' she further argues that when later it became evident that she was expectant, many who originally had had no qualms in receiving the Communion bread and wine from her, refused to participate.

Further arguing on this oneness brought by the new dispensation of Christ, Russel (1974:46-47) indicates that an ordained (woman) minister symbolizes the future of liberation and equality which has been longed for. As she serves at the pulpit, as she administers Holy Communion, her presence becomes symbolic of a coming God who is beyond all distinctions of male and female.

5. Conclusion

The foregoing discussion, has brought the following aspects to light:

- The role played by religion (in particular Judaism and Christianity) in the oppression of women;
- Patriarchy (both in Jewish and African traditions) contributed significantly to the low esteem on women;
- This low view of women would obviously have far reaching implications on how theology would be practised - theology would basically be a white, male-dominated discipline;
- Feminist theology as a discipline emerged as a reaction against such dehumanising and demoralising views on women;
- Black Feminist Theology (which is relatively recent particularly in South Africa) is even more urgent due to the unfortunate state of oppression in which the black South African woman finds herself;
- Hence a need for a theology that would realize and acknowledge the full humanness of all human beings created in God's image.

Black Feminist Theology, I guess, would argue that it is no accident that God created a human being called a woman, a black woman, in God's own image for God's own sovereign purposes. Therefore this woman has no reason (despite the humiliation, dehumanisation, etc from her context) whatsoever to

regret her being created a black woman. She has all the reasons to fight (as a member of the black race and as a member of the female sex) for her human rights particularly in view of the new freedom in Christ.

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