

POST-MODERN THOUGHT IN THE LIGHT OF WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Most of us are tired of hearing about the past and still present state of crisis in theology. And while we may indeed yearn for the past (and its elusive security) we long for the new. This crisis has presented a challenge and the time has come to 'gird' ourselves and stride confidently into new ways of thinking and behaving. Post-modern thought presents us with a key to this future.

This paper is an attempt to put the past behind and look to the present. The paper has a double aim: the first will attempt a brief summary of post-modern thought and its relationship to contemporary sexism (and related -isms) as understood by Mark Kline Taylor; the second half addresses the value of this thinking in the light of contemporary women's religious experience in a changing South Africa.

1. Introduction

1.1

Scott Lash says post-modernism ¹ is no longer trendy as a way of thinking. In becoming a household word it has been degraded to a cliché. But he says it is still worthy of some discussion, and the questions and issues it raises will remain centre for some time to come. For this I am grateful, it would be a pity if it were only a passing trend not worthy of further discussion. If it is put away too quickly we may lose our connection between the past (tradition and authority) and our present reality (pluralism and domination) before the problems arising out of the post-modernist crisis are settled. Many scholars adhere to being 'post-' something, often naively. Therefore, it is necessary to re-examine these 'posts-' more critically than is being done at present. It may

1. Lash S, 1990. *Sociology of Post-modernism*. Routledge. pp ix, 2.

be very necessary to be post-foundational, or post-feminist, but can we afford to be post-Christian? ²

The post-Christian challenge from the Radical Feminists is difficult to ignore. They find very little redeemable substance in traditional theology and its subsequent morality. Some Radical Feminists would even go so far as to negate this tradition entirely in favour of a radical revolution in the way women experience and express their faith. ³

It would appear that Western white Christian male theology has produced more problems than it has solved. This is especially true when it comes to the experience and expression of God and the effect this language has had on the Christian woman's self-understanding. It has effectively excluded her, not only from developing a unique female self-understanding, it has also excluded her from serving God in the fullest sense of the word, i.e. as an ordained minister in God's service. At the original time of writing the C.P.S.A. had not yet made its historical announcement; the Roman Catholic Church still excludes women from fulfilling this call to God's service. The dominance of this perspective, so evident in biblical and Church tradition, is also found in church ritual, the liturgy, in both communal and private prayer and in traditional stipulated social behaviour. Her whole self-understanding of her relationship to God and the Church as well as the way she expresses this relationship, has effectively muted and in extreme cases silenced her unique potential contribution to her own worship and the worship of the Church. ⁴

But the issues at stake are far wider than her call to ordination or even the way we talk about God. Western white Christian male domination and control has directly influenced the way we have mistreated people who stand outside this dominant group. This is particularly true in South Africa where the *apartheid* policy has granted permission to this group to act unjustly and exclude all 'other' peoples from its exclusive circles. It has become urgently necessary to move beyond this autocratic perspective. Together we need to discover new ways of expressing God, our human relationships and our human potential, especially if we wish to co-exist in a context of diminishing violence, hate and greed in South Africa.

It has become imperative for women to take a stand against their mutation and so assist in the liberation of all people suffering the oppression of this domination. The present crisis in both church and society as well as the challenge of the Radical Feminists has made it necessary for women to 'gird' ourselves with courage and stride confidently into new ways of thinking and behaving.

2. The concept of 'post' will be clarified in the second section of this paper.

3. Daly M 1993. *Outercourse - the Be-Dazzling Voyage. An autobiography*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

4. Glanville H L 1990. Theology in conversation with female religious experience. HSRC conference at Stellenbosch September 1990 (forthcoming).

It is my opinion that the post-modern debate presents us with a key to this future.

1.2

Mark Kline Taylor's *Remembering Esperanza* is a useful introduction to the problems raised by modernism and the possible solutions suggested by post-modern thought.⁵ He offers a valuable contribution to theological thinking. It scraps all previous notions of theory forming and suggests something more radical than even the suggestions of Radical Feminism. It is a daring, liberating analysis of the roots of modern sexism and its consequences on all humankind. And is very specifically post-modern in its methodology.

His memories of a sojourn in Central America confront us with a unique form of sensitization to the issues addressed. It is narrative in style, one that is both academic and intellectual. This remembering includes sexism, racism, classism and heterosexism.

Taylor's aim is to move us away from abstract theories to the heart of experience; instead of theorizing on theories we are challenged to listen empathetically to the voices of those who experience discrimination and oppression, and to develop a theology that is emancipating, reconciliatory and empowering to all.

The fallacy of both subjectivism and objectivism is addressed and he concludes that both are:

... an abstraction that wrecks abuse and opposition on humanity and on nature; an abstraction that is turning away from, often an abhorrence and fear of, concrete existence. The fault is not abstract thinking; rather it is thinking and practice turned away from the sources of human and natural life, matter, bodies, mothers, darkness.⁶

Taylor's argument offers us, as women, credible and valuable suggestions for reflection and theologizing on our own circumstances, as we still suffer from this dis - membering and are in need of re - membering.

1.3

His suggestions are limited in that they fail to empower the oppressed (especially women) to self acceptance and expression. David Michael Levin in *The Opening of Vision* reflects on and challenges the ontological tradition. He opts for a frontal ontology that deconstructs ontological metaphysics. He explains this frontal ontology as:

... the process of growing beyond limited views of self towards a greater vision and realization of what it means to be human. This pro-

5. Taylor M K 1990. Orbis Press.

6. Ibid. p ix.

cess is 'inner work', but not in the metaphysical sense of 'inner', which overlooks the intertwining of the inner and outer; this inner work' is also a form of 'practical activity'.⁷

It is a social practice and a concept of self that contests the 'Cartesian' fixed identity of self, which is an isolated and disembodied thing. He explains,

What we are struggling to envision, then, is rather a self which lives with a continuously changing identity: a self open to changes in itself; a self which changes in response to changes in the world; a self capable of changing the conditions of its world according to need.⁸

And further argues that the heart of humanity has been misplaced and needs to be retrieved. It is humanity's tradition of caring, in its deepest sense, that needs developing.

This means caring for the development of our potentiality - for - being - human: our capacity, our predisposition, our response - ability as human beings.⁹

It also means opening ourselves up to the experiences of others; it is to move beyond the thinking of the West to the neglected rich resources of non-West and non-male experiences and explanations.

1.4

There is a plethora of literature describing and evaluating injustices and discriminations of one kind and another especially towards colonized peoples. Many of these writings endeavour to show that the sources of these injustices and discriminations lie in the material, almost hedonistic greed of the European West that followed the Age of Enlightenment and accompanied the Age of Exploration. These eras also paved the way for greater participation of women in education, theology and the work field. This generalized conclusion (greed) was questioned by many, especially women, involved with the emancipation of women in the 19th century.¹⁰

With this involvement women became more aware of the variety of discriminations against herself and her 'sisters' (other marginalised groups). Early writings, dealing with these problems, sought mainly to establish better working conditions for women, but later research revealed a deeper underlying cause - the male ego and the 'need to be master of all'.

7. Levin D M 1988. Routledge. p 14.

8. Ibid. p 17.

9. Ibid. p 18.

10. Some of the earliest writings on women's position of inferiority date back to the 18th century: see L C Gredes 'The role of women in society - a psychological perspective', in Vorster W S (ed) 1984. *Sexism and Feminism. Miscellanea Congregalia* 24. Pretoria. UNISA.

This research also highlighted the inherent possibilities and potential in women that is explicitly unrelated to her role as wife, mother and home-maker.

Having identified this male need for domination and its consequences for women, female researchers (and empathetic males) in all disciplines ¹¹ began asking other questions in relation to the concept of domination and the resulting sexist discrimination. Not only were cross-cultural ¹² questions asked concerning male domination over women but the whole involvement of the West in colonialization and world economics became suspect - and an ugly spectre raised its head, the first cousins of sexism were identified, racism and classism, ecological and human chauvinism; with heterosexism as brothers-in-arms to sexism itself.

It is my contention that this identification will be helpful in examining the need for and potentiating change in the present strained relationship between sexes (and their related -isms) for, as I have said elsewhere:

Women can no longer guarantee as their primary commitment, the male ego. She can no longer allow herself to remain trapped in men's ideas about women or 'men's systems of education (theological)', as this means 'learning a lot about men in male ways and a lot about learning to be the women, men have determined we should be'. Nor can she continue to be part of the evils (exploitation) and gross distortions (sexism and racism) of patriarchy. For liberation from sexism and racism go hand in hand. One cannot be effectively achieved without the other. ¹³

M K Taylor brings the distortions of sexism and the need for innovative change together in his discussion on the trilemma of post-modern thought.

2. What is post-modern thought?

Is it possible to identify thinking classified as post-modern?

11. See articles concerning women's status in culture and society in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 1977, 6:181-225; 1988, 17:427-495. Other Interdisciplinary works include Carol Gilligan 1982. *In a different voice* - a psychological theory of women's development. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Mary Daly 1979. *Gyn/ecology* - the metaethics of Radical Feminism. London: Women's Press. Also in literature, e.g. the writings of Virginia Woolf and Oliver Schreiner.

And more recently John Stoltenberg 1990. *Refusing to be a man - essays on Sex and Justice*. Meridian Books. London: Penguin Press.

12. A good example of this cross-cultural research can be found in Diana L Eck and Devaki Hain (eds) 1986. *Speaking of Faith. Cross-cultural perspectives on Women, Religion and Social Change*. London: Women's Press.

13. Glanville H L 1990. Theology in conversation with female religious experience. HSRC conference at Stellenbosch September 1990 (forthcoming).

It is best understood against modernism which can be identified with the 'flight from authority'.¹⁴ Foundationalism and fundamentalism were found to be wanting, relativism and scepticism took hold.

This switch can be understood as a reaction to premodern philosophy of scientific objectivism.¹⁵

And for those in the theological disciplines it looked as if the 'Christ' baby had been thrown out with the 'theoretical' bath water.

Today, Christian theologians, particularly women theologians, are faced with a tremendous dilemma to react or respond. The early feminist theologians reacted in several ways to the crisis of modernism; many opted for a radical move away from the traditional churches and their patriarchal authoritarian attitudes towards the role of women in the church, others decided to work with and support the *status quo*.¹⁶ It is my contention that we need to respond not react, there is an alternative beyond the above either /or situation: an alternative which the trend of post-modern thought can assist us to think beyond of own narrow selves or the narrowness of our own society, culture or nation without losing the essential good aspects of these.

2.1 The paradox of post-modern thought

True to its own nature, post-modern is difficult to define, as it consistently rejects all forms of metanarrative.

Linda Hutcheon¹⁷ offers us a 'poetic' introduction to post-modern thinking *via* her discussion on post-modern thinking in history, art and theory.

It can be classified negatively, for example, as discontinuous, disruptive, dislocation, decentering, indeterminacy and antitotalization.¹⁸ It is

14. Jeffrey Stout 1981. *The flight from authority - religion, morality and the quest for autonomy*. Notre Dame Press.

15. Post-modern thinking can be understood as a response to the needs expressed in both, that is the need for commitment and valid foundations, that would effect the empowerment of all.

16. The term Mary Daly uses for this type of person is fembot: a female robot: the archetypal role model forced upon women throughout fatherland: the unstated goal/end of socialization into patriarchal womanhood: the totalled women. (see also snool) 1987. *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*. London: Women's Press.

17. 1986. *A Poetics of Post-modernism*. Routledge. See also Nancey Murphy and James W McClendon 'Distinguishing modern and post-modern theologies. *Modern Theology* 5:3 April 1989.

18. G Comstock in 'Is post-modern religious dialogue possible?' *Faith and Philosophy*, April 1989:6:2. is severely critical of post-modern thinking. He accuses it of suspending the rules of philosophy and theology, as it questions the credulity of all metanarratives, like truth, goodness, and beauty. This leads to nihilism and death. He concludes that we need metanarratives like these to survive. What he has difficulty with is exactly the paradox of post-modernism, as G J Percesepe points out in 'The Unbearable Lightness of Being Post-modern'. *The Christian Scholar's Review* 1991 No 7, 118-135. He shows that to be post-modern is not to negate the metanarrative, rather it is to use metanarratives differently: '... we reorient our thinking so that the context shifts from demands for counter-weight to resistance-to-weight, or religious

'notoriously elusive' says Mark Taylor, at worst it is 'mysterious'.¹⁹ It is disturbing in that it challenges the empiricist, rationalist, realist, relativist and humanist assumptions of our cultural and scientific systems. It seems to be in agreement with all, yet agreeable with none, its view point is avowedly limited, provisional and personal, but not subjective. It asserts and then deliberately undermines such principles, as value, order, meaning control and identity.²⁰

The paradox of this paradigm is that the contradictions remain (almost deliberately) unresolved, and they are both to be respected. Quoting Lyotard (1984 *The Post-modern condition*. University of Minneapolis Press), Linda Hutcheon says:

... the post-modern contradictions, formalist and pragmatic vs historical and ideological, incarnate this very crisis, not by choosing sides, but by living out the contradictions of giving in to both urges.²¹

And no attempt is made to harmonize the 'urges'.

This aspect of 'giving in to both urges' will be helpful when we come to discuss the value of post-modern thought to women's religious experience in a changing South Africa.

Pre-modern thinking required an either/or answer. Many feminists still settle for only feminist answers.

The modernist writers relativised answers, all answers were socially conditioned therefore neither could be right or wrong. This approach has satisfied very few as it condoned the tyranny of the *status quo* in church circles and society.

Post-modern thinking looks beyond foundationalism and relativism and asks how can we be of assistance to each other; what needs and values should be considered if we are to respectfully co-exist on this planet.

Hutcheon reminds us that post-modern thought is not to be considered a 'new' paradigm, it does not present something completely new; nor can it be used synonymously for contemporary, as it is not the same as modern thinking.

weightlessness. The "splendid lightness of being" would then celebrate ironically the surface, resisting the numbing weight of religious conflict and intellectual terrorism, yoking itself to the pure peacefulness of Christ in a dizzying, mirthful celebration of the truth behind the truth, the God behind God, and the religious behind religion'. p 134.

19. Taylor M K 1990:30, quoting from Hassan, affirms the post-modern ethos as being 'indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, self-less-ness/depth-less-ness, the unrepresentable/unrepresentable, irony, hybridization, carnivalization, performance/participation, constructionism, immanence'.

20. See Andries Gouws: The post-modernist's progress or bluff your way in post-modernism for a delightful parody on post-modern thought. *South African Journal of Philosophy*.

21. 1986. *A Poetics of Post-modernism*. Routledge. p x.

Yet it remains fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical and inescapably political.

2.2 So how does it hang together? How do we satisfy both urges'?

Post-modern thinking respects both the past and the multiple needs of the present. It is not a matter of returning to either the pre-modern or the modern, but rather of a critically rethinking and a critical reworking of what these have left behind.

This expresses the concept of 'post', i.e. the critical rethinking and reworking of our understanding of what it means to be human and what it means to co-exist with all creation today. It may well mark 'the site of the struggle of the emergence of something new'.²² This sentiment would agree with Nancey Murphy who says that the way forward lies in the labours of many intellectuals, those who experienced 'the preceding modernity inhospitable and will have found ways to go forward not backward'.²³

Essentially, post-modern thinking seeks to assert difference, rather than homogeneous identity. It takes these differences always to be multiple and provisional. And rather than establishing grand monolithic structures or master narratives, it is consolatory.

It is not agnostic, it does not deny knowledge. Post-modern epistemology recognises that all knowledge remains relative to its cultural system, yet no one such system is allowed to dominate another. It remains ever open to new conversation between the differences.

Thirdly, it accepts that truth lies in the relationship and in the conversation between the differences, and not in redundant hierarchies. Values are no longer seen to be eternal and unchangeable.

2.3 Several concepts begin to gel at this point

The past is not negated, post-modern thinking claims some continuity with its past. It is not ahistorical or acultural or ascientific or anti-intellectual.

This recovery of memory after the forced amnesia of a half century is manifest in customs, dress ..., in the mass diffusion of an interest in history and its products, in the ever vaster need for contemplative experiences and contact with nature that seemed antithetical to the civiliza-

22. *Ibid.* p 4.

23. N Murphy and J W McClendon 1989, 5:3:212. The authors conclude that 'We do not yet see who the towering theological post-modernists may be, or whether there will be any, but we suspect that their appearing among us, when it comes, will be the consequence of hard times for the life of the spirit, of anguished existence, and of intellectual rebirth' - in my opinion M K Taylor is one such post-modern theologian.

tions of machines that has characterized modernism in the 20th century.
24

Secondly the post-modern thinker is called to think off-centre, away from paternalistic structures. It acknowledges 'the urge to make order (and be committed) while pointing out that the orders we create are just human contracts'.
25

Doubt is never far away and this encourages critical research. 26 This self-reflexivity serves to situate the conversation in a broader context. This broader context allows other conversation partners a voice. Linda Hutcheon suggests that post-modern's motto should read 'Hail to the Edges'. 27

Thirdly, the subject is at the heart of the theory, yet the theory is not subjectivist as in humanism. 28 The who of the conversation are very important. Quoting Lyotard again, the author shows, that while the self does not amount to much in the discussion as no self is an island, the post-modern picture allows the self to play a decisive role within the conversation relationship. 29 The selves so involved are ecologically motivated.

Hutcheon says:

Each self exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. 30

This post-humanist 31 understanding of self allows for a self-reflexivity that opens up the way for empowerment of all.

3. Post-modern thought in Mark Kline Taylor

Taylor follows a cultural-political approach. He places his theory of sexism at the centre of his argument. Sexism, he says, forms the web that holds all other discriminations in place. He uses Sara Shute's definition as a starting point for this theory:

24. Hutcheon L 1986:39.

25. Ibid. p 41.

26. This doubt is not the doubt of nihilism, into which modernity has lead many, it is rather the doubt of the post-modern thinker who accepts that all knowledge is interpreted and provisional and has moved beyond this to a better understanding of humanity through critical self reflexive thinking. See David M Levin 1988, in *The Opening of Vision* (Routledge) concerning nihilism and the post-modern situation.

27. Hutcheon L 1986:73.

28. See D M Levin 1988:20 on the future on humanism.

29. See Taylor 1990:60 for his use of 'conversation'.

30. Hutcheon L 1986:83.

31. If humanist means to be devoted to human interests and human ethical standards as opposed to theological standards, posthumanism would move beyond the either/or situation and look to a conversation that would include both humanist and theological discussion.

... sexism is the name for systems in which 'there are some people whose actions, practices and uses of laws, rules and customs limit certain activities of one sex, but do not limit those same activities of people of the other sex'.³²

This definition emphasizes at least three aspects of post-modern thought brought to the fore by Taylor, and which he seeks to address:

- (i) domination; of one sex over the other,
- (ii) traditions; decided on by one sex and enforced on the other,
- (iii) pluralism; more than one group is involved.

While Taylor deals with these aspects specifically within his own North American context, I would like to use these to demonstrate a way beyond the impasse of modernist feminism so as to empower all to a new way of thinking and behaving.

Taylor groups these three aspect together so as to emphasize the importance to keeping them together as a unit. One should not be discussed without the others in view, and any situation under review should be assessed by all three working together. He calls this a post-modern trilemma, that is, the trilemma of keeping all three demands in focus at any one time. It is not a matter of keeping them in balance but rather that:

The various kinds of tension experiences in this trilemma provide an *important way to view the situation* in which contemporary theologians work.³³

... especially if their theology is to remain valid and vibrant in today's society.

3.1 Post-modern traits in theology

3.1.1 A sense of tradition

Modernism devalued tradition, authority and history, the context alone was deemed to be important. Post-modern thought accepts the 'decanonization' of these but places tradition etc, back at the centre for theological discussion accepting its limitation to time, place, style, etc. This 'exposes authority's lack of any privilege to claim freedom from location'. In keeping with post-modern ethos the theologian has 'to own up to where you are, whoever you are and however complex your located self and group identities may be'. This is more than just a legitimization of authority, it is an expression of the celebration of one's time and place. This 'minimalist tradition' is evoked from a holist perspective in that 'our specific locations often feature historical lega-

32. Taylor MK 1990: 76.

33. Taylor 1990:23 (with my emphasis.)

cies and fragments of myth, ritual practice, and communal solidarity'.³⁴ This ethos values the past for its contribution to the present yet limits it to the extent of relativising its authority. It resists any dogmatizing strategy of the tradition. It is an attempt to heighten the sense of tradition and caution against generalist and foundationalist claims - it is essentially post-foundationalist.

I see this as an answer to the feminists who would disregard completely the Christian tradition and opt for a post-Christian worship from a solely female point of view. This group of feminists make their brand of believing the only way to believe. In saying this it is not my purpose to deny the problems of patriarchy, or relativise the need for drastic changes in present church policies, but rather to emphasize the need to be more critical of the traditions handed down to us and identify the presuppositions behind these traditions. Taylor, and others, have identified this as sexism, in all its related -isms. These can be traced back to pre-Christian times. This specific presupposition has governed philosophical, scientific, and theological thinking for centuries.

What then is left in the traditional Christian texts that can be retrieved for, not only the modern female theologian, but also a vibrant valid Christian theology?

This can only be effectively answered after we have discussed the other two traits of post-modern thought.

3.1.2 Celebration of Plurality

This is one aspect of society that can no longer be ignored, it is the reality of not only North America but of most countries in the world. And this plurality is not limited to the content of society, it is also the fact of life in religious and biblical interpretation, and scientific and philosophical understanding.³⁵

Post-modern thinking intensifies and challenges our embracement of plurality. Taylor stresses that relativism of this diversity is not the answer. Relativism closes the conversation, there is not necessity to converse. He suggests that we need to keep the conversation open between all parties if this thesis is to be successful. One of the ways to achieve this is by listening to one another. Parties not presently³⁶ or fully in the conversation must be given priority, he suggests that these partners be given every opportunity to develop their own 'literary aesthetic' in which they find self expression and empowerment but also to which we can listen and drawn upon in the conversation.

He states five dynamics of conversational experience that are necessary to identify what he calls 'this hermeneutical privilege'.

34. Taylor 1990:31,32.

35. To this one can also add current developments in hermeneutics, literary criticism, and feminist theory. Taylor 1990:36.

36. See Taylor 1990:60 for his hermeneutical 'Privilege of the Oppressed'.

The first is an openness to both questioning and being questioned. Successful interchange in conversation requires patience and perseverance. At the heart of this first dynamic is the 'sheer initial struggle of each partner to understand each other', no one party claiming any *a priori* privilege over the other.

Other theologians³⁷ have called this the 'hermeneutic of the Cross'. I see this as the first step to empowerment in contemporary relationships. To be free to listen one has to accept without prejudice and unconditionally the freedom of the other to speak and state their choices. Garrett Green quotes Kierkegaard in this respect as he (Kierkegaard) focuses on the relation between love and freedom and holds that this endowment of creaturely independence is the expression of divine power. Humanity, he says, is limited in this regard,

... therefore it is the case that one person cannot make another completely free, because he who has power is himself entrapped by it, and therefore always comes into an incorrect relation to the person whom he wants to liberate.³⁸

Only God has this quality and can endow this quality upon creation. It is this 'image of God' that needs to be reflected and expressed within the conversation if all involved are to be freed from the tyranny of the past and the nihilism of the present.

Here we see tradition and pluralism working for the good of each other.

The second and third dynamic of authentic conversation highlights the particularity of the other and that differences of opinion are a fact of life. Freedom to listen and to be heard requires freedom from stereotyping and classifying the other. This separates the conversation partners into 'us' and/vs 'them'. Everyone within the conversation must be taken seriously with intentional focusing upon each others differences. This is not an unqualified naive delight in difference, nor a call for forced consensus, rather it expresses resistance to all stereotyping and accepts that clash and conflict are part of the conversation and a necessary aspect of getting to know one another.

Because differences and conflicts are a necessary evil in this getting to know one another, the conversation must, besides respecting and valuing difference, foster a nurturing element. We need to, in the words of David Levin, re-vision the caring element of humanity.³⁹

37. for example Luther, Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer, J Moltmann, in Garrett Green 1989, *Imagining God*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.

38. Green 1989:146. Because this is a direct quote I have not removed the exclusivist language. I feel very strongly that texts should not be changed lightly to suit this need. By leaving the texts so, emphasizes their patriarchal status, which is helpful in identifying their blatant misogyny and the need for drastic change. It is the interpreter's responsibility to highlight this and to use inclusivist language to emphasise this point of view.

39. Levin 1988:Introduction.

Lastly there is the necessity to acknowledge and value the marginalized, including those absent from the conversation, these have to be empowered to enter the conversation.

The centre of the 'old' conversation is displaced to include these:

The victims of the oppression of sexism, racism classism, heterosexism, various forms of ethnocentrism - these not only occupy a privileged position that intensifies the width of a conversation, they also have a distinctive insight born out of sustained, radical suffering'.⁴⁰

These have been cut off from the structure of power but they are not, says Taylor, unfamiliar with the behaviour of those in power) behaviour, as

... they tend to know not only the dynamics of their own muted group but also much of the dynamics operative in the groups that dominate them.⁴¹

This widening of the vision to include the marginalised does not mean that they are the only voice to be heard, rather they are heard first and constantly, and they orient the hearing and evaluation of all the other voices. This serves as a critical orienting vision that will assist newly forming theories of experience and explanation.

The whole idea of the opening or re-visioning of the conversation, is a very exciting prospect to women theologians wishing to maintain respect for her Christian tradition and her acceptance of plurality of life. It allows her to work as co-workers, co-creators in the reformulation of her Christian tradition. Her muted experiences and explanations of her understanding of God's relationship to creation become an essential feature of the conversation, and open up the way to new explanations and new ways of behaving.

But how, asks Taylor, do we get away from creating a new foundationalism? Only, he says, by taking a critical stand against all forms of domination.

3.1.3 Resistance to domination

Taylor understands oppression to be 'the systematic exercise of authority and power in a burdensome, cruel and unjust manner.' He identifies four modes of Western oppression that are 'important for understanding the travail of postmodern discourse: dominatio, subjugation, exploitation, repression.'⁴²

He divides these into two groups:

a) domination and subjugation, which he calls discursive/theoretical practices. They include ideas, texts, theories and uses of language which are both

40. Taylor 1990:65.

41. *ibid.*

42. *ibid* p 37.

theoretical and practical. These socialize and reinforce supremacist logic (domination and subjugation) in society.

b) Exploitation and repression are extradiscursive in that they configure social systems, class divisions, economic needs, and institutions in which supremacist logic functions.

What is needed in these circumstances is a new discursive practice that sets out very deliberately to resist all forms of domination. This is not just taking a stand against domination etc, but keeping the trilemma in view, work co-operatively towards the end of all forms of domination. ⁴³

With this trilemma in view I take, very seriously, the needs expressed in feminist literature, that is, if we are

... to have a morality and an ethic that is committed to Christ, referential to the biblical text and contextual, we will have to take seriously the call to liberate all language that enforces Western and male dominance. ⁴⁴

In 3.1.2 the celebration of plurality and the freedom of expression between conversation partners highlighted a very essential aspect of this discussion of post-modern thinking and women's religious experience, that of empowerment - not only of the dominated or oppressed group but also of the oppressor.

It is insufficient to just say this is what must be done. Sensitization is necessary but something else is needed to ensure this resistance.

4. Empowerment through renewed/re-visioned self-perception

Mark Kline Taylor's *Remembering Esperanza* opens up the discussion concerning the root of modern oppression and domination, but how do oppressed people reach out and change their subjugated behaviour? More importantly, how can we as women change the game?

Recognition of the subjugation is important but only a changed self perception ⁴⁵ will effect the transformation to empowerment.

Levin in discussion with Heidegger and Nietzsche highlights the destruction of self (being) that according to them lies at the feet of humanism. From a

43. Taylor cites a number of theologians whom he sees as accomplishing this purpose: John Cobb, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, Gordon Kaufman, Sallie McFague, Langdon Gilkey, Rosary Radford Ruether. '... all display in their own ways the penchant of the post-modern critical pluralist for affirming as enriching while also striving to formulate a critique that enables resistance to the kind of "disseminating" play that leads directly or indirectly to the dismembering of dominated peoples' lives and bodies'. p 40.

44. Nancy Fraser. 'Talking about needs: Interpretive contests as Political Conflicts in Welfare-state Societies'. *Ethics*, January 1898, 99:2:300.

45. It should be remembered that women's self perception has been controlled for centuries by men, whose main purpose seems to have been to create women as they would have them be.

brief historical overview from the Enlightenment to today he concludes that the Cartesian self has left humanity fragmented ⁴⁶, that is both men and women (and one might rightly include all creation when we think of the devastation of the world resources). This has resulted in a negation of being and a negation of openness to self and others. Humankind's very fight for power is a sign of its depowerment in the face of this fragmentation and the need for change. Humankind has lost the vision of itself and until re-visioning takes place emancipation and empowerment is impossible.

What is called for is a recollection of 'self', of being becoming, a dimension of self that extends beyond the individual. ⁴⁷

Since individual and society are interactively and interdependently co-emergent, the development of our inborn capacity for vision, whatever that may be, is of significance not only for every individual, but also for society as a whole. ⁴⁸

In true post-modern style Levin demonstrates that we have to recover the good of humanism. He says that:

... to retrieve the true heart of humanism we will have to acknowledge its humanity, its injustice, its violence, its reign of terror. For this 'same' humanism - 'same' in the sense which is not that of an essentially fixed, non-historical identity - has also changed the world for the better. ⁴⁹

People understanding themselves as nonselves or fixed selves cannot participate in change. Levin suggests that we recover a more authentic form of 'subjectivity'. We need to:

... envision (is) a self which lives with a continuously changing identity in response to changes in the world; a self capable of changing the conditions of its world according to need. ⁵⁰

This recovery of the authentic self stresses a move from the glorifications of narcissism towards a caring of the new/ re-visioned understanding of the corporate self (i.e. the self in relation to one's community). Only with the re-visioning of caring of the corporate self can change be successfully achieved.

46. Levin 1988:14: 'This conception of self development (self-realization, self-fulfillment, self-determination) proposes an interpretation of the self which contests the authority and hegemony of metaphysics, and according to which the "self" is essentially a Cartesian substance, a fixed identity, essentially isolated and disembodied, an ego-logical "thing" encapsulated in a machine of corruptible matter.'

47. Levin 1988:5ff.

48. *ibid.* p 10.

49. *ibid.* p 18.

50. *ibid.* p 17.

Levin's argument complements Taylor's trilemma. It is only by keeping this in view that we can begin to understand how this re-visioning of self will assist emancipation and empowerment.

The modernist self was preoccupied with self gratification at the expense of others (domination - or in Nietzschean terms 'the will to power'; a denial of pluralism and a myopic view of tradition, history and knowledge).

The post-modern re-visioned self, with a clear picture of its individual potential within society, and with its new perceptual capacity of openness, can more efficiently participate in change.

In terms of women's present muted religious experience, this recovery of the authentic self will facilitate her emancipation and empowerment, as well as facilitate the emancipation and empowerment of the patriarchal traditions that have kept both oppressor and oppressed in bondage.

Conclusion

The value of post-modern thinking in the light of women's religious experience and the changing context of South Africa.

The greatest problem facing the woman theologian is how to effect emancipation and empowerment at the expense of no one.

One cannot demand restitution, this is not a possible human achievement, no single human being or group of people can right all the wrongs of the world, especially those caused by the kind of domination experienced as the result of sexism. Emancipation will therefore not come out of a call for restitution. Neither will it come if it is bestowed by those exercising power. Neither will it come if power substitutes power, as the post-modern trilemma demonstrates.

For change to come about the above four 'pillars' of post-modern thought need to be brought consciously and critically into play. The conversation partners will have to take notice of a) the revised authentic self, b) the role of tradition, c) the fact of plurality and d) the resistance to domination.

This paper has been written explicitly in terms of post-modern thought and women's religious experience and more specifically Christian women's experience. But what does this mean when we consider 'Justice and Peace and the integrity of creation in a changing South Africa'? ⁵¹

a) Resistance to domination requires that, as women, we recognize Christian patriarchy and misogyny for what it is. Both the good and the bad of this tradition. The good that includes the tenacious passing on of our Christian traditions in often extreme circumstances, however oppressive they are; and the bad, that is the discrimination, oppression and death, these traditions have

51. The title of the conference at which this paper was presented - 24-26 July 1991, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.

caused. As the bearers of the gospel traditions we have not other choice, especially, in the light of our own fight against our misogyny, but to listen respectfully and responsively to all the voices in the South African conversation today. We need to rediscover who and what we are as humans living together in the South African context of ours.

b) Re-membering the self. This listening requires that we recognize and develop our individual potential as women, being aware that this cannot be achieved at the expense of others. The potential richness within the South African community cannot be subsumed into a morass of some *pot-pourri* synthesis, where individual potential is lost. Self-acceptance and self-expression in community leads to the empowerment of all.

c) The celebration of plurality. Our misogyny has kept us separated from the main stream of theological experience, reflection and expression - this side of our potential needs to be recovered and expressed in this celebration. But we are not the only ones to experience this separation, e.g. traditional African and Asian peoples and religions and other marginalised groups; and in recognizing and responding to the created creative potential of all, we, ourselves are enabled to understand this aspect in other misogynised groups. We are empowered to 'hear' their voice, their own 'literary aesthetic' and accept their contribution to the needs of a changing South Africa.

One last question, which for the time being, for me anyway, remains unanswered: just what will we have to reflect on together, so that we can retrieve that which is enabling and potentiating from the Christian patriarchal traditions, feminist theories, women's needs, African and Asian traditions, etc., that will enhance the integrity of our changing South Africa?

As far as women are concerned there has to be a constant assertive sensitizing of the issues at stake and encouragement towards the recognition of the 'authentic self' in each and every one of us - it is only when this has been achieved that a true authentic consistent liberation can come to all.