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Barth, Romans and Feminist Theology: The Problem of God's Freedom

Feminist theology continues to be very much on the agenda in contemporary theological discussion. This exploration of a somewhat unusual aspect comes from the pen of Dr. F. Sontag, who teaches philosophy in Pomona College, Claremont, Ca.

I. Tailoring God to Our Agenda

Karl Barth was, as he reports, a 'young country Pastor' in 1918 when he wrote the First Edition of *The Epistle to the Romans*.¹ Whether it is called the Theology of Crisis or Dialectical Theology, it is still widely perceived as a call to free God, to let God be God. The constraints on God in Barth's day are not ours, but it is instructive to realize how each day has parochial concerns that tend to restrict God according to topical issues. Looked at theologically, to free God from human confines is perhaps a major task of every time, since, as one of the Pre-Socratics remarked, we tend to construct God in our own image.

Let us review the Letter of Paul to the Church of Rome, and Barth's early 20th century concerns for God's status, and ask what pressing issues in the late 20th century have confined God, and how we might free God again to be God, not bound by our parochial vision. There may be no other way. That is, perhaps we need first to burden God to become a vehicle for our agenda and then, in the light of that office which we ask divinity to perform, see God's nature begin to break through once again, refusing to be restricted solely to our special interests, however important they may be. As has often been reported, it may not be possible for us to approach divinity except by indirection.

Paul begins his address to 'God's beloved in Rome' by reporting his status as a servant, called to be an apostle and 'specially

¹ Trans. from the 6th Edition by E. C. Hoskyns, Oxford University Press, 1933.

chosen to preach the Good News' (1:2).² Perhaps, then, all who approach God must do so as a servant whose main interest is to proclaim the Gospel, as he or she sees it, of course. This Good News is the power of faith 'saving all who have faith' (1:16). Given the constant controversy about God, Paul makes a surprising claim: 'What can be known about God is perfectly plain . . . since God himself has made it plain' (1:19). God is angry against the impiety and depravity, since we are without excuse: 'They know God and yet refuse to honor him as God.' 'They exchange the immortal God for a worthless imitation, for the image of mortal man' (1:15). The goodness of God is meant to lead to repentance, not immoral behaviour. Paul suggests that we reshape God in order to excuse our actions.

We must be convinced that God has the power to do what He has been promised, and the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (3:3). Paul's model for God, thus, includes our role as servant, preaching the Gospel, the power of God to save, known plainly in a self revelation, anger at depravity, promoting goodness, and a call to repentance. Anger, obedience, and love are Paul's models for God, as these are illustrated in Jesus' life. Furthermore: 'Death no longer has power over us' (6:9). As a result, we should become slaves to righteousness and offer ourselves to God. Creation still retains the hope of being free, and 'we too graon inwardly as we wait for our bodies to be set free' (8:23). 'With God on our side who can be againt us?' (8:31).

Concerning our efforts for improvement, which we certainly are to attempt, Paul reports: 'The only thing that counts is not what human beings want or try to do, but the mercy of God' (9:16). 'Do not forget that God can be severe as well as king' (11:22), but how impossible it is to penetrate God's motives or understand his methods! (11:33). Still we know that we are to offer our 'living bodies as a holy sacrifice, truly pleasing God' (12:2). That is the only way to discover the will of God and to know what is good. 'Forget about satisfying your bodies with all their cravings' (13:4). Each is still free to hold his or her own opinion; it is righteousness and peace and joy brought by the Holy Spirit (14:17). 'Greet each other with a holy kiss' (16:16), Paul enjoins us.

Paul paints a graphic and a well known picture for us, not every feature of which can be, or need be, accepted. Still if we discount Paul's own provincialism about the custom of the day,

² All quotations are from *The Jerusalem Bible*.

an amazing picture of God stands out, one consistent with the core of the Christian message. It must be this which caused the codifiers of the biblical canon to place that epistle first among Paul's writings. And we can see why young pastor Barth, struggling with the complexities of sophisticated thought of his day, would be struck with the necessity to free God from human purposes. At least for Christians, our agenda may not be God's own priority. As we come to realize this, God and the message of the Gospel may appear free and clear once again.

What is the bondage from which Barth calls on us to free God? He claims first that his sole aim was to interpret Scripture (p. ix). Protestants, at least, should consider this as a primary (although by no means exclusive) norm for theological construction. Those who know Barth know that he does not mean a biblical literalism in any narrow sense but rather a constant effort to ask yourself: What is the text trying to say to us, not what we want to text to say? To bring out the meaning of the text is inevitably to add something. Any given individual may reject the content of scripture, but the Christian task is to bring each person face to face with it. Barth reports in the Preface to the First Edition: 'My whole energy of interpreting has been expended in an endeavor to see through and beyond history into the spirit of the Bible, which is the Eternal Spirit' (p. 1).

We have, of course, come so fully to accept contextual relativism that it is hard for us to understand that any document might display an 'Eternal Spirit', although Barth was aware that this would still be clothed in a local context. He used Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky as illustrations, so he knew full well that one does not go backwards in time. The issue is, at least where God is concerned (but perhaps for Shakespeare and Blake too): whether the Platonic Forms that may lurk behind the fragile text can become clear to a reader, at least at crucial moments. 'Divinity is set out in no book,' Barth agrees. Yet there is a simplicity which proceeds from the apprehension of God in the Bible, although this is not clear at the beginning of one's quest but rather at the end. The relation between God and man is the theme of the Bible, so we should approach the text as such, Barth urges (p. 10).

Barth concludes his 1926 Preface: 'We of the Twentieth Century must not shrink from being the Church Militant' (p. 24). Given the 'revisionist history' of the missionary movement currently in vogue, and the popular tendency to see all religions as good and as the same, at least among 'mainline churches', this urging of Barth's may seem strange. However, if one discovers God as Barth does in reading *Romans*, one may respond to Paul's plea to

preach the Gospel. When (and if) God stands free and clear, one certainly is less hesitant to speak out, so that the 'relativism' of our time (which may translate into the hiddenness of God) possibly stands as the reason the Gospel is so often weakly preached. Paul claims uniqueness only in his relationship to God, not in himself, and this is the ground of his authority (p. 28). God is utterly distinct from human nature.

What takes us away from the human-centeredness and relates us to God? It is the Resurrection, when the Holy Spirit touches the world of the flesh (p. 30). Faith becomes 'the fidelity of men encountering the faithfulness of God' (p. 32). Of course, if God is not encountered, or if the resurrection is not a real experience, the world of our normal concerns remains as it was. 'God does not need us' (p. 35), that is the meaning of the power of God. God is confined by no cultural or geographical frontier, Barth is convinced. Provincialism remains in the text; that is not denied, but God can break through. Nevertheless, faith can neither be directly communicated nor immediately apprehended. God still remains hidden to direct disclosure. Faith is 'the awe in the presence of the divine incognito' (p. 39).

We live in an age intent upon reducing God to the human level. Barth finds God 'creating and maintaining the distance by which we are separated from Him' (p. 41). We find no standard but our own invention; God measures us by a standard 'not of this world' (p. 61). We propound the problem of God, but Barth is convinced that God answers it (p. 69). We worry about our ability to know God, and he is the unknown God (p. 116). 'He who says "God" says "miracle"' (p. 120), Barth reminds us in a naturalistic age. Faith of necessity involves paradox; it does not eliminate it (p. 123). Seen from the human side, God is always incomprehensible (p. 149). 'Grace' means 'an impossibility which is possible only in God' (p. 231). Our capacity is to know God 'to be unknowable and wholly Other' (p. 250).

It cannot be otherwise: 'our relation to God is a disturbing relation' (p.266). Finally, 'do we now understand the meaning of the Grace of God and of His Freedom?' (p. 270). Barth would set God free of human limitations. The freedom of God becomes human freedom too, for it is a place 'where men may stand and live out their lives' (p. 503). We are free of the trivialities of human relationships in which we are normally imprisoned. But this is 'the freedom of the prisoner of God' (p. 503). Human problems do not disappear. 'There is presented to us the impenetrable ambiguity of human life.' (*Ibid.*) Barth speaks continually of the 'Krisis' which is caused by the inbreaking of

God into a humanly constrained world. The freedom of God, which he discovers in rereading Paul's *Romans*, is one that breaks into our world to set it free.

It is not too much to say that what Barth finds most objectionable is the tailoring of God to our agenda. We naturally start from there in any age; where else could we start but with our own concerns, e.g., Feminism? But in Paul's epistle, Barth discovers God breaking in to reverse our agenda. Whereas we think our freedom is to be realized by successfully carrying out our particular reform, we discover a God free of our concerns but whose transcendence, at least in the Christian gospel, achieves our freedom for us by paradoxically breaking into our agenda. Humanly speaking, we think the success of the programs we propose, compelling as they may be, however urgent in our eyes, is the avenue of our release. But it is God's unexpected, unpredicted inbreaking that in fact can release us by destroying our particular attachments.

In our agenda, of course we project our release, and we tailor God to that. In point of fact, God often refuses our concerns. But ironically, our release can come in our surrender. It is necessary that we see our program as a necessity, but our attachment to our own goals can distort our perspective and block God. This is the antithesis to divine freedom, and only if God is set free from our demands can the divine release effect ours. Of course, we propose our needs; we are human; we suffer and we have concerns. Our natural mistake is to think that, religiously speaking, our success lies in our release. Barth has discovered in Paul's letter to the Romans that God often does not conform to human agendas. But in surprising us, in disappointing us perhaps at first, our freedom comes as God is released from our demands. God breaks every human form; that is the meaning of freedom.

II. The Transformation of Self vs. Self-assertion³

Almost all revolutionary proposals, from Marx to Radical Feminism, seek a transformation of the self and of our life situation. Marx wanted the proletariat to assume power; then release would come through the abolition of private property. Social reform Feminists want women to assume power and abolish Patriarchy. Both take some overt structure to be the source of human limitation and assume freedom to lie in its

³ Naturally, I am using the more radical Feminists as an example, since their agenda is the most novel, and primarily citing Americans in this case.

overturning or removal. Whether in Marx or in Freud, the transformation of the self is the goal, in one case by transforming structures, in the other by exploring and revealing hidden depths in the psyche. Knowing oneself to be restricted and limited, it seems obvious that our freedom lies in the removal of these obstacles, whether internal or external, which then would result in the transformation of self.

Oddly, all of these programs depend upon self-assertion. This is *our* agenda and we demand its implementation. In politics, in economics, perhaps even in psychology (although it is more doubtful), human release may lie in that direction. Barth's discovery is that in religion, where God is concerned, it is otherwise. The assertion of the self usually leads to self defeat. To implement our agenda seems to be what success means, which we take to be the origin of human freedom. To achieve status in society or in economics, perhaps even in education, would seem to constitute our freedom. But with God and with the human spirit, for those who stay within a religious context, self-assertion, (ironically, particularly when it is successful) binds rather than releases the human spirit.

If we build our image of God from the world, which we naturally tend to do, we see God's ways as our ways. Barth discovers in Paul's letter that, with God, natural orders and expectations are reversed. Thus, as long as we limit God to our agenda, God is bound. Only when God breaks free from human limitations and stands alone can our self-assertion be broken. Our goals in fact are often our bondage, although they appear to us as our freedom. This, of course, is the heart of the Christian message. It appears in the life of Jesus and is dramatized in the disciples' misunderstanding. They had an agenda and they looked to Jesus' success as the means to their liberation. They knew what messiahs did; they anticipated Jesus' support of their press for power and thus their success. But God and Jesus did not conform.

Not only was Jesus crucified but so were the hopes of his followers for their own transformation. They did not want the life and the self they knew. They sought release from external restraints. Their mistake was to see this as being accomplished by the success of their self-asserted social-religious goals. Instead, God demanded the sacrifice (not a popular term these days) of their agenda. Their apparent loss was the condition for freeing God from bondage to human programs, in this case inherited notions of the messianic office. Revolutions of the future fall under the same restriction, that is, if we introduce God into the equation

as not all Feminists do. Occasionally revolutionary programs succeed in establishing new orders, e.g., democracy in the United States. However desirable, this is still not the same as the liberation of the human spirit.

Barth writes at the beginning of the age of high human accomplishment. Advance was projected that went beyond earlier human imagination, and Barth saw this agenda extended to religion. Why not? We could shape our own future; we could conceive God, if we had one at all, along human lines. But in commenting on *Romans*, Barth discovered the Christian message to be one of God often dashing human hopes, no matter how legitimate, because they involve human self-assertion. Instead of supporting our agenda, Barth demanded God's release from our programs, although this at first seems to be failure, e.g., crucifixion. In reality it becomes our own release as God is set free from our demands. Human freedom does not always lie where we think it does, particularly that of the spirit.

Accomplishing our agenda can be spiritually self destructive, since even partial success leads to increased self-assertion and an arrogance often vested in our own power. Jesus had told his disciples that he who seeks to save his life shall lose it. They could not believe this then, any more than we can now, so legitimate do our causes appear. And so they may be. But the origin of human sin, and thus of our own downfall, lies in arrogance and self-assertion, which is what 'religious disobedience' means. We come to consider ourselves invincible and in consequence destroy others who stand in our pat, whether literally as Stalin did or figuratively (spiritually) as 'success spoils Rock Hunter' or Michael Milkon (the junk bond king). The freedom of the human spirit lies in loss of self for others, as Jesus tried to say.

Having outlined some of what Barth found as the tailoring of God to the agenda of the day, and having noted that the word Barth found recorded in *Romans* was the transformation of the self vs. the assertion of the self, one must ask: How do we know that pastor Barth did not simply see his own goals when he read Paul's letter? Can we ever escape the human agenda and find God's program located in any document? We live in a time of cultural relativism. How can we say that we have set God free from our restriction and found God's own plan? We answer by asking if there are ever times when God breaks into human concerns, when our vehicles are transformed into God's? The answer Christians must give is that God related to the Jews, appeared quite incongruously in Jesus of Nazareth, and that we still look for God's re-entry today.

God's appearances tend to happen at times of crisis, which is why Barth called his theology 'Krisis' theology. In a certain sense, all human times are times of crisis, but in every day we should look for the focus of human concern and try to see if we can find God active there. In such events, does the depth of the anguish allow us to find God once again breaking through, using human crisis as an occasion to intrude upon our provincial program and announce God's freedom? The Feminist's agenda of change focuses our attention on concerns that a majority of the human race also center upon. Can we see, as Barth saw in Paul's letter, God using the women's program as a divine agenda?

To do so we must first accept the fact that God can break into temporality and point to something eternal by using the crisis of the time as a focus. We are primarily time, culturally, and humanly bound. But we ask: As Jesus incarnated God's divinity in flesh, can other occurrences be occasions for God's inbreaking? To agree that this can happen does not mean that all can see it, any more than in Jesus' time all Jews saw him as God's anointed one. Nor does it mean that, once present, God can always be found by all who look at that point in history. Jesus' time is gone. Few saw God in that day; many claim later to see divinity exposed at that distant time. But all who are religiously sensitive must stay alert for God's reappearance, as the virgins kept their lamps trimmed waiting for the bridegroom, in order not to be caught unawares.

Will all who read the Feminists' agenda, particularly the more radical Feminist Theology, suddenly find God present? Not necessarily. God's inbreaking always creates confusion, since it overturns our concerns. Yet paradoxically, it is through human crisis that God is able to find entry. Human concerns become divine concerns, Christianity asserts, although some are too trivial, too lacking in power, to allow God an occasion to appear. Should we then simply read the Feminist proposals and say that it is God's agenda? That is too simple: a divinity seldom if ever appears as we anticipate. It seems necessary for God to frustrate or to break our anticipations, *however legitimate*, in order for the divine to appear.

III. The Feminist Theological Agenda; God's Agenda

Let us rehearse some items on the Feminist program, and ask how these might be God's agenda, or how they might offer God the occasion to assert the divine program.

- (1). Feminists seek equality, human liberation and the oppor-

tunity for full expression of their talents. God certainly has been said to endorse this goal as divinity's own. But what might be the difference? Insofar as this involves self-assertion, God may require self-sacrifice as the only means of self-fulfillment. We need to discover if our, or the women's agenda, is as such God's own, or whether God might wish to be disengaged, if too much self-aggrandizement is involved.

(2). 'The time is now' for Feminists. They have waited too long for release. God may not thwart any given timetable for human fulfillment, if we can accomplish it, but there is little evidence that our urgency is always God's. 'God will provide', but often the time delay is uncertain and full realization is not guaranteed in our lifetime. If human beings are free to achieve them, God could never be concerned to oppose human release. But the divine timetable may not be as specific as ours.

(3). Feminists bent on social reform, in their quest for a share in power, want to move power centers more into their control. But God always seems to have been reluctant to enter into human power struggles, no matter how 'right' one side may claim for itself. Consolidating power, then, which is often necessary for the institution of reform, is viewed as a mixed blessing in God's eyes, or at least as something God withdraws from as being as corrupting as it is releasing. Outspoken Feminists seek, and perhaps must seek, power. But God's operations, as evidence in Jesus' life, seems always to draw back from power employment.

(4). Biology has bound women for centuries to a secondary role, as far as public prominence is concerned, no matter how much they have been privately celebrated. Modern methods now allow women more freedom from the cycle of child birth and motherhood. As women discover and exercise this freedom, God cannot be thought to be opposed, since this was included as possible in creation's plan, even if only lately realized. However, as one who designed women's biological role which prevailed for centuries, God must at least be of two minds as women seek release from their biological bondage, since the liberating God must be the same as the one who erected the long dominant biological boundaries.

(5). Lesbian and homosexual tolerance are often included on the feminists' agenda for release from prejudice. True, God cannot be seen as utterly opposed to this, since again the biological scheme divinity decided upon allows multiple roles between the two sexes. However, since reproduction is largely (though not exclusively) limited to heterosexuality, it is hard to see homosexuality as God's first choice.

(6). This leads to the notion of sacrifice. Feminists claim women have sacrificed disproportionately for centuries, which is largely true. Thus, they reject a call for further sacrifice, e.g., as in the call to celibacy in the nun's cloistered life. It is difficult to say that God has required any specific sacrifice from religious pilgrims. But on the other hand, the mission of Christ is an example of a life laid down for others, not for itself. Thus, Feminists most certainly can ask whether some rigidly enjoined sacrifice is indeed what God requires of women (and men) who are sincere, whether or not they are bound to any specific form, no matter how traditional it may have become? Still, the Feminist Theological agenda must include the question of what sacrifice God might call upon them, or anyone, to offer.

(7). Feminists often celebrate the body, claiming that it has too often been shamed or denigrated. A rejection of the body and its functions is hard to ascribe to the Christian God, since against current religious prohibitions Jesus ate and drank with sinners. He also forgave those who used the body to sin (but added that they should sin no more). However, he also told us his body was a living sacrifice given for many. True, we need not all give the ultimate sacrifice, since Jesus has done that for us. Still, the 'imitation of Jesus' would seem to indicate that we must never be controlled by our bodies. Paul is a little overly strict on this matter of flesh vs. spirit, perhaps due to particular struggles of his own. But still Jesus' stress upon the spirit is so strong that, should the body obscure or endanger the spirit, it is clear that Jesus recommends bodily control in order to achieve spiritual development. He fed the hungry; he turned water into wine; not for sheer pleasure but for necessity.

(8). Feminists often argue for equality in all churchly functions. Yet oddly Jesus performed his ministry without ordination from reigning authorities. In itself this does not dictate the refusal of any ecclesiastical role to anyone, women or men. Jesus recognized the religious officials of his day, but he seemed concerned that they use their office for the benefit of others, not for self-exultation. Nor did he consider any ecclesiastical office in itself a religious necessity. The Sabbath was made for us, not we for the Sabbath. So ecclesiastical office was made for human purpose, often women's purpose, not women made to exercise official office in itself. The question is for what purpose authority in the church is sought.

(9). When it comes to ecclesiastical tradition on the authority of the scriptures, many Feminists are outspoken that their agenda is primary, that the tradition and biblical interpretation must be

reinterpreted to conform to that agenda. The prominence of women in the text is marginal, although not absent. Thus, women's role must be stressed, and any account which seems to give women a subservient role must be reinterpreted. Of course, scripture and tradition reflect the more of the times, for which God cannot be held responsible. Even God seeks release, as we have said, from all attempts to confine divinity to human limitations.

Still (and perhaps this is our most important lesson from Barth's reading of *Romans*) we have to be sure we do not release God from one set of provincial human limitations (those of Paul's time) only to confine God to some new human agenda, one with which divinity may not want to identify, or at least not in whole. We need, then, to take any Feminist Theological agenda as a measure to stand up alongside Paul's *Romans* and ask: In what sense is this God's own, and in what sense is God discerned again, just because divinity refuses to be confined to what may prove to be a partly self-centered program? What sacrifice of our aims, Feminist or otherwise, is required if God is to be made visible in our day, radicalizing our human if laudable aims in order to expose a divine plan?

(10). High on the agenda of a majority of Feminist Theologians is the destruction of Patriarchy and the reconception of God to include feminine characteristics vs. a long dominant image of God they claim as too exclusively male. This is not a time to rehearse the complicated role of the feminine in religious history or in our ideas of God. In Christian conceptions of God as love, and Jesus as the representation of that often hidden divine quality ('Jesus meek and mild'), one could argue that the Feminine has always been prominent, and not just in Mariology. Still one has to wonder what, other than provincialism, could have possessed God to incarnate himself as male rather than as female, since there is little evidence that God feels constrained by cultural customs.

Still, the main point may be to see God as transcending all distinction and limitations, no matter how we seek to limit divinity. Thus, God could break into any Feminist religious agenda by refusing to be limited to female characteristics, even if male representatives have overly masculinized God for centuries. The Feminist agenda makes us acutely aware of sexual divisions, as perhaps they must in order to make their point. But in response, we might see God as trying to be free of *all* limitations, *all* attempts at confinement, whether in Patriarchies or Matriarchies. Strong Feminist assertions give God the occasion to break any

mould we construct in our effort to confine divinity—is that their primary religious value?

IV. Some Feminist Proposals, an Occasion for Insight Into the Divine⁴

When Barth (or anyone) has an insight into the provincialization of God and argues that we should set God free from our restraints in order to be God, we of course face the question of whether God can ever be seen directly or fully. The overwhelming answer from the tradition (it is not recent discovery) is: No. In that case, whether due to God's transcendence of human conceptual categories, as mystics claim, or due to inevitable distortions in our perceptions, can we reasonably join Barth and argue to set God free from human restraints in our day? In order to answer, we should consider that, in our common literature, in our sacred texts and theologies, pictures of God have been drawn that are of lasting significance for millions. But the fact that these are not all one, and did not appear at the same time, should make us stay open to new perceptions.

Tracing the history of 'visions of God', we know that they are often associated with momentous events or movements. So I suggest that in Feminist Theology, as we unwrap its claims, we might find, as Barth did in *Romans*, insight into God in our own time, since Feminism is a strong movement of our era. Paradoxically, however, since following God is never simple, I will argue that it is in 'correcting' the way in which Feminist theological theory 'distorts' God that new insight into God is to be gained. That is, when we uncover how Feminist Theory 'slants' our perception of God, as we 'correct for this' we *may* (not necessarily) see God stand out clearly (relatively speaking) once again.

Let us take a representative brief selection of Feminist Theologians (using that term for those who approach God with theory), ask what is special in their approach, and then try to say how it may distort, or reveal, God. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is a New Testament scholar who writes from a Feminist

⁴ In characterizing 'feminist theology', I am painfully aware that all feminist theologians do not agree. I say 'painfully', because I am working my way through over 300 books in feminist theory and feminist theology, trying to sort out all the views. The book manuscript I am at work on will have as a major theme the diversity of feminist theory. However, still, considering particularly the North American feminist theologians, who tend to follow more 'radical' themes, I feel the point being made still holds quite well.

perspective. In *In Memory of Her*⁵ she 'reconstructs' Christian origins from that perspective. 'The Christian gospel cannot be proclaimed if the women disciples and what they have done is not remembered' (p. xiv). Can one inaugurate a new perspective in scripture? Fiorenza answers, yes. 'Feminist praxis is rooted in the religious experience of contemporary women and does not derive its inspiration from Christian past' (p. xviii). Here we see our first transfer. All authentic appearances of God must be rooted for all people in contemporary religious experience.

This offers a theology of liberation and a new paradigm, she argues. What we are always looking for is an experience which will liberate the human spirit, whether religiously or politically. Thus our question is: Can seeing God from the Feminist perspective do this for us? But the formulas for liberation 'vary considerably' (p. 3), she agrees. Thus, we know we do not need doctrinal uniformity in order to experience religious insight, else Feminists have no more to offer than others. What Fiorenza wants to do is to liberate the 'true word of God' from its androcentric setting. That is, change the form but not the content of the biblical message. Along with Barth, we must always divorce the forms of the day from the message of God's appearance, something Feminists want to do.

Yet to say, as many Feminists would, that 'the Bible is a product of men and of patriarchal society' (p.23) seems to have a hidden premise that this authorship makes its outlook uniform. This assumes that all men think and experience religion alike, which makes nonsense of our contentious religious history. And it may assume that women have a distinct perspective, uniform and agreed to by all women. But such is not the case. If we say that the agreed perspective is liberation of the human spirit, it would seem clear that some women and some men seek this, but never all of one sex. Many simply enjoy the life before them. It is hard to see the lines of liberation drawn along the boundaries of sex. Fiorenza, of course, does not want to reject the biblical texts but to reclaim them. Yet the words on the pages of the biblical texts are inert in themselves unless reclaimed, are they not, whether by men or by women?

The crucial time, perhaps, is Fiorenza's assertion that the canon for evaluation cannot be derived from the Bible itself but 'through women's struggle for liberation' (p. 32). But could this not be said in non-sexist language, that God appears where, in any text, we reject its linking of God with violence, alienation, and

⁵ Crossroad. New York, 1986. All quotations are from this edition.

subordination? Fiorenza adds 'patriarchial' to subordination, but that is just the kind of limiting perspective I want to claim does not allow God to stand clear and may when removed. Fiorenza correctly sees that the whole biblical text is distorted if seen as a history of oppression (p. 36). When it is seen as a history of liberation, God stands free for whomever is perceptive, male or female.

Mary Daly, of course, is one of the earliest Feminist Theologians, one who was forced to leave Roman Christianity because she felt she could not reconstruct it as Fiorenza suggests. She points to 'an emergence of women consciousness such as never before has taken place' (p.14).⁶ This is true, but our issue is to see how this might alter, or mediate, our perception of God. Daly wants to know if our views of God hinder or encourage human fulfillment (p. 21). Feminism has stressed this issue. But the question it raises about God applies to us all, even if Feminist concerns opened it up in our day. Women's liberation is 'essentially linked with human liberation' (p. 25). To seek self-transcendence, she agrees, keeps alive 'the question of the ultimate transcendence of God' (p. 25). 'The movement is smashing images that obstruct the becoming of the image of God' (p. 24).

Of course, it is well known that Daly did not remain with these words but moved radically beyond, ultimately rejecting the whole of traditional religion. Still our question from Barth becomes: As the Feminist challenges inherited traditions, as all reformers have before including Jesus, do they offer to set free a new vision of God, but only if we in turn set God free from the particular concerns of that movement? One could say the same thing about Calvin or Luther without denying them their revolutionizing insight, as Luther and Barth found in reading *Romans*. Each was in turn trapped in the provincialisms of their concerns which subjugated God again. Can the revolution in our approach to God be set free from particular feminist concerns?

Like Daly, Rosemary Ruether began a Roman Catholic, but unlike Daly she argues to stay within the church. 'A new God is being born in our hearts . . .,' Ruether tells us⁷ (p.11), which she connects to a revolutionary overthrow of all hierarchies. 'The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women,' (p. 18) she reports. If she would simply make that 'all', we could view God in that way, but there is little evidence God has singled out women (or men alone) for full

⁶ *Beyond God the Father*. Beacon Press. Boston, 1973.

⁷ *Sexism and God Talk*. Beacon Press. Boston, 1983.

humanity. 'All women' cannot claim this principle, since in fact all do not. But the principle of promoting full humanity as that which is holy (p. 19) is an experience in our day. It is highlighted now by women but experienced by many before.

Ruether will set aside 'many aspects of the Bible' (p. 23), and she will not let God be used to justify social domination or subjugation. Ruether discovers 'the prophetic God', as others have done since time immemorial. If it is Feminism which has brought her to this discovery, all we need is next to divorce God from any unique tie to Feminism to become the prophetic God of all. Ruether wants a new social order, but our discovery of God must extend to see how and when this is to be accomplished. Our relationship to God is transformed (p.30), as Christians have always reported, but is it so transformed as no longer to be the exclusive product of Feminist theory?

Phyllis Tribble is a biblical scholar but concentrates more on the Hebrew texts. She holds in tension 'God the lover and God the punisher' (p. 1).⁸ This in itself would seem to divorce God from sexism, male or female, since these have been seen as attributes of both sexes. 'Scripture in itself yields multiple interpretations of itself' (p. 4). This being so, it should be impossible for any human being, male or female, to persuade God to be seen in any single sexual stereotype, although it may well be Feminists in our time who have raised our consciousness about confining God to any stereotype, sexual or otherwise. She clearly finds female imagery in the biblical text (e.g., the womb). But just as clearly she sees that God is not limited to description by one set of sexual images.

Perhaps it is when we move to the third world that we see most clearly our need to free God from any exclusive Feminist attachment. Elsa James has edited a series of essays by Latin American Women.⁹ Reading these, although the need for constructing women's theology is stressed, it is clear that they identify as much with the stressful condition in their own situation, the poor and the uneducated of both sexes, as with women alone. In this sense they share more with those in similar situations than with women in affluent countries. Recognizing this, it may be that it is the poor and the suffering through whose eyes God appears, whether male or female. However, perhaps today it is long enforced restrictions on women that cause us to see this, when they are expressed.

⁸ *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. Fortress Press. Philadelphia, 1978.

⁹ *Through Her Eyes*. Orbis Books. Maryknoll, NY, 1989.

Alice Laffey is, again, an Old Testament scholar who gives us a Feminist Perspective.¹⁰ Her underlying assumption is that 'women are equal to men' (p. 2). The Israelite conviction of God's presence to the oppressed and God's power working in their behalf (p. 3) is important as a religious vision of God for all who are oppressed. 'Patriarchy' means the society on which father has first place and 'hierarchy' means first place in the community. In almost all sacred texts, men occupied these positions primarily, although not exclusively. When this is not the case today, or when we want to balance that perspective with equality for women, the vision of God can break through and set aside all structures, however much priests may have sought to sustain them.

Linda Hurcombe has edited a volume which shows the varieties of women's religious experience.¹¹ Her contributors cover a wide range of religious backgrounds, which evidences the diversity not the unity of 'women's experience'. She quotes Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. 'God ain't a he or a she, but a It.' 'I believe God is everything,' she says (p. 2). Still she offers the feeling of connectedness as a central observation of feminist spirituality (p. 3). It is spirituality that recognizes the need for 'sexual wholeness' (p. 9). In their struggle for equality and their rising consciousness, it is quite possible that this is a leading aspect of women's religious experience. But now, detached from any one sex, as Alice Walker suggests, can God be seen again in a multifaceted spiritual experience that does not include sex but transcends it?

Sallie McFague argues for the use of 'mother', 'lover' and 'friend' as *Images of God*.¹² Lover and friend, of course, may be either male or female and are experienced no more by one sex than another. 'Mother' is an image that may balance the more frequent model of God as 'father'. But we know the mothering image has been used in sacred texts by male authors, so that it would seem to be the exclusive possession of neither sex, although biologically connected to one. Our problem of seeing God in these models is that friends betray (e.g., Judas), lovers grow jealous and rage, and mothers sometimes neglect or even abuse their children. Still the avenue for God's appearance in our day could come in the Feminist pursuit of new models, once they are disconnected from sex.

¹⁰ *An Introduction to the Old Testament*. Fortress Press. Philadelphia, 1988.

¹¹ *Sex and God*. Routledge and Kegan Paul. London, 12987.

¹² Fortress Press. Philadelphia, 1987.

Anne Carr considers *Women's Experience* within the Christian tradition.¹³ As the member of a religious community, she finds 'the movement of women is indeed a transforming grace in our time' (p. ix), and so it may be. Since in the Christian tradition God's presence in the intervening time is experienced as the Holy Spirit (often seen as feminine), what this means is that we must ask if the Holy Spirit can be found moving us all to see God in the Women's Movement. As would be true of God, of course, this cannot be seen in every aspect of any social agenda, some items of which are parochial and self-concerned. But in the liberating movement, can God's spirit be seen and made visible to all, irregardless of its origins in the concerns of Feminism?

Is the struggle of Feminism with Christian 'truth' and 'authentic grace' offered to Christianity (all?) in our time, as Anne Carr suggests? As allied to liberation theology, feminist theology begins with a 'critique of the past' (p. 7). But doesn't all 'refreshing' theology do so? They want to emphasize Jesus' humanity rather than his maleness. But hasn't that always been the case, and isn't it Feminist Theology which has, in its constant stress on sex, been teaching us to think of Jesus in male terms? If we now correct the Feminist stress on sex, do we discover again Jesus' humanity, and possibly God's. 'Sin' needs reinterpretation to allow for a female perspective, we are told. But hasn't every sensitive priest hearing a confession always known that sin is individual and that not all male sin is connected to pride and self-assertion while female sin is otherwise?

Carr has discovered 'the liberating gospel message of equality, mutuality, and service' (p. 10). But has this not always been our problem, and Barth's, to liberate God from all that confines divinity to petty concerns? And if 'Jesus represents a model of humanity that can be emulated by both men and women' (p. 15), surely religious experience has been divorced from exclusive sexual connection. 'Christian women are deeply conscious of the way the Spirit breathes where the spirit will' (p. 23). If so, the Spirit may have appeared in the Women's Movement and in Feminist Theology. But now the time has come, once again, to set God free from the particular context in which divinity has appeared in our day, namely in the Women's Movement.

¹³ *Transforming Grace*. Harper and Row. New York, 1988.