Gendering Christian Ethics

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Gendering Christian Ethics

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INTRODUCTION

JENNY DAGGERS

The launch of the Liverpool Hope *Ethics* series created an opening for considering the ethical implications of viewing Christian theology and practice from a gender perspective. *Gendering Christian Ethics* is a collection of essays bringing together the ethical reflections of a new generation of European and American researchers, who are well versed in feminist theology and feminist theory, and whose work builds on foundations laid by pioneers who first raised gender questions within Christianity. It is a measure of the current scope of gendered reflections in the academy that connections between the contributors to this volume were forged as papers were given and debated, and through broader networking at conferences: the American Academy of Religion; the European Society of Women in Theological Research; The Gender Feminism and Theology Seminar of the Society for the Study of Theology; and the postgraduate seminar at Liverpool Hope University. From these encounters it is clear that scholarship concerned with gender is constantly breaking fresh ground in the work of a new generation of women theologians. The current collection will give the reader insight into a representative selection of work from a broad and vibrant field.

In its original conception, it was hoped that the project would extend beyond women's scholarship in the western world, but this aspiration did not bear fruit. Readers who are new to this field might therefore be interested in placing this volume in its broader global context. The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians produces a number of publications, such as the papers from a 2003 conference in Johannesburg, *On Being Church*.[1] Latina women's theology, with its exchange between Latin American and North American Latina women, is a growing force, as shown in papers from the First Inter-American Symposium on Feminist

[1] Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, eds., *On Being Church: African Women's Voices and Visions* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005).

Inter-cultural Theology, *Feminist Intercultural Theology*.[2] A comparable project, which brings together work of Asian and Asian American women theologians, is the collection *Off the Menu*.[3] In *Hope Abundant*, the Chinese American postcolonial theologian Kwok Pui-Lan has recently gathered a collection that draws together representative writings by Third World and indigenous women from across the continents.[4]

This new generation of women's writings has a global provenance and a resonance beyond its immediate contexts, as it builds on earlier women's contributions within well-established networks and organisations: notably, the World Council of Churches, and the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians. It is fitting to have this wider body of Christian women's writings in mind when approaching the collection of essays gathered here. Our concerns have arisen within our own, various, western contexts. An agenda is set by colonial legacies and by adjustment to a world order where Eurocentric dominance is beginning to decline. In some essays this global agenda gives way to legitimate local concerns, though our current postcolonial condition has some bearing on the ethical imperatives contributors bring into view.

The inclusion of essays by women from two different East European countries makes visible the challenges faced there by Christian women theologians, as conservative churches and societies reconstitute themselves after several decades of communist political rule. For these women, feminist theology is a new project and they are the pioneers. Their work is a reminder of European diversity and complexity, even among those of white European heritage.

Christian ethics have a bearing both on the conduct of Christian theology, church or institution, and on the broader question of distinctive Christian ways of engaging with the wider world. The gendering of Christian ethics needs also to address both these inner and outer dynamics. Rachel Muers's essay sets out to "do justice" within Christian traditions, by deploying the concept and practice of restorative justice. For Muers, this strategy enables feminist theologians to engage with classical Christian texts, despite their misogyny and the consequent harm done to women throughout the long tradition of Western Christianity. Restorative

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[2] Maria Pilar Aquino and Maria José Rosado-Nunes, *Feminist Intercultural Theology: Latina Explorations for a Just World* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2007).

[3] Rita Nakishima et al., eds., *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion and Theology* (London: WJK, 2007).

[4] Kwok Pui-Lan, ed., *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women's Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010).

justice will allow this harm to be acknowledged. Muers follows the feminist biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in "democratizing the past" and extending "the ekklesia of wo/men" into the past, so that mainstream theological texts and traditions can be rehabilitated for feminist re-performance of tradition, alongside the alternative, lost and hidden traditions so lovingly recovered by feminist theologians. Her strategy ensures that feminist critique is constantly re-presented. Just as the Church Fathers are "entitled to be present at each and every theological seminar," so too may restorative justice be done wherever they appear.

Karen V. Guth makes a feminist intervention into Christian public theology. She "genders" Reinhold Niebuhr and the Church's politics, by bringing to bear feminist insights that are frequently marginalised in wider debate. Using Kathryn Tanner's notion of "self-critical cultures" to illuminate the Church's politics, Guth presents a constructive feminist ecclesiology that reveals and rehabilitates Niebuhr's neglected ecclesiology. Her purpose is to offer an ecclesiology that presents churches as self-critical communities "that make themselves receptive to divine judgment with practices of repentance as their political practice." Guth's essay, like that of Muers, sets out to do justice to Christian tradition, in this case by highlighting the ineradicable presence of political practice.

Jenny Daggers, too, is concerned that Christian tradition receives its due in contemporary forms of interreligious dialogue. Setting these in their context of twentieth-century debate over theology of religions, Daggers notes recent intervention of women into what had previously been a male-led area of contest. She, too, turns to Tanner's work, in this case to Tanner's postmodern theorising of the relation between theology and culture, to forge tools enabling a particularist approach to interreligious dialogue that does justice both to Christianity and partner traditions and to the women taking part in dialogue. A common theme and strategy can thus be detected in the first three essays: sustained feminist theological critique has opened new possibilities for the conduct of mainstream theologies within the classical tradition, as well as for constructive work beyond classical core texts and traditions. New ethical imperatives and new possibilities emerge that are *more* capable of doing justice to Christian tradition than perpetuated practices which seek to exclude women and feminist modes of engagement.

There is a move from theology to institutional practice with Janet Nevin's chapter, which offers critical analysis and reflection arising from her professional experience as an educator within Catholic institutions. She draws conclusions from her research into educational leadership within the Catholic sixth form colleges that provide further education for

16-18 year olds in England and Wales. Nevin's careful gender analysis of complex issues of justice and power at play between the Catholic Church and the sector allows her to make a constructive ethical proposal: in tune with broader changes in women's role within church and society, a "paradigm shift" is necessary to dismantle barriers preventing women's entry to educational leadership roles. Advancing an argument that resonates with the previous three chapters, Nevin endorses the distinctive Catholic values enshrined in policy statements, and holds these are contradicted by the exclusion of women from key roles: there is a new chapter to be opened in enabling women's leadership as a means to a fuller realisation of Catholic educational distinctiveness. Nevin's ethical analysis has implications for both the inner dynamics of the Catholic Church in its relations with Catholic institutions, and its outer dynamics in the wider world, given the heterogeneity in the student intake to Catholic colleges.

Sigridur Gudmarsdottir moves the discussion to yet another level. Her philosophical analysis breaks new ground in feminist and Christian ethics as these bear upon "gendered [bodies] in relations and power dynamics [among] gendered bodies in the *poleis* of contemporary communities." It is clear her concern is with dynamics that are "outer" as well as "inner" to Christian traditions. Her essay deploys the thought of the Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt to challenge any easy notion of a simple gender dichotomy between men and women. Gudmarsdottir uses Arendt's three strands of the natal, the will, and the abyss of freedom, to "serve as a warp to the weft of [an] ethics of political embodiment." Her insistence on the political unites Gudmarsdottir's essay with commitments found in preceding chapters of this book. She finds in Arendt a radical yearning for freedom that insists we always begin anew, and insists also on the diversity within gendered embodiment. Given its Augustinian origin, Arendt's abyss of freedom resonates too with classical Christian ethics: natality, which finds expression in the nativity, insists we begin anew.

Where Gudmarsdottir draws on philosophy, Ursula Glienecke turns to psychology and psychotherapy to investigate the harm that can be caused by images of an abusive God drawn from biblical passages where a vindictive, judgmental and oppressive God is displayed. Glienecke's careful analysis draws on object relations theory, then examines texts which tell of divine abuse of women, and their effects on contemporary women readers who are subject to the trauma of abuse. A clear ethical imperative emerges, to image an alternative biblical "vulnerable and listening God who listens so creatively" that traumatised women are brought to healing speech, and to resolutely counter negative internalised images with their destructive psychic and social effects.

Susannah Cornwall's essay engages directly with the postcolonial context discussed at the beginning of this introduction. Her examination of the discourse concerning recent "gender tests" undergone by the South African woman athlete Caster Semenya draws on postcolonial analysis of nineteenth-century, colonising, European attitudes towards the Khosa woman dubbed "the Hottentot Venus." But Cornwall's investigation does not stop at drawing parallels and identifying contrasts between instances of western discourse concerning these two young black South African women, separated by an historical distance of almost two hundred years. In addition, she navigates the effects of a problematic

> grid of narratives surrounding homosexuality, heterosexuality, and the ongoing outworkings of relationships between countries of the Global North and Global South…after colonialism.

While resistance to acknowledging the possibility of intersex conditions is evident in South African discourse, just as it occurs elsewhere, Cornwall advocates the methods of postcolonial theology as useful in challenging "theological colonizations of all indeterminately sexed and gendered bodies," wherever these occur. While postcolonial relations between former coloniser and colonised are difficult to negotiate, given the possible reiteration of western imperial motives, Cornwall advocates a "speaking with" rather than "speaking to" in our theologies and theological ethics; in the case of practices around intersex, she maintains that western Christians need to speak to and with African Christians about issues of sexuality, and western researchers into intersex and related conditions need to speak to and with doctors, parents and intersex activism groups in Africa and elsewhere. At the same time, it is to be expected that western expertise will be treated with a hermeneutic of suspicion, whenever it repeats hierarchical and colonising attitudes.

In the final chapter, Nadja Furlan extends the reach of Christian feminist ethics by means of ecofeminist critique that links patriarchal violence towards women and violence towards nature and the planet. Furlan draws out ethical implications from the theological ecofeminism she presents, to develop an ecofeminist family ethic reflecting an "ecocentric egalitarianism"—"the next step of the evolution of human and non-human relationships in the web of life."

Furlan's is a fitting final chapter for *Gendering Christian Ethics*, as theological ecofeminism is a strong theme within the postcolonial feminist theologies invoked at the beginning of this introduction. In sum, the essays gathered here are testament to the vitality of feminist theological strategies that insist on the gendering of Christian ethics as an indispensable means

of doing justice to Christian traditions, both in their inner spaces and in their dealings with the wider world.

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CHAPTER ONE

DOING TRADITIONS JUSTICE[1]

RACHEL MUERS

Introduction

Feminist theology needs, we have been told for many years, to stop being so negative and produce something constructive.[2] The critique of Christian sexism—in theologies, liturgies, symbols and institutions—has been conducted thoroughly and has made some useful contributions; but feminist theologians now need to stop just attacking sexism and start putting forward a positive theological vision.

The response to such a challenge from within feminist theology might be, in the first place, to argue for the constructive value of the critique of sexism, as an indispensable strand of the theological vocation. Theology has a properly critical function as anti-idolatry—the uncovering and condemnation of any God-talk that is unworthy of God; and feminist theology has been, and remains, engaged in an ongoing critique of the idolatry of male power. Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, the demand that feminist theology should "move on" is deeply problematic, not least because of the curious assumption it imports that theology makes progress (and that sin—in this case, sexism—will disappear as soon as it is

[1] I would like to thank, not only my fellow contributors to *Gendering Christian Ethics* for their very helpful comments, but also members of the research seminar at the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Chester, for their constructive engagement with an earlier version of this chapter.

[2] The clearest and best-known exposition of this critique is probably Linda Woodhead, "Spiritualising the Sacred: A Critique of Feminist Theology," *Modern Theology* 13/2 (1997): 191-212. See also Anne Carr, "Is a Christian Feminist Theology Possible?" *Theological Studies* 43/2 (1982): 279-97.

named).[3] Feminist theological work is, among other things, an ongoing practice of restating what we already know—that women are human beings, that God is neither male nor female—in all the contexts in which these obvious truths are denied in practice.

This is, however, only part of the story about why feminist theological work does not "move on." Feminist theological work, if it is identified as Christian, is in unavoidable and ongoing relationship to a tradition of theological work that is, among other things, sexist. The flip side of "theology does not, straightforwardly, make progress" is "theology is never without its past." Theology is done in the presence of, and in a situation of responsibility towards, the past. In this article, I want to explore the implications of this relationship to a tradition for those of us whose theological work is motivated in part by an ethical challenge to the texts and thinkers of the past. My own primary areas of interest are gender-critical readings of Christianity, and Christian anti-Judaism; I would suggest that the issues apply across a wide range of contemporary theological projects.[4]

When Karl Barth writes "there is no past in theology," he means it primarily as a celebratory affirmation. But, especially as he expands it—"Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Schleiermacher, and all the rest are not dead but living"[5]—Barth's claim is for the feminist theologian, and for any other theologian whose work incorporates a significant *critique* of the Christian past, also a statement of the problem. It would be much easier to do feminist theology (for example) if at least some texts and thinkers from the Christian past could be relied upon to stay dead. Indeed, the "living

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[3] See Rachel Muers, "Feminist Theology as Practice of the Future," *Feminist Theology* 16/1 (2007): 110-27.

[4] Particularly worth mentioning here are debates around Christian anthropocentrism (see in particular the debates around the work of Lynn White Jr) and colonialism. On the methodological issues common to ecological and feminist interpretation, see for example David G. Horrell, Cherryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate, "Appeals to the Bible in Ecotheology and Environmental Ethics: A Typology of Hermeneutical Stances," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 21.2 (2008): 219-38.

[5] Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History* (London: SCM, 1972), 17. I am indebted to Mike Higton's discussion of this passage, and of related issues, in his "Theological Aphorisms on the Politics of Tradition" (unpublished paper presented at the Society for the Study of Theology, Durham, April 2008). The inclusion of Schleiermacher in this list of "living" interlocutors reminds us that the non-pastness of the past was a challenge for Barth as well—see his *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, ed. Dietrich Ritschl, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982).

tradition"—and the linked but not identical problem, the authority and non-negotiable character of the scriptural canon—has featured prominently in post-Christian feminists' accounts of their rejection of Christianity.[6] In response to such rejections of Christianity's traditioned life, it is not really sufficient—although it might be worthwhile—to point out that we are shaped by our past(s) whether we like it or not, that "everything must come to us from outside,"[7] and that freedom from the past is an empty (and peculiarly modern and Western) dream. What both Barth and the post-Christian feminist critic are talking about, after all, is not simply the unavoidable happenstance of being affected by the past, but the act of acknowledging ongoing *responsibility* towards that past, such that we consciously intend it to affect our life and work in certain ways. In the normal (modern, Western?) way of things, we know the past is there, but we do not have to talk to it; we certainly do not have to accord it claims over the living. The claim is that Christians do not grudgingly accept, or seek to escape, the influence of the past on them; they recognise and enact a responsibility to engage with that past.

This is a problem for external critics of Christianity, particularly when we consider Christianity's misogynistic and anti-Jewish past (again, to give but two examples). However, we do not only have to look to "post-Christians" or critics of Christianity to find the clear demand that certain texts and thinkers from the Christian past should and must be buried quietly. Theologians who locate themselves within Christianity have also sought to bury the past in order to make possible present and future theology that would be good news for all—particularly for those who suffer the ongoing effects of past wrongs perpetuated in the name of Christianity. The outright rejection of "classic" thinkers, texts or groups of texts from the past, as misogynistic and therefore impossible conversation partners for a feminist theology, is also a fairly common feature of Christian feminist theological texts.[8]

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[6] See for example Daphne Hampson, "On Autonomy and Heteronomy," in *Swallowing a Fishbone: Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity*, ed. Daphne Hampson (London: SCM, 1996), 1-16.

[7] G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. and trans. Peter Hodgson, vol. III (Berkley: University of California Press, 1998), 252.

[8] A particularly common—and I think problematic—example is the use of the expression "classical theism" to denote a (supposed) group of theological texts and ideas that are implicated in Christian misogyny, anthropocentrism and colonialism (as well as many other problems). See for example the discussion of process

At this point I do not want to pass judgement on the merits or demerits of this rejectionist move. I want to note the prominence of its antithesis—the *defence* of the "classic" texts and thinkers, attempting to exonerate them from the charge of misogyny (or anti-Judaism, or whatever it might be). And I want to suggest that the binary alternative—condemn the past or exonerate the past—is not a particularly fruitful one for the ongoing projects of Christian theology.

While other ways of relating to the ethically problematic past—moving beyond simple condemnation or exoneration—have been *performed* in much recent feminist theology, they have less often been thematised or discussed.[9] The taxonomies of feminist theological approaches to difficult *scriptural* texts provided by Carolyn Osiek and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, among others, have attracted much attention, and can to some extent be useful in analysing feminist (and other) approaches to tradition. However, I would argue that the relationship to tradition (as opposed to scripture) foregrounds *ethical* questions that are not fully addressed in debates around feminist interpretation of scripture.[10] The aim of this paper is to contribute, from a feminist perspective, to a discussion of the ethics of relating to a sexist past.

The clue I follow, in these initial reflections, is the frequent presence, in debates around the reading of our problematic past, to language used in other contexts in which past wrongs are named, examined and dealt with by a community. Most prominent is the language of the courtroom—of accusation, exoneration, defence, judgement.

So, in this chapter, I want to ask what we can learn about "doing justice" to tradition from a set of wider debates about what it means to "do justice" when living with past wrongs. While I have referred above to the language of the courtroom, some of the accounts of justice that might be most helpful in constructing ethical relations to tradition are precisely

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theology in Anna Case Winters, *Reconstructing a Christian Theology of Nature: Down to Earth* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), chapter 5.

[9] Among the many notable examples of constructive-and-critical feminist engagement with tradition we might cite the work of Sarah Coakley (*Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* [Oxford: Blackwell, 2002]) or Tina Beattie (*Woman* [London: Continuum, 2003]).

[10] I would also argue that feminist interpreters, even those working within "revisionist" and "liberationist" paradigms (i.e. those who, in different ways, seek to work with the texts without denying their misogyny) have not often been able to find constructive responses to, or to forestall, the defensive/exonerating counter-move.

those that avoid, as it were, the court's stark alternatives of condemnation or exoneration, and the court's assumption of a neutral position of authority. To anticipate my conclusion, I want to enquire from a feminist perspective about the possibilities for, and the preconditions and limitations of, a "restorative justice" of tradition.

One of my presuppositions, as should already be clear, is that Barth is in some sense right. Doing Christian theology means being in some kind of lived relationship of responsibility to the dead. This emphatically does *not* mean that temporal relationships collapse, that the past ceases to be past, or that our responsibilities in relation to the past in some way equate to or compete with our responsibilities in the present. Theologically speaking, I assume that the work we do is located within the communion of saints; but I do not intend by this to collapse historical differences.

This emphasis on a communal relation to a living tradition extends, deepens and complicates the set of ethical responsibilities that I and others would argue pertain to any act of *reading* or interpretation.[11] It is an understandable—even if also a debatable—question to ask of a reader whether she has "done justice" to what she reads, whether her representation of the text is "fair," whether we can trust what she says;[12] and these questions are commonly asked even when the author of the text under discussion is dead.[13] I would argue, moreover, that "doing justice" to what we read is also a responsibility we have to fellow readers and future readers.[14]

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[11] On the theological aspects of this, see for example Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001).

[12] Such ethical language, used widely of the act of reading (as of the act of interpreting scientific data, or narrating historical events) does not preclude discussions of the nature of the interpretive act. I merely want to note here that reading or interpretation *is* widely assumed to be an ethically significant process, even without an explicit (or implicit) theological framework.

[13] Proponents of a strictly "person-affecting" account of ethics may be resistant to giving the language of justice or fairness any ethical weight here when the author is dead—or might prefer to argue that any ethical responsibility involved is owed to contemporary and future persons, who have (for example) the right not to be misled about what the text says. However, the case for responsibilities *to the dead*, responsibilities that have to do with the interpretation and use of their work, can be made on non-theological and person-affecting grounds. See John O"Neill, "Future Generations: Present Harms," *Philosophy* 68/263 (1993): 35-51.

[14] This theme is not developed in the present essay; I consider it in chapter 8 of Rachel Muers, *Living for the Future: Theological Ethics for Coming Generations* (London: Continuum, 2008).

In fact, thinking about the "ethics of reading" in the context of the communion of saints leads us into wider and significant questions about the nature and ultimate end of justice. Framing my discussion in terms of feminist appropriations of a misogynist past, I have set up the issue of justice in the context of past wrongs. In other words, following Iris Marion Young among others, I locate questions of justice in the context of recognising and protesting against *in*justice in specific historical circumstances, rather than (for example) in a supposed pre-ethical and pre-political neutral space.[15] From this point, however, the direction we take will be affected by our understanding of the components of justice. Like many of those involved in the legal, political and historiographical processes of "justice-making" after civil conflicts, we may find ourselves caught in an apparent dilemma between truth and expediency. We want to tell the truth about what we read—and about all its problems—but we are also, because of our commitment to this ongoing community of thought and life, engaged in the search for a *useable* tradition, a way of doing theology that faithfully speaks good news for the present and the future.[16]

Justice has been a central concern for much feminist theology, even in the context of feminist ethicists' critiques of the ethics of justice. Theologically, demands for "justice" from within the liberationist tradition have used and developed the biblical vision of *shalom*. Justice as *shalom* is an inclusive vision of peace, right relation and flourishing before God. To do justice is to proclaim and further this vision. Feminist theologians have used this inclusive account of justice to emphasise the relationships between gender justice and other aspects of human flourishing.

At the same time, there have been several influential theological critiques of contemporary, political and legal, models of justice—drawing

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[15] Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). This is one reason why feminist critiques of an "ethics of justice," associated with Carol Gilligan among others, have less relevance to my argument than might otherwise be thought. In the broader contexts of applied ethics, theology and law, "justice" does not necessarily have the connotations that enable Gilligan, following Kohlberg, to contrast it sharply with "care."

[16] As Higton puts it, tradition is "that activity by which the past is construed as the enabling context for action"—tradition, the *process* of interpreting the past, has a present-and-future orientation. My way of setting up the problem—the relationship between truth and expediency in the wake of past wrongs—puts a specific edge on the general issue that Higton raises concerning the relationship between *the past* (in its non-negotiable givenness and complexity) and *tradition* (the stories we tell about the past).

on biblical accounts to expose (what is argued to be) the poverty of our *narratives* of justice and the inevitable failures of our *practices* of "doing justice." There has been particular interest in the relationship between justice and reconciliation, and in the theological, ethical and practical possibilities of restorative justice approaches.[17] Key figures in the development of restorative justice, both as a small-scale practice between individuals and as several interrelated processes of collective justice-making following conflict or trauma, have drawn explicitly on biblical and theological visions of justice. The complex tradition of reflection on atonement, forgiveness and reconciliation within Christianity invites theological dialogue around new models of response to wrongdoing. In this chapter, I want to bear in mind this broader account of doing justice—including a concern for peace, for right relationships, and for the flourishing of humanity and the world—as a basis for thinking about how we do justice in relation to tradition.

Truth and Full Disclosure: Democratising the Past

Of course, feminist readers who perform gender-critical readings of Christian tradition, and who on that basis critique the misogyny of the past, are already engaged in "doing justice" to tradition. As I suggested earlier, the suspicious feminist reader is not simply an agent of destruction or a provoker of conflict; she is engaged in the essential theological work of uncovering and critiquing wrongs. At least on their terms, feminist critics of Christian tradition are seeking to expose and name injustice as a

[17] See, for examples of discussions that either start from theological perspectives or engage with theology, Daniel Van Ness, "New Wine in Old Wineskins: Four Challenges of Restorative Justice," *Criminal Law Forum* 4/2 (1993): 251-276; Zenon Szablowinski, "Punitive Justice and Restorative Justice as Social Reconciliation," *Heythrop Journal* 49 (2008): 405-422; Geoff Broughton, "Restorative Justice: Opportunities for Christian Engagement," *International Journal of Public Theology* 3 (2009): 299-318; Heather Thomson, "Satisfying Justice?" *International Journal of Public Theology* 3 (2009): 319-338. For a discussion of the possibility of applying restorative justice approaches to *intra-ecclesial* wrong —in this case, the sexual abuse of children by clergy—see Theo Gavrielides, *Restorative Justice Theory and Practice: Addressing the Discrepancy* **(**Helsinki : European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control, affiliated with the United Nations [HEUNI]; Monsey, N.Y. : Criminal Justice Press, 2007). I am very grateful to Alistair McFadyen for discussions of restorative justice, and for drawing my attention to some of this material.

necessary first step towards seeing justice *done*—indeed, as an indispensable element in an inclusive vision of justice. Within the classic models of restorative justice, the "full disclosure" of the wrong done is taken to be an essential part of the process.

Feminist critics of Christian tradition would not necessarily claim that what they were achieving was "full disclosure" in the sense of a single, neutral or comprehensive account of the traditions they read. This would be to presume a "God's-eye" view of a text or a situation—which is precisely what, as Pamela Sue Anderson and others have argued, the male-dominated tradition has claimed for the privileged scholar, and the feminist reader must disavow.[18] However, a gender-critical reading of a text—say, for example, a reading that exposes the maleness of the supposedly-neutral "man" of theological anthropology—can attempt and claim to perform *dis*closure, *un*covering, the bringing to light of what had been hidden. It can trace, for example, the hidden processes by which misogyny is naturalised. Furthermore, a gender-critical reading "discloses" the problems with an existing model of tradition and its authority. The "church fathers" receive feminist attention because the claim is made on their behalf that they *are* "fathers," carrying paternal-patriarchal authority, or at least (unlike some of their contemporaries) entitled to be present at each and every theological seminar. Here as with many practices of restorative justice, then, the process of disclosure—ending deception, denial and concealment, and giving some form of public or communal recognition to "what happened"—is central. It is not that we now have the final or complete account of "what happened," but in some important respect truth has been told.

If I make the analogy between suspicious feminist reading and "disclosure," however, I am making the suspicious reading stand in the position of what would, in a restorative justice process, ordinarily be a confession by the originator of the wrong and/or the testimony of the victim. When dealing with texts from the past, however, this seems highly questionable. It is more plausible to cast the critic as the accuser, the voice on behalf of the victims, or on behalf of the community whose wider vision of justice has been assailed. But if that is the case, and since we cannot hear the voices of the accused or of the victims outside the texts we interpret, can the process of disclosure lead to anything more profitable than a trading of accusations and defences?

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[18] See Pamela Sue Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 36.

There have, of course, been many situations in recent decades in which it is the wrongs done by the dead, rather than the living, for which repair, recompense or restoration is sought. Historians, in these circumstances, have sometimes understood themselves as carrying crucial ethical responsibility—perhaps the responsibility for "democratising the past," to quote Alan Cairns. For Cairns, the historian is obliged to ensure that past victims receive the just representation that was previously denied them.[19] For feminist theologians, the critical rereading of tradition can be regarded as a way, not only of "democratising the past," but of extending into the past the "ekklesia of wo/men."[20] The church envisaged by Fiorenza and others in this phrase is a community within which a shared response to the calling of God overturns existing hierarchical distinctions between persons, and gives rise to a shared social identity focused on doing justice. If the church *through the generations*—the "living" past—is also called and enabled to be this kind of community, feminist rereadings of tradition are a way of telling the truth about Christians' shared identity, as well as (and more importantly than) the truth about particular texts and thinkers.

A further component of this historical extension of the "ekklesia of wo/men" might be the processes that Ann Loades evocatively terms "searching for lost coins"[21]—recovering and re-emphasising the lost or little-known work of women and (proto-)feminists from the past, locating "silenced" theological material, or evidence of "hidden" dimensions of lived tradition. Again, as the terminology shows, the point here is less to give the spurious impression of a final and complete picture than to undo a process of deliberate or accidental concealment—and hence, in this case particularly, to right an ongoing wrong done in relation to the past.

It is important, however, to note that the concern to do justice for the victims of history—to read history, in Johann-Baptist Metz's terms, from the underside—is manifested in critical feminist readings of mainstream theology as well as in the work of recovering lost or little-studied traditions. The two processes are complementary and produce complementary analyses; the critics disclose how non-misogynist voices came to be lost, alongside disclosing *what* was lost. The "disclosure" of

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[19] Alan S. Cairns, "Coming to Terms with the Past," in *Politics and the Past: On Repairing Historical Injustice*, ed. John Torpey (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 63-90.

[20] See for example Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 3-31.

[21] Ann Loades, *Searching for Lost Coins: Explorations in Christianity and Feminism* (London: SPCK, 1987).

the past, in restorative justice processes, often involves the hearing together of multiple testimonies.

There is a further dimension to the feminist search for "alternative," "lost" and "hidden" voices as part of the re-performance of tradition. Feminist thinkers thereby perform a different understanding of what tradition *is*—an understanding that is not focused on "great books by great men," that remembers the multiply conflicted contexts in which these books are produced and received, and that does not assume that theological thought trickles down from the elite to the masses, from the pulpit to the pews, from the heroic/creative author to his gratefully receptive public.

What, however, should we say about the critical and judgemental dimension of this exercise? Should it be leading us to reject certain texts or traditions—and if not, how is their "rehabilitation" to be accomplished without falsehood?

Directing the Blame

Most of us who have attempted to teach (about) feminism to undergraduate students have probably encountered similar sets of difficulties. Even if we get past the arguments about the nature of freedom ("but if it's THEIR CHOICE to have a boob-job, how can they be oppressed?"), we encounter the resistance to anything that looks at all like the ascription of blame to ordinary, nice people living normal lives. We explain, again, that we are not saying that all men are evil when we say that sexism is pervasive and structural. We explain, again, that we are not "blaming" women for having boob-jobs. And then perhaps we explain, again, that we are not even saying that Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and all those great theologians, who are also sexist, are or were evil; and that we are not saying that we want to stop reading them or caring about them. We are not claiming that Christianity is a male *conspiracy*, or that these texts are *designed* as instruments of oppression.

It is a difficult case to make, because the ascription (and fear, and avoidance) of individual blame is so deeply entrenched in modern self-perception—along with the belief that we control our actions and our intentions, that we are transparent to ourselves. It can be hard at the start, I find, even to rouse students' interest in the idea that the text might say things *despite* the author's intentions, that it might speak more than his (for these purposes, let us recognise that it is usually his) conscious individual thoughts. The most interesting thing about this text might not be, straightforwardly, the blameworthiness or otherwise of the author; it

might not be worth arguing for very long about what is his "fault," even though he takes responsibility for the text that bears his name.

The text on the seminar table sits in a hard-to-negotiate space—both a conversation partner and an object of conversation, both the theologian and the theologian's action. We are reading "Augustine" today—but we are not reading *Augustine*, we are reading his work. This can be useful. Separating the author from the text, at least for some purposes, opens up a space in which we can move past the to-and-fro, and the individualisation, of accusation and defence. It becomes possible, for example, to see in a text the traces of the *structural* sin of sexism, in which the author is caught up—along with his context, his audience, his readers, his successors.

Ideologically-critical reading was never intended (so I remind my students) to enable the easy identification of heroes and villains, the granting of clean bills of health, or the formation of a rogues' gallery. Of course, identifying heroes and villains makes things much easier, particularly for students (and of course we are all "students" of Karl Barth's living teachers—and of Barth himself, alongside all the others). Things get simpler if there are certain people you know you do not have to read, or listen to, any more. Purges have their uses; but they are rarely a way of doing justice, other than on an account of justice as crude punishment. The impulse to construct a "pure" tradition of recognised and accepted authorities, free from all taint of whatever heresy we are currently most worried about, has a long history in Christian thought and practice—but not a particularly illustrious one.

When the author and the text are separated—so that the text is seen as *one* of the author's works, one thing he did (with its particular implications and effects)—what happens to "doing justice"? My hope is that it makes it easier, first, to name a wrong. Even if the authoring of the misogynistic text is "nothing special" in its time, merely evidence of its author's entrenchment in a particular manifestation of social sin, it can and should be named as a wrong—in the case of the texts that attain influence and authority within the tradition, a wrong with long-term effects. As I discussed above, this is part of "doing justice."

But this move, in turn, allows us to recognise the author—the "living" author—as part of a wider and deeper problem, one that he does not create but does not stand above. If he was on a pedestal, he descends from the pedestal—not to be trampled underfoot, but to be part of the historical human community for which we hope for a peaceful and just future, and that is still marred by personal and structural injustice. This in turn may enable us to reread the author as a fellow participant in hope—as someone

whose work might (sometimes *despite* himself, but that does not actually matter) witness to God's promise of *shalom*.

In the "restorative justice of tradition," this kind of rereading is perhaps the closest we can come to the crucial step of forgiveness. It matters, I think, both to restorative justice practices and to traditions that *people,* not deeds and not texts, are forgiven. The goal, at least in most descriptions of restorative justice, is the restoration of relationships for the sake of continued life together, not the falsification of moral accounts or the changing of bad deeds into good.

Even in the analysis of the "wrongs" in texts, we should of course beware of making facile assumptions about the relationships between beliefs and practices. Kathryn Tanner's work, for example, demonstrates that it is difficult to "map" theological positions onto political practices.[22] It would be simply irresponsible—a failure of the responsibility of a reader, as well as of the particular responsibility to a living past—to assume without close analysis in each case that a given theological position will produce politically or ethically unacceptable conclusions. (Divine impassibility does not, for example, obviously or straightforwardly mean colonialism, sexism and hierarchical thinking.) Of course, it would be equally irresponsible to deny, or cover up, the pervasiveness or the systematic ramifications of sexism—to trivialise it by assuming it is incidental to "real" theological work.

So in some cases we might be able to "forgive" problematic texts—at least to leave them on the table, not to write them off or bury them—in the hope of a just and peaceful rereading, even if we *ourselves* cannot perform that rereading. In other cases—perhaps more often—we would have to leave the wrongness of the *text* to stand without mitigation, while recognising the *author's* fellow-humanity, and community with us in hope.

Power and Forgiveness: Can we Get beyond Resentment?

The problem with the description I have just given of intra-traditional "forgiveness" is that it assumes that it is easy to bring the great dead/living theologians down from their pedestals and allow them to mingle on the floor of the ekklesia of wo/men. There are, as several analysts of restorative justice practices have pointed out, some very difficult issues to confront when restorative justice is used in situations with an ongoing

[22] Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God*: *Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

imbalance of power, in which the structure of an existing relationship has caused or exacerbated the wrong done. In situations of domestic violence, for example, a plea for forgiveness may be a perpetuation of the abuse (and may in fact have already been made and given several times). As Julie Stubbs notes, a survivor of domestic violence generally wants *safety* (for herself and her children), as well as a "public" acknowledgement of the wrong done; the "restoration of a relationship" may be a problematic demand.[23]

Analogously, we should not neglect the possibility that there are acts of forgiveness that are simply impossible—especially if forgiveness is taken to mean the need to form some sort of living and ongoing relationship. There are, perhaps, some texts that certain people *cannot* be asked to read deeply or reflect on at length, without real consequent harm. From a feminist perspective, it is particularly important to realise that the demand often made by theologians (myself included) for "vulnerability" and "risk," in the ideas we engage with and the conversations we enter, looks very different depending on whether it is made from an initial position of power or an initial position of powerlessness. The "great tradition," the lists of great dead/living theologians, have considerable and continuing power; if they enter the church or the seminar room as living voices, we cannot assume that everyone will be in the position to address them as friends and conversation partners rather than as former abusers.

James Alison's account of "theology amid the stones and dust," engaging with the past and present homophobia of the Christian churches, is a valuable account of the problem of power imbalance and of a theological response to it.[24] For Alison, the key is Jesus's refiguring of (what he describes as) "human relationships structured around 'paternity' as 'fraternal.'" It is natural, he suggests, to read homophobic church documents as "paternal," expressing a claim to domination and an exercise of power, to which the gay Christian reacts with resentment, guilt or submission. If the texts are read as the work of fellow "brethren" of Jesus and children of God, however—read free from the need to obey, or rebel against, a human authority—the texts can be openings to dialogue. Key to that move, Alison suggests, is liberation from *resentment* about past and present injustice—liberation that is given, in fact, with the passage

[23] Julie Stubbs, "Beyond Apology? Domestic Violence and Critical Questions for Restorative Justice," *Criminology and Criminal Justice* 7/2 (2007): 169-187.

[24] James Alison, "Theology amid the Stones and Dust," in *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2001), 27-55.

"through death" to new life in Jesus. The dead—in their new life—are radically free from the need to avenge or resent the wrongs done to them, and something like that freedom is promised by Jesus to everyone who becomes part of his death and new life.

Although Alison's gendered language is unfortunate, it is crucial to attend to the context and mode of what he says. He addresses these remarks to survivors of past and present injustice, and he describes freedom from resentment as a gift from God—a gift that motivates and empowers their ongoing work for justice, and that promises to break open the cycles of fear and resentment, accusation and defence.

In fact, what Alison (drawing, of course, on René Girard) offers here is, I suggest, a fruitful way of thinking about the kind of forgiveness that makes it possible to do justice to a tradition. As I have done here, he argues for ideological critique as an important step towards re-engagement with them on other terms—it is a way of naming the sinful structures, the patterns of violence, that affect the texts, without reducing them or their writers entirely to instruments of sin and violence. The language of "resentment" is useful for naming (at least part of) how their relationships to oppressive traditions constrain victims' freedom for loving and creative action.[25]

It is important, however, not to be too sanguine about the possibilities for a restorative justice of tradition. Alison himself is realistic (albeit at some points more than others) about the limitations of what can be changed. Some representatives of "paternal" authority are simply not able or willing to engage when addressed in this way—even though they may agree notionally with Alison's central claim, that we stand together as the children of God. A further problem, more specific to our discussion, is that his refiguring of tradition's conversation as "fraternal" presumes that the victims/survivors of injustice are capable of *entering* the conversation. What if its very terms seem to exclude them from the outset—by addressing everything, for example, to "brothers"? (A gay man might be accepted eventually as a "brother," but a woman will not—and this might be more than a linguistic point).

The feminist thinker who seeks a restorative justice of tradition might, then, have to ask: what if part of the past and continuing wrong is the denial of a *voice,* or the fact that someone has been given no space and no permitted language in which to speak of God? Inclusive justice in this

[25] Korean *minjung* theologians point to something similar, of course, in their use of *han*.

situation might require, at the very least, a period of "safety" before the victim/survivor entered the conversation and attempted to enact reconciliation. We might have to create seminars, courses, or liturgical contexts in which students were not forced to study explicitly misogynistic material, even for the sake of critiquing it. Alternatively, or alongside this, we might have to pay close attention to our practices of teaching and writing—to model not only justice as strict equity, but the "preferential option" for those past and present voices that are in danger of being silenced.

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CHAPTER TWO

CHURCHES AS "SELF-CRITICAL CULTURES": REINHOLD NIEBUHR, KATHRYN TANNER, AND THE CHURCH'S POLITICS

KAREN V. GUTH

Introduction: Reinhold Niebuhr, the Church, and Feminist Ecclesiology

The "church's politics" has become an important topic in Christian ethics in the United States. And while this phrase may call to mind the work of Mennonite John Howard Yoder or his more famous expositor, Stanley Hauerwas, it is certainly not associated with Reinhold Niebuhr. One of the most enduring criticisms of Niebuhr contends that, although he pays significant attention to the relationship between Christian faith and politics, he altogether lacks an ecclesiology.[1] Moreover, several feminists

[1] John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, and William Cavanaugh, among others, make this claim. See Yoder, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 29 (April 1955), 115; Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 60; and Cavanaugh, "Church," in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology,* ed. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 393-406. Gary Dorrien points out in his recent treatment of Niebuhr that this is certainly not a new claim. See *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 238. Interestingly, Wendy Dackson has recently argued that Niebuhr espoused an "outsider ecclesiology." While her argument nicely attends to Niebuhr's criticisms of the church as an institution, it neglects his substantive, albeit not well-developed, statements about the church's identity. See "Reinhold Niebuhr's 'Outsider Ecclesiology,'" in *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics: God and Power*, ed. Richard Harries and Stephen Platten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 87-101.

argue that Niebuhr's distinction between the "moral" individual and "immoral society" underestimates the moral potential of religious communities.[2] And many others claim that Niebuhr's Christian realism endorses the *status quo*, rather than supporting transformative social change.

These views square with standard accounts of Niebuhr in Christian ethics. More often than not, critics view his contributions not in terms of understanding human possibilities or churches' creative moral action, but in terms of his emphasis on the power of sin, love's "impossible possibility," and the admissibility of state-wielded force in the pursuit of justice. To be sure, Niebuhr provides ample evidence to support these views. His understanding of human beings as finite creatures inevitably prone to sin often overshadows his companion claim affirming their creative capacities for self-transcendence. His description of justice as the "approximation of brotherhood under the conditions of sin" receives far more attention than his statements about the present reality of mutual love.[3] And his focus on the politics of nation-states obscures his theological reflections on the church, including ways that his thought might give rise to reflections on churches' roles in cultivating human beings' creative capacities for self-transcendence.

Consequently, Christian ethicists, and especially feminist Christian ethicists, are tempted to regard Niebuhr as having little to contribute to thinking about churches' ethical and political practices.[4] But what happens if we, in the words of this volume, "gender" Niebuhr and the "church's politics"? What difference might it make for Christian ethics? As I hope to demonstrate, reading Niebuhr through a feminist lens not only uncovers his ecclesiology and aids in its development, but also contributes valuable resources for a feminist engagement with discussions of the "church's politics."

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[2] See Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000) and Rebekah L. Miles, *The Bonds of Freedom: Feminist Theology and Christian Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[3] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, *Vol. 2: Human Destiny* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996 [1943]), 254.

[4] Although I cannot address the issue at length here, Niebuhr's thought is indeed vulnerable to robust feminist critique. For an excellent discussion of feminist criticisms of Niebuhr, see Miles, *The Bonds of Freedom*. In working with Niebuhr, I aim to stake out a middle position between what Rachel Muers characterizes as the "rejectionist move" of some feminist theologies and a simple "exoneration" of Niebuhr from feminist criticism.