

# Christianity of Feminism?

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This is a vast and complicated subject. I will therefore try to present my position as briefly and simply as possible. This paper will essentially be an outline. Although I am well aware of the differences that exist among the various feminist writers, I shall limit myself to those issues on which they all essentially agree.

My thesis is quite simple. Most of the feminist theologians are giving us *not* the Christian faith, but a quite different religion. And, unfortunately, their efforts are being aided and abetted, as well as camouflaged by the churches themselves, particularly by the mainline Protestant churches. It is generally recognized today that these churches are in trouble—some would say in a mess. Basically the problem is one of uncertainty about their true function, accompanied by, and actually resulting from, a general theological disarray.

The feminists, of course, not only find this unnerved church (or unbelieving church) a very receptive medium for promoting their agenda, but their agenda also serves as a very effective catalyst for magnifying the theological disarray in the churches.

Of course, if one is going to speak of the Christian gospel being replaced by other gospels, one has to be clear about what one means by the Christian gospel. I am assuming at least the following perimeters must be acknowledged if one is to legitimately claim to be within the Christian tradition:

- (1) The authority of the Scriptures must be recognized. Without the Bible there can be no church.

- (2) The crucial significance of Jesus Christ must be recognized. The Christian faith stands or falls with God's self-revelation in Jesus of Nazareth.
- (3) This self-revelation requires speaking of God as Trinity. If we wish to speak of the Christian God, and not some other god, we must be clear regarding the significance of the trinitarian name for God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Each of these statements could easily require a large volume for its development. I will only mention very briefly some of the basic issues involved. Each of these issues is very significant for understanding the theological crisis we face today, and the place of feminism in that crisis.

First, we need to consider a very important statement by John Calvin, a statement which has been repeated by generations of theologians since his time. He wrote that the word "God" is merely an empty term, flapping around in our brains, with no relation to reality, unless and until we attain some knowledge of God as he has made himself known, as he has imaged and designated himself [*Institutes* 1.13.2]. The term "God" is simply a general, abstract, empty term flapping around in our heads until it is given some definite referent—until we know *which* god we are talking about.

For the Christian, the Scriptures, the ancient creeds, and the historical Christian faith have been very clear that God has made himself known in his Son, Jesus Christ, and has designated himself through that event as the triune One—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This historical faith rules out as inappropriate certain specific ways of referring to God. God is *not* to be referred to as some "spirit of love," or as a "concern for life." Instead, the Christian faith affirms, along with the early members of the community which gave us the Scriptures, that Jesus is "Lord and Christ" [Acts 2:36]. This is both a theological and an historical statement. It says that God has done something for human beings at a particular time, in a particular place, and in a particular manner. It also involves the affirmation that as a Christian one understands oneself as a member of that particular historical community which has its origin in that particular act of God—the life, work, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

This historical Christian faith does *not* begin with some phenomenon of the world and deduce God from it; it does *not* begin with some human value or activity and define God by elevating that value or activity to "divinity." Doing so is making God in our own image—concocting the God we want. The most common and insidious form of this is "role-model" theology—concocting a God who "is like me," and hence one to whom I can relate.

What's more, the historical Christian faith does *not* begin with the claim that the term "God" refers to the "Great Unknown," thereby implying that we must invent language for this Unknown—language that then can be changed at will since it was invented at will. Rather, we begin with the understanding that the Christian God has made himself known, identified himself in the biblical story—the story of redemption and the promise of salvation as given in the history of Israel and the event of Jesus Christ. And that particular God is specifically identified by the trinitarian name—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—which distinguishes him from all other gods. The Christian answer to the question *Who is God?* is simply *The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*.

But this gospel is under heavy attack today throughout the churches—particularly in the mainline Protestant churches. This attack appears under different banners, usually involving the promotion of some favorite cause, and the feminists are in the front lines in this respect. This God who tells Moses "I am Who I am," who enters into contingent relationships with human beings at particular times and in particular places, who approves of certain actions and not of others, has always been, to say the least, hard to live with. Human beings have always preferred gods for whom they can write the job descriptions themselves.

Scripture refers to these preferred gods as idols, and the author of Isaiah 44:9-20 gives us as clear a description as has ever been written of the idol maker and his idol. The craftsman cuts down a good, healthy tree, uses part of it for a fire to warm himself and to cook his dinner. Then from part of it he makes a graven image, to which he falls down and worships, praying—"Deliver me, for thou art my god!"

It's only at this point that Isaiah delivers his punchline, a punchline which is all too often overlooked. He tells us of the awesome power of the idol. That piece of wood which the craftsman himself has formed has deceived him—has led him astray to the point that he no longer recognizes it as his own creation. He has been blinded—blinded by his own creativity—so that he no longer recognizes that he is worshipping a delusion and hence is no longer able to deliver himself. He is unable to ask himself, "Is there not a lie in my right hand?"

Other Old Testament passages speak eloquently of the idols as being useless, unable to do anything, unable to support their people; instead, having to be carried around and being a burden to them. But Isaiah puts his finger on a far more dangerous characteristic: they have the power to delude and deceive their makers.

The work of those attempting to craft a god of their own making, the god *we* want, and for whom *we* can provide the job description, is rampant

within the church today. The feminists are not alone. They have built on a foundation provided by many others, but they lead the pack. The foundation on which feminists build is the widespread view that not just what Isaiah calls idols are made in the carpenter shop, but that *all* gods—including the Christian God—have their origin in somebody’s carpenter shop.

One of the leading spokesmen for this view is Gordon Kaufman, professor at Harvard University. Kaufman argues that we need to recognize that Scripture, like all texts, is a culturally bound product of humanly created concepts. It does *not* refer to a Reality with Whom we must deal and Who deals with us—One with Whom we must come to terms. The central concepts of Scripture, the concepts of God and Jesus Christ, come out of an ancient carpenter shop. And while they may have served a useful function at one time, we need to recognize that they are now badly disintegrated—they are actually misleading and dangerous, destructive to human well-being today. So the task of today’s theologians is to get back to the carpenter shop, to work on producing new images—new symbols that will serve a useful function for our time.

The feminists lead the work forces that have gotten busy in this way. Their carpenter shops are very energetically turning out replacements for the traditional “images” of God and Jesus Christ. The basic material being fashioned in their carpenter shops is not the wood of an oak tree, but something referred to as “women’s experience,” or more specifically, “women’s experience in the struggle for liberation from oppression.” The blue prints which guide the carpenters in their work carry the title “guidelines for promoting the full humanity of women.” And the tools they employ are designed for the express purpose of liberating women from all forms of patriarchal oppression in both church and society.

Within this program “patriarchal” is the expression of ultimate evil. It encapsulates all forms of racism, classism, and above all, sexism. And in all these forms of oppression it is the men who dominate the women. Patriarchy permeates all of our social, political, cultural, and economic structures. All of the evils of these structures can ultimately be laid at its door. And for the feminist theologian the chief culprit in this respect is the Christian faith, with its Bible, its tradition, and its churches saturated with patriarchy.

The first hurdle to be overcome, then, is the Bible, since it is regarded as essentially and totally androcentric, and thoroughly pervaded by patriarchy. It was written by men living in a patriarchal society, has been interpreted throughout the centuries solely by men, and has been used in the church to subordinate women to men. Moreover, its influence is

regarded as a major reason for the oppressive patriarchal structures and attitudes within modern Western society.

This understanding of the Bible leads to the obvious conclusion that what needs to be done is, if possible, to find something in it which will support the goal of promoting the full humanity of women, and to reject any aspect of it which denies or diminishes the full humanity of women. Any such passages cannot be true to the new image being fashioned. Or as Rosemary Ruether puts it, such passages “must *not* be presumed to reflect the divine will or the authentic nature of things.” In this vein, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza proposes that all such texts should *not* be retained in the lectionary, should *not* be proclaimed in Christian worship, and should *not* be used in catechism classes. Obviously, the authority of the Scriptures in any traditional sense has been rejected. They do not speak authoritatively *to us*—*we* control them.

The function of the feminist’s carpenter shop is to turn out images which promote the full humanity of women, and the Scriptures are only useful to the extent that they serve that purpose, and, as just indicated, they don’t do that very well. A number of shops have claimed to have found other sources, other traditions, that serve their purpose better.

According to the owners of these shops, the fundamental problem with the images produced in the ancient carpenter shops is that they were male. The traditional Christian God is a male God, and according to Mary Daly “If God is male, the male is God.” The Bible’s use of masculine language for the deity serves to legitimate the domination of women by men. It legitimates patriarchy. Hence the first order of business in the task of producing new images is to “feminize” God. And the solution would seem to be obvious—just turn out female images instead of male. Some shops are willing to settle for about a 50-50 ratio as being sufficient; others have decided upon a genderless or neuter image; and others have opted for nothing less than 100% female images. After all, this is the better product—the one that will serve more effectively to correct the oppressiveness found in our churches and our society.

It’s time to take a closer look at the basic theological issues that are at stake here. Specifically, we need to inquire into the theological legitimacy of the premises upon which the feminist workshops are organized and which are responsible for the work being carried out. Assumptions are being made, not only about the use of language, but about the nature of the Christian God himself, that are being regarded as almost self-evident, and frequently being accepted without question as axiomatic.

Crucial, of course, is the view that the Christian God is male. When it is pointed out that usage of masculine language does *not* mean that the

biblical God is male (that never has been the teaching of either the central Christian or Jewish faith), the feminist response is usually—*But that is the way it is heard, and hence it is exclusive and offensive to women.* It may be that some people have heard it that way, but if so, that is a misconception—a misunderstanding. Misunderstandings can only be corrected by improving our understanding, by arriving at a better understanding. One cannot correct a misconception by further contributing to that misconception, by reinforcing it and making it appear valid even though it is invalid.

Attempts to correct this misconception by employing female images and language to speak of God (i.e., attempts to counteract the maleness of God by “feminizing” the deity) are based upon a further assumption, namely, the claim that the Bible itself makes frequent use of female images for God, and this justifies the use of female language as a literary device to overcome the sexism of the patriarchal tradition.

This assumption is based on a fundamental linguistic and literary mistake. The nature of this mistake is dealt with specifically by several authors in *Speaking the Christian God* (ed. Alvin Kimel: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), most directly by Roland Frye. As Frye puts it, this mistake consists in a confusion about two central uses of language, two figures of speech, which he refers to as “metaphor” and “simile.”

We don’t need to get into a debate over what a metaphor is and how it functions. That is not the issue. The issue is simply this: whatever term you use to indicate them, you have two different uses of language (or figures of speech) that are being employed. One merely states a resemblance, saying that something may be like something else under certain conditions. This figure of speech Frye calls a *simile*, and the way in which something may be like something else is clarified or explained by the context in which it is used. The other form of speech, which Frye calls a *metaphor*, makes a bold statement that the one thing represents, or predicates the other. This form of speech stretches language, so to speak, as a means of providing a fuller and more direct understanding of the subject in question.

The Bible is filled with statements which say that God, in certain situations—under certain conditions and in specific contexts—*acts* like something else, or may be compared to something else. And some of these involve feminine activities or subjects. Thus God in the Scriptures is said to act like a comforting mother [Isaiah 66:13], cry out like a woman in childbirth, act like a mother eagle, and rage like a mother bear robbed of her cubs [Hosea 13:8]. But God is never addressed as mother. To say that

God acts like a mother bear robbed of her cubs is vividly meaningful; to say that God *is* a mother bear is ludicrous.

It is also very generally assumed that the biblical language is sexist, and, of course, the prime examples are “Father” and “Son.” Obviously, Jesus of Nazareth is male. But *are* these terms sexist? A number of authors have shown, very convincingly, that the relation between the Father and the Son as provided in Scripture has nothing to do with sexuality. (Here I simply refer you to some sources that argue this point very clearly, such as the articles in *Speaking the Christian God* by Garrett Green, Colin Gunton, as well as those by Elizabeth Achtemeier and Roland Frye. These all provide references to additional sources.)

To call God Father in the Christian tradition is always shorthand for “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In other words, it does not refer to a father, but it addresses God in solidarity with Jesus as “our Father.” Hence the meaning of the metaphor has to be sought in the story of *the One Whom Jesus called Father*. Immersion in that story—immersion in Scripture—provides the means for eventually recognizing that those images we have made in our own workshops to serve our own purposes are lies that we hold in our hands.

We need to close our carpenter shops—all of them—and immerse ourselves in Scripture. Then we will meet the Christian God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our Father.

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For further study into the questions raised by this essay I highly recommend the following books:

Mary A. Kassian, *The Feminist Gospel: The Movement to Unite Feminism with the Church* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1992).

Leander E. Keck, *The Church Confident* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1993).

Alvin Kimel (editor), *Speaking the Christian God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1992).

The volume entitled *Speaking the Christian God* deals specifically, and in detail, with the relationship of feminism to Christianity. It includes an article of mine that is distinct from the present essay, but one with the same title, “Christianity or Feminism?”