

Example of the unique problems feminist theologians confront essay

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Issues that Feminist Theologians Face

The role of the feminist theologian remains a complicated one, even as feminism has made so many advances in the other disciplines. One factor making this especially complicated is the variety in responses to women in the various wings of religion. Even now, a woman in the Sudan stands under a death sentence that has only been delayed, to this point, because she needs to nurse her newborn child. Her crime? Marrying a Christian from another country. Even though she was raised by a Christian mother, she is considered the property of Islam on the basis of their theological doctrines. Even in the West, though, which generally prides itself on having moved beyond the rigid confines of fundamentalism in many areas, the Christian religion has some denominations that permit women to take on any role in the church, others that allow women to take on some ministerial roles (but not the full pastorate of a church), and still others in which women may only hold professional roles of ministry if they take a vow of celibacy. While this rule also applies to men in that denomination, the questions of sex and gender are still very much an important part of the considerations that go into theology.

In Elizabeth Johnson's *Consider Jesus, Waves of Renewal in Christology*, the author is careful to focus on the most practical elements of christology, as the purpose of this book is to enlighten people who are "actively involved in ministries in the church" (Johnson, 1990, vii). Johnson's role here is to provide a robust, reflective update in christology to those who are wanting "greater understanding of their faith" (1990, p. ix). In order to move toward this goal, she outlines and elucidates the various forms of understanding

Christ that, over time, have “formed, swelled and broken upon Catholic consciousness since the mid-twentieth century (Johnson, 1990, p. x). Underneath the rhetorical level of her analysis, though, lives a vibrant and noteworthy argument that those “living and passionate controversies” (Johnson, 1990, p. 14) that have roiled recent discussions about christology serve to point out the enduring power, rather than the disappearance, of Catholic tradition. She expresses a poignant imperative to her audience related to the importance of keeping this ongoing tradition going forward, rather than allowing discussions to dry up and wither away. The notion of feminism as an idea that can augment existing tradition rather than replacing it is a refreshing one, given the tacks that feminists have taken in the past.

Johnson begins by discussing the modern renovation of the Chalcedonian notion of the personal identity of Jesus within Roman Catholic theology. This shift was initially motivated by the shift in the theological anthropology of Karl Rahner toward the subject and then by a renaissance in interest in biblical scholarship within Catholicism as a whole. Next, she takes up shifts in christology that come from a growing consciousness of the corrosive effects of injustice and oppression taking place in many forms around the world. It is these sections in which Johnson spends the most time illuminating christology with feminism, perhaps because the accurate claims of injustice resonate so loudly in the modern milieu, particularly in the West. While the claims of feminism are not completely synonymous with those of the social gospel and liberation theology, the fact that women, in so many different contexts, remain the target of oppression simply because of their sex is not

compatible with a gospel of mercy, justice and love. The levels of oppression that exist, even in those parts of the world that advertise themselves as being liberal bastions of the love of God, are what make Johnson's claims burst forth with such authority. Of particular interest is the way she contrasts the complementary methods in which the ascending and descending Christological systems of the American Catholic bishopric and Pope John Paul II set themselves up to take on "the systemic forces in the world which create so much terror and misery" (Johnson, 1990, p. 79). Finally, she moves on to discuss the various ways in which the shift in emphasis to global trends within Roman Catholic theology has influenced attitudes concerning the universal nature of salvation and the unique character of Jesus.

When taken from the point of view of oppressive theologians, the notion that Jesus has a unique character and a unique role in history takes the form of exclusionary thinking. Instead of being a welcoming figure who brings the gift of salvation to everyone, in the hands of some thinkers, Jesus becomes the officious maitre d' at a wonderful restaurant, carefully scanning the reservation list to see who is allowed to come in - and who may never, ever, eat at the glorious tables located inside. It becomes difficult, from the oppressive standpoint, to accept that the invitation that Jesus has extended to the world is indeed open to all, because the human tendency is to judge, to exclude, to draw boundaries. What these more restrictive theologians forget, conveniently or otherwise, is that the invitation remains open to all. Universality of salvation can still require a response from the saved; after all, it is clear from Scripture that the believer must indicate faith in order to receive salvation. The invitation is universal, though, no matter how some in

the Church would like to keep it.

Because the ostensible audience of this book is the ministry, these three areas of emphasis are crucial. While its contributions to ongoing theological conversations among adult Catholics are also robust, the implications for the clergy are perhaps the most instructive. Throughout the entire book, Johnson nimbly walks the line between simplicity and richness, which is a touch that both the clerical and lay readers alike will appreciate. Brief lists of her sources give those who want to pursue the studies further are a helpful feature as well.

With all of this said, the book leaves some questions for the reader. This is more of a survey of the recent changes in christology, as opposed to a deeper analysis of any one of them, so those who complain that the various topics each receive short shrift are a bit off the mark when it comes to Johnson's work. This is not a heavy tome of systematic theology that a seminary student would plod through once before sitting for a final examination and then consigning to a dusty bookshelf, if not a box at the back of one's closet. Instead, it is a lively book that is meant to stimulate and promulgate further discussion about these issues, which is why much of the jargon unique to theology is not present in this book. However, there are times when the areas in which Johnson takes interest do not square well with the actual tide of renewal within christology. One example stems from the overly hasty switch to looking at the Bible's uses for practical teaching and narrative insights. This historical critical method for analyzing Scripture is certainly a valid level at which the texts need to be discovered. However, it is not the only level. This shift in hermeneutics has led to some changes in

christology that Johnson simply does not address. While it is nice to see attention given to the more practical elements of the faith, attending to those solely ignores much of the richness of Biblical study and misses out significantly on layers of meaning that are of benefit to the clerical or the lay reader alike.

It is interesting that Johnson makes some of these omissions in her book, particularly given her claim that our own time is “ a period of christological ferment unmatched since the first century” (Johnson, 1990, p. 145). As such a central element of Church doctrine, christology will necessarily cause waves of dissent when potential change comes, because while such disputes as that over a literal or figurative millennium, a literal seven-day creation or a more metaphorical look at Genesis 1, or even a debate as to the percentage of St. Paul’s writings that were divinely inspired, as to those that he inserted on his own (as he admits) might not lead to thunderous division within the Church, changes to the ideas about the person of Christ will necessarily cause seismic activity (theologically speaking), but none of that sense of friction appears in the book.

Johnson’s book would also have broader validity if it did not rely so heavily on Catholic authors, as Juergen Moltmann is the only Protestant author who appears in the entire book. While the Catholic tradition of scholarship is beyond question, having a broader representation of the entire group of denominations that considers Christ to be Lord would make it a more accurate representation of the wider streams within theological culture. Also, at times the book veers into personal confession, failing to come out for an extended period of time. While modern culture may well be more secular

than any other culture at any other time in history, allowing the secular to intervene so broadly in a discussion of the Christological is puzzling at best. When the secular is permitted to come in, it makes Christ more of a relic and less of a reality, as He becomes a figure, a bust on a shelf, rather than the central figure to a faith.

The whole idea of reconstructionism, when it comes to feminist theology, makes for compelling discussion. The idea that it is committed to Christian tradition but also seeks a theological center that is liberating would at first seem to be counterintuitive. After all, if one looks at the Christian tradition as a reflection of the theological center, it seems difficult to remain true to the original elements while also changing the dogma at work. The fact that reconstructionists want to rebuild church and society is also interesting, because that seems to fly in the face of maintaining tradition as well.

The key to remember here is that it is possible to make changes to tradition without throwing out the valuable parts of the belief system. The idea that Johnson focuses on has to do with Jesus' role in promoting egalitarianism.

One of Jesus' central areas of emphasis during his ministry was to speak out for the necessity of treating the poor with dignity and justice. Many of Jesus' parables have to do with the difficulty of finding salvation as a wealthy person or the ways in which riches can keep one out of the kingdom. This is not necessarily true because of the simple fact of the wealth itself, but it instead reflects more the ways in which the wealth alters one's personality and character. Beginning with the idea that belief in Christ also means a belief in a sense of equality for all of God's children, then it is easier to move toward embracing the idea of a discipleship of equals and an inclusive

community, moving the Church more toward an action-centered institution rather than one that centers in dogma.

This is an area that can lead into the central criticism, though, one that focuses on praxis only. The Church is not just a social work agency, after all; it is centered on the transformation of all humanity by ushering in the proper conditions for God's Kingdom to be established. While some of this involves ministry to the needy and certainty of equality, those are just starting points in the restoration of humanity. The fact that Jesus reserves almost all of his vitriol for the religious institutions of his day, though, suggests that it is high time for many of the reconstructionist ideas that Johnson suggests to begin taking place.

Works Cited

Johnson, E. (1990). *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology*. New York: Crossroad.