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Feminist Christians - A Conflict Resolved?

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a textual study of feminist Christian and sociological perspectives and is complemented by a small oral history project, which has been carried out using a feminist methodological framework.

The research focuses on some strategies worked out by a selected number of Christian feminists in three different denominational groups as they individually negotiate traditional Church structures of beliefs and practices. I identify several specific ways in which these women deal with the dissonance and conflict they acknowledge and encounter as a result of their retaining their Christian beliefs and practices alongside feminist perspectives. Their theoretical approach to the Christian tradition is situated within the scholarly frameworks developed by Christian feminists thinkers explored in this thesis. In particular Ruether and Fiorenza, who have written substantially about the experience of feminists remaining within the church and attempting to remedy the patriarchal practices and belief systems that have disempowered women for two millennia are used to understand the choices of the interviewees. I name this approach 'reformist' and contrast it briefly with a second broad strategy, sometimes called the post-Christian or 'revolutionary' approach. Mary Daly exemplifies this position and argues that there is no place for women within the androcentrism of Christianity and its misogynist practices.

Principally a study of feminist approaches to gendered religious experience, this research

explores how and why some selected feminist Christians in New Zealand live with (or decline to live with) the conflict their feminism presents to their Christianity. The fieldwork is situated within an examination of sociological perspectives on the social roles and functions of religion. Specifically, I discuss a range of differing views about the extent to which religion both benefits and disadvantages groups marked by gender. The gender analysis central to this thesis is established through a discussion of how differing feminist approaches to gender relations influence both feminist sociology and feminist Christian thinking.

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INTRODUCTION

The irony of an introduction to this thesis is that it has been written, as I am sure many are, at the end of the research project. There are several important reasons for this.

One is that the research process evolves and changes like living entity over time. The research process involves more than setting out a question or thesis and then answering it. My experience has been that the process of researching the thesis topic has informed the thesis itself. That is, the question has changed as I have carried out the research. My original query “Feminist Christians - A Conflict Resolved?” has transformed itself as I have begun to appreciate the complexities and the processes involved when feminists choose to remain within Christianity.

The question I first asked myself when embarking on this project was, of course, the “why” question. Why am I doing this? What does it matter? Is this an important part of my feminism, or anyone else’s for that matter? These questions have been addressed throughout the course of the research and writing process.

WHY FEMINISM AND CHRISTIANITY/RELIGION?

Feminism examines women and their lives/views/existence/status/relationship with the world.

In the context of western, white, colonial culture in Aotearoa/New Zealand in 1997, feminism

concerns itself with women and their relation to living in this particular culture. An important and formative part of this colonial inflected culture is defined by Christianity. A deeper look at what feminism in this context means and how it is theorised appears in Chapter Three.

Why study religion? Precisely because I am a feminist. In an examination of issues of gender it is impossible to overlook the influence of religion. Both gender and religion (feminism and Christianity) “are closely interrelated as our perceptions of ourselves are shaped by and deeply rooted in our culturally shared religious and philosophical heritage, even when this is rejected” (King, 1995:2). In my cultural context it is impossible to ignore the influence of (past and continuing, active, passive and rejected) the Christian church, both the institution and the psychological and spiritual effects and influences thereof. As King has argued,

“Religion has not only been the matrix of cultures and civilizations but it structures reality - all reality, including that of gender - and encompasses the deepest level of what it means to be human” (King, 1995: 4).

As a feminist who is interested in exploring and critiquing culture and its influence on the gender category ‘woman’ I agree with King that it is impossible to examine what makes male and female in both their human commonness and gender difference without examining and acknowledging the important role that religion plays in both forming our structured identity as one of two possible gender categories, but also as a critical formative influence on our personal self-hood and unconscious being. I take King’s point that even feminists/women such as myself

who have rejected Christian beliefs and value-systems cannot reject what has been a life-long process of identity formation and understanding of the world and society in which I live, exist and am defined. What has significantly shaped my self cannot be excised because I no longer want it to be so. Who I am and, to some extent, continue to be, is inevitably shaped by the Christian influences on social institutions around me. It is, therefore, important to me as a feminist to examine this important cultural, personal, psychological and spiritual part of my culture.

WHAT IS RELIGION?

What do I mean by “religion”? In the context of this study, I view religion as a source of meanings and as a series of understandings and rituals that aim to structure and explain human interactions and the environment. For the purpose of this work, I have examined various meanings institutionalised by religious thinking into religious traditions. In the context of this study, the specific religion I examine is Christianity (hence my use of religion/Christianity) I am not attempting to explore other cultural contexts, constructions or meanings of religion outside the one I have experienced and continue to experience. The question of *what religion is* is dealt with in some depth in Chapters One, Two and Three.

WOMEN AND RELIGION

This thesis explores the relationship between three women and their religious beliefs and practice (in this case, Christianity). How women are religious is an important issue in this thesis. Are there, for example, distinctive ways in which women tend to ritualise or symbolise? How is the position of women in society related to their position in religion? If women's position in society is reflected in religion, how is this expressed? How do women operate as religious agents, actors and innovators? Does religion assist them in resisting oppression in patriarchal society or does it enforce the patriarchal social mores and reinforce the oppression they find in other social structures, both private and public? The religious experience and expression of women is within the context of centuries of androcentric interpretation when they are Christian. How does this affect their attempts to re-interpret and recreate Christianity into a non-patriarchal system of belief? Is it, in fact, possible to do so? In this thesis I explore these questions through interviews with the women and through analysis of key texts by feminist theologians and feminist sociologists.

The involvement of each of these women in a Christian sub-group, the way in which these groups operate, and the way in which each of these women design, develop and express their spirituality is explored. In each interview I discuss with the women both the content and explanation for these beliefs. I also explore with them what their beliefs prompt them to do in terms of both social action and religious practice, and examine how they negotiate traditional church practice in terms of its conflict with these practices, actions and beliefs. Each of the

women critique the traditional Christian church structure in terms of their own feminist approach to both religion and society.

I selected women who were known to me indirectly. That is, I had never or only briefly met each one of them and had no previous history with them in terms of any type of relationship. They were known by friends to be feminist Christians and were accessed by me through an intermediate contact with whom I do have a relationship. The issues associated with choosing interviewees is explored more fully in Chapter Four. The process of inviting each interviewee to join the project is also fully outlined there.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

The connection of Christianity and feminism has been addressed in this thesis by my examination using a textual analysis of the relationship between the two. The intersections and points of conflict have been well theorised by both feminists who chose to depart Christianity and those who wish to continue to embrace it in some form or other. These theoretical viewpoints, along with an examination of why addressing Christianity is important for feminism, are contained in the first chapter of this thesis. I begin by discussing the connections between women and religion, move through an introductory explanation of feminism itself in order to contextualise my approach to the research, and then begin to examine how Christianity is diversely viewed by feminists. The analysis deals with the spiritual or experiential aspects of Christianity. The structural aspects are dealt with in later chapters. I focus at some length on the work of Mary

Daly in particular when discussing the importance of religious symbolism and signage. Her critique has been at the forefront of the exile from Christianity for many years and form an important part of an understanding of the history of the relationship between Christianity and feminism in the Second Wave, and I use her work to introduce the body of work written by those feminists who have sought spirituality outside of Christianity due to their views of it as being untenable for feminists to remain within the Christian church. This leads into the second part of the chapter which deals with feminists who have chosen to stay within the Christian church on the basis that the religion, whilst unacceptable to feminists in its current form, is able to be reformed to the extent that it augments feminism itself by making a place for women and women's voice in a non-sexist environment. For theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, working within the framework of Christianity to reform it from its patriarchal nature has been the work of a lifetime. It is also a work they carry out because they believe it is important for women that they do so. These two feminist critiques are in agreement as to the patriarchal nature of the church in its current form. They diverge in their views about what can be done.

This discussion of the nature of religion and its impact on women, particularly in the context of the Christian church, is followed in Chapter Two using a sociological analysis. This chapter, therefore, deals with the structure and social functions of religion and the Christian church in the context of the societies in which they are present. Rather than looking at religion as something that is both personal and experiential, a sociological perspective looks at human behaviour in society with a focus on the societal structures that order and maintain societal

cohesion. In this Chapter I explain the key features of a sociological view of religion. This chapter introduces Chapter Three where feminist sociological theories with regard to religion are discussed. In particular, feminist analyses of the church as a patriarchal institution are examined from different feminist theoretical perspectives, each of which is explained. In particular, theories relating to public and private patriarchy are seen as important in this analysis, and the theoretical perspectives of Sylvia Walby in particular are examined in some depth.

The contextualisation for the interviews that form the second part of this thesis begins in Chapter Four, where feminist research methodology in general is discussed and leads on to specific details of the research method undertaken in this work. As part of this chapter, the ‘problem of speaking for others’ and the question of ‘truth’ are addressed. It is at this point that I, as a feminist researcher, become more present in the text. This follows my understanding of feminist theoretical approaches to oral history work. It is at this time that I become not only more present but more engaged with subject as the research moves from being textually based to being based in the articulated experiences of women. Issues of power within the interviewing situation and issues of friendship are examined, along with some discussion of the use of the feminist empathetic ear in an interview situation. The interviewees are also introduced at this point, and interview specifics outlined (questions asked, interview locations, and consent).

Chapter Six contains an analysis of the information provided by the interviewees. Each

interview has answered the same five questions with regard to the nature of their involvement in Christianity and these answers are compared and contrasted. They are also examined in the context of the theory covered in the earlier three chapters and their answers highlight some of the theoretical approaches already covered. This chapter is also one of engagement, as I wrestle with textual theoretical approaches, interview transcripts, and my own role in both the interview processes and the analysis of interview material. The major part of this chapter looks at how the interviewed women deal with the problem of their commitment to Christianity in the light of their feminist views. I identify the various strategies by which these women negotiate the problem. And, finally, I look at how the women live with the unresolved conflicts that they are surrounded by. This is, perhaps, the single most important part of this thesis, although it was not apparent to me at the commencement of this work that this would be so. Indeed, it is through a process of my engagement with both texts (written theoretical and oral historical) that I revisit the thesis itself and challenge my own assumption that feminist Christians somehow resolve the conflicts they are presented with.

The final chapter involves a review of **findings** of the oral history element of the work and revisits some of the theoretical approaches discussed in earlier chapters that seems more appropriate to the lives of the interviewees. It is of interest that the psychoanalytic approaches to the theorising of religion and womanhood seem to be the ones alluded to by the interviewees.

I also summarise the strategies these women practice in order to continue to live within a Christian context. These range from confrontation through to acceptance and also lead to the creation of alternatives. This chapter re-visits the work in terms of assumptions I have made

at the beginning and wisdom I have gained through the process of knowledge gained through a theoretical study and through the gathering of oral history research. I point out here the relationship and relative importance in this study of the two. I finish this chapter, and the thesis, by signposting issues that this work has raised which might usefully become the subject of further research and study.

THEMES

There are a number of themes in this work and these will be threaded throughout the thesis.

An important theme is that of how women live with conflict. It was not clear to me at the beginning of the thesis that these three women did live with conflict with regard to their feminism and their Christianity. I had hopes of discovering from them some way of resolution to the intersection of feminism and Christianity. I discovered this not to be the case. All the women, as expected following a review of the feminist theory on the matter, do find that their feminism and their Christianity conflict. It is what these women did about the conflict that has informed this study. That is, I have explored with these women ways in which they negotiate the conflicts they live with. I begin this thesis by setting up the basis for that conflict, and I explore through these women's lives ways in which they negotiate it. It has been an exciting process to learn about women and conflict in this context. This theme of conflict and negotiation will recur throughout the following chapters.

A second theme has been with regard to the polarised feminist views with regard to what to do about the problem of patriarchal religion. Feminists have reacted in many ways to Christianity, in both their theory and their actions. Mary Daly, for example, not only condemns Christianity at its very core but led a literal exodus from the church in 1971 when she delivered a sermon at Harvard Memorial Church. "Sisters. Our time has come," she spoke. "We will leave behind the centuries of silence and darkness. Let us affirm our faith in ourselves and our will to transcendence by rising and walking out together" (Daly, 1977:271). And they did.

There are, of course, many who have not literally nor figuratively walked out of the church. Some women of intellect and power have continued to work within both the institution and the mind set of the church, attempting to reclaim both. I am comfortable with my description of feminists with regard to Christianity as being either reformists or revolutionaries as I believe this description encompasses both ends of the polarity, although it fails to distinguish those positions in between. The theoretical framework has been applied here because I am studying a particular group of women who fall clearly into one of those two categories. The women in this study have chosen to remain actively aligned with and involved in the traditional Christian church. They have done this, in each case, by becoming part of a feminist sub-group within each main denominational structure. For this reason I have no hesitation in calling them reformist in terms of their behaviour towards the institution of the church. This is the reason I continue to use the polarity framework, and I believe it to be a useful one for this study.

A third theme that occupies a sub-text of the research is the meaning of 'feminist'.

Although I describe the commonly accepted descriptions of categories and stances of various feminist perspectives, I am also aware that feminism encompasses shades of meaning and defies simple description. Indeed, each of the three women interviewed described what the term means to them differently, although there were common aspects with some widely-accepted descriptions of the term. I have come to understand feminism as a fluid notion that exists not outside each and every woman who is aware she is a woman but deep within, both consciously and unconsciously. Feminism, an awareness of our gendered selves and our position in society, is a part of our journey through life, and it forms part of the way we negotiate many of the conflicts that beset us including, for some, the conflict between their awareness of themselves as women and their religious belief and practice. What it means to be a feminist underlies my research method, my interviewing praxis, my interpretation. What it means to be a feminist underlies much of the conflict within these Christian feminists. It is also apparent in every aspect of the reform versus revolution debate, as one feminist argues with another not about religion, I suspect, but about what it really means to be feminist.

The role of the unconscious in the formation and maintenance of our psychological selves is another thread that runs through this work. Starting with Mary Daly's exploration of the power of naming, through Carol Christ's exposition of the power of symbols, clearly brought out in the interviews, the role of the unconscious or subconscious is a persistent one in this thesis. I have looked at not only what people do - women, feminists, theorists, practitioners - but attempted to explore why they do what they do. It becomes apparent in the first chapter

of this thesis that I am exploring motivations, moods, subconscious and unconscious forces that compel or impel us towards certain kinds of behaviours. Nowhere is this more apparent than when I explore theologian Daphne Hampson's view of the impossibility of a Christian feminism through feminist re-reading and interpretation of scripture. "One can read feminist content into scripture, but she (Hampson) feels that such efforts are only made by women who have already decided to maintain their Christian allegiance and who are thus faced with having to derive the feminist present from a patriarchal past" (Madsen, 1994:491). I ask again the question "why?" I have been forced to look at the role the women's formative pasts have had in their present position as a result of what the women told me in the interviews. In this regard, I fear this thesis raises more questions than it answers. Perhaps some can never answered because they are unknown even to ourselves.

As a feminist researcher I have laid considerable importance on the experience of women. I do not privilege other texts above my interview transcripts. But doing so has created difficulties, not only where what the women have said to me resonates with what the theorists have said, but where they do not. A feminist approach creates interpretation difficulties such as these. They appear throughout this thesis.

Finally, the problem of bringing a feminist approach to any research is also a recurring theme. I ask myself, as a feminist interviewer, how important is my role as interviewer in eliciting certain responses, one way or another, from the interviewees? As Susan Grogan (1994:109) has rightfully posed an important question when she asks "It would be utterly misleading to

suggest that what I am doing is allowing a person to speak for themselves. This is my selection of themes and labels, my organisation of them, my attribution of significance to them". As a feminist researcher I apply these comments equally to all my texts, not just the interview situation. I am left asking myself if I have spent a year of my life researching myself. It this thesis about Anne Duncan? It goes beyond that, but I recognise that this is my organisation of themes and my interpretation.

The thesis does not attempt to present a comprehensive review of all feminist literature of the subject of religion in general and Christianity in particular. I have selected some theorists, some feminists, some commentators, some women who were willing to be interviewed, and I have, as Adrienne Rich (1979:187) so beautifully expresses it, sought the pattern that lies under the weave of the carpet. There is no truth. But there can be greater levels of understanding. It is my sincere hope that this thesis brings a greater level of understanding to any who might read it. It will not bring truth, just perspectives. Mainly, I suspect, they will be mine.

The thesis is a snapshot, in time, of how I thought, how I interpreted, how I responded, how I interviewed. It is a snapshot frozen in time for each of the women who contributed for the interviews. I strongly suspect that they have moved along in their journey, re-thought some issues, re-defined their meanings, re-organised their practice. I am changed for meeting them, and they for meeting me. It is the nature of things to be so, and a feminist researcher in particular needs to understand this. As I stand at the door at the end of the long corridor that has been this thesis and step out into the sunshine, I see I have already changed. Were I to re-

write it today it would be a little different. My experience in carrying out this research has changed me, as building knowledge always must.

CONCLUSION

And thus it is done. I invite you to travel with me on this journey. I began with a simple question- "Feminist Christians - A Conflict Resolved?" and ended with an entirely different set of questions with regard not only to how the conflict is negotiated by why these women, but why they chose to do it at all. I regard this thesis as a journey of knowledge, a process by which textual information is gathered and ordered, and is measured against women's experiential knowledge and found wanting. Textual theories do not fully explain, for me, how and why these women stay within Christianity. The questions raised here could, perhaps, be the beginning of another thesis.

My thanks to the women who gave of their life-knowledge in order to help me on this journey. Their lives have informed the process of this feminist knowledge, as women's lives always do.