

New Feminist Christianity

MANY VOICES, MANY VIEWS

Edited by Mary E. Hunt and Diann L. Neu
Cofounders of the Women's Alliance for Theology,
Ethics and Ritual (WATER)

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*New Feminist Christianity:
Many Voices, Many Views*

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In gratitude and with deep respect for
the women scholars and activists
who led the way.

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The Road Is Made by Walking

JANET WALTON

War, ever more of it; health care suspiciously limited for women and poor people; girls with no access to school; human trafficking and sexual violence too rarely prosecuted; people without jobs, potable water, and food: these are urgent concerns. The numbers are growing. Nothing is new. Tonight a group of women gathers for liturgy. The planners shape a ritual from feelings of despair and disempowerment. It is a time when we feel our dreams slipping into oblivion.

Feminist Liturgy: Claiming and Practicing

Feminist liturgy intends to shore up belief in possibilities in such a moment. It provides a space where everything matters: our dashed hopes, sadness, determination, joys, and small successes. We count on our liturgies to meet our day-to-day, year-after-year human concerns and public responsibilities with long-term hope bolstered by

beliefs in one another and in a living God. On any one day we do not know what will happen ahead of time, that is, what the structure of the liturgy will be or what texts, textures, objects, sounds, or movements will engage our focus. However, we can be certain that whatever we use, whether it is the inner workings of an old radio to spark our understanding of how resistors work (in a liturgy about resistance) or photos taken after Hurricane Katrina by one of our members (in a liturgy about death and birth), we know we will experience unpredictable connections that will open a window for some fresh air and courage. We are sure that we will leave with determination to keep on taking necessary steps, sometimes small, sometimes big, to live justly. Feminist liturgy is a time to claim our possibilities and practice believing in them.

For years now—decades, really—women have been working to create liturgical experiences that deal with the world as they see it and that will, at the same time, uplift and inspire them. The future of feminist Christianity, as experienced in feminist liturgy, will not be in the center of Christianity but rather in many spaces along its edges. Feminist Christians do not rest in the certainty that exists in the center of Christian institutions (it has limited them); rather, we live in a different kind of certainty that is dynamic. We look backward and forward at the same time. We are leaving behind a model of life and liturgy steeped in kyriarchy,¹ where women have been told what to think and feel and do, where our participation is restricted simply because we are female. We are leaving behind everything in which gender, class, race, sexuality, or abilities determines who anyone is and can be. However, leaving behind deeply ingrained attitudes is not a one-time commitment. It takes years, even a lifetime, to learn how to resist images of inferiority and limited expectations and to discover God in consistently unfolding metaphors.

We go forward as a community with responsibilities to each other. We desire to be subjects of our liturgical actions, not objects or mere viewers. We do not prize one model of liturgy but rather multiple experiences with a variety that matches our human desires

and the world's needs in the moment. Each liturgy has some characteristics in common: doing rather than watching, speaking in our own names, paying attention to spaces and to what is "in between."

Doing Rather Than Watching

Most inherited ritual forms focus on presentations and cognitive interactions. A few leaders speak. They assume responsibility for what happens. They create the ambience, choose the texts, write the prayers, select the music, preach to the community, and bless each person. Everyone else watches and listens.

Feminist liturgy, from its earliest stages in the 1970s, adopted a different pattern. While a few people prepare the structure for the liturgy (usually not the same people), everyone comes expecting to contribute to it. There are no mere spectators. Over many years of gathering month after month, the New York Women's Liturgy Group has learned that *doing* rather than *watching* can be exhilarating despite its unrelenting demands. We are practicing another way of living:

- ... enjoying the freedom of self-determination, setting our own limits, trusting self-approval;
- ... not expecting protection, but risking and getting around barriers;
- ... being prepared for opposition, and learning to live with fear;
- ... and having the courage to walk away from places that are secure but deadening.²

Doing implies interaction and communal exploration, listening, looking, moving, and responding. It is active, embodied, and sensual, not passive or primarily in our minds. "The road is made by walking."³ At times we use processions, an inherited form, changed to meet our own needs. On Passion Sunday we carried posters of women who have risked their reputations and political careers to

reverse injustices in the world. We walked to feel their power and our own power in our bodies. This expression of solidarity helps us remember our authority when we need to link arm in arm with many others to express publicly our resistance to injustice.

At times, doing is inspired by ritual objects. An ice sculpture was a focus for a liturgy on rage.⁴ With ice picks, we chipped away at it until it cracked and melted. The ice was hard to break. It was cold on our hands. It gave way only from the constant chipping of each person. We reflected: We will not be frozen by inaction. We will work together to discover how to express our rage and use it for every struggle. We poured the melted water over primroses, not to resolve or dissolve our rage but rather to find ways to nourish ourselves in the midst of it with beauty found in nature and in ourselves. Feminist Christianity requires a lifetime of resistance, persistence, and imagination.

Speaking in Our Own Names

Brazilian theologian Ivone Gebara defines resistance "as an internal and external movement that invites women ... not to accept a pre-determination of their being," not to be submissive to others' desires, and not to obey and repeat.⁵ This movement is within each person and it is also public, social, and collective. Resistance pries open a door shut tight by others with authority and power. The kyriarchal stronghold that feminists breathe is all around us. To resist is to embrace a process that moves from awareness to taking a stand and staying in the struggle. There are costs and rewards.

During a liturgy intended to gird us with hope, one of our members shared a story of resistance. This woman had lived temporarily in a city-owned shelter. There, she was identified only by a number, though all the people did know each other's names. When she accepted a job as a counselor for persons living with HIV/AIDS, she noticed the same dehumanizing attitudes. Spend as little time as possible with each one, she was told; they will die soon. She did not

obey. She treated them with particularity and respect. She was rebuffed by the supervisor: that was not the practice in this agency. Her resistance and her persistence honored her clients, who are often marginalized in many venues, and she honored herself, too. Acting from her own experience and convictions, she did not give in. She spoke up in her own name, regardless of the cost, even at a job she needed desperately.

Not to be submissive to others' orders and expectations is difficult for many women. Many women are trained from an early age to sacrifice themselves, both their minds and their bodies, for the needs of others. Equally problematic is the stance that suggests women's bodies exist for the pleasure of men. Sexual harassment and violence, an egregious reality for many woman and girls, fall into this category.

Some years ago artist Elizabeth Schell planned a feminist liturgy to explore abuse and its relationship to Christian faith. She chose a biblical text from the book of Judges that recounted the story of an unnamed woman, a concubine, who was gang-raped. After a night of abuse, the men left her body on the doorstep of the host who had offered the concubine to them for their pleasure. Schell made a twelve-foot soft sculpture of a women's body. On it were names of people who were broken, sacrificed, and violated and also images of the earth as susceptible to abuse as well. The sculpture was beautiful, with vibrant colors and striking shapes.⁶

When the community gathered for liturgy at the door of the chapel we listened to the story of Judges. As we entered the main room, we saw the sculpture in twelve pieces placed all over the floor. We felt the brokenness of this body, of a woman and of our earth. It was not easy. We took time, generous amounts of time, for silence, for speaking, and for action. Breaking silence about abuse requires the support of one another. We tied the pieces together as an act of commitment, personal and collective, to remember and to speak out. It was a liturgy of justice and freedom.

The Road Is Made by Walking

In feminist liturgies in the New York Women's Liturgy Group we remind ourselves month to month about what it takes to claim what is true. Drawing from deep within ourselves, we rehearse speaking in our own names. In so doing we know God in the mystery of where we are living.

Feminist Christianity is not for women only. It extends to all who are defined by what others say about them, and to all whose voices are stifled by external and internal forces.

The season is Advent. The days are short. We depend more and more on generated lights. An artist created a lighted sculpture from five hundred syringes that she melted and stretched into a small sphere and wired with a lightbulb.⁷ She called it *A Point of Light*. She works with a harm-reduction community that intends to reduce the impact of drug-related harm on injection drug users. She says about the artwork:

I created this point of light to re-imagine/re-configure/re-fashion these very contested/criminalized objects (and symbolically their users) into something beautiful, light-generating, light capturing.⁸

To take in the complexity and beauty of *A Point of Light*, we looked at the piece in total darkness. The darkness was necessary. More often than not, doors are shut to drug users; they are marginalized by laws, by their addictions, and by stigma. This piece of sculpture invited them and us to see through drug addicts' eyes, to glimpse for a short time what it feels like to depend on something that, though as life-preserving for them as daily food, is prohibited in society. This sculpture symbolized darkness pierced by light. For a moment, people who lurk in the shadows of society were a point of light for everyone. Their struggles were visible. The care, respect, and determination of an artist opened the door. Drug users and their allies were in the same movement to honor each other as human and particular and important. Professor Elaine Scarry describes the action of seeing something so beautiful as a "radical decentering ... what

happens, happens in our bodies ... we find that we are standing in a different relation to the world than we were a moment before."⁹

No one explained the meanings of *A Point of Light* to us. There was not one interpretation. Each person responded to it from her own context and experience. Listening to each other opened multiple layers of meanings that exist in the spaces between the object and our lived realities.

Paying Attention to Spaces

Feminist liturgy is not rooted in soil created from dogmas that each person must believe and confess. It is dynamic and fluid. It develops in varied spaces where faith meets justice, personal and global. The words we use about ourselves, others, and God were the first step in a new direction. Decades later it continues to be an ongoing challenge.

Writers and editors Casey Miller and Kate Swift published a small book, *Words and Women*, in 1977. In the midst of an editing project about sex education they saw something they had not noticed before: "The way English is used to make the simplest points can either acknowledge women's full humanity or relegate the female half of the species to secondary status."¹⁰ They were discovering something others had pointed to years earlier. But now the civil rights movements of the 1960s provided a new momentum for a larger, continuous discussion of language. Words determined possibilities: "Language is not merely a means of communication; it is also an expression of shared assumptions. Language transmits implicit values and behavioral models to all those people who use it."¹¹

Throughout the intervening years there has been sustained feminist attention to how language works in inclusive or expansive or emancipatory ways. Whatever the description, the goal is the same: to name people accurately and, in so doing, to prevent limiting them, and instead to cherish each one.

Though the awareness about language began with attention to sexist language, very soon it included attention to similar misuse of

words that demeaned people of different ethnicities, sexual identities, races, or limited physical and mental abilities. The task of educating people about language is far from over. Although some churches have committed themselves to it, most have not. It is still common for leaders of worship to use male-biased language (*man* rather than *human beings*). It still remains acceptable to hear only male pronouns when talking about women and men. We still hear adjectives describing people negatively, as if to be poor or deaf or yellow, black, or an addict defines a person's possibilities. What seems so obvious—inclusive, nonjudgmental language—continues to be resisted vehemently.

Feminist Christians bring the same critique to language used for God that is also awash in maleness, as if God could be described adequately as Father or even by any one image. More often than not we encounter images and language in our churches that perpetuate an understanding that God is male. This is idolatry in its most formative expression.

As feminist Christians we thought that much of what we were learning and cherishing would be received by congregations and incorporated into worship with gratitude. Some of it is and will be. But for the most part, from what we have seen from the struggle to incorporate expansive and emancipatory language, the center of Christianity is fixed and certain and fearful. It is not a welcoming space for listening, speaking, and acting in our own names in response to day-to-day realities.

Honesty in variation, anticipation in uncertainty, hope in what is ongoing, shared responsibility for each other, God living in the mystery of all of life—all these describe more adequately and fully what feminist Christians believe and what feminist liturgies embody. Our future is made by walking—on the edges, in the gaps, into the openings—where resistance and persistence, imagination and action meet and embody a living God. Our future as feminist Christians is good, beautiful, hard, and demanding. Because it is true for us, there is no going back.