

CURRENT THEOLOGY

NOTES ON MORAL THEOLOGY: 1989

FEMINIST ETHICS

Ecclesial events of the last several months make this an opportune moment to raise the question of the aims and the accomplishments of Roman Catholic feminism. Explorations of the roles of women in church and society have been stimulated by the release of the U.S. hierarchy's first-draft pastoral on women's concerns and by the apostolic letter *Mulieris dignitatem* offered by John Paul II in commemoration of the Marian Year 1988.¹ Key concerns in both documents are women's domestic and public roles, and the relation of the potential for motherhood to women's "nature," identity, and equality with men. In March 1989 the pope and Vatican officials gathered in Rome with the United States archbishops to discuss the state of the American church. While women were not an explicit agenda item, the feminist movement and attitudes toward sex, marriage, family, and divorce frequently surfaced as Vatican concerns, as was evident in comments offered to the press by Roman conferees. Allusions to "ideological" and "radical" feminism implied anxieties apparently shared by the pope, who in his closing remarks called for "a sound philosophical critique" of feminism.²

In her John Courtney Murray Forum Lecture at Fordham, Margaret O'Brien Steinfels casts some common sense on the volatile rhetoric which often voices concern about women's changing roles. Finding the magisterium's "idealized image" of women's "nurturing, maternal qualities" to be "strangely implausible," she observes that it is "separated as by a chasm from the ordinary experience of an increasing number of women and men." Accountability to experience will not be achieved by

¹ Models of Mary are of key interest to Catholic feminists. Recent Marian studies include Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J., "Mary and the Female Face of God," *TS* 50 (1989) 500-526; Els Maeckelbergh, "'Mary': Maternal Friend or Virgin Mother?" in *Motherhood* (see n. 33 below); Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Marian Principle," *Communio* 15 (1988) 122-30; William M. Thompson and Peter F. Chirico, "Mary, Virgin and Wife: A Dialogue," *Chicago Studies* 28 (1989) 137-59; Ben Kimmerling, "Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary," *Furrow* 39 (1988) 279-88; Jean Galot, "Marie et l'unité de l'église," "Maternité virginale de Marie et paternité divine," and "La relation de Marie avec l'Esprit Saint," *Esprit et vie*, respectively: 1988, no. 50, 687-93; 1989, no. 4, 57-63; and 1989, nos. 30-31, 440-47. *Theology Digest* reviews "Reactions to Redemptoris mater," 35 (1988) 9-15. The following feature thematic issues on Mary: *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 88/8 (1988); *Lumière et vie* 37/189 (1988); and *Chicago Studies* 27/1 (1988).

² For a digest of news reports, see "Vatican Summit Hostile to Women: But John Paul II and U.S. Archbishops Call Meeting Successful," *Conscience* 10/2 (1989) 7-8.

brandishing the term "radical feminism" to ward off threats to the episcopacy's foregone conclusions; nor by reviving the word "complementarity" to advance hierarchically ordered links between reproductive characteristics and social roles, thus to "evade real equality in the church."³

The present essay will (1) overview some general contributions of feminist ethics, especially its recognition of historicity, sociality, and embodiedness; (2) outline some responses to the above magisterial ventures, in light of feminist aims; (3) examine "motherhood" as a biological and social role with different cultural realizations, and as a point of departure for understanding women's general social situation; and (4) address some fundamental ethical and epistemological implications of feminist thinking.

What Is Feminist Ethics?

Virtually by definition, feminist theology is "moral" theology or ethics.⁴ It emerges from a practical situation of injustice and aims at social and political change. Although, as David Tracy claims, it may be true of contemporary theology generally that its theory is always correlated with praxis, yielding "ethical-political criteria" of validity,⁵ this is true in a special way of feminist and other liberation theologies, which have their very *raison d'être* in communal transformation. As Anne E. Patrick, the current president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, has defined it, to be "feminist" is to take up "(1) a solid conviction of the equality of women and men, and (2) a commitment to reform society, including religious society, so that the full equality of women is respected, which requires also reforming the thought systems that legitimate the present unjust social order."⁶ Hence primary tasks for feminist ethics are definitions of "equality" and "justice," and the elucidation of criteria of "reform." In pursuit of same, much feminist literature inspects gender difference and its relation to fundamental human equality and to just

³ "The Church and Its Public Life," *America* 160 (1989) 553-54.

⁴ Space constraints preclude a full review of feminist theology. This essay shall, with a few exceptions, focus on *Roman Catholic* authors with a clear moral interest, publishing in *periodicals* during the last two years (1987-89). Even within these limits many fruitful contributions will be neglected or shortchanged.

⁵ "The Uneasy Alliance Reconceived: Catholic Theological Method, Modernity, and Postmodernity," *TS* 50 (1989) 569.

⁶ "Authority, Women, and Church: Reconsidering the Relationship," in Patrick Howell, S.J., and Gary Chamberlain, eds. *Empowering Authority* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, forthcoming). Patrick draws on Patricia Beattie Jung, "Give Her Justice," *America* 150 (1984) 276-78. See also Margaret A. Farley, "Feminist Ethics," in James F. Childress and John Macquarrie, *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 229-31.

social organization. It also examines the normative function of women's "experience" in challenging traditional gender roles—particularly those said to be grounded in women's "nature"—and in projecting more egalitarian social arrangements.

While many feminists continue to find nourishment in their Christian heritage,⁷ they argue that the Church's avowals that women and men are equal as persons are belied by its continuing promotion of distinct and hierarchically related male and female gender roles. Evidence about women from the Bible⁸ and tradition⁹ is inextricably colored by patriarchal culture and must be complemented by, and even meet the final test of, women's own experiences of oppression, liberation, and transformative justice.¹⁰ The appeal to experience as the paramount authority for feminist thought raises serious epistemological issues, shared by feminist thinkers with other postmodern theorists, regarding the objectivity or "truth" value of knowledge and moral judgment.

Generally speaking, feminists are all too well aware of the perspectival character of assertions about religious truth and moral order, and so formulate their own program with due attention to historical contextualization. They tend to see their work as a critical dialogue with Christian texts, teachings, and practices, one which asks constantly after the consequences for women's lives. Rosemary Radford Ruether, perhaps the most prominent Catholic feminist ethicist, uses the model of a

⁷ See Anne Patrick's schematization of feminist Christian positions, using H. Richard Niebuhr's typology of "against," "above," "of," "in paradox," and "transforming" the dominant tradition ("Authority, Women, and Church," n. 6 above).

⁸ See *Interpretation's* issue (42 [1988]) on feminism and the Bible, with fine essays by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, George W. Stroup, PHEME PERKINS, and Elizabeth Achtemeier; Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J., "Feminist Hermeneutics," *Chicago Studies* 27 (1988) 123-49; and Phyllis Trible, "Five Loaves and Two Fishes: Feminist Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology," *TS* 50 (1989) 279-95.

⁹ See Robert Hannaford, "Women and the Human Paradigm: An Exploration of Gender Discrimination," *New Blackfriars* 70 (1989) 226-33; Paul Mommaers, "Hadewijch: A Feminist in Conflict," *Louvain Studies* 13 (1988) 58-81; George S. Worgul, Jr., "Ritual, Power, Authority and Riddles: The Anthropology of Rome's Declaration on the Ordination of Women," *Louvain Studies* 14 (1989) 38-61; *Thought* 58/254 (1989) on the theme "Gender and the Moral Order in Medieval Society"; Ruth Ahl, "Frauengeschichte im frühen Christentum," *Stimmen der Zeit* 114 (1989) 713-16; Felix Bernard, "Ist die Frau in der katholischen Kirche rechtlos?" *Trier theologische Zeitschrift* 97 (1988) 150-58, summarized in *Theology Digest* 36/1.

¹⁰ "Patriarchy" is a systemic bias toward the male point of view, which reads "human" experience disproportionately from that vantage point, privileges male interests and authority, and organizes gender roles hierarchically to favor those that are typically male. On "experience" as norm, see Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, "Feminist Perspectives in Bible and Theology," *Interpretation* 42 (1988) 5-18; and, in the same issue, George W. Stroup, "Between Echo and Narcissus" 27-29.

dialectic between the tradition and the critical insights which arise from concrete practice. She begins with pressing social issues, such as racism, anti-Semitism, militarism, and, above all, sexism. She then uncovers the ideological patterns in Christian thought which have served consistently to legitimate violence and oppression by identifying them as "the order of creation and the will of God."¹¹ In the case of sexism and the feminist response, Ruether correlates the prophetic principle of Christianity, which locates the voice of God "on the side of the poor and marginalized people of the society," with the critical principle of feminism, which is "the full humanity of women." Although women's experience and gathering in community are crucial in calling to account the patriarchal distortions of classical theology, Ruether affirms that the "goal of women-church is to transcend itself in human-church, in a redemptive community that encompasses all people and rights the human relation with nature."¹²

Feminists emphasize not only the historicity of moral agency but also its communal or social character. The fact that "personal" morality and virtue are integrally related to social ethics is especially evident when one considers that the personal virtues historically associated with "femininity" have been embedded in quite specific role expectations for women in family and society. Many feminists have noted the asymmetry of exhortations to the Christian ideal of self-sacrifice for men and for women.¹³ In addition, Anne Patrick highlights the social implications of gender-specific appropriations of the ideal of chastity. In what she calls the patriarchal paradigm for virtue, all Christians are expected to be "kind, chaste, just, and humble." Yet "women are expected to excel in charity and chastity," while "men are trained to think in terms of justice

¹¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Development of My Theology," *Religious Studies Review* 15 (1989) 1-4. In the same issue, see Kathryn Allen Rabuzzi, "The Socialist Feminist Vision of Rosemary Radford Ruether: A Challenge to Liberal Feminism" 4-8, and Rebecca S. Chopp, "Seeing and Naming the World Anew: The Works of Rosemary Radford Ruether" 8-11.

¹² *Ibid.* 4. Other authors who address the inclusion of men in the feminist project include Christine E. Gudorf, "The Power to Create" (n. 20 below); Mary Condren, "To Bear Children for the Fatherland: Mothers and Militarism," in *Motherhood* (n. 33 below); Susanne Heine, "Das 'Mannsbild' in der feministischen Theologie," *Diakonia: Internationale Zeitschrift für die Praxis der Kirche* 19 (1988) 162-67, summarized in *Theology Digest* 36/1; Patrick M. Arnold, "In Search of the Hero: Masculine Spirituality and Liberal Christianity," *America* 161 (1989) 206-10 (provoking heated letters to the editor, same volume, 286, 304-6); Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead, "Women and Men: Partners in Ministry," *Chicago Studies* 27 (1988) 159-72. On feminism and ecology, see Catharina Halke, "The Rape of Mother Earth: Ecology and Patriarchy," in *Motherhood* (n. 33 below).

¹³ Valerie Saving Goldstein was the pioneer here ("The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *Journal of Religion* 40 [1960] 100-112) and continues to be cited frequently.

and rights." This paradigm also elevates chastity as "the pinnacle" of moral "perfection," circumscribes it by physicalist interpretations of natural law, and stresses its pre-eminent necessity for salvation by isolating it as the one area in which sin admits of no "parvity of matter." Patrick sees a metaphor of domination as central to this paradigm, since it assumes control of the lower by the higher, whether the flesh by the spirit, the woman by the man, or the masses by the civil and ecclesiastical authorities.¹⁴ In the contrasting egalitarian paradigm, "reason itself" is understood as "embodied," with women and men as equal partners. "Instead of control, the notion of respect for all created reality is fundamental to this paradigm, which values the body and the humanity of women and promotes gender-integrated ideals for character." It models sexuality "as a concern of social justice as well as of personal virtue" and is concerned to build "*social relations of respect, equality, and mutuality.*"¹⁵

Patrick's redefinition of virtue captures well the feminist aim to interpret rightly the significance of human embodiment in the development of moral norms.¹⁶ As Susan A. Ross argues, "the feminist concern for the body is the route for reconceiving, minimally, theological anthropology, liturgical and symbolic expression, and ethics."¹⁷ Yet bodiliness can cut both ways, since it is precisely embodiment as reproductive capacity that has grounded stereotypes. Discussion of motherhood will demonstrate the impossibility of extricating the biological "givens" of reproduction from the elaborate symbol systems and institutions through which their human meaning is transmitted. As Hedwig Meyer-Wilmes illustrates, all available constructions reflect both male projections and

¹⁴ Anne E. Patrick, "Narrative and the Social Dynamics of Virtue," in Dietmar Mieth and Jacques Pohier, eds., *Changing Values and Virtues* (Concilium 191; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987) 72. On the social context of virtue and of sex roles, see also Patrick's "Rosamond Rescued: George Eliot's Critique of Sexism in Middlemarch," *Journal of Religion* 67 (1987) 220-38, and "Christian Ethics and the Good Conscience: Building a Course around a Novel," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1988) 249-53. Another proposal of a "metaphysic of connection" is Mary Grey, "Naar nieuwe verbondenheid: Feministisch proces-denken als belofte voor theologie," *Tijdschrift voor theologie* 29 (1989) 114-30, with English summary.

¹⁵ Patrick, "Narrative" 73. On the social implications of the new, nondualistic paradigm, see Patrick's "Ethics and Spirituality: The Social Justice Connection," *The Way*, Supplement 63 (1988) 102-16. See also June O'Connor, "Dorothy Day and Gender Identity: The Rhetoric and the Reality," *Horizons* 15 (1988) 7-20.

¹⁶ An important book is Paula M. Coe et al., eds., *Embodied Love: Sensuality and Relationship as Feminist Values* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987).

¹⁷ Susan A. Ross, "'Then Honor God in Your Body' (1 Cor 6:20): Feminist and Sacramental Theology on the Body," *Horizons* 16 (1989) 27. Constance F. Parvey agrees, "Review Symposium: Anne E. Carr's *Transforming Grace*," *Horizons* 15 (1988) 368. Other contributors to the symposium are Mary Jo Weaver, William M. Thompson, and Elizabeth A. Johnson.

specific forms of exploitation, especially the assignment of women's spheres of labor.¹⁸ But the question remains whether differences in embodiment and in experiences with the world can be recognized while avoiding oppressive sex-role distinctions and hierarchy. Can these stereotypes be challenged in a nondualistic way? Conversely, can sexual embodiment be affirmed in a nonreductionist way? One defender of the pope's outlook insists, "One uniquely important feature of our material part is our sexuality," which is "a feature of our personhood." Sex "permeates our being, and is a factor in everything we do, in what we are, precisely as persons." So far, so good; then why does the following development make a feminist flinch? "Men and women perceive reality differently, think differently, feel differently, achieve *communio* differently. *La différence* is a difference that makes a difference, in our very identities as persons." "Men and women, as ontological equals, are reciprocal models."¹⁹ Feminist criticism is directed against traditional theological and moral anthropologies which associate strong gender differences with reproductive biology, asserting not only that women's intellectual, emotional, and social capacities are channeled by reproduction, but that this function and these capacities are both "natural" to women and subordinate to men. Fundamentally, feminist authors question whether the assignment of women primarily to domestic roles, and men to economic and political roles, is genuinely necessitated by human reproductive embodiment.

Yet, while advocating broader conceptions of the sexes' capacities and potential contributions, feminists do not all agree on whether to emphasize the difference of women's experience from that of the men whose constructions of reality have tended to dominate social organization, or to emphasize the essential similarity of human capacities across genders. Insisting on the cultural contextualization of experience, Georgia Masters Keightley questions whether there is a truly "common" foundation of human experience at all, and cautions against assuming one human nature for both sexes. "While men and women together represent human nature, attention must be paid to the different ways in which each of them embodies and engages reality."²⁰ But Mary Ann Donovan sees a

¹⁸ "Woman's Nature and Feminine Identity: Theological Legitimations and Feminist Questions," in *Women, Work and Poverty* (n. 27 below).

¹⁹ Mary F. Rousseau, "Pope John Paul II's Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women: The Call to Communion," *Communio* 16 (1989) 221, 227.

²⁰ Georgia Masters Keightley, "The Challenge of Feminist Theology," *Horizons* 14 (1987) 262-82. In this issue on feminism, see also Joann Wolski Conn, "A Discipleship of Equals: Past, Present, Future" 231-61; Mary Ann Donovan, S.C., "Women's Issues: An Agenda for the Church?" 283-95; Christine E. Gudorf, "The Power to Create: Sacraments and Men's Need to Birth" 296-309; Diane Jonte-Pace, "Object Relations Theory, Mothering, and

common nature as essential to avoid a subtly hierarchical “complementarity” and to affirm equality for men and women, with individual rather than gender differences controlling assignment of roles.²¹

Because they can serve as a reality test, findings of the human biological and social sciences about culturally variant and culturally constant factors in gender will be valuable. Yet scientific investigations are unlikely to be conclusive, since analysts never achieve access to “pure” forms of female and male embodiment, or to sex differences free from the inevitable cultural overlay of gender expectations. Moreover, both feminists and antifeminists are inclined to read the experiential “evidence” about sex and gender from a political standpoint, i.e. with the aim of lending support to passionately held social commitments. Some feminists, including Susan Ross, recognize the problem’s complexity by arguing for “differentiation,” or “a recognition of difference” without the “dichotomization” that too often seems to characterize magisterial portrayals of the feminine personality.²² However, the intransigent dilemma of giving content to any hypothetical “feminine” or “masculine” character will no doubt persist for the foreseeable future. Feminist ethics insists that no formulation be accepted uncritically.

In discussing the links between male and female embodiment and natural equality, feminist authors push the moral relevance of embodiment and its cultural shaping beyond reproductive roles. All human beings exist in spatial and material relationships which not only are constitutive of individual identity but are also the conditions of possibility of human communities and institutions. The social implications of “embodiment” may be able to supply theological ethics with a critical edge against liberalism, rationalism, and individualism, as well as against sexism. Yet, despite embodiment’s experiential pervasiveness and critical promise, its content as a theoretical category can be somewhat elusive and vaguely treated. The concept has been helpfully nuanced by L. Shannon Jung, who includes under the broader term “spatiality” the “experiences of embodiment, sociality, and symbolization.”²³ All three structure human consciousness as integrally formed in the experience of physical extension in the environment. Spatiality is essential to the individual’s identity, to his or her relations with others, and to the ability to communicate. Yet the features of spatial experience have been more typically associated with women than with men, and have been depre-

Religion: Toward a Feminist Psychology of Religion” 310–27; Mary Jo Weaver, “Overcoming the Divisiveness of Babel: The Languages of Catholicity” 328–42.

²¹ “Women’s Issues” 289–90.

²² “Then Honor God in Your Body” 25.

²³ “Feminism and Spatiality: Ethics and the Recovery of a Hidden Dimension,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 4 (1988) 55.

ciated: affectivity, particularity, limitation, and relation to others. Jung challenges Western ideals of disembodied, dispassionate objectivity and recommends that reason be understood as "embodied, relational and inevitably affective."²⁴ Positive consequences he envisions are increased "lateral awareness," or sensitivity to surrounding persons and events; the balance of control with living in harmony, of autonomy with interdependence and reciprocity; and the recovery of a sense of the intrinsically good over against instrumental relationships.²⁵

In summary, Christian feminists employ women's experience as a critical norm in approaching both theological traditions and social practice; in re-examining human experience as male and female, they focus on its embodied and its social character; they extend the moral meaning of embodiedness beyond sex-based gender roles; they challenge historical constructions of gender as oppressive to women, as culturally biased, and as not demanded by natural sex differences; and they critically combine both Christian resources and philosophical and social analysis to guide their transformative vision of more co-operative and egalitarian communities.

Recent Church Teaching

In March 1988 the NCCB released its first draft, "Partners in the Mystery of Redemption: A Pastoral Response to Women's Concerns for Church and Society," produced by six bishops, with five consultant and two staff women.²⁶ The now-familiar method of the pastoral is to address areas of concern in three stages: a review of women's testimony, a reference to Catholic "heritage," and an episcopal response. The representation of women's voices of "affirmation" and "alienation" communicates positively the commitment, shared with feminist (and liberation) theology, to begin with the situation or "praxis" and to listen to the experience of those most involved in it. Moreover, the bishops are concerned to ensure that both criticism and praise of church teaching are well represented. At the same time, these categories create the impression that affirmation and alienation are about evenly represented in attitudes of contemporary Catholic women, with the term "alienation" even implying that those voicing objections are somehow outside the community. Nor do the bishops deal with the problem of self-selection among their respondents (e.g., by age or present degree of active affiliation) and the possibility of internalized oppression among some who are supportive.

²⁴ Ibid. 66.

²⁵ See also Ruth L. Smith, "Moral Transcendence and Moral Space in the Historical Experiences of Women," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 4 (1988) 21-37.

²⁶ National Conference of Catholic Bishops (Washington, D.C.: USCC, 1988).

The pastoral condemns "sexism" as a "moral and social evil" which infects even the Church; violence against women; and the "feminization of poverty" and discriminatory wages. It exhibits an emergent recognition that issues of race, sex, class, and work intertwine to create a complicated and diverse situation for women, one in which many suffer double and triple forms of oppression.²⁷ Rosemary Ruether makes the good point that, despite these commendable steps, the bishops still reflect the magisterial tendency to see women's work (especially mothers' work) outside the home as an unfortunate economic necessity rather than as potentially a vocation in society.²⁸ At the familiar pressure points, the bishops are hemmed in on one side by the dissatisfaction of many committed Catholic women, and on the other by their own internal pluralism and the existence of clear Vatican mandates precluding change. Debates about contraception and the priesthood are resolved with a simple report of what the tradition has said. The bishops can be criticized for lack of courage to interact more critically with this tradition and to make a clear normative judgment, but their approach does represent refusal to put premature closure to the exchange between the tradition and the "voices." In the case of ordination, the bishops make the politically significant step of urging the admission of women to the diaconate. They conclude by extending to women the call to follow Jesus as well as to emulate Mary, to whom they ascribe nontraditional roles, in addition to wife, mother, and widow. Mary is a woman of courage, a foe of injustice, a refugee and displaced person, member of an oppressed people, mother of a prisoner, and a victim of persecution. Although the bishops hardly endorse all the aspirations of feminist Catholics, their overture should be read against the background of an "official" ambience which is much less encouraging.²⁹ One hopes that in its final version the pastoral will be at least as emphatic in supporting women's equality in society and church.

In September of the same year, John Paul II issued *Mulieris dignita-*

²⁷ On this problem see the revealing cross-cultural collection, Anne Carr and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, eds., *Women, Work and Poverty* (Concilium 194, Special Column; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987). Among many valuable contributions, see M. Shawn Copeland, "The Interaction of Racism, Sexism and Classism in Women's Exploitation" 19-27, and Nantawan Boonprasat Lewis, "The Connection of Uneven Development, Capitalism and Patriarchy: A Case of Prostitution in Asia" 64-71.

²⁸ "The Catholic Bishops' Pastoral on Women: A Flawed Effort," *Conscience* 9/3 (1988) 6.

²⁹ See Jane Redmont, Marylee Mitcham, Mary C. Seegers, Emilie Griffin, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Anne E. Patrick, "Sexism, Sin and Grace: Responses to the Bishops' Letter," *Commonweal* 115 (1988) 361-66; Georgia Masters Keightley, "Women's Issues Are Laity Issues," *America* 159 (1988) 77-83; and William H. Shannon, "The Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Women," *ibid.* 84-86.

tem.³⁰ In contrast to the American document, the role of woman as mother and the model of Mary are central. It should not be overlooked that the pope does affirm the rights of women as human persons, recognizes their "essential equality"³¹ with men, encourages men's participation in the family, and outlines the results of recent feminist scholarship, pointing to the origin of patriarchy in sin (Genesis) and to the prominence of women disciples in the NT, especially Mary Magdalene. At the same time, he suggests that women's primary role is motherhood, the implicit paradigm for which is found in the Western, middle-class, two-parent family. He opines that even women who are not biological mothers fulfil their destiny of self-giving love only by some analogous extension of motherhood. Although there is a "rightful opposition of women" to male domination, it must not lead to "masculinization," and must not "deform and lose what constitutes their essential richness." Albeit the "personal resources of femininity are certainly no less than the resources of masculinity," they nonetheless are "different." While the pope opposes discrimination against women, he fails to ask critically whether stereotypical definitions of "feminine" nature—here cast after a romantic ideology of mother-love—are part of the problem.³²

Motherhood

In part following on the papal letter, the question of women's maternal role has made a focus for a considerable amount of feminist literature appearing during recent months. A very significant contribution is a Concilium volume edited by Anne Carr and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.³³ As they say in the introduction, the social, cultural, and religious institution of motherhood is patriarchally shaped and not identical to women's potential relationships to their reproductive powers and children. But that institution, in its many cultural forms, has served to mediate women's parental experience as we know it, and also children's and men's experiences of women. Gregory Baum, replying directly to

³⁰ Apostolic letter, "On the Dignity and Vocation of Women," dated August 15 and released September 30, *Origins* 18 (1988) 261, 263–83.

³¹ *Ibid.* 16.

³² See also René Coste, "La lettre apostolique 'Mulieris dignitatem' de Jean-Paul II sur la dignité et la vocation de la femme," *Esprit et vie* 45 (1988) 610–24; Oswald Summerton, S.J., "Pope John Paul II on Women," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 53 (1989) 219–22; Jackie Latham, "Male and Female He Created Them . . . Not Masculine and Feminine," *Month* 22 (1989) 384–87; and J. S. Botero Giraldo, S.S.R., "Comunión y participación: Presupuestos para una nueva imagen de familia," *Studia moralia* 27 (1989) 159–78, which reviews additional papal writings.

³³ *Motherhood* (Concilium 6; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989). The present author read this volume partly in manuscript and partly in page proofs, thanks to Anne Carr's and the publisher's kindness; thus no page numbers.

Mulieris dignitatem, faults it for hinting significantly at differences in male and female characteristics, without spelling them out.³⁴ Quite vague references to “femininity” are used to confer vocation for social leadership only on men. Although women today continue to aim at whatever virtues may make them good mothers, they also include public life in their self-definition. Marie-Thérèse van Lunen Chenu, mother of five grown children, sees the papal exhortation as a “pathetic example” of a “typology of paternity/maternity which appears more and more challengeable.”³⁵ She understands the image of maternity—focused on the Marian cult—to advance a “natural” unity which at once encompasses the whole of femininity and invalidates through its primordially the role of man as partner and father. As a result of the sexual division, men take refuge in civil and ministerial power, while women reign over “sons/masters” and “submissive daughters” themselves being prepared for maternity. In general, the papal letter’s confused anthropology adds up to an “unconvincing attempt to re-centre a teaching which does not respond to the demands of thought and ethical values today.”

Other authors³⁶ move from critique of oppressive social structures to the retrieval of women’s experience by making use of recent psychoanalytic theories about motherhood, taking their lead primarily from Nancy Chodorow’s applications of object-relations theory.³⁷ Chodorow offered the thesis that the subordination of women is not based on “innate” human characteristics but is reproduced through the institution of mothering. Male and female children must mature differently out of their initially close relationship to the mother, enjoyed in the relative absence of the father. Boys undertake a task of differentiation, requiring them to deny the mother and female characteristics. Girls develop an identity based on connection with and similarity to the mother, with all the attendant difficulties in a patriarchal society.

The solution from the object-relations perspective is more egalitarian child-nurturance patterns, along with less exhaustive maternal commitment to the infant. This approach reinforces the thesis that the whole panoply of male and female psychological characteristics which are associated with traditional gender roles are neither innate and “natural” nor unavoidable. Even if the female reproductive roles of pregnancy, birth, and lactation do originally define women’s relation to their offspring differently from that of men, the complex institutions which

³⁴“The Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris dignitatem*,” in *Motherhood* (n. 33 above).

³⁵ “Between Sexes and Generations: Maternity Empowered,” in *Motherhood*.

³⁶ Ursula Pfäfflin, “Mothers in a Patriarchal World: Experience and Feminist Theory”; and Johanna Kohn-Roelin, “Mother-Daughter-God,” in *Motherhood*.

³⁷ *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California, 1978).

prolong their relationship and entrench male and female role separations go far beyond what is demanded by reproductive biology. Mary Condren traces some of the implications of rigidly defined sex roles, including the male's "Not-Woman" self-identification, for militarism and institutionalized violence.³⁸ Leslie Griffin has argued that official prohibitions of the participation of religious women in politically partisan activity are rooted in an account of human nature in which public is divorced from private, and women are associated with the latter.³⁹ Similarly, Ann Ida Gannon traces the pernicious effects of the "two natures" doctrine on the social concerns of women in the labor force.⁴⁰ And E. H. McGrath, S.J., demonstrates that sex-role stereotypes pertaining to women religious are certainly thriving among religious superiors, at least in India.⁴¹

Although cross-cultural research certainly substantiates the pervasiveness of patriarchy, it also reveals some of the flexibility which attends human social arrangements, and hence loosens the foundations of gender stereotyping. Some authors suggest that women fare best in the egalitarian societies more common in beneficent natural environments, not requiring the hunting and killing which give males favored access to the food supply (in contrast to gathering, herding, or agricultural societies).⁴² Sarah Jane Boss adds that women's situation is better safeguarded in adversity when there exist important traditions of integration with the natural world, and of female symbolism of the divine.⁴³ But egalitarian societies are far from the norm. Western Christianity has lacked an appreciation for the natural world, has minimized female symbolism, and has continually been engaged in wars of domination and defense. Christine Gudorf opens a broad cross-cultural vista in an essay documenting mostly horrific revelations of conditions for women in sex, marriage, motherhood, and childcare. The institutionalization of women's sexuality frequently legitimates physical violence, including rape, genital mutilation, coercive sterilization and abortion, and murder (as in India to obtain a second dowry).⁴⁴

On the other hand, non-Western cultural traditions also can validate some forms of women's power. Mercy Amba Oduyoye displays the posi-

³⁸ "To Bear Children for the Fatherland," in *Motherhood*.

³⁹ "Women in Religious Congregations and Politics," *TS* 49 (1988) 417-44.

⁴⁰ "Perspectives on Women in Business," *Chicago Studies* 28 (1988) 47-63.

⁴¹ "No Laughing Matter: Sex Roles Stereotypes and the Religious Superior," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 53 (1989) 199-208.

⁴² After Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Female Power and Male Dominance: On the Origins of Social Inequality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1981).

⁴³ "The 'Weakness' of Women," *Month* 21 (1988) 975-85.

⁴⁴ "Women's Choice for Motherhood: Beginning a Cross Cultural Approach," in *Motherhood*.

tive sense of mothering among the mother-centered Akans of Ghana. Though it is not limited to one's own biological offspring, mothering is for her people an essential women's role. She resents the preaching in the South of the "anti-baby economy of the North," sometimes implemented through economic coercion. In her view, the solution to poverty is not reducing births but economic redistribution. Bénézet Bujo also questions whether Western feminist theology, "like Western theology generally, wants to be universal and considers itself the measure of all theologies."⁴⁵ Bujo notes the need for sensitivity in conveying the feminist message to traditional Africa, so that the legitimate critique of some practices does not abolish whatever positive cultural element may have been inadequately embodied in them.⁴⁶ Such cautions reinforce the point that sexuality, embodiment, and "motherhood" are not invariant experiences but pliable and culturally nuanced.

Women's embodiment, and motherhood as experience and as institution, are also crucial to a number of specific ethical dilemmas, pre-eminently abortion and reproductive technologies. The solutions to these and other problems have too often been plotted on a chart of neo-scholastic principles which prescind from the differences that social context makes for moral truth and discernment. Feminist authors redress these imbalances by placing matters of "personal" sexual and family ethics within a fabric of socially woven roles, expectations, pressures, and consequences. Many Catholic authors transcend liberalism's narrow "rights" framework for abortion, uncovering its social conditions and implications. They not only see a single focus on the "right to life" of the fetus as inadequate; they also move beyond feminist approaches which see "abortion rights" as the pre-eminent aegis for women's equality and "free choice" as the definitive moral category for understanding abortion. Patricia Beattie Jung regards abortion or childbearing decisions as sometimes "tragic" attempts to balance many competing values, some of which may be mutually exclusive and impossible to rank decisively. Although Jung accepts that the decision to abort can sometimes represent legitimate self-love and self-respect, she develops an ethic of self-giving and servanthood (not servitude) for women. Like organ donation, childbearing in difficult circumstances can be "a gracious gift, not unlike God's own gratuitous Presence," and "a sign of solidarity with the weak among

⁴⁵ "Feministische Theologie in Africa," *Stimmen der Zeit* 113 (1988) 529-38. Summarized in *Theology Digest* 36 (1989) 25-29; quotation at 25.

⁴⁶ Also note Virginia Fabella, M.M., and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, eds., *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology, Reflections from the Women's Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989); and "Special Section: Asian Women Theologians Respond to American Feminism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3 (1987) 103-34.

us."⁴⁷ Obviously, women in Third World nations or in otherwise desperate economic circumstances still have fewer resources and less support to realize such a moral choice, especially if more weighted by cultural and religious systems which circumscribe women's sexuality, maternity, and social opportunities.⁴⁸

Discussions of reproductive technologies have framed interesting recent treatments of motherhood, joining considerations of embodiment, family, and technology.⁴⁹ Although there is certainly no ethical consensus among feminists here, frequent concerns are the technological alienation of conception and pregnancy from the human person; the commercialization of (women's) reproduction; the exploitation of poor women; the inclination to see the child as a "product" and to expect that it be defect-free; the reinforcement of the idea that pregnancy and childbirth are indispensable to women's identity and fulfilment; and the devaluation of biological kin bonds (especially that of mother and child) in favor of free-consent "contracts" dissolving or establishing family relationships.

In brief, feminist ethics turns to women's experience to challenge women's subordinate status in family, society, and church, and to reconstitute the images, theories, and institutions which shape women's and men's gender identities. As a praxis-rooted discussion in progress, feminist "theory" highlights certain common concerns, but remains diverse and developmental. Levels of analytic precision and theoretical coherence vary. But feminist authors realize increasingly that constructive, critical debate within the movement, which can clarify genuine differences and lead to productive revision, can only enhance feminism's integrity as a philosophical and theological discipline and lend credibility to its political agenda. The epistemological debate will serve as an example.

⁴⁷ "Christian Reflections on Bodily Life Support," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 16 (1988) 296, 295. See also Patricia B. Jung and Thomas A. Shannon, eds., *Abortion and Catholicism* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

⁴⁸ Ana Maria Portugal, ed., *Mujeres e Iglesia: Sexualidad y aborto en América Latina* (Washington, D.C.: Catholics for a Free Choice, 1989).

⁴⁹ See Stephen G. Post and Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, "Recent Works on Reproductive Technology" (separate essays), *Religious Studies Review* 15 (1989) 210-18; *Logos: Philosophic Issues in Christian Perspective* 9 (1988), on the theme "Manufactured Motherhood: The Ethics of the New Reproductive Techniques" (essays by Albert Jonsen, Lisa Cahill, Joseph Ellin, Ann Davis, Lori Andrews, Herbert Krimmel, Lisa Newton, June Carbone, Laurence Houlgate, David James, Kevin Stanley); Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "Man between Reproduction and Creation," *Communio* 16 (1989) 197-211; Mary E. Hunt, "Ethics on Ice: Soul-Chilling Dilemmas in New Reproductive Technology," *Conscience* 10 (1989) 1-6, 23-24; Marie-Louise Lamau, "Paroles de femmes," *Lumière et vie* 37 (1988) 17-27; and Dorry de Beijer, "Motherhood and the New Forms of Reproductive Technology: Passive Source of Nutrition and Rational Consumer," in *Motherhood*.

Moral Truth and Moral Knowledge

This review has demonstrated the feminist eschewal of ahistorical paradigms of gender identity, social organization, and even of moral order itself. As David Tracy tells it, "contemporary Western feminist theory . . . at its best is the most ethically challenging and intellectually sophisticated exposure of the full dilemmas of our pluralistic and ambiguous postmodern moment." Typical of the "postmodern" intellect is the fascination with "otherness" and "difference," the recognition that a hermeneutic of suspicion vis-à-vis Enlightenment "rationality" is occasioned by the newly heard voices of the marginalized and oppressed, and the refusal to cut short the conversation which these voices demand.⁵⁰ Anne Patrick characterizes modern moral theology similarly, remarking on its "attention to discourse . . . and its acknowledgment of the moral significance of language forms and the politics of discourse."⁵¹ Hence the urgent feminist attention to more inclusive language about the divinity.⁵² But if theological and moral inquiry are understood on a paradigm of pluralist, ongoing, constantly critical, but finally ambiguous discourse—rather than the conformity of reason to an objective metaphysical and moral order—then the possibility of making moral judgments at all may be called into question. A nagging relativism plagues feminism insofar as it appeals to "experience" precisely on the grounds that no "universalist" definition of women has been genuinely adequate to women's reality. At some point the feminist must confront Sheila Greeve Devaney's radical assertion that, because human beings and their knowledge "are irrevocably historical and hence conditioned by time and space," there is "no such thing as objective, universally valid experience or knowledge."⁵³ Rebecca Chopp, along the same line, faults Rosemary Ruether for her "abstract" notion of "full humanity," because it seems to postulate "a metahistorical structure" which is "merely realized in historical experience," and to suppose that "we can grasp something independent of our concrete situation."⁵⁴ What possibilities of objectivity and verification can there then remain for the feminist's moral claims?

⁵⁰ "The Uneasy Alliance" 550–51.

⁵¹ "The Linguistic Turn and Moral Theology," *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* 42 (1987) 51.

⁵² Johnson, "Mary and the Female Face of God"; Michael L. Cook, S.J., "The Image of Jesus as Liberating for Women," *Chicago Studies* 27 (1988) 136–50. Also Sallie McFague, "Mother God"; Marie-Theres Wacker, "God as Mother?: On the Meaning of a Biblical God-Symbol for Feminist Theology"; Jean D. Schaber, "The Foremothers and the Mother of Jesus"; Ursula King, "The Divine as Mother," all in *Motherhood*.

⁵³ "Problems with Feminist Theory: Historicity and the Search for Sure Foundations," in *Embodied Love* 82, as quoted by Carol P. Christ, "Embodied Thinking: Reflections on Feminist Theological Method," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5 (1989) 7.

⁵⁴ "Seeing and Naming the World Anew" 10.

Carol Christ replies that, granting the perspectival nature of all truth claims, feminist experience contradicts any view which sees such claims as sheerly relative. As she puts it, feminism and patriarchalism do not have the same "ontological status"; it is more "true" to believe in equality and the importance of both sexes' contributions to the human community.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, the truths of feminist experience cannot be "objectively proved to all by rational argumentation"; their truth is found in commitment and in practice, in a verification in life of the relatively more true and just. "We seek to speak a truth rooted in our experience, our time and place, our bodies."⁵⁶ It is more accurate to see feminist authors as representatives of the larger postmodern movement to locate discovery of truth in the function of practical reason and in praxis, than to see them as jettisoning objectivity altogether. The feminist recognition of the perspectival limits of hegemonic construals of gender leads not to relativism but to advocacy of counterproposals which can better account for women's experiences of wrongful inequality. As Anne Patrick notes, moral theology in the postmodern period is being defined above all by the "turn to the oppressed," to the "'otherness' in all who are oppressed," and to a hopeful dialogue and incipient praxis of inclusion.⁵⁷ Hence for the feminist the criteria of theological validity become, as for David Tracy, "political-ethical criteria." "There is no manifestation disclosure that is not also a call to transformation." What the inquirer after truth can expect are not absolute but "relatively adequate" criteria,⁵⁸ criteria focused on the pragmatic personal and political consequences of action. And for the Christian theological feminist, the oppressive or liberative quality of experience itself, and hence the content of the ethical criterion, is discerned in a constant, critical dialectic with Scripture, theological interpretations, Christian communal traditions, broader philosophical perspectives, and the provisional investigations of the human sciences.

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ECOLOGY, JUSTICE, AND DEVELOPMENT

Since the first Earth Day 20 years ago, there have been many efforts to make environment a major public issue. While there have been some revolutionary developments domestically—the Wilderness Act (1964), the National Environmental Policy Act (1969), the Clean Air Act (1970),

⁵⁵ "Embodied Thinking" 13.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 14. A lesbian feminist critique of distanced "objectivity" is Carter Heyward, "Heterosexist Theology: Being above It All," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3 (1987) 29–38.

⁵⁷ "The Linguistic Turn" 56.

⁵⁸ "The Uneasy Alliance" 568.