

CHALLENGES TO THE ROLE OF THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN FEMINIST THEOLOGIES

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[Convictions about human personhood, rooted in an analysis of women's experience, are often foundational to Catholic feminist theologians. Drawing on the work of Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Rebecca Chopp, the author identifies challenges to Catholic feminist theological anthropology. Fulkerson and Chopp adopt a poststructuralist approach to human personhood, emphasizing the relationships that exist among human consciousness, language, and politics. Although poststructuralism's understanding of subjectivity differs significantly from that of most Euro-American Catholic feminists, it does offer ideas that Catholic feminists need to explore further.]

ONE OF THE MOST serious challenges to the turn to the subject that has so influenced Catholic theology is found in postmodern thought or more specifically in poststructuralist theory. This challenge is most keenly experienced by those who have been influenced by Euro-American feminisms that have been in dialogue with the thought of Bernard Lonergan, Karl Rahner, and Edward Schillebeeckx. This article arose out of my desire to find out where a thoroughly different theological anthropology might lead. Although I have not become a poststructuralist feminist and in fact remain committed to feminist-Lonerganian approaches to theology, I believe there is something to be learned from poststructuralist feminism's attention to the relationships that exist among human consciousness, language, and politics. I suggest that Anglo-American poststructuralism might be valuable even to feminists who have philosophical and theological commitments quite contrary to some of its central tenets.

Here I first briefly review the models of theological anthropology prominent in Catholic theology, then offer a sketch of the poststructuralist approach to the relationships that exist among language, subjectivity, and

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politics. Finally I offer a few suggestions about how poststructuralist feminism, in its Anglo-American expression, may contribute to non-poststructuralist theological anthropologies and theological method.

In particular, I am interested in how poststructuralism can stimulate new thinking about the appeal to women's experience that has been so prominent in Catholic feminist attempts to reconstruct theological anthropology and to forge a feminist approach to theology in the Catholic tradition. The volume edited by Ann O'Hara Graff *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology* takes experience as its foundation and frame; her own contributions to that book make clear the challenges of working with the category of women's experience. Elizabeth Johnson in *She Who Is* lays out the methods, criteria, and goal of a feminist liberation theology that would ground critical discourse about God, identifying as foundational the experience of protest against sexism and a commitment to the flourishing of women in their concreteness. She describes this foundational experience as a kind of conversion involving contrast and confirmation: "contrast between the suffering of sexism and the *humanum* of women, and confirmation of women's creative agency and power, both mediated through the same Christian tradition."¹ More recently, in an exploration of feminist ethics and natural law, Christina Traina has condemned a naïve appeal to women's experience while advocating a "critical approach to women's experience" that is rooted in "a primary commitment to women's well-being."² She contends that an epistemologically sophisticated notion of experience is necessary because experience serves a pivotal role maintaining the tension between creativity and givenness in theological anthropology and in "the formation of normative moral claims."³ Attention to women's experience in Catholic feminist theology tends to be rooted in a conviction that women are made in God's image and called to participation in the project of building up the reign of God. Thus, the well-being of women—understood not in isolation but in relation to God, other human beings, and the earth—serves as a goal and criterion of adequacy for feminist theology. If the glory of God is a woman, as well as a man, fully alive, we must identify what is death-dealing and create pathways to a more fully human life. Built into Catholic feminism is an implicit if not explicit notion of what makes for full human personhood.

If "women's experience" is not to become either a clichéd move in theological reflection or one that is riddled with so many difficulties that it

¹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 29.

² Christina L. H. Traina, *Feminist Ethics and Natural Law: The End of the Anathemas* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1999) 41.

³ *Ibid.* 17.

becomes ineffectual, feminists working out of the Catholic theological tradition need to reexamine the relationship between their notions of experience and their understandings of human personhood. Although some might find it surprising, I think that certain developments in Anglo-American poststructuralist feminism might enhance the thought of Catholic feminists who are looking for ways of connecting their discussions of experience with their interest in theological anthropology.

MODELS OF THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Four models of theological anthropology are now quite familiar to those engaged in Catholic feminist theology in North America.⁴ I refer here to (1) the dual nature model which stresses that the sexes are different and complementary, with preordained roles in the created order; (2) the single nature model which stresses the humanity common to both sexes, without predetermined roles based on biology; (3) the transformative, person-centered model proposed by Mary Buckley, which focuses on the need to transform social structures and to promote the reign “of justice and peace which leads to the questioning of oppressive structures and relationships, whether sexist, racist, or classist;”⁵ and (4) the multipolar model that Elizabeth Johnson has adapted from Edward Schillebeeckx’s work.⁶ According to this model, human persons are constituted by a set of essential elements or anthropological constants that mutually condition each other: bodiliness, relation to the earth, relation to other persons and social groupings, and economic, political, and cultural location.⁷

The last two models—the transformative and multipolar approaches—seek to fully incorporate questions of sex and gender without placing them at the center of theological anthropology. Both Buckley and Johnson are explicitly committed to moving beyond the confines of the one- or two-nature discussions. The transformative and multipolar models offer two ways to move beyond the sex/gender system as the primary frame of meaning.⁸ Both wish to formulate an approach to theological anthropology that highlights the impact of economic, political, and cultural institutions on

⁴ See, for example, the fine historical presentation of these models in Mary Ann Hinsdale, “Heeding the Voices: An Historical Overview,” in *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology*, ed. Ann O’Hara Graff (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995) 22–48. See also Anne Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women’s Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 117–33.

⁵ Mary Buckley, as quoted in Mary Ann Hinsdale, “Heeding the Voices: An Historical Overview” 28.

⁶ Johnson, *She Who Is* 154–56. ⁷ *Ibid.* 155.

⁸ Jane Kopas, “Beyond Mere Gender: Transforming Theological Anthropology,”

human identity. In other words, both call attention to the grounding of theological anthropology in experience. Theologians such as *mujerista* Ada María Isasi-Díaz, with her search for generative themes in the experience of U.S. Hispanic women/Latinas,⁹ and womanist Shawn Copeland, with her analysis of the dynamics of race, class, and gender, have intensified attention to the specifics of women's experience.

Other common ways of framing the anthropological issues, drawn from developments in other disciplines, are in terms of essentialism and social constructionism. As defined by Serene Jones, essentialism or universalism "refers to any view of women's nature that makes universal claims about women based on characteristics considered to be an inherent part of being female."¹⁰ In contrast to essentialism is feminist constructivism, the position that our views of what it means to be a woman are historically and culturally determined. There are variations within social constructivism known as "strong" and "weak" constructivism.

There are also options that seem to incorporate some elements of constructivism within a basically essentialist framework. One such approach is strategic essentialism, which is named "strategic" because it takes a pragmatic or functionalist tack that makes practical effect the measure of theory.¹¹ Theories of women's nature are judged according to their ability to empower women, to promote their flourishing. Jones suggests that the principal difference between the constructivist and the strategic essentialist is that "the constructivist is content to offer localized thick descriptions of constructed rules and essences, whereas the strategic essentialist elaborates the normative meaning and power of these universals with respect to the flourishing of women."¹²

I have elected to begin by recalling these four models of theological anthropology because of their powerful influence on Catholic feminist theology and because of the common assumptions about human subjectivity they share: the belief that although we are to a great degree shaped by our social context, we remain relatively stable subjects. In other words, despite historical variables, subjectivity is characterized by relative coherence, unity, and stability.

Poststructuralists contend that this acknowledgment of social context does not go far enough. They argue that subjectivity is not simply influ-

in *Women and Theology*, ed. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Phyllis H. Kaminski (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995) 216–33.

⁹ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha/ In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993; rev. ed. 2003).

¹⁰ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 26.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 44.

¹² *Ibid.* 45.

enced by political, economic, and social practices, it is constructed by them. This approach to human personhood focuses on the ever shifting linguistic and material practices that constitute various modes of subjectivity, whereas the four models of theological anthropology just discussed seek to articulate the permanent impulses, orientations, and values that define humanity.¹³

To understand the extent of this difference, one must understand the theory of language and meaning that supports poststructuralist feminism, a theory which stands as a critique of the approach to language and meaning that I believe is implicit in the four models of theological anthropology that currently inform Catholic feminist discussion.

POSTSTRUCTURALISM

Poststructuralism is especially open to diverse interpretations and appropriations, so let me be clear about what I mean by “poststructuralism.” In brief, poststructuralist theory explores the relationships that exist in language, social institutions, and individual consciousness.¹⁴ While structuralism approaches language as a system of signs, poststructuralism understands language as the nonsystematic play of signs. Although poststructuralism is most closely associated with literary theory, its reach extends into a number of disciplines. Its varieties include Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory, Derrida’s deconstructionism, and Foucault’s analysis of power. These thinkers differ greatly in important ways but share similar assumptions about the relationships that exist in language, meaning, and subjectivity.¹⁵ The reading of poststructuralism I am offering here might be described as a moderate one that relies most heavily on literary theory but downplays the more radical claims of deconstructionism.

Feminist poststructuralism is often associated with the work of the so-called French feminists. However, American feminist theologians have been forging their own appropriation. I have in mind here Protestant theologians Rebecca Chopp and Mary McClintock Fulkerson. Rebecca Chopp’s book *The Power to Speak* develops a feminist theology of the Word deeply indebted to poststructuralist insights.¹⁶ Fulkerson’s work *Changing the Subject* proposes a thoroughgoing poststructuralist approach to feminist theology that would, in her judgment, adequately account for

¹³ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Crossroad, 1980) 733.

¹⁴ Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1987) 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 19.

¹⁶ Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

the diverse subject positions of women.¹⁷ My presentation is informed primarily by these theologians and by British feminist Chris Weedon's book *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. Perhaps the best way to enter into this world of poststructuralist feminism is to explore its understanding of language.

Language, Discourse, and Meaning

Poststructuralist feminists begin from the premise that gender difference dwells in language rather than in the referent.¹⁸ They explore the workings of language through a theory of discourse. Structuralism approaches language as a structure consisting of a set of units and the rules for combining these units to make sentences. The discourse theory employed by poststructuralist feminism, however, sees discourse not as an invariant structure but as a historical form of language and as a type of social action. Discourse in this context "is not merely a linguistic unit but a unit of human action, interaction, communication, and cognition."¹⁹ Discourse theorists focus not on isolated utterances but on praxis and on the power dynamics of societies or segments of a society which privilege certain world views. In particular, poststructuralist feminists use discourse theory to "denaturalize" gender. They seek to unveil the social practices that underlie what people regard as natural about being female or male.

In its understanding of language, poststructuralist feminism departs from liberal humanism. Although liberal feminism might be the feminist perspective most readily associated with it, liberal humanist discourses are rather diverse. They include not only that of liberal political philosophy's presupposition of a unified rational consciousness, but also radical feminism's attempt to articulate the essence of true womanhood and Marxism's focus on alienation.²⁰

According to poststructuralists, liberal humanism rests upon a representational theory of language which maintains in some fashion that language represents reality, reflects inner experiences, describes what is real, and truly makes present our thoughts and feelings.²¹ From a liberal humanist perspective, experience is in some sense independent of language; experi-

¹⁷ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject: Women's Discourses and Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

¹⁸ Diane Elam, "Poststructuralist Feminism," in *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1994) 242.

¹⁹ Robert de Beaugrande, "Discourse Analysis," in *ibid.* 208.

²⁰ Weedon, *Feminist Practice* 32.

²¹ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1983) 129.

ence is expressed in language but not constituted by it. In contrast, poststructuralist theory contends that language does not reflect reality; it constructs it. For poststructuralist feminism, language consists of a range of discourses which offer different versions of the meaning of social relations.²² Social practices *construct* rather than *express* individual desires, beliefs, and actions. Language is thus a site of political struggle. Where the liberal humanist view maintains that language *reflects* social changes which have an established meaning, the poststructuralist position contends that there is no meaning prior to language.

The Poststructuralist Approach to Subjectivity

Intimately related to its view of language and meaning is the poststructuralist understanding of subjectivity. In this context, the term subjectivity refers to “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world.”²³

Poststructuralists vigorously oppose liberal humanist discourses that presuppose some type of fixed, coherent essence that makes us what we are. For the poststructuralist, subjectivity is the product of a variety of economic, social, and political discursive fields. The term “discursive field,” as Foucault has formulated it, refers to competing ways of giving meaning to the world and of organizing social institutions and processes.²⁴

Where a liberal humanist approach to subjectivity would suggest that human beings are influenced by the meanings that inhere in social institutions and practices, poststructuralists would contend that human beings are constituted by them. As Fulkerson states it, “The subject is not an entity, a substance, but a relation, or sets of relations.”²⁵ In other words, “subjectivity itself is an effect of discourse.”²⁶ It therefore is neither unified nor fixed because the meanings of the discursive practices that constitute us are constantly changing.²⁷ Subjectivity does not involve an immanent, pre-defined orientation toward human wholeness but the competition of various modes or “subject positions.”

For example, there are different modes of femininity that vie for my lived allegiance.²⁸ Since most discourses tend to uphold themselves as the only version of meaning, I may not even realize that other ways of understanding of femininity are possible for me and that what I see as perhaps the true and only meaning is not intrinsic but created by the intersection of particular discourses.

²² Weedon, *Feminist Practice* 86.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 35.

²⁶ Weedon, *Feminist Practice* 86.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 97–98.

²³ *Ibid.* 32.

²⁵ Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject* 82.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 19–21.

Underpinning the poststructuralist feminist understanding of the human subject are three key points. The first point has to do with its theory of meaning. For poststructuralism, meaning emerges temporarily—almost as a flicker—in the ongoing play of signifiers; meaning is never fully present and is always in some sense deferred. Subjects cannot, therefore, be stable sites of meaning. The second point is pragmatic. Poststructuralist feminists explicitly or implicitly tend to connect the notion of a relatively stable subject with the fixing of masculinity and femininity. Not surprisingly, then, they argue that only by destabilizing or decentering the subject can social change occur. General laws or principles about women and men, even if formulated by feminists, have the effect of limiting the possibilities for change.²⁹ The third point concerns the suppression of conflict and the masking of power interests. Poststructuralist feminists contend that notions of a unified subject tend to hide the fact that power relations are at play in constructing subjectivity. The drive for a common vision of humanity obscures the competing interests that are battling to fix the meaning of human personhood, even if only temporarily.

The Poststructuralist Approach to Experience

This poststructuralist analysis of language, meaning, and subjectivity raises questions about the categories of “women’s experience” and “feminist experience” in theological reflection. The appeal to women’s experience that underlies the work of feminist theologians such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether has drawn criticism from postmodernist feminists. Sheila Greeve Devaney, for example, questions what she perceives as the fundamental assumptions of their work: first, that “there is a perspective from which we can perceive how things really are” and second, that feminist experience offers such a perspective.³⁰ Although Devaney does not develop her analysis along poststructuralist lines explicitly, her position is consistent with the theory I am outlining here.

Although poststructuralist feminist theologians reject the appeal to women’s experience or to feminist experience as foundational to theology, they do emphasize the importance of analyzing the experiences of women in different socioeconomic, religious, and cultural settings. Chris Weedon observes that the meaning of experience is, in her words, “perhaps the most

²⁹ Ibid. 157.

³⁰ Sheila Greeve Devaney, “The Limits of the Appeal to Women’s Experience,” in *Shaping New Vision: Gender and Values in American Culture*, ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret Miles (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1987) 42.

crucial site of political struggle over meaning since it involves personal, psychic, and emotional investment on the part of the individual.”³¹

Although Mary McClintock Fulkerson affirms the appeal to women’s experience as valuable for consciousness-raising groups, she finds it inadequate as a theological warrant. As she interprets it, the prevailing feminist, liberationist notion of experience presupposes a prelinguistic realm of experience and neglects the constitutive character of language.

The Reception of Poststructuralism

The reception of poststructuralism in theology and religious studies has been varied and has depended largely upon whether it is interpreted more radically as in alignment with nihilism or whether it is given a more moderate reading, more akin to hermeneutical philosophy.³²

The assessment of poststructuralism’s ethical and political implications varies greatly as well. Literary theorist Terry Eagleton, for example, contends that if, as poststructuralists claim, meaning is forever shifting and unstable and if reality is constructed by discourse rather than reflected by it, one is led to a position of “jaded resignation.”³³

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has expressed similar concerns about postmodernism in general. She has written that “[i]nsofar as postmodernism or the ‘New Historicism’ assumes that subjectivity is constructed by various cultural codes, it stresses subjectedness, not agency.”³⁴ More recently, she has claimed that poststructuralist theory is mired in linguistic analysis and thus remains deficient in historical engagement.³⁵ Essentially, she rejects the relativistic pluralism of postmodernism, which she concludes is unable to privilege the subject position of women struggling for liberation from patriarchy.

Now, although Schüssler Fiorenza seems to read poststructuralist feminism as a strictly linguistic approach, it is important to take note that on other readings of this theory, language is not so distinct from material

³¹ Weedon, *Feminist Practice* 9.

³² Dan R. Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol, and Story* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996) 188–92.

³³ Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 141–50.

³⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992) 87.

³⁵ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet* (New York: Continuum, 1994) 13. See also the endnote which accompanies these remarks, n. 42, 196. In this endnote, Schüssler Fiorenza lists the following as exemplary works: Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (see above n. 14); Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1989); *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990).

concerns, whether that of the body or of economic forces and cultural practices. The poststructuralist understanding of discourse as a mode of power and a unit of human interaction suggests that its linguistic interests are inseparable from its historical-material analysis. Along the lines of this last observation, philosopher John Caputo offers an evaluation of post-modernism's implications that differs strikingly from Schüssler Fiorenza's. He interprets poststructuralism as a prophetic concern for justice carried out through a critique of oppressive power in language and in life.³⁶

Thus, the relationship between poststructuralism and feminism is fairly complex. On the one hand, poststructuralism in its more radical strain celebrates the dissolution of the self at a time when women and oppressed people throughout the world are claiming recognition of their selfhood.³⁷ On the other hand, feminists are attracted to poststructuralism's aggressive interrogation of ideology and its deconstruction of binary oppositions such as man/woman, mind/body, and nature/culture. In brief, the appropriateness of poststructuralism for feminist purposes depends to a large degree upon the variety of poststructuralism considered.

THE POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION OF POSTSTRUCTURALIST FEMINISM

While I do not advocate a full-scale adoption of poststructuralism for Catholic feminist theology and in fact find it deficient in important respects, I do believe that it offers insights that can enrich current models of feminist theological anthropology and possibly lead to the creation of new models. Primarily, I find its characteristic themes helpful in identifying areas in which feminist theological anthropologies may need to venture further. At the risk of being accused of domesticating it, I would like to highlight three aspects of poststructuralism that I find of particular interest and potential value to questions of theological anthropology and to the role of women's experience in understanding what it means to be human.

First of all, poststructuralist feminism's pragmatic orientation can serve as an asset in analyzing the social elements so vital to the transformative and multipolar models of theological anthropology. Even though poststructuralism would regard the notion of "constants" as reflective of liberal humanist discourse, it still may assist in a general account of how the anthropological constants mutually condition each other by stressing the interconnectedness of language, consciousness, and social practices. Poststructuralism keeps our hermeneutic of suspicion lively with regard to the anthropological elements we choose to accept or to reject as constant.

³⁶ Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language* 190–91.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 187–88.

There was a time not too long ago, for example, when our relation to the earth would not have been given such prominence in theological anthropology. In other words, poststructuralist scrutiny of the social-symbolic order is helpful as a form of ideology critique. In its relentless investigation of the psychological and political forces at work in our lives, poststructuralist feminism demands that we examine in greater depth how discursive practices construct desires and create pleasures that we regard as naturally constitutive of the human person.

Second, poststructuralist feminism challenges facile notions of solidarity and community. It approaches solidarity not as a presupposition but as a historical project, a commitment to “the concrete other.”³⁸ Its starting point is not common experience or a common human nature (or two natures), but the struggle for emancipatory transformation that advances only when human beings embrace difference, embodiment, specificity, and dialogue.³⁹ For the most part, poststructuralist feminists are wary of the notion of community. They warn of the proclivity of dominant groups to impose sameness and to marginalize those viewed as “others.” There are, nonetheless, poststructuralist feminists who envision a notion of community that recognizes and resists this pattern of domination. In their view, the recognition of difference is integral to the process of forging shared visions, values, and meanings.

To explore the dynamics of such a community of emancipatory transformation and solidarity, Rebecca Chopp proposes a retrieval of rhetoric. Poststructuralism’s emphasis on the effects of discourse has led theologians such as Chopp to give this ancient discipline another look. As she points out for her purposes, rhetoric is “the art of deliberation, the ongoing process of community life in communication of its ways, means, symbols, and acts.”⁴⁰ Feminism, in her view, moves the Christian Church forward by creating the possibilities of community in which men and women may engage in the rhetorical practice of life together in just and fair deliberation.⁴¹

The third potential contribution of poststructuralist feminism lies in its praxis-oriented approach to language. Although poststructuralism can indeed sink into unending critique of the oppressive uses of language, it also calls to our attention the tantalizing possibilities of linguistic analysis for personal and communal transformation. By arguing that human consciousness, language, and politics are inseparable, poststructuralist feminism demands that theological anthropology treat all three elements of human existence in some integrated fashion. More pointedly, it suggests that po-

³⁸ Devaney, “The Limits of the Appeal to Women’s Experience” 46.

³⁹ These themes recur in Rebecca Chopp’s *The Power to Speak*.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 92.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 93.

etics and politics can converge not only to oppress but to create new possibilities for human flourishing. Catholic feminist theology might consider exploring further the power of the word. Catholic feminism arises from a deeply sacramental tradition which theologically grounds its interest in experience and in human bodiliness. In tapping into this sacramental heritage, Catholic feminism has sometimes overlooked the sacramentality of language and perhaps might consider what directions it might open up.

Normativity

Poststructuralism and postmodernism more generally highlight the difficulties of appealing to women's experience as the basis of theology. Poststructuralism pushes Catholic feminist theologies not only to refine their notion of women's experience but to reconsider the place of appeals to women's experience in theological method. Not only is there the now familiar question of whether women's experience is a source or a norm for feminist theology, but there is also the matter of determining what—if anything—makes something normative.

Sheila Greeve Davaney, who in her earlier work emphasized the *limits* of the appeal to women's experience, has more recently suggested that "feminist theologians need to return to women's experience, selfhood, and identity, but in historicist terms."⁴² Her postmodernist historicist approach (as distinct from a poststructuralist approach) calls feminists to develop theories of tradition and to acknowledge situatedness while maintaining female agency. She suggests that we assess the adequacy of constructive proposals on the basis of "pragmatic repercussions." The context in which the content of pragmatic norms are "continually forged" is a "full and open debate." Her turn to pragmatism has its appeal, but I think has its difficulties in practice, where repercussions are often difficult to predict and open debate is difficult to achieve, as Jürgen Habermas as often emphasized.

Devaney quite rightly contends that feminist theologians need to attend not just to theory, not just to practical consequences, and not just to historical experience. In the end, she privileges pragmatics above all, and this is where I would part company. Feminist poststructuralism presents the threat of relativism quite vividly, but Devaney's turn to pragmatism is just one possible response to it. Rebecca Chopp's identification of three trends in feminist approaches to relativism may prove helpful here. She states that the tendencies in feminist theology have been (1) to search for guiding practices or quasi-transcendentals to mediate conversations, (2) to opt for

⁴² Sheila Greeve Devaney, "Continuing the Story, Departing the Text," in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, ed. Rebecca Chopp and Sheila Devaney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 198–214.

the voices of those who are excluded, or (3) to follow a pragmatic approach that seeks culturally situated strategies of truth that promote human well-being.⁴³ It seems to me that Catholic feminist theologies have sought to ground themselves primarily in the first and second approaches, with some attention to the third. In other words, Catholic feminist theology's turn to experience has led to its listening to the voices of those excluded as "other," defining guiding practices or quasi-transcendentals in a contextual manner, and attending with care to the practical implications and consequences not just for theology but for public policy. Catholic feminist theologians often seem to function as "strategic essentialists." While many have not embraced a full-scale social constructivist position and have remained in some sense "essentialists," they have been ever alert to the importance of context and steadfastly committed to advocating practical strategies that promote the well being of women. I would characterize the work of Elizabeth Johnson in this manner. She maintains a sense of the *humanum* as a vision for full humanity but also grounds her theological options in a more grassroots level of experience, with attention to practical consequences.

Experience and Theological Method

I would like to move toward an approach that goes beyond questions such as "is women's experience a source or a norm?" and beyond analyses of women's experience that characterize theories of women's experience in an either/or manner (e.g., either universalist or historicist). Similar issues arise in the debates surrounding foundationalism, and I have found there an idea that might prove helpful to feminist theology. In his proposal for a non-foundationalist foundational theology, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza recommends that the tasks of theology be envisioned as a wide reflective equilibrium, a "constantly revising movement" consisting of three components: hermeneutical reconstruction, retroductive warrants, and background theories.⁴⁴ Hermeneutical reconstruction provides an interpretation of Christian identity and praxis. In feminist terms, the task of hermeneutical reconstruction would focus on the roles and identity of women in the Christian tradition and in the social settings surrounding Christianity. Background theories offer theoretical tools for the process of interpreting the data of religious experience. These theories could investigate the roles of consciousness, language, and politics in theological construction, as post-structuralism would indicate. Background theories in feminist theology

⁴³ Chopp, "Theorizing Feminist Theology" in *Horizons in Feminist Theology* 223–24.

⁴⁴ Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Foundational Theology: Jesus and the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1987) 302.

would include gender theory as well as approaches to social analysis. Affirming the need for background theories reinforces what I regard as the rightful place for theorizing in feminism. It is the retroductive warrant, the third element of foundational theology's reflective equilibrium, that is of particular interest here, however.

The third element of this broad reflective equilibrium is called "retroductive warrants from experience." "Retroductive," as Fiorenza explains, is a philosophical term for an argument that is neither inductive nor deductive.⁴⁵ The retroductive argument "is not accepted because of logical cogency as in deduction or because of the generalizations of data as in induction. Instead, the argument is accepted because the hypothesis generates illuminative inferences."⁴⁶ Use of the retroductive warrant may be found in quite diverse theologies; examples include Karl Rahner's indirect method, and liberation theology's attention to the hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed.⁴⁷

In Fiorenza's schema, the retroductive argument is one way in which a religious heritage, brought to light through hermeneutical reconstruction, is interpreted and evaluated. Fiorenza contends that foundational theology must consider not only the cognitive and traditional coherence of a religious belief but also the belief's ability to shed light on human experience and to motivate well-informed and life-enhancing action. In his view, "since the hermeneutical retrieval of a tradition entails the retrieval of meaning and truth conditions, the ability of a hermeneutical retrieval to illumine and to guide praxis provides a warrant for the tradition."⁴⁸ In its focus on the actual, practical, social, and personal effects of religious tradition, the retroductive argument is compelling to those favoring a praxis-oriented approach to theology. It seems to me that the appeal to women's experience, past and present, functions in this manner. Women's experience has its place within each component of Fiorenza's threefold approach to theology, but can operate most powerfully if understood as a retroductive warrant for theological discernment and judgment. I do not intend to recommend that feminists simply adopt Francis Schüssler Fiorenza's proposal but to suggest that it sheds light on the multiple tasks involved in feminist theologies and demonstrates that challenges facing these theologies are part of a wider conversation. From this perspective, Catholic feminist theologies can continue their interest in theological anthropology with

⁴⁵ Ibid. 306.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 307.

⁴⁷ Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Systematic Theology: Task and Methods," in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, vol. 1, ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 77–80.

⁴⁸ Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Foundational Theology* 308.

renewed awareness of the need for hermeneutical reconstruction and theoretical reflection as well as a deeper commitment to promoting the theological claims that emerge from this process.

CONCLUSION

With its attention to the interrelationships of language, subjectivity, and politics, feminist poststructuralism offers a powerful critique of ahistorical approaches to theological anthropology and highlights the difficulties in making women's experience central to feminist theology. With their strong hermeneutic of suspicion, poststructuralists such as Fulkerson seek to uncover the "hidden workings and commitments of the communities in which women reside—from conservative churches to academic settings."⁴⁹ Sometimes the results are surprising. In Fulkerson's study of resistance to feminism among particular communities of poor Pentecostal women and middle-class Presbyterian women's groups, she discovered that "what is liberating for *us* may not be immediately applicable for others and vice versa."⁵⁰ Thus she argues that feminist theologies cannot ground themselves in claims about the human person or in appeals to women's experience.

My suggestion in regard to Catholic feminist theology is that while a theological anthropology rooted in women's experience should in some sense continue as foundational to Catholic feminist theologies, we might need to think more precisely about how it functions in those theologies and in the transformation they seek to effect. Like Fulkerson, I see the problems with simple appeals to women's experience and agree that poststructuralism is a useful tool for exploring these difficulties. As a Euro-American feminist, I stand in a tradition that has often universalized experience and sought simply to include women of color in the dominant culture, thus negating their experiences in blanket statements about "women's experience." Unlike Fulkerson, however, I remain convinced that an understanding of human subjectivity as historically conditioned but not entirely socially constructed can serve feminist theologies well. A revised "turn to the subject" that demands respect for women as full human beings and values their experiences seems strategically appropriate since it is often that very dignity that is at stake, evident in the limit as the struggle to survive. Perhaps what is called for is a more socially grounded sense of humanity, as often stressed in liberationist thought.

What then do we do with the notion of "women's experience"? The experiences of women do need to be told, especially those of women who

⁴⁹ Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject* viii (see above n. 17).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 177.

have been oppressed or silenced. Storytelling ends their unjust invisibility and challenges the tendency to universalize women's experience. Beyond that, however, we need to consider how the narratives of these experiences function methodologically. The diversity of women's experiences, so rightly emphasized by feminist liberation theologians, makes this task complex.

To move beyond a consciousness-raising sharing of experiences, which is still of enormous importance, to strategies for action we need methodical reflection on these experiences, ways to mine them authentically. With culturally appropriate methods and attention to historical and theoretical matters, feminist theologies can advance women's experiences as credible retroductive warrants for theological claims. These methods may involve ethnographic interviews in search of generative themes, such as those conducted by Ada María Isasi-Díaz for her book *En la Lucha /In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*. Another approach might engage women's interpreted experience with a reading of Scripture and the history of the Christian theological tradition, as undertaken by Elizabeth Johnson in her *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. Although they take different tacks, both theologians stress the interpretive dimension of their work. Their interpretations of the experiences of diverse women lead both of them to the conclusion that there is an essential connection between an affirmation of women as fully human persons and the freedom of women to exercise moral agency.

In this sense, theological anthropology, reflection on what it means to be human, cannot be divorced from ethics in the academy or in our daily lives. The devastating effects of being considered a "nonperson" have been well described by Latin American liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez. Though there are challenges to the role that both theological anthropology and women's experience have played in Catholic feminist theologies, I suggest that we not abandon the endeavor. Nonetheless, these challenges deserve examination. My hope is that by acknowledging what is truthful in them we can deepen our understanding of what it means to live an authentically human life and to remove the obstacles to realizing that end. Without endorsing its position, we can learn from feminist poststructuralism that scrutinizing the interplay of language, subjectivity, and politics is critical in any meaningful discussion of women's experience and in the construction of a truly liberating theological anthropology.