Feminist Critique of Sexuality and Religion

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It has been argued by feminist theologians that the construction of gender, sexuality and the construction of religion work hand in hand. This chapter will argue that there are heteropatriarchal assumptions underpinning the construction of religion and sexuality/gender which result in narrow and hierarchically driven narratives about both. It will further argue that within the Christian tradition, which is the home terrain of the author, there are historical examples that challenge and undermine this dominant understanding, opening new and exciting possibilities for the understanding of religion and sexuality and gender. Feminist theology with its emphasis on experience has allowed a new relationship between sexuality and religion to emerge with the body gaining a voice and certain legitimacy, within a hitherto dualistic and spiritually dominated set of doctrines and practices. This chapter will examine ways in which incarnation theology has provided the theological possibility for a radical new engagement with sexuality and how in turn this engagement has challenged and expanded the possibilities of incarnation. The chapter will be interdisciplinary using insights from psychology, anthropology, church history, philosophy and queer theory and will also use examples from other faith perspectives where appropriate.

Christianity declares itself to be a religion with incarnation at its heart, that is the entering into flesh of the divine and the transformation and salvation of the world through such an event. Unfortunately the religion that sprang from such an understanding has never to date managed to find the courage to take that declaration seriously and has operated from its earliest days within a split world. The initial split of material and spiritual has led to further splits within the material world itself, between man and woman, animal and human, black and white and so on. None of these dualisms have it seems led to positive and life-enhancing outcomes. In most cases oppression and exploitation have been the order of the day with those at the head of the hierarchies benefitting, most often in financial terms. The split between man and woman has had devastating consequences for women who have also had to carry the weight of patriarchal disapproval in matters of sexuality being believed to be the more material of the two genders and therefore
more prone to sexual immorality than the more spiritual man. Indeed the Fathers often warned against intercourse as the spiritual man would be literally trapped in the material women, who of course would have enticed him through her lisping speech and devilish flesh. There could then only be dangers involved in anything to do with women and so salvation and redemption did not tend to include women ‘as they are’ in the rhetoric or even the possibility until relatively late (Radford Ruether 1988).

It is not surprising then that Christianity has therefore been historically blind to questions of gender, believing that ‘mankind’ includes the experiences of women and men and encompasses all that makes us human. This assumption of course works in many ways, to a certain extent it becomes self-fulfilling in that women do begin to understand themselves through the male lens and in so many respects begin to see themselves as defective, insufficient or as simply experientially deluded. As de Beauvoir realised, all those years ago, a woman is not born, she is made, and her making is in order to support the male dominated status quo, she is made into what is useful. As she also so movingly noted women apprehend their own bodies not as ‘instruments of her transcendence but as an object destined for another’ (Bartky 1990, 38). This destination is usually the physical male but can also be the great Phallus in the sky, the patriarchal father who invades all manner of relationships. Once the ‘intimate recesses of the personality’ are invaded, ‘it may maim and cripple the spirit for ever’ (Bartky 1990, 58).

Although God plays no part in our secular society it has to be acknowledged that this making of women has its roots in theology since the way in which men and women are meant to be supposedly reflects God’s design for the universe. For example, the inequality between the sexes has been and still is attributed to the notion of complementarity which can be derived from a patriarchal reading of the Genesis myth. Eve is taken from the side of Adam thereby signalling that the two halves need to be made whole once more. Woman being a derivative of man can never expect to possess the original, holy qualities to the same extent. This is not just a view that can be lifted from the Hebrew scriptures. Some scholars also argue it is there in what at first seems a very positive statement for women, the Pauline injunction regarding equality in Christ (Gal. 3:28). On closer inspection it is argued that what is actually assumed is that woman disappears, the rib slots neatly back into place and the male image of God is left as he was first placed on this earth. In Christ the breach that occurred in Genesis is healed and man once again shines in unitary glory (Borresen 2005, 62). Presumably it is not beyond the bounds of speculation to assume that at the eschaton woman will cease to exist but until that time she will be judged against an androcentric norm. Borresen argues that Christ had to be incarnate as a male if he was to represent perfect humanity, such is the weight of patriarchal ideology (Borresen 1995, 190). It would have been inconceivable to the Fathers that a woman might be the divine incarnate. Indeed, for them it was often hard to imagine that woman could be holy.

This is a trend which started in Ephesians where we are told that woman’s salvational equality is gained by achieving Christ-like maleness (Eph. 4:13). It was picked up and carried on with vigour, Tertullian imagining that resurrected
women would be a mixture of angels and men while Jerome thought that if a woman wished to serve Christ she had to give up being a woman (Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 10, 161) while Ambrose added that a believing woman does indeed progress to complete manhood (Regula Episcopi, Preface). This gender-bending for salvation is rather a blunt instrument under which woman’s ultimate destiny is to disappear and it is evident in much Christian doctrine. However, if we look at some of the actual practices of women within Christian history that instrument of removal may itself be blunted and we are confronted with an interesting and nuanced picture of the place of gender in the Christian narrative.

Alternate Gender Narratives in Early Christianity

As early as 1902 Ernst Von Dobscutz was surmising that the Apocryphal Acts (many of which are now thought to have been written by women) were written in the genre of the Hellenistic romantic novel as Christians thought this would be a good way to spread the word in an underhand way (Burrs 1987, 11). Kerényi traces the genre back to the first century BCE and to Seneca (Burrs 1987, 16) and he sees cultic roots in the stories since the women in these stories have very passionate sex with a god and are threatened but then saved. Kerényi suggests that this motif transfers itself very easily to the Christian stories making them legends and not novels. There is a very strong body of scholarship (see MacDonald 1983), which suggests that they are folk-tales and as such they claim to present history. Folk-tales serve two opposing purposes; they stabilise society and at the same time they de-stabilise society. They can define the identity of those who are dissatisfied with society and become a source of strength for that group.

What we find in many of the Christian stories are women who defy physical boundaries and so question social gender and sexual roles by their actions. These days they may be called queer narratives. The women are always the heroines, even when an apostle like Paul is part of the story, because they are faithful and true and overcome adversity and threats to themselves. Thecla is an interesting character, to our modern eyes and ways of understanding is, she a transvestite, transgendered or transsexual, or is this motif used to tell us something of significance about the relationship of people who become Christian with their environment? Contemporary scholarship is no longer content to leave the argument that she and others cross-dressed for the sake of safety. After all in Thecla’s story she does not cross-dress from the beginning even though she is travelling and at some risk, she only cross-dresses after baptism. And of course, this is in strict contravention of scriptural command (Deut. 22:5). Transvestites were quite common in some pagan cults where they were associated with Aphrodite of Cyprus, however this does not help explain Thecla.

The clue to Thecla may be found when she is thrown to the beasts but not killed, and the tale relays that she found herself clothed by God. John Anson suggests that this is perhaps a literal fulfilment of the putting on of Christ that Paul speaks about
in baptism and so for him the donning of men’s clothes is simply another step in this process that started in the arena with the beasts (Anson 1974). He continues that a faith based in Galatians 3:27–28 would mean followers would embody a state of primal perfection that overcame all distinctions including that of sex. In putting on Christ followers would attempt to appropriate his male form. There is of course a real danger here that we see perfect creation as male and so women have to disappear, or at least cross-dress in order to be saved! The Gospel of Thomas may be seen as the transgendered or even transsexual gospel where it reads ‘For every woman who has become male will enter the Kingdom of heaven’ (Doresse 1960, 370). This was made quite explicit in some baptismal rites such as those amongst the Valentinians where bi-sexual fusion was enacted and women were transformed into males. Of course such readings can simply reinforce the notion of the inadequacy of women and so need to be seen through new eyes.

Another possible background for Thecla’s actions may have been rooted in Montanism where the women prophets Prisca and Maximilla had prominent roles. They had many visions and understood themselves as female Christs. This understanding was based in their reading of Galatians 3:27–28 whereby once the distinctions and divisions were overcome they were free to embrace their divine natures. There are many such stories and indeed they are found in many of the religions of the time as well as ancient mythologies. While I want to totally reject the idea that this has to be understood as the donning of male perfection, I also want to question that it was purely a device to protect chastity. Even though many of these women donned men’s clothes after they ran away from marriages or engagements and wandered in the world I think there is much more to this than meets the eye. I wish to argue that they understood their male attire as connected in overcoming the binary opposites of gender that set in place unequal lived reality. Cross-dressing implies a starting point and a place towards which one is aiming and so serves to highlight gender polarity since clothes allow us to play with identity and they aid that becoming in a physical embodied performance. Cross-dressing creates an illusion for the user and the observer or, as Van Gennep puts it, it is a liminal space allowing movement across boundaries and transversing margins which confine (Suthwell 2004, 18). Cross-dressing is an ingenious tool as it does not fit categories of sex or gender alone and as such exposes both and so in this way is a form of gender iconography, making visible the spaces of possibility which are closed off by dichotomous conceptualisation. Ritual cross-dressing which pre-dated Christian cross-dressing has at its heart the notion of returning to wholeness believing that it allows a very deep experience of gender – both one’s own and the other. In some societies cross-dressing represents magical qualities which are signalled by the ambiguity. So Christian cross-dressing has a cultural heritage and in taking seriously the message of equality of the Christian gospel those who did it queered gender in order to find a way of living that radical equality. After all, once we engage in confusing the categories it leads to their breakdown as oppositional points of reference and we need to ensure that we do not replace them with points along an old axis. We are perhaps beginning to understand what our cross-dressed fore-sisters were doing and can begin to ask if we should be doing it too.
It seems entirely possible that these stories of gender-bending were written by and for women who wished to subvert the social order. Possibly they represented wishes rather than realities at the time that they were written but it may also be the case that they traced back to the time of Jesus and had a kernel of truth embedded in the lives of women around him. Women who break out from the norm in any age face the threat of physical violence and I find it extremely fascinating that their way of remaining safe was to keep transgressing the norm. Indeed, later male readers often praise them for escaping their feminine natures. While we may not wish to side with John Chrysostom who is ecstatic that Olympius may be said to be male, having risen above her female nature, we can also see possibilities for breaking out of crushing gender expectations. Women like Thecla both cut their hair and wear male clothing, which is an extremely transgressive action in the world which they are inhabiting. These women were not all transsexual but they did push the gender boundaries very hard in order to create space in which to flourish. Their stories are inspirational in that they provide a memory that is counter to the ‘good girl’ image that we have been presented with by the church hierarchy. They ask questions about engendered spaces that are as relevant today as they were then and they show that story-telling and action can be subversive. They tell a different story and so make possible a different reality.

Fathers, Fathers Everywhere!

We see just how embedded questions of gender are in western culture when we look to the ‘fathers’ of another kind, those of philosophy and psychology – they like the Church Fathers before them place women on the back foot. Gender is inscribed on the body and the bodies of women have carried a very heavy burden under patriarchy, the way in which the bodies of women and men have been ascribed gender roles is a question of power and significance in the world, these definitions do not simply show the difference they make the difference and as such need much attention by feminist theologies. The way in which the bodies of women and the gender roles given them have been viewed by the churches and traditional theology has meant that women are denied access to the symbolic order in any creative and positive way, they are the abject, the ones that have to be rejected in order that the symbolic and political realm can work.

Lacan as we all know may well be called the father of the Phallus! For him the Symbolic Order is what defines us as embodied persons and following Freud he makes it very difficult for women to find a place at all in this Order of the fathers. For him the acquisition of language is extremely important and even this is different for boys and girls since girls do not speak the language of the father which is the

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1 See Isherwood (2000). In the conclusion I argue that safe sex for women in this day and age is transgressive sex since playing the game has got us nowhere. It seems our sisters in faith had the same idea.
dominant currency. Sexual/gender difference then is at the centre of the Symbolic Order and the Phallus reigns supreme as the structuring principle; this of course is developed from a very uncritical acceptance of the Freudian notion of the Oedipus complex but also has its roots much further back in our cultural heritage, some would say in Eden itself when the differentiation of the sexes and the relationship to the Symbolic was first alluded to. These tales we tell ourselves create a world in which women and of course our bodies are always lacking, indeed Lacan speaks of women as absences which need to be filled with phallic signifiers.2 There is no way to resolve this situation within the world of the Symbolic Order and Lacan urges women to find their own economy beyond that of the phallus. This can be done through female sexual pleasure (jouissance) but it is never likely to be achieved since it is beyond the phallic and therefore beyond language and meaning itself. There can be no subjectivity then and women and their bodies can only find significance through the male body and the male symbolism.

This situation permeates the whole of culture where women are constantly on the outside without a language to call their own. Our bodies then have no hope of a voice in the discourses that are played out on them. Irigaray highlights this dilemma by suggesting that there can be no subjectivity until women find a place in culture since this belonging gives psychic leverage to our personhood (Howson 2006, 103). For Irigaray (1985) this can begin with the body, we can find a language when our genital lips meet and speak. She also feels that we have to find a language of the divine; in fact the two processes are not that distinct. It is a matter of great urgency that we find a language because if we do not then we simply repeat the same history through an inability to think otherwise. Irigaray’s contribution to religious philosophy is well known to readers and what is perhaps of most relevance here is her insistence that women have to find a place in culture, a tradition, in order to empower them. It has been argued by some that sociologists of the body have often forgotten the materiality and social contexts of bodies in their prioritisation of Lacan and the psychoanalytic discourse, the one that gets us in the most intimate parts of ourselves, our psyches.

Both Butler and Braidotti challenge the Lacanian notion that women are outside language, Butler through suggesting that woman is in process and so not a finally defined other who can be placed outside, she is a body becoming, this is a language of its own, a language of materiality (Butler 1990, 30), while Braidotti speaks of figurations which are politically informed accounts of alternative subjectivity. The living ‘as if’ which is ‘a technique of strategic re-location in order to rescue what we need of the past in order to trace paths of transformations of our lives here and now’. She continues, ‘as if’ is affirmation of fluid boundaries, practice of the intervals’ which sees nothing as an end in itself (Braidotti 1994, 6) – not even the Symbolic Order one suspects! While she does acknowledge that we as women have no mother tongue we do have linguistic sites from which we both see and fail to see. For this reason then we need to be nomads, taking no position or identity as permanent but rather trespassing and transgressing, making coalitions and

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interconnections beyond boxes. No language but we do have bodies, bodies that have been ‘the basic stratum on which the multilayered institution of Phallocentric subjectivity is erected [she] is the primary matter and the foundational stone, whose silent presence installs the master in his monologic mode’ (Braidotti 1994, 119). These same bodies can be radically subverting of culture when they find their voice beyond the fixed language and meaning of the masters’ discourses.

Braidotti anticipates the objection that total nomadism will never allow for coalitions by suggesting that the only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular, to engage in a politics of positioning (Braidotti 1994, 73). However, this does not require us to be static or defined by male definitions because as she tells us it is the feminine that is a ‘typically masculine attitude which turns male disorders into feminine values’ (Braidotti 1994, 124) and not the female body, this is free to roam and to express itself, to find new ways of being by thinking through the body. The nomadism of which Braidotti speaks perhaps enables the feminist theologian to pick up the notion of Christians as resurrection and pilgrim people especially in the light of our nomadic cross-dressing fore-sisters. Should we take seriously the possibility of shifting and moving within gender and sexual identities that could free us from the oppressive repetitions required by religion and culture? Perhaps by highlighting the constructed nature of gender categories we begin to draw attention to their foolishness and restricting (non-redeemed) nature and begin to enflesh the Galatian baptismal formula, ‘In Christ there is neither male nor female’ – is this a Christian politics of positioning?

Women Find a Voice

The Women’s Movement claimed that women had the right, based on their own experience, to define their own lives. This is a revolution under patriarchal Christianity which claims the right of definition for itself and the male God. Women therefore need to find a way to be ‘where they are’, undefined and free. It can be argued that both the history and the destiny of women are written on their bodies through the inscription of gender. In addition, the female body can offer a new paradigm, a new knowledge, one that challenges the traditional Word. With the adoption of feminist methodology in theology we have a revolutionary situation in which embodied subjectivity is placed at the heart of knowing and this declares invalid ‘objective absolute rationality’ which has been the ‘norm’ within patriarchal mythology.

Butler (2004) is provocative when she declares that multiplicity is not the thing that makes agency impossible but it is rather the very nature of agency, precisely the condition in which agency flourishes. Further she suggests that it is in the fear
of the questions posed by multiplicity that we find the creation of the rhetoric of morals as a defence of politics (Butler 2004, 180). She illustrates her point through considering how the Catholic Church deals with issues of gender and sexual difference. The Curia has called for the United Nations to eliminate the language of gender from its platforms to do with the status of women, declaring that the word is simply a cover for homosexuality which they condemn and do not see as having a place in a rights agenda. They insisted on a return to the word ‘sex’ and their rhetoric attempted to indisputably link sex with maternal and feminine, reflecting as they saw it the divinely ordained ‘natural goodness’ of things.

To those observing the agenda was very clear, it was an attempt to reverse many of the gains that women had made in relation to human rights, and it was a narrow defining that could be once again placed at the service of containment and control. Butler puts it as follows, ‘the Vatican fears the separation of sexuality from sex, for that introduces a notion of sexual practice that is not constrained by putatively natural reproductive ends’ (Butler 2004, 184). It is then no surprise to her that the Vatican considers the inclusion of lesbian rights in United Nations legislation as ‘anti-human’. Given their understanding of the relation of sex and the human person then it is correct to make such a statement since the inclusion of lesbian into the realm of the universal would be to expand the boundaries of what is so far defined as human within the conventional limits. In order then that all humans may be recognised it seems that ‘the human must become strange to itself’ (Butler 2004, 191).

Butler goes on to say that this new human ‘will have no ultimate form but it will be one that is constantly negotiating sexual difference in a way that has no natural or necessary consequences for the social organisation of sexuality’ (Butler 2004, 191). Is this what those early Christian fore-sisters were attempting to embody in their interpretation of the declaration in Galatians? Is it in this enactment of the beyond, the becoming strange to oneself, that all the possibilities of incarnate life find root? Butler reminds us that the body is the site on which language falters (Butler 2004, 198) and the signifiers of the body remain for the most part largely unconscious which in itself is a language, but one ever unfolding and of many tongues. Performativity is a whole body engagement just as incarnation is and both resist the deadening claws of narrow and controlling definitions of personhood – both expand the edges of where it is we think we inhabit.

The other massive contribution offered by feminist theologies is in the area of sexuality. The traditional interpretation of Christianity has not looked kindly on sexuality, particularly the sexuality of women which lives in the Christian psyche as the cause of the Fall of Man! Many of the early feminist scholars illustrated how women, sexuality, spirituality and the sacred were not always at odds in our human history. Indeed, how women’s sexuality was for many centuries intimately and positively connected with the sacred and the divine itself.3 It is this recovery of the erotic within theology that has marked a significant contribution of feminist theologies. For theologians Audre Lorde, although not a theologian herself, stands

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3 See for example, Tess Tessier’s Dancing After the Whirlwind (1997).
out as the provider of the essential canon on the erotic. For Lorde the erotic is the intense kernel of our being that, when released, ‘flows through and colours my life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitises and strengthens all my experience’ (Lorde 1984, 57). It is a form of outreaching joy that connects us to all things and transforms all experiences into delight. Not quite how the Fathers saw it!

Rita Brock (1988) and Carter Heyward (1989) are two feminist theologians who expand this understanding and are most associated with the notion of Christ as erotic power. Rita Brock believes that when speaking of Jesus as powerful we have to be quite clear that this is erotic power; this is no abstract concept but is power deeply embedded in our very core. This kind of power is wild and cannot be controlled and living at this level saves us from the sterility that comes from living by the head alone. Eros allows us to feel our deepest passions in all areas of life and to reclaim it from the narrow sexual definition that has been used by patriarchal understanding. Christianity has always encouraged agape, which Brock sees as heady and objective and therefore not as something that will change the world. Indeed it is part of the objectifying discourse which allows us to stand by as though powerless in the face of many of the horrors of our world. Both Brock and Heyward show how in fearing passion traditional Christianity has made us a passionless and therefore largely impotent people.

For Heyward intimacy is the deepest quality of relation and she sees no reason why it should be left out of our theological story. Heyward believes that to be intimate is to be assured that we are known in such a way that the mutuality of our relation is real, creative and cooperative and so it has a fundamental part in any theology and religious practice. Heyward’s original work was rooted in a close analysis of Mark’s gospel and a re-reading of the meaning of exousia and dunamis as used in that gospel. Her conclusions led her to assert that it is the power of dunamis, that raw dynamic energy that attracts us to each other and the world, that is the transforming and thus salvific power that Jesus points us towards through his life and engagement with just such a passion. Heyward’s grounding of passion and erotic power within the Christological arena opened the way for much creative and revolutionary sexual theology and with it rethinking of women’s sexuality in general. If the central core of Christian belief, Christology, is indeed rooted in the erotic, which has some expression through the sexual, then Christian theologians will have to think again about their naïve division of these deeply human, deeply divine elements of humanity. Heyward stunned the theological world when a preface to her book noted that she could not write theology unless she was grounded in sensuous pleasures including making love to one of her women lovers who would bring her forth to herself and the world and in so doing to God. Strong words in so many ways for an Episcopalian priest. This feminist engagement with Christology and ways of interpreting actually gave female sexuality ways in which women could lift their bodies and sexuality out of the mire of male clerical dictate and once again declare the sacredness of their sexual lives. Of course in turn this also highlighted how, under patriarchal rules both clerical and secular, the lived reality of women’s sexuality was not always as free or sacred – many a woman has had her body made the object of blasphemous treatment by clerical declaration.
as well as physically harsh and disrespectful treatment. By suggesting that the embodied reality of eros is central to the life of Christ as it is to our own becoming and relating Heyward opened the gates for sexual lives to be part of the basis for the unfolding of the divine and the reflection that becomes doctrinal.

Queering the Old Terrain

In recent years queer theory has impacted on feminist theology. The postmodern agenda makes it imperative that we look with new eyes at the old questions and especially in the light of rethinking what it is that women may be, that we do not come to easy and safe answers – sexual theology asks that we be bold in order to fully explore the depths of our human/divine nature. If Heyward is right then it is in the depth of our relationality, a relationality that is tested, stretched and enabled through skin-on-skin engagement, that we find the depth of the divine. Incarnation is not for the faint-hearted! Of course there is a difference between not being faint-hearted and actually being blind to some of the old ways creeping in under another and seemingly more inclusive name.

Although Sheila Jeffreys is not a theologian she is an activist with a keen eye for the pitfalls lurking in sexuality and gender. She is concerned that in considering gender as a performance we are still stuck within binary opposites when looking for ways to perform and that in perhaps being afraid to question such things as butch/femme relationships and transsexual surgery we are reinforcing all that we say we have stood against for years, that is the binary opposition of male and female and the unequal power structure that it enables. She is concerned that a number of older butches are opting for sex change surgery as their bodies soften and they look more female, in order to overcome this they go under the knife. Jeffreys is understandably concerned that both womanhood and lesbianism are being undermined here in an attempt to opt into male power and privilege (Jeffreys 2003, 130). She is also aware that when sexuality is spoken of in academic language it becomes difficult to criticise without being labelled as out of touch. She ventures to suggest that much butch/femme role-playing popularises a watered-down form of S/M in which dominance and submission are embraced as delights and not political problems (Jeffreys 2003, 127). Of course, as many feminist theologians have pointed out S/M may be a very enabling and empowering practice for women and so original feminist concerns may have to be revisited and thought through from a different starting point. However questions such as S/M and pornography do highlight some of the tensions that are raised by the suggestion that embodied eros is a place to begin the creation of theology and the revelation of the divine. At what point if any do we declare actions to be outside the unfolding of the divine? The narrow boundaries may have shifted but does this mean there are no longer any boundaries at all?

If it was ever believed that opening up the sacredness of female sexuality would be an easy path then time has proved otherwise. There has, as we may
have expected, been a great deal of backlash from the churches but the path has also not been smooth within the discipline itself. While many have welcomed this development there have been others who have seen it as another way of reinforcing the relationship between the nature of women and sexuality in a less than positive way. In addition, concern was voiced through the Good Sex project that western values were once again to the forefront when the reality of many women’s lives, particularly in the east, was that sex was far from a blessing let alone a place of sacred meaning. Those who are in the sex trade that serves western consumerism were felt to have no voice in this discourse while those from religions such as Buddhism felt that this was a Christian dialogue that took little account of other ideas of the body. At the time of the project it was also felt that little if any attention had been paid to the notion of celibacy. Although I was not the first to do so, we can now reply that it has been addressed (Isherwood 2006) and with some seriousness but as a sexual stance. Further, there has always been a keen awareness that women are situated differently and that this contextuality hugely affects all matters to do with the divine through the lived reality of women. Exploitation is always a reality and one that feminist theology is keen to oppose and it does highlight that feminist theologians need to tread carefully when they open areas for discussion.

While some feel that the feminist theological interventions in the area of sexuality may have broken open the narrow boundaries too wide, there are others such as Marcella Althaus Reid (2001) who call feminist liberation theologies to task for not having the honesty to face the full reality of women’s lives. She claims that much liberation theology, of which the feminist sexual theology is a part, can only deal with ‘decent women’, that is to say with those who are seen as suffering and sexually pure. The married mother who is the victim of domestic abuse is within the remit but the poor woman who likes sex, all kinds of transgressive and beyond-the-pale sex, is a test for feminist liberation theology. Althaus Reid points out that the experiences of many women are not included in the activity of feminist sexual theology and she urges a new look and a move beyond. She offers us Xena, a leather lesbian warrior, as a salvific figure, as an image of Christ. The drag queens of her home town Buenos Aires are brought into the theological conversation and no longer held at the edges in a morally disapproving cage, rather their lived experience and what they signal about sex and gender is at the centre of theological considerations. Back street prostitutes become images of Christ as they give their bodies for the lives of others, normally their children, and the child prostitute becomes Christ since her suffering calls us to redemptive action, that is to deep and transforming action within ourselves and the systems that create such suffering. If we are declaring the sacredness of female sexuality it is counter-productive to place a ring around the good sex and the bad sex, feminist theologians have to get far more comfortable with sex, all kinds of sex, and not run and hide behind the gender discourse.4 Incarnation is much rawer than that!

So raw in fact that it is constantly challenging the edges of any discourse in theology. In the area of sexuality it does seem that there is tension in feminist

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4 See Lisa Isherwood’s ‘Indecent Theology’ (2003).
theology, particularly over whether the discipline can carry forward the harder questions. There is though a more disturbing notion and that is that sexuality is once again a private matter, one that is concerned with integrated, happy people doing whatever gives them pleasure. Feminist theology for these people has helped to make sexuality a broader playing field and contributed to the political move for more rights and the social movement for more acceptances regarding a range of sexual preferences. It is therefore alarming since the political goes much deeper than more diverse pleasures being accepted across a greater range of society. In my opinion it would benefit us to keep the words of Heyward in front of us: ‘When I say I love you, let the revolution begin.’ This is no statement of simple self-acceptance and contentment; it is a fundamental declaration of the personal as political and a commitment to embodied justice seeking between two people and far beyond into the whole social order. It is the kind of revolution that is spoken of in the Song of Songs where the lovers challenge all convention, race, class, economics and place their sex – there is very little mention of love and certainly no marriage envisaged – within the widest possible context, that of the cosmos itself as an act of revolution.5 Feminist theology has always been concerned with freeing people from the narrow confines of patriarchally constructed discourses but has also seen links between many of those discourses, in this way free expression in the body should also be linked with social change. We have come a long way from the dualism of early and much contemporary Christian doctrine with its negative impact on sex and gender. We no longer have to see both as aspects of ourselves that are fixed in the material realm and so in need of transcending if we are to fulfil our spiritual natures. We have indeed come far but there is much further to go and now due to the opening up of theology by feminist methodology we may go there in the arms of lusty lovers in order to speak more moistly of the passionate God who draws us on.

References


5 See Lisa Isherwood (forthcoming).


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