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SOME RHETORICAL PROBLEMS OF THEOLOGY IN RELATION TO THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT AND A POSSIBLE APPROACH TO THEIR SOLUTION

In Rhetorica for Winter 1987, Kathy Eden begins her article, "Hermeneutics and the Ancient Rhetorical Tradition" with a quotation from Schleiermacher: "the unity of hermeneutics and rhetoric results from the fact that every act of understanding is the obverse of an act of discourse, in that one must come to grasp the thought that was at the base of the discourse" (59). It is this matter of the 'thought at the base of the discourse' that I particularly want to address. Specifically, I want to look at two women's approaches to Christian theology: Mary Daly's Beyond God the Father and Sally McFague's Metaphorical Theology.

Christian theology is often considered to be the last stronghold of the male. The scriptures were written, or written down, by men, and throughout the centuries have been interpreted primarily by men. The community which theology serves--the church--has until recently excluded women from the priesthood and for the most part from the preaching ministry; and even today a large part of the church still denies important and influential positions to women. It is not surprising, therefore, that feminists are troubled by an institution which appears to exclude them. To quote Mary Daly: "If God is male,

then the male is God" (19). Even moderate feminists object to this apparent identification of God and the male in Christianity, and radical feminists have attacked Christianity as one of the most powerful of the forces which have contributed to their oppression. The bitterness and hostility of such radical feminist attacks are, and are meant to be, shocking. They therefore draw attention to themselves in way which the more moderate criticisms do not. Yet I believe that these more moderate contributions will have a more lasting significance; I also believe that some of them, in particular McFague's Metaphorical Theology, are more truly typical of a feminine approach. In what follows I shall try to support this contention.

In doing so, I shall draw upon a recent, and I think very important work, Women's Ways of Knowing, by Mary Field Belenky and others. The book is particularly useful because what it addresses is the way that women--not specifically feminists--look at the world and interpret their experience of it. What the authors are concerned with, then, is the feminine, rather than the feminist. And what they see as distinguishing the typically feminine from the typically masculine approach is the strong preference for a connected way of knowing. This they contrast with what they call separate knowing.

Separate knowing they characterize as objective and impersonal. It involves the deliberate exclusion of feeling and the application of abstract rules and principles. It is essentially adversarial, and it is based on doubt rather than on belief. The procedures of separate knowing, say the authors, "have been most highly elaborated and explicitly codified in the sciences, but they exist in some form [. . .] in all the disciplines" (109). This method of approach has been the dominant one since the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century; it was developed by males, to be used by them, and although

many women have successfully learned how to use it, most of them have never been really comfortable with it.

Far more natural to the female is the connected way of knowing. This is concerned with synthesis rather than with analysis, with the particular rather than with the general, with the concrete rather than with the abstract. It includes specific persons and contexts; it is opposed to adversarial positions, preferring a win/win/ rather than a win/lose outcome; and it is grounded in belief rather than in doubt. "Women find it hard to see doubting as a game," say the authors; "they tend to take it personally. Teachers and fathers and boyfriends assure them that arguments are not between persons but between positions, but the women continue to fear that someone will get hurt" (105). "Believing" on the other hand, "feels real to them, perhaps because it promises to reveal the kind of truth they value--truth that is personal and particular, and grounded in first-hand experience." What is typical, above all, of connected knowing is the quality of caring, reconciling, healing and nurturing. Whereas separate knowing sees education according to a banking metaphor-information is power, money in the bank, and is transferred from one person to another--connected knowing sees it according to a metaphor of midwifery--a bringing into being, a co-operative process. Connected knowing is unifying; separate knowing is divisive.

Before I go any further, I want to make two points clear: first, the authors do not claim that the distinction between separate and connected knowing is a new one. John Stuart Mill made it in contrasting the approaches of Jeremy Bentham and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (113n). And secondly, as the foregoing example implies, connected knowing is not confined to women. There is evidence that it is gender-related, the

authors tell us, but not that it is gender specific. Moreover, it seems to me that connected knowing is increasingly recognized as important in the academic world of today. The separation of subject and object, of the knower from the known, is no longer taken as a given, even in scientific enquiry. And whatever we women might like to think, I do not believe that the questioning of the ultimate value of separate knowing has arisen as a result of women's contributions, though it may have encouraged, and been encouraged by them.

Now where the study as religion is concerned, an approach which takes account of the context--in rhetorical terms, one that recognizes the importance of ethos and pathos--is no new thing. The significance of the message in terms of the credibility of its source and the cultural values of its audience has been seen as important in religious studies for quite some time. But here I must make a distinction between the study of religion and the practice of it-between those who investigate a religious belief and those who hold it. And I think it is true, certainly of conservative theologians, that although they take ethos and pathos very seriously so far as the transmission of the message is concerned, they do not allow them to affect the central belief. That it, ethos and pathos affect how the message is sent, not what it fundamentally is. When, therefore, the feminist objects that the patriarchal image of God as Father is one that excludes her, and that she cannot receive the message because she does not feel herself to be part of the audience, the typical conservative response will be: "That is too bad, and we are very sorry that you feel excluded; but we cannot alter the facts; and one of the facts is that God is Father, and therefore male."

Recognizing--or at least assuming--this to be the response of traditional Christianity, Mary Daly rejects Christianity altogether. A religion which bases itself on the concept of God as patriarch has, she believes, nothing to offer women. The only kind of religion which she sees as acceptable to women is the Dianic--that is, witchcraft--which not only recognizes but privileges women. "The witch that burns within our being will have to bring out [our] potential stature, repudiating ambivalence and servitude, refusing the torture and honors which are their only reward" (149).

The question which we must now ask is this: is Mary Daly's approach typical of connected knowing? At first it may appear that it is. Certainly Daly takes very seriously matters of ethos and pathos. The message of Christianity is unacceptable because its source--men--lacks credibility, and because of the negative emotional response it stimulates in women. But in a more fundamental way, Daly's approach is inconsistent with the values of connected knowing, which is essentially unifying and reconciling, not divisive and adversarial. Whatever may be true of radical feminists, women in general do not care only about other women; they care about people. Daly, in fact, uses men as scapegoats in much the same way as men have often used women, projecting upon them whatever is denied in the self. She merely turns the tables. The antagonism between the sexes is thus maintained and indeed promoted. And just as she divides the human race, alienating one half of it from the other, so she divides and alienates the means of persuasion. For Daly, it seems, logos has no significance at all. What matters in religion is relevance and usefulness. Whether Christianity or any other religion actually accords with the way things are is a question which she entirely ignores. Ethos and pathos are privileged to such an extent that logos is totally excluded. And this kind of divisiveness,

it seems to me, is not typical of connected knowing. Daly belongs with connected knowers only in so far as she rejects separate knowers, whom she accuses of 'methodolatry' (11).

Sally McFague's more moderate approach seems to me to be more typical of connected knowing, and thus more truly feminine, because it is healing and creative. It divides neither the human race nor the means of persuasion. Instead, she brings considerations of ethos, pathos and logos together in a fruitful way. Although she takes as seriously as Daly does the objections of women to the patriarchy which traditional Christianity has supported, she neither accepts nor rejects it; she has another look at it; she asks questions about it.

The fundamental question that McFague asks is: "What kind of statement is 'God is Father'"? Her answer is that it is a metaphor. Now this response is so obvious that it may appear that it cannot be useful. Not only is it obvious to us in the twentieth century; it was obvious to most of the great theologians from Augustine to Aquinas to Luther and beyond. As Augustine says, all our human language is inadequate to describe God, who is ultimately beyond our powers of description (McFague, 130). But McFague follows up this recognition of the metaphorical nature of the statement by bringing to bear upon it the extensive study of metaphor that has been done this century, particularly that of Paul Ricoeur. In particular, she applies Ricoeur's assertion of the tensive quality of metaphor: that it says at one and the same time both 'is' and 'is not.' As long as metaphor is alive as metaphor, this tension is evident. But metaphors, particularly those which are extensively used for a long time, have a tendency to die; and when they die, the tension is lost. The 'is not' falls out and is forgotten. And this is particularly

dangerous in view of the interactive nature of tenor and vehicle. That is, although primarily the vehicle is used to shed light upon the tenor, the tenor is also affected by the vehicle. To say that war is like a chess game modifies not only our ideas of war but also our ideas of chess (37).

What happens when this tension between 'is' and 'is not' is lost is that the metaphor dies as metaphor, and is interpreted as literal truth. As McFague puts it, 'similarity becomes identity' (41). This, she claims, is what has happened to the metaphor of God the Father: it has ceased to be understood as metaphorical and is now taken as being literally true. It is not surprising that this has happened. In the first place, the metaphor has been with us for some time, and it would be more surprising if it had not fossilized. In the second place, there has been within the Protestant tradition a strong tendency towards literal interpretation especially among the more conservative parts of the church. Here I must make it clear that I do not altogether agree with McFague: she sees metaphorical, as distinct from symbolic, interpretation as typical of Protestants. What I see, on the other hand, is the increasing tendency of Protestants--who by and large abandoned the fourfold interpretation of the medieval church--to insist upon literal interpretation where earlier theologians would not. For example, on the vexed question of the interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis, St. Augustine asserts in the Confessions that we cannot possibly know what Moses meant when he said that God created the heavens and the earth, and must therefore be content with any interpretation that is consistent with the principle of love (302). This is a great deal more liberal than the rigidly literal interpretation insisted upon by some of the more extreme Protestants today.

One of the problems with the idea of God the Father is, then, that it is a dead metaphor that has become a literal truth. But this is not the only problem. Another has to do with its dominance. Theology, which because of the ineffability of its subject, must always rely heavily upon metaphors, can offset the danger of their fossilization by shifting them all the time. As McFague says:

> The strong iconoclasm of the Old Testament, its fear of making graven images of God, resulted in a superabundance of images, none of which was to be regarded as literal or even adequate. As one exegete says, "A Hebrew sucked the juice out of each metaphor as he used it and threw the skin away at once." The Hebrew poet piled up and threw away metaphors of God in the hope of both overwhelming the imagination with the divine richness and undercutting any idolatrous inclination to absolutize images (43).

The same is true, of course, of the New Testament, both in the parables of the Kingdom and in the metaphors of Himself used by Jesus as they are recorded in John's Gospel. Here Jesus refers to himself as, among other things, bread, a vine, a door, a shepherd and a way.

Had the metaphor of God as Father been used all along as one of many, according to the scriptural model, not only would it have been less likely to be taken literally; it would also have been less potent. But, in fact, it has been not only a metaphor, but also a model; and as such it has become the object of idolatry: that is, it has assumed an importance which it should not have. McFague attacks the patriarchal model on two grounds, one feminist--its irrelevance--but the other theological--its idolatrousness.

McFague defines a model as a dominant metaphor, a metaphor with staying power. It organizes and controls other metaphors in an organic, consistent and comprehensive manner. And drawing upon the work of Max Black, McFague points out

that a model acts as a filter or screen, one which allows certain elements to be more clearly visible (23). But because it does this, it also acts as a set of blinders, suppressing whatever is not consistent with it (82).

Because the model of God as Father has been dominant in this way, it has screened out much that cannot be seen in terms of it, both in the Bible itself and in Christian experience. For example, McFague claims that it has blinded us to the fact that, although Jesus spoke of God as His father and ours, he specifically denied any identification of the human with the divine father. Here McFague follows Rosemary Ruether's interpretation of Matthew 23:9, "Do not call any man on earth father; for you have one father and he is in heaven" (151). The model has also tended to obscure the fact that the ministry of Jesus was anti-establishment: he identified with the poor and the outcast, with people of other cultures and with women.

In particular, with women. I am reminded here of the work of another and much earlier feminist, one who also had some claim to be considered a theologian. Dorothy Sayers, in "The Human-Not-Quite-Human" has this to say:

> 'Blessed be God,' says the Jew, 'that hath not made me a woman.' God, of course, may have his own opinion, but the church is reluctant to endorse it. I think I have never heard a sermon preached on the story of Martha and Mary that did not attempt, somehow, somewhere, to explain away its text. Mary's, of course, was the better part--the Lord said so, and we must not precisely contradict Him. But we will be careful not to despise Martha. No doubt, He approved of her too. We could not get on without her, and indeed, (having paid lip-service to God's opinion) we must admit that we greatly prefer her. For Martha was doing a really feminine job, whereas Mary was just behaving like any other disciple, male or female, and that is a hard pill to swallow.
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> Perhaps it is no wonder that women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man-there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as 'the women, God help us' or 'the ladies, God bless them'; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their

> questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind, and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as He found them and was completely unselfconscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything 'funny' about woman's nature (46).

Not only parts of the scriptures but also important elements in the Christian experience have been screened out by the model of the Fatherhood of God. McFague refers briefly to the women mystics of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It is worth quoting here from the one among them whose ideas of God as Mother were most highly developed. Here is a passage from Revelations of Divine Love, by Julian of Norwich, a contemporary of Chaucer:

> As we know, our own mother bore us only into pain and dying. But our true mother Jesus, who is all love, bears us into joy and endless living. Blessed may He be!
> As mother feeds her child with her milk, but our beloved mother Jesus feed us with himself (169).

McFague's point is significantly corroborated and indeed extended here by Caroline Walker Bynum. Bynum's book, Jesus as Mother, was published in the same year as McFague's Metaphorical Theology; no doubt that is why McFague does not refer to it. For Bynum makes it clear that the idea of Jesus as Mother, though it is used by the female mystics, does not arise for the first time in their work:

> In recent years, several scholars have become deeply interested in this aspect of medieval piety, impelled by a feminist theology that either calls for androgynous God-language, or condemns the image of 'God our Father.' This new enthusiasm for the 'mother Jesus' of medieval religious writers has usually concentrated on the thirteenth and fourteenth century uses of the image, especially on the sophisticated theology developed around it by the anchoress Julian of Norwich. . . and has often implied that such a devotional tradition is particularly congenial to women and must have been developed by or for or about them. The first flowering of the image after the patristic period appears to come in the twelfth century in the works of men (111).

In the list of eight such men she includes Bernard of Clairvaux, and Anselm of Canterbury, from whom, she says, the Cistercians may have borrowed the idea. In Bynum's view, the image of Jesus as mother has less to do with explicitly feminine experience than with the tendency of the piety of the time. In the earlier medieval period, God was thought of primarily as king, judge and warrior. In contrast, eleventh and twelfth century writers stress Christ's humanity. "The fundamental religious drama is now located within the self, and it is less a battle than a journey" (16). The mystics--and not only the female mystics--"see moral evil as the opposite of union--that is as an experience of alienation, emptiness, a personal suffering or loss of what is good and meaningful, rather than as a chosen rebellion against good or a deliberately espoused corruption" (17).

It is interesting to note in passing how closely this resembles the experience of the twentieth century.

The fact that important parts of the Christian tradition and experience have in this way been screened out by the dominant model of God the Father suggests to McFague that, in spite of its dominance, it is not the root metaphor of Christianity. It is important for her to establish this point, for she identifies herself as a reformer, not, as Mary Daly does, as a revolutionary. Here McFague uses as a parallel the history of science, as set forth by Thomas Kuhn in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. She accepts the proposition that a paradigm will continue to dominate as long as it can tolerate anomalies. When it can no longer do so, there will be a revolution, and it will be replaced by a new paradigm, provided that one is ready to take over. In her view,

the failure of the patriarchal model to accommodate feminine experience constitutes a critical anomaly. If, then, the patriarchal model is the fundamental model, the root metaphor of Christianity, without which it cannot survive, what will occur is not a reform, but a revolution. To quote McFague: "The question [feminists] are asking is whether Chrisianity has the resources as well as the openness to address the anomaly they pose, or whether they must, in order to be true to their experience, base themselves in another paradigm" (83).

Daly's answer is, of course, that they must. The paradigm she favours is that of witchcraft. But McFague disagrees. For her, the root metaphor of Christianity is not patriarchy but relationship. Again, I quote: "The content of the root metaphor of Christianity is a model of personal relationship exemplified in the parables and with its chief exemplar Jesus himself, a tensive relationship distinguished by God's impossible way of love in contrast to the loveless ways of the world. This root metaphor occurs within the paradigm of the Jewish religion, and its basic assumptions are partially affirmed and partially revolutionized by the introduction of the new metaphor" (108).

This way of being is, as she says, itself highly metaphorical in that it is open-ended, tensive, and dynamic, not static: "Its distinctive note is not a new view of God, or a new image of human nature, but a new quality of relationship, a way of being in the world under the rule of God" (109).

As McFague sees it, the metaphor of relationship is superior to that of patriarchy, because it is more inclusive: paternity itself is included within it, as just one of the many metaphors for God, all of them ultimately inadequate. God can still be seen as father,

but not in such a way as to preclude his being seen also as mother, or as brother, or--and McFague sees this as particularly important for our time--as friend.

What McFague attempts, then, is not revolution but reform. She does not reject the whole of the Christian tradition; rather she puts it in a new light. And it appears to me that her reforming approach is far more typical of a connected way of knowing than is Daly's revolutionary one. It reconciles apparent contradictions instead of reinforcing divisions.

Let me briefly summarize some of the apparently warring elements that McFague reconciles:

First, she brings together the means of persuasion, and allows them to cooperate, rather than to conflict with one another. Unlike the conservative theologians, who fail to take the non-rational means of persuasion seriously, or Mary Daly, who ignores the rational, she allows considerations arising out of ethos and pathos to inform her enquiry into the logos. By doing so she brings new light to bear upon the nature of the patriarchal model in a way which promises to be fruitful not only for women but for men as well.

This brings me to my second point. McFague's feminism does not operate in such a way as merely to turn the historical tables. The violence of some feminist attacks upon men, the absolute refusal to recognize that men and women can understand one another and be part of one culture does not seem to offer much hope for the future, and will in the end, I think, be self-destructive.

In "Affirmation by Negation in the Women's Liberation Movement," Brenda Robinson Hancock suggests that the use of men as scapegoats is necessary if women are

to overcome their sense of alienation from themselves. This may be true, for some women at least, but I think and hope that it will be only a passing phase.

Thirdly, McFague reconciles both traditional and modern insights. Far from destroying or negating the traditional wisdom of the Christian community, she rejuvenates it by using a new metaphor to bring to light much that has for too long been hidden. And although Daly's total rejection of the tradition may at first appear to make her more truly modern, I do not think that this is really so. As McFague herself says, witchcraft is not a serious option for the modern industrialized world (159). It drew its strength from an agrarian community and it is not likely that it can be reintroduced at this stage. McFague, though she retains much that is traditional, is also deeply in touch with both the knowledge and the experience of the twentieth century. As I have tried to show, she uses the insights into the nature of language, particularly metaphor, which have been an important part of twentieth century studies. And she recognizes too that our experience of the world in the twentieth century has convinced many of us that the old conception of the world as static is no longer tenable. Our century experiences the world as dynamic rather than as static. As Ricoeur says of metaphor, the emphasis must be on the verb, not on the [static] noun.

As long ago as 1930, Ortega y Gasset said that the world in the twentieth century had become 'scandalously provisional.' Since 1930, it has become more provisional still. What McFague does, I think, is to take 'scandalously' out of the statement. Quoting John Dominic Crossan, she asserts that life for the Christian is "life on the edge of the raft" (109). And this highly provisional way of being has, in her view, always been

typical of Christianity as it was preached by its founder; the life and teaching of Jesus discounted all security except that which was grounded in trust in God.

In this way, McFague's approach accommodates and reconciles both the twentieth century's deepest and most painful experience of life and the original and essential message of the Christian gospel.

And this unifying, reconciling and healing quality makes it, I believe, typical of feminine discourse at its best. I certainly would not argue that this approach is exclusively feminine in the sense that it is never used by men. It is, however, one which is particularly congenial to women because it allows them to include all that they most deeply value in their experience of the world.

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