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# A Lutheran Pilgrimage: My Dilemma

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For the last three years, I have been on a Lutheran pilgrimage. My work, my pleasure, my worship has been surrounded by Lutheranism more than at any other time in my life. A portion of this pilgrimage was devoted to the area of theology. I have visited Lutheran seminaries and schools of theology as well as been present in a number of Lutheran theological gatherings both small and big. At all these occasions, I have been privileged to talk with people, faculty, students, leaders and congregations. The women among these groups form a specific category to which I was particularly "sent" and "called" to serve in my ministry as a staff person of the Lutheran World Federation, Office for Women in Church and Society. Therefore we have spent more time with and for each other. New friendships have evolved, and bonds of trust sprouted. As women of faith, sharing in the hope of the Gospel, we have done theology together.

The sum total of who I am today must be seen in this wider context of others that have shaped me and my thoughts. I am presently a shaken, frightened woman, but also a determined, celebrative Christian, for whom salvation has come. I often think that if God had spared me this pilgrimage, I would have been a better adherent to the church that Luther accidentally founded, because it was far away from my comprehension, and therefore it did not disturb my personhood. At a distance I simply assumed that my church had answers to most of my questions. The discovery of the reality is a rude awakening. Yet it might as well be that, for me, these years of pilgrimage are the reckoning which I lacked and needed. It is now that I really can come face to face with the struggles that lie behind the question, "... to be or not to be...".

## On Theology

The story of my pilgrimage is entwined in the stories and lives of my friends.

I met Violet at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. She was one among the group of students and faculty who invited me for a dialogue over lunch. Through that one-hour meeting, a seed was planted in both of us, and today, our lives interact as we share ourselves through letters, exchange papers, telephone calls and prayers for one another. Violet recently served as a student pastor in an urban area. She shared with me a lot about her experiences as a student pastor. One of her gifts to me was a poem. She wrote it after encountering a badly abused woman. As I moved between words and lines of this poem, I could see, feel and know the pain of these two women. One a student pastor, and the other, a hurting woman. Every word shaped itself into an image of another woman hurting—physically, psychologically, spiritually, with whom my work has connected me; the many stories I hear and know from my work bubbled inside my chest, causing me to choke. Was it anger that was boiling over? Was it lack of seeing what the future offers for women? Was it the seeming realization that things seem to be getting worse for women in different situations rather than better? Poor women are getting poorer. Violence against women in our societies is increasing; the marginalization of women's concerns in theological circles is still a norm rather than a rarity. Women still have to speak at the top of their voices in order to be heard and often their very presence in itself seems to be a dilemma for the church!

The Bible usually provided me with a safe place to return to whenever I was in doubt. But this time, various stories of terror in the Scriptures became alive, revived by this poem written in 1989. The betrayal, rape, murder and dismemberment of the concubine in Judges 19 could not be different from the stories that the Asian women theologians are telling about sex tourism and the selling of girls into prostitution in their own context. The sacrifice of the daughter of Jephthah (Judges 11:40), parallels the clear documentation by UNICEF of the abuse of a girl child today and which we African women continually witness as we see many young girls being traded for marriage, their

education being curtailed, and resources for their health care being redirected to fund military regimes and other causes! The societies in which we live still sacrifice daughters of the present-day Jephthahs! Therefore the women—daughters of Israel—who went year by year to lament the daughter of Jephthah could not be far from the mothers of those Kurdish children who in the recent past were dying from cold and misery in a war not of their making, or the legendary Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina whose lament caught the attention of the whole world, or the mothers of the many women of our cities who constantly live in fear of rape, abuse, joblessness, and valuelessness.

What does theology offer to all these women? Could the theology of the cross, for example, provide them with sustainable hope? What does the cross mean for all these different women? Do they understand their suffering as being in the company of one who suffered on the cross and consequently accept their conditions as a precedent to emulate? Is this suffering their cross and are they called to bear it? Or is the theology of the cross indeed about the suffering that accompanies the struggle for life and justice and therefore one which invites those who are suffering to journey out of the environment of their suffering? How do our different experiences influence our understanding of theology? Can theology help women to understand the paradoxes of life as seen in the pain that women bear through experiences of violence? How would I, or how would Violet, or the abused woman, embody theology in a way in which our understanding of it becomes a concern for our church? The bottom line in all these questions is: What does my feminine self offer to the study of theology? Is the church hearing our pain?

### **Ministry and Vocation**

My Lutheran pilgrimage took me next to Ethiopia where I did theology with Amarech. In her Lutheran church, both men and women are trained in theology. After completion of seminary training, men automatically become pastors, while women do not. Although the church leadership has from time to time discussed the issue of ordaining women, this discussion has not yet been extended to parishes and congregations. To

those women who, after training in theology, have indicated a wish to serve in ordained ministries, the church says that their individual cases will be reviewed after they have had a "call" from a congregation. While being aware of the double meaning that is often applied to the concept of "calling" in Protestant churches, this double-edged interpretation from the same church to people trained together troubles me. For women, the call is equal to having "a job". They are told to prove that they are marketable as pastors. For the men, the call to ordained ministry is a theological and spiritual reality which is not governed by the individual's abilities. The church trains them, ordains them, and places them in the area of service. This is an anomaly. I was soon to discover that many Lutheran churches allow this ambiguity and actively perpetuate this anomaly.

Both the African and Asian women are quite outspoken about this discrepancy between their professional training and their present vocations. In India, for example, for many years theologically trained women were treated with indifference by their churches though they are very dedicated and committed people who spent the best part of their lives and a considerable amount of their own money to study theology. Not only was the question of the ordination of women never discussed, but even their employment in suitable positions warranted by their qualifications was totally brushed aside by their churches. The Indian women theologians waited until 1990 when the United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India (UELCI) decided that women will be ordained. In response to the move to ordain women, Prasanna, a prominent advocate for change, commented "there were psychological barriers for absorbing theologically trained women in the ministry until the question of ordination was settled. Before this, the more than one hundred theologically trained women had become an unwanted, embarrassing and abandoned lot." But today India has changed. Two women have been ordained. What a joy! The church will now use the gifts of men and women in ordained ministries.

Interestingly, both the Asian and African women point out that the missionaries among them are often "differently gifted" in matters of opinions. Many of them neither agree with the opinions of other Christians in their own countries or with overriding opinions of their host church. Some actually derive their missionary call from dissatisfaction with their home

church where they have no possibility of getting their divergent opinions implemented. When this type of person arrives and settles in another country, they seek to impose what they could not do in their home church. Unfortunately, many of the churches in the South are still struggling with a self-identity issue, and when this is linked to the finances of the church and the missionary is the go-between for those finances, then issues get blurred. Honest discussions are shelved in the name of peace and respect for one another. Unfortunately for women, this has often meant silencing their cries of agony. This mission *disservice* to Third World women is either conveniently neglected or, like other omissions, it passes unrecognized. In this day and age, surely, this state of affairs deserves attention.

The ordination of women is of concern to many women in Africa and Asia. Women wish to participate fully in the renewal of their churches. They wish to share their spiritual gifts for ministry within the full spectrum of the life of the church, including ordained ministries. This full participation is important not only for the church, but also for the whole society. It is of no use for churches in Africa and Asia to use cultural excuses to bar women, and at the same time, hope to "minister" and to witness Christ in matters where cultures are a hindrance. For example, churches in India will have no right to condemn the caste system, which has strong cultural rooting, if they can say that, culturally, women are unsuitable for the ministry. What right have African churches to condemn polygamy, a well-developed cultural marriage system in Africa, and not condemn aspects of cultures which keep women in limited prescribed roles?

African cultures are not uniform in their approach to leadership. In some cultures men are the leaders and heads of the family. But one cannot belabour this point. In matriarchal societies such as the Chewa of Malawi, or the Akan of Ghana, the women's leadership is the prescribed cultural and social order even these days. In so far as linking this to the ordained ministry, John Mbiti, an outstanding authority on African Traditional Religions, believes that "priesthood" not only existed in several African beliefs, but was also not gender specific: "Priesthood as a class is distinct and developed, training may comprise reclusion from the world, instruction in laws and sometimes possession by divinity. The vocation

of priesthood and devotee is highly honoured. It is generally open to both men and women.”<sup>1</sup>

In many African Traditional Religions as well as African Instituted Churches (AICs) African women play prominent roles as spirit mediums, a role belonging to the priestly circles. The powers of healing, preaching, and spiritual direction typically understood by the Christian church to be priestly duties are powers traditionally exercised by both women and men in African societies. The church, therefore, is neglecting these important historical links and opting for easy ways to brush off women’s participation and sharing in God’s ordained ministries. In fact, women theologians from Africa and Asia have now unearthed evidence to show that excuses made on the basis of culture often do not have historical truth. In many Asian religions women have been prominent in cultural religious practices. The issue of Gospel and culture and its relationship to ministry in the church begs for attention.

The ordination of women in Lutheran churches in Europe and North America (non-Missouri Synod) may be a non-issue. Yet for there to be a “communion of Lutheran churches” as the member churches of the Lutheran World Federation affirmed at their Eighth Assembly (Curitiba, February 1990), Lutherans need to be in complete altar and pulpit fellowship with one another. At the present time, this is still not possible within many Lutheran churches. Yet, *communion* begs for sharing even in the harder discussions of which this is one.

An encounter with Naito sparked another area of concern in women’s ministry. Naito was one of the eight students studying at the Japan Evangelical Lutheran College. She decided to study for the ministry as a second career, having been a preschool teacher before. On 13 March 1991 Naito was ordained together with her husband whom she met at the seminary. The couple desire to share a pastorate. This decision has brought new challenges to the Lutheran Church in Japan. The issue of a shared pastorate though common in some parts of the world is fairly new to others. The questions surrounding it, however, seem to be relevant globally. The question of responsibilities and salaries always seems to arise, especially with regard to the role of the woman as pastor. Placement seems to favour men as the senior pastor, often with the women as assistant pastors or co-pastors. Where congregations are too

small to have two pastors, often the woman must opt out of ministry into some other service. This is the option for Naito. This was acceptable to her, but in other cases, it creates a dilemma for women pastors. Some feel that it is quite difficult for them to gain credibility as pastors if their first posting is problematic. In some clergy couples' cases, some women pastors are struggling with the congregations which still have the image of a pastor's wife who supports him in his ministry. The problem for the woman pastor in a clergy couple team is whether she should accept this understanding of her role or not. If she doesn't, how could she help educate the congregation on the new understanding of a shared pastorate among clergy couples without seeming to push her own case? Or as one clergy woman agonized, "Whose responsibility is it to educate the congregations on the new inclusiveness in ordained ministries?"

In some parts of Africa, for example, "clergy-wives" are very important. The coming of women pastors threatens the authority and functions of "clergy-wives" and causes considerable pain for both. The woman pastor, however, has a higher price to pay. In many cases she is younger and better educated, but also from a minority group, and in this case, an intruder into a long and well established tradition. She also is a pioneer and her every move is watched carefully by both the public and the private eye. Often she is insecure, unprotected and overburdened with the mere responsibility of seeking her identity in her newly acquired "robes". If she herself is in a clergy couple relationship, then she has the double burden of separating or merging her two roles as the pastor's wife and as a pastor herself.

When a woman pastor chooses to have a family the situation gets even more complicated. People assume that she ought to choose between motherhood and ministry, a choice which women pastors feel would compromise their calling to ministry. Yet, ironically, the women pastors with children seem to feel that their credibility is enhanced when they become mothers. Single women pastors, on the other hand, are often misunderstood. Christa from Germany cried out: "People think just because I am single I have no other interest except clergy work." The single clergy woman is expected to give all her time to pastoral work. Her leisure or pleasure is not



respected either by other clergy or the congregations or the official church structures. Some single pastors even feel interrogated and scrutinized with a view to determining their sexuality.

A consensus among women of all regions is that established male pastors are often the least supportive of women pastors. This drives a wedge between people who ought to uplift one another. It also begs such questions as: What insights have been gained by the presence of women and men at the seminaries? Today seminaries are almost like parishes, with men and women present and even their children often living with them on the campus. This setting would seem to provide tremendous possibilities and opportunities for an early learning of inclusiveness. But does it happen? Are seminaries being challenged to develop and involve new methods of training which take into account the fact that women are now part of theological training and ministry?

In Latin America and Europe there seemed to be an agreement that active lay women are often devalued by the presence of ordained women. The church authorities seek women pastors to serve on committees and to take visible roles in meetings, conferences and church delegations. Lay women therefore become invisible. To me, what this seems to imply is that the church is still struggling in a very special way with the whole issue of the nature of ministry. This issue goes beyond the male-female divisions. It is, however, newer for women because the ordained ministries are still quite new in some places.

I do need to mention here that another emerging pattern has been observed. In some cases, where representation at events and on committees of the churches is a conscious effort to include both men and women, it is very common to see the pattern where all men are clergy and all women are lay. This comes about because of the genuine desire by churches to include policy-makers on these bodies. It makes a lot of sense, but it shows that inclusiveness of lay and clergy in all ministries of the church is still an incomplete task and the nature of ministry an unresolved issue.

In addition to the challenges that women have brought to the study of theology and specifically to the area of ministry, some women are at a point where they have begun to ask, "What difference have women made? Has the presence of

women made things any better or does it only add strain upon strain?" Some women feel trapped at this juncture. Mature women who have developed into their work, and have become more confident in themselves, are becoming less and less willing to work within the structured church as it is. They want some changes. At the Conference of European Women which took place in Loccum, Germany, in October 1990, European women spent some time discussing this issue. They asked, "Have women changed the church or has the church changed women?" The focus of their reflections centred on "ministry". As it is to be expected, there were arguments for both sides, but the overriding consensus seemed to be that women could help bring new life to the church, but that it will take a lot of work to realize this. However, there was no question of women backing out their present roles. Rather, the present tensions are seen as necessary though undesirable. The women pastors in Iceland with whom I spent three days pinpointed some of the difficulties. They said that the partnership needed by men and women cannot be based on the legal protection of women's rights. Legal rights help to have civil security, but the real changes come only through individuals and communities daring and accepting one another fully as sisters and brothers.

### **Feminist Theology**

From Violet in Philadelphia to the women in Iceland, it is clear that basic questions still exist about theology, Christian vocation and professional ministry. With regards to theology, women world wide want women's concerns in theological studies to be taken seriously. This means many things. For some, it means that the study of theology should take into account various experiences of women, past and present. For others, it implores theological institutions to take into account the existence of feminist theology and to draw upon its resources when training theologians. Today, there exist feminist studies on almost every aspect of theology. Important attention has been given to the issues of ministry, ecclesiology, biblical interpretation, etc. Feminist theology has been with us for nearly three decades, while the women's movements that gave birth to it go back to a much earlier period. In some countries women have organized for change for over a century. Feminist

theology is critical theology. Like other liberation theologies it includes a fundamental component of unearthing injustices against women in the previous traditions and of aiming towards justice and the establishment of community between men and women.

Women all over the world are doing feminist theology. They are doing this in their Bible studies, in their fields, in their kitchens, and in their church. Women have redefined theology to mean the expression of a religious experience of God's people. It is experiencing God speaking to us in various situations and in new ways. We express these experiences in order to tell the story of what God is doing. No theology was ever so close to women's hearts and ever so inclusive of so many dimensions of people's lives. Women of all denominations and colours do this theology without being constrained. This feminist theology is ecumenical and inclusive and it comes in many forms, in many names and from many cultures. It is a theology that does not stop at holiness, but seeks wholeness.

I am often expected, as an African woman, when talking of theology at home or abroad to denounce feminist theology as being only for western women whose problems are different from ours. Indeed, my own experiences in feminist theology will be different, because feminist theology is a contextual theology. However, every scholarly and reflective discipline draws from the works of others as a means of validating the theories and praxis that we are trying to express and understand. In the same way in which I must draw upon Luther scholars to study Lutheran theology, I need feminist theologians to support and put into context my quest for the theological issues of African women.

There is also something new with respect to the study of theology from a feminist approach. Feminist hermeneutics and biblical studies have uncovered abundant evidence that Scripture seems to endorse the inferiority, subordination and abuse of women. While this has led some people to denounce biblical faith as hopeless and misogynous, for many other people these findings have been put in the context of the social and cultural setting within which the Bible was founded. There are many of us women who are not willing to let the case against women be the determining word for our salvation. For me, the unearthing of these passages that were hidden from my

Sunday school classes, our family devotions and all my adult training in school and college help me to make a case for sin and repentance. I see this in terms of my own sin and our collective sin as communities. Jesus came that our sins may be forgiven. This is my celebration, my faith and my hope. The power of Christ's gospel is inviting and compelling for me. The prophetic life and action of Jesus opens a new understanding of Christology, soteriology and ecclesiology for women and for the church.

Feminist theology has been most criticized for its experiential base. Yet this component really means redirecting our study of theology from upwards to all sides, from the vertical hierarchy to the horizontal communion and wholeness of the people of God. Every human life is a life of worth, worthy because God interacts with it and in it and through it. The option for the poor—as posited by liberation theology—means shifting our focus from *only* the great theologies, the classics, the leaders, into the life of ordinary people, those to whom God sends the message of assurance through the coming of Jesus Christ. Those who criticize the experiential base of feminist theology understand it to mean subjectivism or relativism. Feminist theologians and other women drawing from this methodology do not give up their insistence upon truth claims. Rather, through the telling of our stories and our experiences, both criticism and self-criticism become necessary. The need for looking beyond me to my neighbour in order to celebrate together or to mourn together becomes inevitable. Feminist theology is a community theology. The importance of telling stories is to have Christ shine in our lives. At the end of the day it is not my story, but the story of Christ that gets told. For when Jesus heals a woman and calls her “daughter” the healed woman tells of her illness in order to exalt the healer, the Christ.

Even though women are accused of doing too much experiential theology, it would take a lot to exceed Luther's passionate and sensitive probing of his own feelings and emotions vis-à-vis God and the Bible. We all know and accept that Luther was eager to submit his life and teaching to the chastening rod of the Scriptures. His major understanding of the work of Christ in his life came after he understood, from his own desperate searching and spiritual struggles, that he hated

God. God was a great problem for him because he could not be good enough to stand before God. Without Christ's intervention, Luther knew he was damned. We women also claim Christ whose coming gives us a new life and self understanding.

We women also know that without Christ we are damned. Thus, for the Christian feminist, the key towards feminist theology takes as its starting point the prophetic life of Jesus. A feminist biblical exegesis that centers upon Christ almost immediately begins to experience the transforming, renewing power that comes from the depth of the life and actions of Jesus the Christ. To follow this Jesus means to overcome the cultural and ideological conditioning which violates the ideals for which Jesus stood. It means equipping oneself with a mind that is ready to journey towards the path of righteousness, justice, peace and love. This is the mission of all in the world. It is a mission that could be richly endowed by listening to aspects of feminist theology.

For some Lutheran women, the cry for feminist inclusion includes the staffing of women theologians in seminaries and schools of theology. The Scriptures are full of examples of God telling the people to follow role models. The men of Israel were often told to have the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Women have used male models for too long and we simply do not want to continue this unnatural behaviour. We want to emulate models that speak to us, and in a personal way. We want to develop a critique of our own behaviour in different situations. We want to know who we are as women in order to understand how we can be human with men and with ourselves. We want to develop a notion of vocation with a feminist understanding of it. Our heritage as Lutherans opens us to the broad sense that every believer must struggle with the call of God towards her or his destiny. This concept accords with the studying of our lives as women. Vocation calls us exactly to reflect upon our journeys of faith, to do theological reflection as we move on our pilgrimage. This is the whole story underlying women doing theology.

I have reflected particularly upon ministry because it became so clear to me during this period of my Lutheran pilgrimage that the issue of ministry ranks very high in the theological concerns of women theologians. My early Christian roots come from the Quaker church. I recently met Graciela

Chamorro, a Paraguayan Baptist woman, who through her stay in Brazil recently converted to Lutheranism. Like me, Graciela was amazed at how Lutherans emphasize clericalism. In her words, Lutherans, both men and women, "are so hung up on clericalism that they have no imagination of the nature and value of ministry outside the ordained sphere." For continued reflection on ministry and vocation, Lutherans need to draw from models of other Christians and from the Scriptures. The biblical ministry is that which transforms leadership into servanthood and transfers power from self to empowerment of others. Perhaps if Lutherans perceived lay ministries in a different way, our focus on clergy would change.

A true seeking with a view to changing, that is, liberating, both the understanding and the practice of ministry may help Lutherans to reclaim their history of the Reformation. For in realizing that we are wrong on some things, we can revise our thinking and "reform" for the glory of God and the joy of humanity. We can reclaim true Lutheran, celebrative joy that is found in our liturgies, our songs, ancient and new, loaded with deep, heart convincing messages to which we listen even as we sing them.

As an African, Lutheran woman, I know that my endearment to Christian theology is and can only be built on the hope and the joy of our shared good news about Jesus Christ. Martin Luther, Leonardo Boff, John Mbiti speak to me sometimes. At other times I need to hear Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Letty Russell, Elsa Tamez, Chung Hyun-Kyung. But as for right now, while still on this pilgrimage, I yearn to hear more voices of Lutheran women theologians.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) 187.