

## ***Gender, Gospel, and Social Justice.***<sup>1</sup>

WOC/WOW Conference Philadelphia September 18, 2015

Since my colleagues Dr. Shannen Dee Williams spoke about racism in the Roman Catholic Church and our movement and Dr. Mary Hunt celebrated the accomplishments of our movement, I want to focus on one accomplishment at the heart of our movement, feminist liberation the\*logy and the Vatican's response to it issuing the proclamation of the *New Feminism*, a strategy to which Pope Francis subscribes.

When he appointed rather conservative wo/men theologians to the Papal theological commission, Pope Francis likened them to “strawberries on the cake.” This reminded me of Father Hesburgh of Notre Dame University who in 1970 or so likened the few women faculty and students on campus to “flowers that beautify Notre Dame.” Hence, I am trying to figure out, whether it is a promotion to have moved from “flower” to “strawberry” or a put down. After all, flowers are nice to look at, while strawberries are there to be digested!

Both images flowers and strawberries invite us to identify with our “feminine genius” and to sweeten the papal theological pie of true womanhood which has been in the making for hundred years or more. Rather than, being baked into the Papal the\*logical pie of womanhood in and through ordination,

we need to reject it as dangerous to our health and survival. We can do so by continuing to articulate a critical feminist the\*logy of liberation as the subversive virus weakening the kyriarchal body of kyriarchal church and hierarchy.

In order to keep the anti-kyriarchal virus strong and alive, I have argued for quite some time, we have to create institutional locations for a critical feminist the\*logy of liberation. Feminist the\*logians were able to bring about intellectual change in Catholic the\*logy and church because as so-called lay- the\*logians we unlike priests and bishops we have not promised obedience and become kyriarchal company men.

However, we have not realized our position of strength as a movement of a critical feminist the\*logy of liberation. We have not rallied around feminist the\*logy and education but around women's ordination to have the same right as men to become part of the kyriarchal corporation. Hence, it is no accident, that this session has been placed before the WOW/WOC conference actually begins, rather than be centrally located within the conference program.

Yet, instead of banging our heads on the proverbial kyriarchal walls, we need to use a critical feminist the\*logy of liberation as entry point to change the kyriarchal system rather than being incorporated and digested by it. We must no longer overlook that the papal the\*logy of womanhood and the "feminine genius" has been articulated in order to co-opt the Catholic feminist movement and its the\*logical vision of liberation. Since feminist liberation the\*logy has had a great impact on Catholic wo/men around the world, we must build on its strength.

Hence, we have to free the WOC and WoW movements again and again from the danger of the “Babylonian Papal captivity” and fixation on ordination into the kyriarchal hierarchy.

With this conference, we take again a deliberate step toward such a change. Unlike previous conferences this conference does not gather us under the banner of wo/men’s ordination with its demands to be admitted to kyriarchal clerical ranks but rather - and I think appropriately so- we are gathered under the banner:

**Gender, Gospel and Social Justice.** The Conference thereby invites a the\*logical rhetorical change that does not seek for integration into kyriarchal - hierarchical structures but explores issues of social justice in the name of the Gospel, the good news of liberation. We do so in the political contexts of the US societal and the Roman Catholic ecclesiastical kyriarchal situation.

### ***1. Social Justice and the American Political Situation***

Author Nancy L. Cohen sees the developments of the last fifty years in the United States as the outcome of the conservative reaction against the sexual revolution of the 1960s. The sexual fundamentalists, as Cohen calls the antifeminist movements, are fighting for the myth of the traditional middle class, male-headed, white family of midcentury America, where man was the breadwinner and wo/man was the homemaker subject to many pregnancies. In previous eras only the urban, educated, Protestant, Jewish and Catholic upper class could afford to live by this ideal of woman, which I have called the ideal of the White Lady .

While in the 20 years after World War II white working class men's families could live this ideal, black, immigrant, or poor families never could do so. By the late 1970s when income growth stagnated, even middle-class white married wo/men had to join the workforce in order to maintain the family income.

Since they could not maintain this kyriarchal order of the middle class family, the Roman Catholic hierarchy and Protestant fundamentalist groups in the United States have resorted to political means for undoing the legal and political feminist gains of the last fifty years or so. Their politics are sanctioning and justifying the increasingly escalating "war" on all, but especially on poor and working-class wo/men. Their attacks on same-sex marriage and wo/men's rights to contraception and safe legal termination of pregnancy on state and national levels are fought in the name of religious freedom. In this process, the rights of all wo/men are jeopardized and religion is entitled to prejudice.

Taking class and race analysis into account, the Roman Catholic as well as Protestant attempts to the\*ologize the nuclear middle- to upper-class bourgeois family as ontologically given or divinely revealed is exposed as colonial elite male rhetoric promulgating the ethos of the White Lady and a defense of the kyriarchal order.

In order to reinforce the ideology of middle- and/or upper-class femininity, which I have dubbed the ideal of the White Lady, the Roman Catholic *New Feminism* and the Protestant *True Woman* movements proclaim this ideal as

essential, and natural the feminist critique of kyriarchy points to contradictions between the democratic political promise of equality, self-determination, and freedom in modern societies and wo/men's subordination, global exploitation, and exclusion in many areas of sociopolitical and religious life.

## ***2. The New Feminism and Feminist The\*logy***

While feminist theorists and scholars in religion have hotly debated gender essentialism, difference, complementarity, the ethics of care, and radical feminism, we have paid little attention to the dualistic, feminine identity movements and the\*logies in Christianity and their differing kyriarchal constructions of the Eternal Woman or the "feminine genius" as the subject position of white upper-class femininity. Whereas the Protestant *True Woman* movement is biblically based, the Roman Catholic *New Feminism* movement is inspired by the *the\*logy of woman* which Pope John Paul II has formulated. Both essentializing feminine theologies and movements are articulated in order to counteract the influence of feminist egalitarian the\*logies and liberation movements. Hence, the *New Feminism* has taken over many feminist liberationist arguments and movement strategies in order to foster the cultural bourgeois femininity of the White Lady, of middle and upper class privileged wo/men.

The term *New Feminism* was originally used in 1920s England to differentiate suffragist feminism and "new" feminism, which was primarily

concerned with motherhood and family. Pope John Paul II reintroduced the term in *Evangelium Vitae* (1995). Just as he had called for a *new* liberation theology, so too he called for a “*new feminist theology*” as an antidote to feminist liberation theology. According to him, *New Feminism* rejects models of “male domination” and insists on woman’s true essence, which is biological and spiritual motherhood. Man and woman are essentially different, but such difference enables them to complement each other.

Since the nineteenth century, official Roman Catholic teachings have developed in interaction with the feminist movement worldwide. These teachings have stressed, in line with Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, the *equivalence* of the genders but at the same time have insisted on the *subordination* of wo/men. Beginning in the 1960s and especially during the reign of John Paul II, this official Roman Catholic rhetoric changed, however, from emphasizing “subordination” to stressing “equality and complementarity.”

As feminist author Ivy Helman observes, wo/men’s structural and subject positions are “sexed and gendered down to their souls. Femininity is not just taking on God’s divine design for women.” Femininity operates out of “the order of love” and is fulfilled either in physical or spiritual motherhood.

The New Feminism is articulated to engender a right-wing Roman Catholic wo/men’s movement in support of the Vatican’s societal and ecclesiastical anti-wo/man politics. It is often overlooked that John Paul II’s rhetoric builds on the

rhetoric of the “Eternal Woman,” which was inspired by German Romanticism Edith Stein (1932) and Gertrud von Le Fort (1934), among others, rearticulated this concept in the context of and as a religious alternative to the emerging “new woman” ideology and politics of German National Socialism. Both authors emphasized that women’s essence and vocation comprised biological and spiritual motherhood.

Read as a response to technological developments and the international feminist movements, the Vatican’s lofty the\*logy of womanhood turns out to be articulated as kyriarchal theology of the Whit Lady justifying the hierarchy’s stance on birth control, termination of pregnancy, and the exclusion of wo/men from church office at one and the same time. As in Nazi Germany, so also in today’s official Roman Catholicism, political right-wing wo/men and wo/men’s movements are inspired by the the\*logy of the Eternal Woman to spread its lofty but oppressive message among wo/men.

The Vatican doctrine of *New Feminism*, gender complementarity and true womanhood presupposes that maleness and femaleness are essential sex/gender structural positions that exist in binary opposition. This doctrine does not simply insist on the meaning of gender, but decrees that there are only two distinct genders that are essentially different and that each gender has to complement its opposite.

Since Jesus’ maleness is defined in ontological gender terms, wo/men

cannot represent him because they lack his ontological maleness. Their physical-ontological structural gender position entitles men but not wo/men to hold positions of sacred institutional power in the church. Although this doctrine of gender complementarity contradicts the doctrine of incarnation, which does not say that Jesus became male but that Jesus became human, it is enforced as infallible revealed truth.

### **3. The Struggles for Wo/men's Rights**

After Pope John XXIII and the assembly of bishops in Vatican II endorsed religious freedom and a range of civil rights also for wo/men in his *Encyclical Pacem in Terris*, the struggles for wo/men's reproductive and ekklesial rights have become central Catholic feminist struggles in the post-Vatican II era.

A birth-control commission appointed during Vatican II delivered its report to Pope Paul VI in June 1966, which was passed by a vote of 52 to 4. Its majority recommended that any method of contraception within a framework of committed love was acceptable as long as it was medically and psychologically sound, whereas the minority of the Commission insisted that the authority of the traditional teaching was infallible. Paul VI, who was worried about weakening the hierarchy's teaching authority, sided with the minority in his 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. Whereas Paul VI's successors in the papacy have continued to insist that the traditional teaching on contraception is not only unchangeable but



infallible, the majority of Catholics around the world have rejected this teaching.

The Women's Ordination movements must not overlook that the papal the\*logy of womanhood, motherhood, feminine genius, and complementarity has been developed in the context of this birth-control debate. The Vatican has insisted the\*logically on wo/man's essence and nature as biological or spiritual motherhood and has politically attempted, through regional bishops' conferences and its representation at UN conferences, to prevent funding for birth control and pregnancy determination for wo/men around the world.

The majority of Catholic wo/men has not bought into the papal argument against artificial contraception and has rejected it through their praxis. For example, Melinda Gates, a practicing Catholic, has announced her lifelong commitment to providing contraception for wo/men worldwide. She argues that wo/men have the decision-making power to plan and space pregnancies responsibly so that they can feed and educate the children to whom they give birth. Studies show that responsible contraceptive use has enabled families to move out of poverty, whereas the lack of effective contraceptive means leads to an increase in abortions, starvation, and impoverishment. If Pope Francis is concerned about the poor, he must change his the\*logy of the "feminine genius" which cannot be the\*logically sustained in the face of poor wo/men.

#### **4. Feminist The\*logical Education**

Moreover, the kyriarchal church has successfully organized grassroots

wo/men into study and social movement groups to bolster global “feminine” identity formation and religious authority dependence, whereas liberationist feminists have mostly organized in academic circles along the lines of cultural “identity politics” but are less and less involved providing an intellectual home to feminist grassroots movements in religion.

This has been partly the case because feminists in the\*logy and feminist studies in religion have lacked the institutional resources open to the *New Feminism*. Moreover, feminist the\*logies and Studies in Religion have been little –recognized by so-called “secular” academic and movement feminists. However, in the face of the Right’s mobilization of wo/men, it is important that feminist liberationists organize “consciousness- raising” or conscientization groups compelled by the following insight from bell hooks: Before we can change kyriarchy “as a system of interstructured dominations, we have to change ourselves and raise our own wo/men’s consciousness.”

In the 70s I was part of a group of Catholic feminist the\*logians who gathered to discuss feminist the\*logical education. As far as I remember, we worked out several different models of the\*logical education, but I can only recall two of them. The first was the central “school model” of the\*logical education that requires students to move to and have residence at a university or the\*logical school. This model was adopted by the group and was institutionalized as the ecumenical Women’s Theological Center located at the

Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge.

The other model proposed was a decentered “satellite” model of the\*logical education often used in D. Min. programs. Our educational model, however, would not orbit around a “school” but be resourced by a circle of feminist the\*logians and movement workers. This model had as a goal to the\*logically equip feminist leaders for forming feminist discussion/consciousness raising groups of wo/men across the country. This model envisioned the\*logical “leaders” (students) to stay in their “home spaces,” to form local reading/discussion groups of wo/men as part of the program and to meet several times a year regionally with a facilitating (“faculty”) team of feminist the\*logians. Our hope was that this model would develop such strength that we also could meet annually or biannually for a national and international feminist the\*logical gatherings, especially if we could gather support from Catholic nun’s congregations.

This model had several strengths: It did not require wo/men to move to a the\*logical school and could enable especially married and financially limited wo/men to engage in feminist the\*logical studies. At the same time, this model of the\*logical education was designed to build up local feminist movement groups in parishes, neighborhoods, professional, family, or friendship circles, and put them in communication with each other about their faith and church. Thus, this model would simultaneously develop feminist the\*logical leadership and the\*logical

education as well as facilitate feminist wo/men's groups. However, WOC or Religious Congregations did not pursue this educational model at the time, and as far as I can see, it also has not been developed and realized in international feminist the\*logical contexts.

As a consequence, feminist the\*logy and studies in religion has been, for the most part, developed by the second and third generation of feminist the\*logians in an academic context and around academic organizations. The book *Frontiers in Catholic Feminist Theology: Shoulder to Shoulder* may serve as an example. The editors state: "This book has its origins in the Workgroup for Constructive Theology" and it seeks to bring together Catholic feminist the\*logizing and teaching in terms of the\*logical education in Catholic colleges. However, such a location of feminist the\*logy and the\*logical education in the academy has had the tendency to make feminist the\*logy primarily accountable to the academy, which institutionally marginalizes , co-opts its frameworks, or altogether silences feminist the\*logical work. Feminist the\*logians in Catholic institutions are increasingly controlled by the hierarchy and as "nun wo/men," are subject to repression and silencing by the Vatican as the examples of Ivone Gebara, Elizabeth Johnson, and Margaret Farley document.

In contrast to the situation of feminist academic the\*logy, the right-wing education of women in the doctrines of New Feminism has garnered great institutional support. Thus, the the\*logical feminist "conscientization" model that

we envisioned but did not realize more than thirty years ago has been co-opted and partially actualized, for instance, by ENDOW the acronym for *Educating on the Nature and Dignity of Women*, albeit with a different content. According to their website ENDOW was created in 2011, is active in more than 80 dioceses and has involved almost 3 800 wo/men in ENDOW study groups. Many more undoubtedly access their attractive website. ENDOW has developed study guides for women to use in small study groups which start out reading John Paul II's 1982 *Letter to Women*. ENDOW is focusing especially on the middle-school and high-school programs because of the "great need to reach girls younger and younger in our culture.

I agree that the most pressing task for WOC and also for WOW is to create spaces for feminist education in feminist the\*logies of liberation, because there is a great need for it in the context of ever increasing global exploitation. The most pressing questions to address for feminist the\*logians, teachers, and ministers is not only how we can create alternative feminist organizations, groups, and media for conscientization and support in religious communities locally and globally, but also: How can we develop educational places that unmask the New Feminism as a kyriarchal theory serving global neoliberal exploitation?

Rather than neglect the importance of feminist theory, the\*logy, historical heritage, and the need for feminist the\*logical education as too intellectual and

too academic, we need to spend time asking: How do we create religious institutional spaces that can sustain alternative feminist liberationist movements in times of neoliberal globalization? How can we create radical democratic *ekklēsia of wo/men* spaces for articulating, developing, communicating, and debating feminist theories, the\*logies, and spiritual practices of conscientization? How can we develop a sociopolitical Catholic imagination that opens up an egalitarian feminist Catholic future? I hope this conference will move us to take action for establishing places and programs for engaging in “doing” feminist the\*logy as a critical the\*logy of liberation. .

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[See my forthcoming book *Congress of Wo/men: Religion, Gender and Kyriarchal Power* (Cambridge: Feminist Studies in Religion, 2015)].