

# ENGENDERING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION: SOME EXPLORATIONS

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The theme of the Consultation “Engendering Theological Education For Transformation” has evoked a lot of interests and at times, curious remarks. One such was “are you going to endanger theological education?” Another query was whether we are trying to put “old wine in a new bottle.” Many others are excited saying that it is timely, radical and visionary. I do hope it would be a combination of the first and the third remarks. I acknowledge that we are all at different stages of the process, with different contexts to address. Therefore this is but a beginning of a long process. Mahatma Gandhi once said, “A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history.” I strongly feel that this small body is such a one.

I need to point out that I rather prefer the use of the term ‘feminist perspectives in theology’ than ‘feminist theology’ to acknowledge their rich and valid diversities and affirm their central and rightful place in theology, not a peripheral one. A question may arise “are we going to stir the pot, so to speak, and come up with a globalized feminist theology?” That definitely is not the intention. But I cannot help but think that if the essence of the sentence “Justification by grace through faith alone” could transcend cultural, geographical, race, class, gender boundaries, creating a great reformation knitting us together even after hundreds of years, there is every scope that a gender concept could and would do so, given the chance.

I would also like to affirm that feminist perspectives in theology have ceased to be the domain of women. Men have started to learn, understand and speak about it in positive ways. It would be interesting to make a survey of how many men now teach feminist perspectives. What we attempt at this consultation is to see how best the perspectives could serve in the mainstreaming of gender in theological education. At the cost of sounding repetitive, I want to record some of the impacts feminist perspectives have made in theological education.

- A broadening of perspective in the field of Biblical theology that includes a re-reading of scriptures, feminist exegesis and hermeneutics.
- Excavations of the existence of women without history, an enlarging of their participation in church history, documentation of their diverse contributions despite women’s invisibility in history, using previously discarded sources. Analysis of Theological anthropology, Christology, images of God, language about God, symbols by which God is presented in systematic theology.
- Fresh inputs on spirituality, new ways of worship, forging networks and alliances across boundaries, and explicit voicing of women’s concerns excluded to the margins of societal and church life.

- Challenges to the rationalist, clinical and dispassionate way of theologizing by beginning with women's experiences that elevate and authenticate emotions to a higher level than has been assigned to it so far.
- Personal behavioral changes, changes in campus life and in the churches' very being, when women gained entry into the ordained ministry, the decision-making bodies etc.
- Serious analysis and call to rethink on 'power' and how it is exercised in faith communities.
- Challenge to churches from being hierarchical structures to be worshipping communities.

## Shortcomings

Nevertheless, it is to be admitted that some men and women still have varied negative reactions to and reservations against feminist theologies and the impact they have made. At best, they are seen as attempts made by women to reclaim their selfhood and at worst seen as a western phenomenon often influencing women of the south since they owe their beginning to the west, and because the west still serves as the training ground for many feminist theologians. It is also to be confessed that feminist perspectives in theology have not made intentional efforts to appeal to male solidarity.

The term 'feminist theologies' tends to limit or gives indications to being women's enterprise for women or "as a discipline within a discipline." They are grounded in women's experiences and by "defending the primacy of women's experiences above all other norms of theology, there is a real danger that the distinctiveness of the tradition, the essence that gives it its identity, is subsumed."<sup>1</sup>

We acknowledge and affirm the multiplicity of their contexts and offerings. But an uneasy question needs to be asked. How far and how much could we

accommodate them all, and still speak with one voice? Theology has been the domain of the initiated and the elite as a specialized field, which tends to exclude the lay and make them uneasy about voicing their theologizing. There are walls between church women workers, the ordained women and the theological educators, which is detrimental to making it a dynamic movement. Some men, though convinced of the validity and relevance of feminist perspectives, cannot boldly confess to being part of feminist theologizing because of its exclusivist nomenclature.

There is also a doubt that feminism could fall into a rut and might lose its momentum and/or be accepted as something that is inevitable and thereby become accepted but a peripheral sphere for the interested who might be majority women. There are the second and third wave theological students who balk at the idea of being tagged as 'feminists.' A gender approach could circumvent many of these shortcomings.

## The demand of our Times

Some Christians tend to have a compartmentalized existence in countries where Christianity is not a major religion. Some parts of the world not only live in a postmodern world, but also in a post Christian milieu while other countries are concentrated as fields for charismatic endeavors. The charismatic movement is overtaking the traditional churches and is offering alternatives and simplistic answers to many who feel exhausted to find answers to face life's complexities in the much bruised, abused and drastically changing world. The EATWOT General Assembly in Tagaytay, Philippines (1996) identified the need for a paradigm shift for three reasons:

- There are new brands of theologians with different perspectives.
- There is the identification of the need for a new religiosity and spirituality.

<sup>1</sup> Is there a Future for Feminist Theology?" edited by Deborah F. Sawyer and Diane M. Collier, published by Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, England, p. 21-22.

- A new thrust, the hermeneutic key being no longer 'liberation' but 'life' for the whole of creation and emphasized; to do theology became more important than to think theology.

This 'being' and 'doing' on the basis of the thinking and feeling is the gender approach to theology. Experts on leadership also remark that the future of leadership is going to depend on 'sense-making' rather than on decision making. So, if the church as an organization has to lead, gender analysis becomes an urgent skill we need to train people in.

There is a tendency in our theologizing to be 'descriptive' than 'prescriptive' for political correctness and inclusivity. Though we have forged ecumenical alliances, we are unable to make a radical headway on the issues of ordination of women, issues of life orientations and human sexuality as these have the potential to divide. By discussing on gendered roles, expectations and stereotyping, there are possibilities of creating more openness to such sensitive issues that people had to live with.

### **Concept of gender**

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A conceptual clarity on gender is first of all essential if we are to lay the foundation for its practical application. We need to acknowledge gender-differentiated experiences and gender-related sufferings that are diverse in different settings. But foremost we need to emphasize that the term 'gender' is not to be used interchangeably with 'women' or 'feminism.' Gender is to be understood as an analytical tool to help women as well as men to understand the local contexts, structures and systems in the world through which classism, racism and sexism entrenches and operates. The visible expressions of these are patriarchy, hierarchy and dualism that are reinforced through culture, socialization processes, religious teachings and practices. These result in imbalance in and control over resources, increasing conflicts, neo-colonization, economic globalization, polarization, creation and perpetuation of injustices that marginalize most of humankind. People who live with these issues seek answers in

and through religion and spirituality. This 'capability building' as Amartya Sen puts it, offers theological education a leading role to play in the coming years.

### **Engendering for Transformation**

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Christianity is all about relationality: God relating to us and we relating to God and with one another. "Language about God shapes the thinking and life orientation not only of the corporate faith community but also of the individual members.... While officially it is rightly and consistently said that God is Spirit and so beyond identification with either male or female sex, yet the daily language of preaching, worship, catechesis and instruction conveys a different message." The images of God used by the church are mostly male: father, king, lord, and so on. One difficulty created by this is that while we understand the maleness of God to be metaphoric, this metaphor might attribute divinity to the male, therefore supremacy over the 'non-divine' female. "Therefore each and every word about God must be analyzed to see if it speaks of God and not of the one who speaks and interprets God; whether it speaks of the attributes and the Divine Mercy of God or of the power of the one who uses the language. Effort needs to be made however difficult it might prove to be, to move beyond gender, toward the divine mystery of God."<sup>2</sup>

Christian tradition with its roots in the Hebrew and Greco-Roman worlds has been faulted as a prime source of making women and nature inferior. It had given rise to triumphalistic colonization and subjugation of the more egalitarian indigenous communities. It has trivialized their subsistent existence that was more nature friendly. Their cultural diversities have been erased as paganism and their knowledge and wisdom discounted as outdated. The self understanding of Christians with no difference between Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, men and women as in Galatians 3:28 in the early church period had scope for leadership of women. But the churches have turned out to be hierarchical and patriarchal over centuries.

A gender analysis for example would help us to redefine the 'chosenness' of certain people, which

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<sup>2</sup> *Churches say NO to Violence Against Women*, an LWF draft document, 2000.

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we, as Christians have also appropriated and to a certain extent misused. This exercise liberates us from being separated or to be put in hierarchies but opens up the possibilities of building communities.

A Gender approach guides us to the 'text in contexts.' "To engage in theological dialogue with gender issues means to attempt to understand how the understanding of gender in society has affected our understanding of God, the Scriptures, the teaching and practices of the church and our relationship as men as women with one another. For ages, people have debated the roles and functions of women and men in the home, church and society, speculating on whether these roles are God prescribed or culturally determined. Some have argued that women and men are innately or ontologically different beings and therefore designed by nature to fulfill separate roles."<sup>3</sup>

Therefore we need to re-visit what we mean by the essence of human nature and our relational matters as women and men and with God. For example, we could ask "is there a particular nature for women and for men that is not just based on biological differences but on their psychology and approach to life?" If we are ontologically different, then what is the role and purpose of feminist perspectives? Is it to give the 'other' perspective, to build women's self worth and/or to challenge the existing theology? Alsford argues that a "relational approach can signal a constructive contribution from feminist thought to theology; It can mark a feminization of theology; rather than offering a distinct exclusive theology for women, the relational approach can offer an inclusive theology for humanity."<sup>4</sup> This in turn could pose a challenge to the rising individualistic, self-promoting, self-actualizing ethos of the present times, which has already been seen and cited as a divisive factor internationally.

Though cultures are not constant and vary even within countries and changes over time, they have often been used as a tool to prescribe behavior and are closely linked with religion. For some Christians, culture can be layered like an "onion skin" where on the outside there are manifestations of what is known as 'Christian practices,' but deep inside, the influence of local culture remains. Some examples are the practice of veneration of ancestral spirits, racism, casteism etc. How do we accompany people who wrestle with cultures from without in their societies and from within in scriptural passages that are often made normative? Sometimes they mutually reinforce each other at times, to the detriment of women.

"One way to begin answering these questions is to specify to readers of the Bible that Scripture too is reflective and a product of particular contexts, culture and ages, and interpretations must look beyond and transcend these realities to get to the essence of the gospel that affirms life for all. This is very difficult and would be misconstrued as faith disturbing task."<sup>5</sup> Feminist hermeneutics have pointed out that the Word of God is mediated through androcentric, patriarchal setting and that Biblical contents have a direct impact on the way women are perceived and expected to behave in the contemporary society. Elizabeth Gössmann with her reformist/traditional view suggests that we highlight the "consistent strand of counter tradition that runs throughout the history of Western Christianity..." "Gössmann shows that women's experience, women's counter-tradition, is a significant part of Christianity's history of divine revelation."<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has also "uncovered an early type of Christianity, which was characterized by gender inclusivity in its egalitarian anticipation of the Kingdom of God."<sup>7</sup> This would help in a way to tone down the call of radical feminism

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<sup>3</sup> "Gender and the Theology of the Churches," by Margaretha Ringström, in *Women* magazine, number 48, page 16.

<sup>4</sup> "Is there a Future for Feminist Theology?" edited by Deborah F. Sawyer and Diane M. Collier, published by Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, England, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> *Churches say NO to Violence Against Women*, an LWF draft document, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> "Is there a Future for Feminist Theology?" edited by Deborah F. Sawyer and Diane M. Collier, published by Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, England, p. 14.

that points out that “Christianity is irreformable in terms of any feminist agenda.”<sup>8</sup> By relating ourselves to the contexts of cultures, we also would be able to reclaim those positive cultures that have been erased due to westernized Christianization.

There are other resounding questions we need to apply ourselves to. “Is patriarchy God’s order, God’s design? And “Can feminist perspectives in theology contribute to the historical demise of patriarchy?” The book “Is there a Future for Feminist Theology?” explains that it is an urgent need to analyze “the full extent and depth of patriarchy within the structures...” “Unless these foundational faults are exposed, any reconstruction would be a façade without substance.”<sup>9</sup> Such a view is endorsed by secular leaders on management. “We finally need to put to rest the traditional hierarchical, job-based and bureaucratic model of organization...” since they are “simply too inflexible and rigid to compete effectively.”<sup>10</sup>

Emphasis on ‘his’tory to include ‘her’ stories not only within the canonized Bible but going extra canonical has to be made. Ursula King remarks that this “historical investigation is not simply a matter of setting the record straight...it is also an issue of personal and corporate identity.”<sup>11</sup> This brings us to the question of the canon and the authority of the Bible. I asked a theologian why is it not possible to inform the lay people of the historical development of the Bible and its canonization processes. The answer was that it might disturb their faith. I could not but wonder, if the theologically trained people could learn, understand and accept the background and are still trusted to keep their faith and moreover be the pro-

motors of faith, what is wrong in trusting lay people. When selected texts are used and interpreted to keep women subservient and in limited areas of ministries. Ardent Christians who fervently defend positions on the basis of scriptures go into undue agonies that some of us are blasphemous, leading people astray if we do not subscribe to Biblical literalism.

Religious extremism from within Christianity and in other religions is a matter of great concern to us. ‘The Great Commission’ as the Mathew 28:16–20 more popularly known as the commandment to baptize, was excavated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and used by the founders of the modern missionary movement. It is “still used as the ‘proof text’ for pushy forms of mission.” The insistence most of the time is on ‘conversion’ and particular form of baptism that is one of the reasons for backlash against Christians in some parts of the world. Also the commissioning is perceived to be for the male disciples and therefore the insistence on apostolic succession. This leads to the exclusion of women in the preaching ministry. Christine Lienemann likes to regard this text instead as a manifesto for education for discipleship. If we read it from this point of view, we discover that it is talking, explicitly or implicitly, about teaching and learning, about the community of teaching and learning, and also about the power relationships within this community.”<sup>12</sup> It is about being disciples and making disciples that is non-threatening and invitational also to other faiths. A more worthwhile initiative could be shifting the call to mission instead by focussing on the ‘revolutionary song of Mary.’ Then any one who is looking for a change in the unjust system feels the call and is willing to take risks, feels

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p.14.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> *The Future of Leadership* ed. By Bennis, Spreitzer, Cummings, published by Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Company, San Francisco, 2001 p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> “Is there a Future for Feminist Theology?” edited by Deborah F. Sawyer and Diane M. Collier, published by Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, England, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> *Women and Power in Ecumenical Theological Education*, a Bible study presented at the Women and Leadership Seminar, Bossey, June 4–10, 2001.

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invited to participate in God's salvific mission, women included. The world needs such a sensitive, justice seeking, and 'missional' approach.

There has been quite a positive reaction in men when confronted with feminist perspectives who are formulating men's studies, solidarity networks of men against violence against women etc. The inclusion of men into the subject enables two things: ensures men's active participation and encourages their inputs on gender that "ensures informed and credible critique".... "of men challenging the ownership of patriarchal oppression. Women have been forced to listen to male voices naming the pains of patriarchy."<sup>13</sup> Allowing "challenging concepts from the realms of post-modernity gender theory to meet with biblical text....opens the way for new meanings for sacred text... how scripture remains an important resource for theology, and is not restricted to traditional scholarship, but central in the most radical contexts, including those that explore gender and sexuality."<sup>14</sup>

Many of the recent WICAS' and ecumenical consultations have given a call to concentrate on spirituality that is more deeply felt at the emotional level and living out one's faith. By authenticating emotional experience as important and valid, we would reemphasize the need to explore the many dimensions of spirituality and mystical experiences that have been under valued or sidelined. This would make a remarkable change in the practice of one's faith.

There are two specific reasons for using the term "engendering theological Education for transformation." First, it is not because it is the 'in' thing or the globally accepted, politically correct terminology. To be reformed and reformative, there is a need for dynamism not 'status quo' therefore we have to move beyond feminist perspectives. I wonder whether it follows Hegel's postulation: "thesis, antithesis and synthesis."

There is also a second and a more vibrant meaning attached to the term 'engendering.' Engendering also means 'giving birth to something new (breed, cause, hatch, induce, muster, occasion, produce, provoke, work up, develop; excite, stimulate; arouse, quicken, rouse, stir.' I find all these words applicable when we use the term gender. The purpose of our gathering is therefore not to incorporate the feminist perspectives into the structured curricula that we already have, but to put our collective energies and expertise to mobilize a reformulation of theological education, relevant and life affirming.

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## Conclusion

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The LWF's self expression that came out of the Eighth Assembly at Curitiba, Brazil, 1990 is "to intensify their efforts to be a sign of an inclusive communion in the world." This statement interpreted the Biblical understanding of the image of God (Gen 1:27) and oneness in Jesus Christ (Gal 3:28). It emphasized the salvation given in Christ and the "promise of a new community between men and women." So we already have the mandate to move in this direction.

Therefore this consultation must make an attempt to go even beyond gender, be creative, taking care not to imprison the contributions of feminist perspectives into the traditional theological approaches. This means we need to make intentional and bold initiatives to uncover the trappings, uplift the essence of the gospel and live the hope of augmenting the new heaven and the new earth. 2001 has been declared the International Year of Volunteers therefore I invite you to be part of this process and make it a transformatory enterprise for all of us.

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<sup>13</sup> Is there a Future for Feminist Theology?" edited by Deborah F. Sawyer and Diane M. Collier, published by Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, England, p. 21.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, p. 23.