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The Making of a Feminist: A Philosophical Autobiography

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There was never a point in my life when I "converted" to feminism.¹ However, on reflection, I see a trajectory toward feminist ideas which seemed to become inexorable in recent years. During my youth I knew several women who, though not espousing feminist ideas themselves, were yet powerful role models who contradicted the stereotype of women as the weaker sex. My great grandmother, Orpha Buxton (1889-1978), was a figure of towering strength and character, a virtual matriarch on my father's side of the family.² My mother, Noni Viney (b. 1934), also defies stereotypical female behavior. As long as I remember, she worked outside the home, always as an educator.³ I also recall the associate pastor at the Methodist church my family attended, the Reverend Fran Bigelow. Her example prevented me from falling into the error of supposing that women are somehow unfit for the ministry.

Although I had important female role models as a youth, I did not become familiar with feminist ideas until I was an adult. When my daughter Jennifer (b. 1979) was born, I began to ask what kind of a world she was being born into. I wanted her to have the same opportunities and rights that I had had as a male. It did not take me long to realize that our society was (and still is) a long way from granting men and

women equal opportunities and rights. It was probably inevitable, given what I wanted for Jenny, that I should become a feminist.

Once my interest in feminism was sparked, I had the good fortune to find friends and family members who helped me explore and develop my own ideas. Rebecca Viney (b. 1952), my wife, and our friends, the Reverend Joyce Jenkins (b. 1950) and the Reverend Regina Falletti (1950-1991) discovered feminism at about the same time. We spent many hours in conversation, argument, and fellowship, excitedly sharing each new insight that came our way. Each of these women had been a student in my classes. Yet, looking back, I believe that I learned as much or more from them as they could ever have learned from me.

I became painfully aware that feminism is more than academic interest in April 1991 when Regina was murdered by her estranged husband outside the church in Westminster, Colorado, where she was the associate pastor. The tragedy of her death was a vivid reminder that violence against women is one of the greatest challenges our society faces. Of course, men also experience violence, but it is usually women who are abused, raped, and murdered.

In July 1993 another of my former stu-

dents, Stephanie Schmidt, was murdered. She was the latest casualty in what sometimes seems like a war against women. Dorothy Miller, the head of Safehouse in Pittsburgh—and one of the first people Rebecca and I met after coming to Pittsburgh—spoke eloquently at Stephanie's memorial service of the need to face the spectre of violence against women. If I had no other reason for being a feminist, this would be enough.

One of the first issues to catch my attention was the apparently insignificant question of how we talk and fail to talk about women. I used to think of language as a neutral vehicle for conveying information. Having read Plato, Confucius, and especially Wittgenstein, I should have known better. At any rate, I discovered that language is the expression of a culture—its insights as well as its prejudices. The study of etymology proves this. Consider an example not directly related to feminism. In our language, left-handedness has a decidedly negative connotation. Being left-handed is associated with clumsiness; a left-handed compliment is actually an insult; we speak of someone being “way out in left field” when they are out of touch with reality; to be *gauche* (from French for “left”) is to be crude or awkward; to be sinister (from middle English for “on the left”) is to be evil; no one would want a left-hand man, but a right-hand man is a trustworthy companion; in classical art God creates with the right hand, but the devil does things (like baptizing followers) with the left; finally, “right” has a double meaning, either as “the opposite of left,” or “correct.”

I think that prejudice against left-handedness is rather mild—I am left-handed—and for the most part not damaging to us southpaws. But it is a fine example of how language can embody a systematic prejudice.⁴

Thinking about language also led me to the discovery that words have a life of their own, independent of what any individual intends to say. There is a delightful illustration of this in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. Humpty Dumpty says to Alice, “There's glory for you.” Alice replies that she doesn't know what this means. Humpty retorts, “Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant ‘there's a nice knock-down argument for you’.” Alice complains that this is not what “glory” means and that words can't simply mean anything we please.⁵ Alice is correct. Humpty may explain what he means by “glory,” but he would also be required to explain what he means by “there's a nice knock-down argument” and he would be required to explain the explanation of this, and so on, forever. If each of us had a personal dictionary in our heads, communication would be impossible. This may be what Wittgenstein meant when he said that there is no such thing as a private language. This conclusion goes hand in hand with what I have already said about language being a product of culture.

My final discovery about language was that it is one of the most powerful forces in human life. J.L. Austin wrote a book, *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), and spawned the discipline of pragmatics. Austin's ideas can be generalized to show

that language can be, and is, used to help or harm people. Sexism is simply one way in which language can be harmful to people.

I was witness to a demonstration of the sexism in our language and its power to mold our perceptions. Joyce Jenkins was running a Sunday school class of which Rebecca and I were members. Joyce gave each member of the class a card with a topic written on it. I later found out that she made sure that topics were distributed to the class members in a random fashion. Each person was to make a collage depicting the assigned topic. What the class did not realize is that Joyce had chosen the topics in pairs, one using language with male sexual connotations, the other using gender neutral language. For instance, topic pairs included "industrial man" and "industrial society," or again, "the religions of mankind" and "world religions," and so on. When the collages were completed, Joyce revealed her design and the class compared the collages of the paired topics. To everyone's surprise, those who had been assigned topics in language with sexual connotations tended to make collages with images of males. Those who were given topics in gender neutral language tended to pick pictures of men and women equally.⁶

The Sunday school experiment was a good illustration of what Janice Moulton calls parasitic reference.⁷ A word with a specific connotation is used as an umbrella term to cover more than its original meaning. This happens when we use "Kleenex" to talk about all facial tissues, or when we use "Coke" to talk about all soft drinks. Advertisers are well aware of the impor-

tance of parasitic reference. If the Coke company can get people to call other soft drinks "Coke" they will not only sell more of their product, they will promote the idea that other brands are somehow inferior versions of Coke. I believe this happens with so-called gender neutral uses of nouns and pronouns such as "man," "mankind," "he," "his," and "him."

My discipline, philosophy, provides a wealth of material to document the sexism inherent in language. When I was in undergraduate and graduate school, I thought that when Aristotle said that all men are rational he was talking about all human beings; or when Thomas Aquinas said that all men are created in the image of God he meant to include women; or when Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal, women were included. Not so. In each case, women were included, if at all, as an afterthought with caveats concerning their alleged weaknesses, defects, and moral inferiority. This came as a revelation to me. Why hadn't I been taught this sometime in my many years of schooling? This was parasitic reference with real teeth. I concluded that Confucius (though himself terribly sexist by modern standards) was correct when he said that the moral level of a society is reflected in its language. Language is one of the important ways by which women (or any marginalized group) either are oppressed or gain legitimacy.

The other thing that heavily influenced my thinking about feminism besides role models and the study of language was when I finally read the feminist theolo-

gians. One book, more than any other, was pivotal: Rosemary Radford Ruether's *Sexism and God Talk*.⁸ I met Ruether when she came to Pittsburg, Kansas, in November 1985 as the Rising Lecturer. In Ruether's work I found a coherent vision of feminism as it pertains not simply to social issues but to religious issues as well.

Ruether pointed out that Christian theology denies that God is a man. On the other hand, Christian theologians have often given the impression that God is, in some mysterious metaphysical way, male. For instance, a popular Christian apologist, C. S. Lewis, wrote,

"God Himself has taught us how to speak to Him. To say that it does not matter is to say either that all the masculine imagery is not inspired, is merely human in origin, or else that, though inspired, it is quite arbitrary and unessential. And this is surely intolerable."⁹

My respect for Lewis did not prevent me from seeing that this is a bad argument. First, he overlooks the fact that there are many female images of God in the Bible.¹⁰ Second, he proposes a false dilemma. Even if the Bible is inspired, it does not follow that particular biblical metaphors or figures of speech are privileged. Are we to avoid talk of a spherical earth because the Bible speaks of the "four corners of the earth" (Revelation 7.1 and 20.8)?

The practical fallout of Lewis's sexism becomes apparent when one realizes that arguments like his are routinely used to keep women out of the clergy. This same nonsense still passes for high theology in much of Christendom. Many women min-

isters and priests have faced some resistance to their vocation from other people within the church. Ruether rightly calls this sort of attitude idolatrous.

After reading Ruether, feminism became a part of my spiritual life. I should add that I was encouraged by the example of a famous male philosopher. Charles Hartshorne (b. 1879), when he was in his eighties, wrote explicitly in favor of feminism and of its applications to philosophical theology. My father, Wayne Viney (b. 1932), served as a male role model in the same way. As I was becoming aware of sexism in philosophy and theology, he was discovering sexism in his field, psychology. To my delight I saw that we were developing along parallel and complementary paths.¹¹

There has been a lot of fuss over the project of "de-sexing" the Bible, so I should say something about this, since it brings together two of the things I have talked about, language and religion. My opinion is that there is no point in trying to make the Bible something it is not. And it is definitely not a feminist document. Scholars should translate the ancient tongues as accurately as possible and not be driven by ideological agendas. On the other hand, there is nothing wrong with imaginative rewritings of the Bible—a kind of Christian midrash—to bring out alternative viewpoints. A good example of this is Miriam Therese Winter's *The Gospel According to Mary*.¹² Winter rewrites the story of Jesus as she imagines an intelligent first century woman might have written it. Of course, Winter is not trying to replace the Bible

with her imaginative reconstruction. However, her book gives new meaning to the four Gospels by allowing one to read them from a different perspective.

Mary Daly once remarked that if all of the misogyny and sexism were taken out of the Bible there might be enough left to make a pamphlet! That's an extreme view that I don't accept. Nevertheless, as Ruether suggests, the Bible can be read through "feminist lenses." What she means is that one can read the Bible with a view to picking out the sexism that is there. One can also use feminist lenses to find the various ways in which positive images and attitudes towards women manifest themselves even in a patriarchal society.¹³

These few reflections on role models, language, and religion, do not begin to do justice to the variety of forms that feminism can take. I have simply picked the dimensions of feminism that have been important in my development. However, my discussion would be incomplete if I did not give some sort of characterization of feminism. I see feminism as involving two interrelated claims: (1) society should accord women and men equal opportunities, rights, and responsibilities and (2) women are, in any way that matters, the equals of men.

I acknowledge the biological (and perhaps some psychological) differences between the sexes. However, I do not see these differences as giving any special advantages or privileges to one sex over the other. An anti-feminist student once remarked that no female would be a match for Mike Tyson, the famous boxer. This

example is ironic since Tyson was convicted of rape and represents the very violence that feminists like me abhor. It is true that no woman could best him in the ring (neither could most men). On the other hand, Tyson would look rather silly trying to compete against Mary Lou Retton, the Olympic gold medalist in gymnastics. We all have our heroes.

We live in an unprecedented age. For the first time in human memory vast numbers of people, both men and women, believe in the above ideas, even if many are reluctant to call themselves feminists—more's the pity.

Notes

1. This paper began as a letter written October 13, 1993 to Megen Duffy. Ms. Duffy requested that I rewrite the letter as an essay.
2. My father, Wayne Viney, wrote a brief biography of Orpha Buxton shortly after her death and distributed it to family members. It is called *With Wings As Eagles, A Biography*.
3. My mother and I discussed feminism on October 16, 1993. I asked her if she was a feminist. She replied, "Sort of." She said that she is a strong supporter of women's rights and that she always sided with the underdog. On the other hand, she said that she has "trouble" with extreme forms of feminism. She explained that she has a wonderful husband and that she had never felt discrimination in her profession. "I've been in a woman's world." She concluded by saying, "I had sons. Maybe I would have

- felt differently had I had daughters. I don't call myself a feminist, but I probably am one."
4. Some of the examples in this paragraph were culled from Stanley Coren's *The Left-Hander Syndrome the Causes & Consequences*. New York: Vintage, 1992.
 5. Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland and Other Favorites*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1951, p. 190.
 6. Casey Miller and Kate Swift report a similar experiment with similar results at Duke University in 1972 by Joseph Schneider and Sally Hacker. See Miller and Swift, *Words and Women*. Garden City, New York: Anchor, 1977, p. 19.
 7. Janice Moulton, "The Myth of the Neutral 'Man'," in *Feminism and Philosophy*, edited by Mary Vetterling-Braggin, Frederick A. Elliston and Jane English. Totowa, New Jersey: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1977: 124-137.
 8. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk Towards a Feminist Theology*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1983.
 9. C.S. Lewis, "Priestess in the Church?" in *God in the Dock* edited by Walter Hooper. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970, p. 237.
 10. See Virginia Ramey Mollenkott's *The Divine Feminine The Biblical Imagery of God as Female*. New York: Crossroad, 1986.
 11. Hartshorne's most accessible work is, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984. My father's book on the history of psychology is an excellent resource for studying both how women have been affected by sexism in psychology and how much women have contributed to the field; see Wayne Viney, *A History of Psychology: Ideas and Context*. Needham Heights, Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon, 1993.
 12. Miriam Therese Winter, *The Gospel According to Mary A New Testament for Women*. New York: Crossroad, 1993.
 13. A little classic on finding sexism in the Bible is Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984. An excellent general discussion of women in the Bible is Denise Lardner Carmody's *Biblical Women*. New York: Crossroads, 1988.