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HAMISH F.G. SWANSTON

Sexism and God-talk. Towards a feminist theology.

R.R. Reuther, SCM Press 1983
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The blurb-writer remarks, with rather more justification than is usual in such persons that Professor Rosemary Reuther's new book amounts to a *Principles of Christian Theology* written from a feminist perspective. This theology begins from a myth of creation and redemption and goddess, a myth related to the tellings now orthodox among us rather as is the reworking of Adama and Apollo and Sheba in *Battlestar Galactica*, but a myth designed, as that amusing television series is, I suppose, not, to prompt a revaluation of our cultural assumptions. To show us at the start what truth there is in the scholastic tag *quidquid recipitur secundum modum recipientis recipitur.* Those domineering, earth-scarring, complacent males who run our society and its religion, could receive revelation only as from a domineering, earth-scarring, complacent, male God. From such a revelation an authority may be derived for burnt-offering, crusade, and defoliation, for male hierarchs, patriarchal government, and derring-do, for a male's understanding of himself as *imago Dei.*

Professor Reuther's thesis is forwarded, the blurb-writer is right again, by 'personal' as well as 'intellectual' references. She even characterizes gossip and its attendant "bitchiness" as a 'network of female communication and covert resistance'. A reader may, therefore, feel justified in sometimes reacting to her work in anecdotal terms. Having read the first part of her book in the train on the way to the English National Opera's current production of *La Traviata*, I was the readier to appreciate what the elder Germont is doing in his Act II scene with Violetta. I felt, as keenly as on that very first time I distinguished the words being sung, how appalling was his insistence that it was God's will for the fallen woman to enable his son's escape from the disapproval of society, at whatever cost to herself. Even the splendour of Mr. Norman Bailey's singing could not distract me from the recognition that Verdi's social criticism was entirely congruent with Professor Reuther's feminist analysis of experience.

Experientia facit theologum, Luther remarked of his life and work, and it is by such experiences in the Dress Circle, or the *Turm,* or the window at Ostia, that a language is given for theological reflection. 'What have been called the objective sources of theology, Scripture and tradition, are themselves codified, collective human experience'. Religious authorities attempt to persuade us that the symbols in which they express our experience should be accepted as dictating what can be experienced. Woman can recognize this strategy more clearly than men who are half in love with easeful orthodoxy. As Ms. Sallie McFague insists in *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language,* the allegation of women's experience exposes the accepted theological tradition of our society as inappropriate for the expression of universal human experience. 'Feminist theology makes the sociology of theological knowledge visible, no longer hidden behind mystifications of objectified divine and universal authority'. It may be necessary to re-examine those theologies which christian orthodoxy has rejected in order to see whether they might have been offering some image of experience more consonant with what women know. Ms. Olivia Harris has been showing lately how attractive such a re-examination might be. Women in Brazil and Colombia, and in several mediterranean countries, have recovered a source of inspiration in the femaleness of divinity. Professor Reuther takes such a programme to be vitiated from the start. It is 'historically inaccurate' and 'ideologically distorted'. The Biblical tradition is not quite empty of resources for feminist theology, and the old Goddess cults of the Levant were often vehicles of male power. She is content that ancient paganism 'does not exist as a living tradition'.

Other human beings, even males, may have at least a momentary appreciation of what the Goddesses reveal. Autobiography and anecdote seem appropriate again. On the afternoon of 17 December, 1978, having taken a 'bus for the greater part of the road, I walked along the Sacred Way from Athens to Eleusis. The great precinct was deserted. The janitor had gone off for a nap. There was not even a solitary German or Japanese tourist. So, free of the feeling that I would be giving others a bad example of sacrilege, which had restrained me on previous visits, I determined this time to sit on the *agelastos petra,* that laughless rock upon which Demeter had rested in her search for her daughter, Persephone. I did so. The winter sun had that afternoon been strong enough to warm the stone. I shut my eyes. The memory of the *mater dolorosa* was strong, also. I heard the Goddess weep'.

Professor Reuther says nothing of Demeter, but she does make time to note 'the widely diffused image of the Goddess without an accompanying male cult figure' in Paleolithic times. She construes the large-breasted, large-buttocked, large-thighed, Lady of prehistoric religion as 'an impersonalized image of the mysterious powers of fecundity', though to me the Lady has seemed quite closely related to the Beauty Queen, and expressive of some male notions of personal charm. Professor Reuther is interested in the Goddess as imaging an order of complementary existence, of human beings living in ecological harmony with animals and plants. This is a particular theme of her feminist theology. 'We cannot criticise the hierarchy of male over female without ultimately criticising and overcoming the hierarchy of humans over nature'. Professor Reuther's ecological sympathy is of a piece with her social programme. 'Any ecological ethic must always take into account the structures of social domination and exploitation that mediate domination of nature and prevent concern for the welfare of the whole community in favour of the immediate advantage of the dominant class, race, and sex'. In all talk of this kind, of course, there is something to prompt the male fear that women will cause trouble if they can. It is a fear expressed, Professor Reuther tells us, in the theologies of Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Barth, and which has erupted into 'prolonged bouts of witch-hunting that took the lives of as many as a million people, most of them women'. The eruption in Puritan communities of New England was, significantly, against women who had some talent, were economically independent, and lacked the required docility towards male neighbours and clergy. Such women were accused of being in league with nature against men.

It is no wonder, therefore, if those women who understand what has been going on are enraged. 'Males take on a demonic face. One begins to doubt their basic humanity'. Chief among such angry women is Professor Mary Daly. When I was teaching at Boston College in 1971 and 1972 she was turning men out of her theology course along the corridor on the ground that their presence would slow down the class because the universe that human beings know would have to be explained to them. Going back to that university to give a lecture last October, I was told that she turns them out still.

Professor Reuther, while acknowledging the real cause of such anger, does not wish to delay on the alienating past. She wants to be remaking christian theology. She looks out for redeeming signs in Jesus. And in his parables she finds a language which goes beyond the criticism of existing power systems to suggest a wholly new pattern of relations in our dealings with one another and with God. 'Women play an important role in this Gospel vision of the vindication of the lowly in God's new order. It is the women of the oppressed and marginalized groups who are often pictured as the representatives of the lowly. The dialogue at the well takes place with a Samaritan woman. A Syro-Phoenician woman is the prophetic seeker who forces Jesus to concede redemption of the Gentiles. Among the poor it is the widows who are most destitute. Among the ritually unclean, it is the prostitutes who are the furthest from righteousness'. So Jesus prompts a feminist theology which will liberate 'the oppressed of the oppressed', that is, 'women of the oppressed'. But a feminist theology must find Jesus problematic. Even if the theologian reaches behind the christological symbols which have been used to enforce male dominance, and remakes, as Professor Reuther surely does, the scriptural figure of the Servant in her own image, the Jesus of history presents only in partial, fragmentary, conditioned, terms, the possibilities of being human. Professor Reuther will have nothing to do with attempts to see Jesus as embodying the feminine, either in the *kitsch* of repository statuary, or in the romantic devotion to one who is meek and mild. She would have made short work of that delight in christological androgyny that Coleridge, Tennyson and F.D. Maurice indulged. It is certainly a pity that she did not have space to notice Maurice's remarks that 'Truth is essentially the manly virtue' and that in Christ 'Truth is wedded to Obedience, the characteristic of the Woman'. She does, however, have some sharp things to say about 'clergy and other males who belong to the more humanistic disciplines and who find themselves marginalized from the centre of (male-macho) power', complaining that they have been deprived of their right 'to cry, to feel, to relate', and about patriarchs who, as a grand exception, will take over the family cooking when it's a matter of a barbecue on the porch. It is a necessary preliminary for a theology of the future that we should abandon the myth of such distinguishing marks of female and male. It is a myth which is supported on many levels by male organizers of society. Men have a 'cultural tendency to identify their ego with left-brain characteristics and to see right-brain characteristics as the "repressed" part of themselves, which they in turn project upon and identify with women'. Men have a 'cultural tendency' also to seek out dichotomy and place reality in pairs to match their own opposition to women. They re-interpret equivalents as complements, as in their theory of the old Goddess and God couple of Near Eastern cults. 'There are tensions that define ancient religion – especially between chaos and cosmos, death and life – but divine forces, male and female are ranged on both sides'. After all, Professor Reuther says in an innocently incidental phrase, 'the Canaanite Goddess continued to be worshipped alongside Yahweh in the Solomonic temple for two-thirds of its existence'. Men have suppressed the witness to equivalence in their exegesis of Jesus' parables. He imaged the divine as a farmer who sows seed, a woman folding leaven into dough, a shepherd who recovers a sheep, a woman who sweeps up a coin. Such sayings are 'basically the work of Christian prophets', male and female, who speak out of the spirit of Jesus, representing Jesus' teaching as it is effective not in the past but in the present. 'Soon, however, a developing institutional ministry (bishops) felt the need to cut off this ongoing speaking in the name of Christ'. So those who are loyal to the spirit of Jesus must look for a Third Age.

There is no 'once-for-all' disclosure of the divine in the past; but by holding the memory of the life and death of Jesus among other memories of other persons, we may come to recognize what 'authenticity' there may be in ourselves and those we encounter, and in earlier reachings toward the new world. Montanism is to be remembered as preserving the prophetic office of women as well as men. And a gnostic group has left us, in the Nag Hammadi library, witness to their veneration for the apostolic authority of Mary Magdalene. Within the confines of the seventeenth-century Quaker movement, 'thanks in no small part to the role of Margaret Fell', something of a coherent theology of the *imago Dei* in all human beings was developed, but, even among them, 'in the world' the male was still to rule. The late eighteenth-century Shakers saw that if women and men were created in the image of God, there must be androgyny in God, and in the divine order of redemption; 'the Messiah must appear in female form as well'. Their ministerial order properly reflects their soteriology. In their Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, leadership is given equally to celibate orders of men and women. And there are signs that, 'although Eddy stopped short of allowing her a new Christ', she too saw the need for a messianic disclosure in feminine form. She accepted the title of new "Mary".

The original Mary of christians does at least look promising as a feminine sign wholly disassociated from the myth of woman as bringer of evil. No-one, to use a neologism Professor Reuther employs on at least six occasions, *scapegoats* female sexuality for sin and death in orthodox mariology. In her exegesis of the *Magnificat*, Professor Reuther makes much of Mary's dominion over her own body. When the angel arrives, Mary does not consult Joseph, but makes her own decision. There is a contrast here with Hannah, who wanted to fulfil her husband's expectations of a woman. Mary makes liberation possible through her free act, and, at the same time, is herself liberated. 'She is the humiliated ones who have been lifted up, the hungry ones who have been filled with good things'. It would have been more consonant with Professor Reuther's professed interest in all humanity if she had noted that *Luke* 1.46-55 depends not only from *I Samuel* 2.2-8 but also from *II Samuel* 6.9-23, and that the evangelist is remembering a woman who sneered at the poor, hankered for the restoration of the mighty on their thrones, and refused to welcome the divine power. However that may be, Mary herself may represent, in the language of Latin American liberationists, God's 'preferential option' for the poor. In an older language, she may present a *metanoia*

within woman by which her familiar role is understood to be the negation of her humanity. 'This *metanoia* necessarily starts within woman herself, who in turn demands a recognition of woman's personhood from men as well'.

That this *metanoia* should be first exemplified in Mary's pregnancy is significant for many women in the present Roman Church. When that anxious, tradition-ridden, well-meaning male, Pope Paul VI, at last brought himself to issue *Humanae Vitae,* my aged mother, long past any child-bearing but with a lasting memory of the horrors of child-birth, and a life-time's accumulation of 'covert resistance' stories about drunken husbands, sadistic rapists, and back-street abortionists with their knitting-needles, ceased, after seventy years of mass-going, to count herself a Roman Catholic. 'That man hates women', she declared. The nature of male power-broking was perfectly revealed to her when the local parish priest called to tell her that 'there is death-bed perversion as well as death-bed conversion' and that it was equally decisive for eternity. At this, my mother slipped from uninstitutionalized christianity into paganism. 'Do you then worship a God who would, if I am making a mistake now, not remember all my years of serving Him? How right I was to make my escape'. In a moment, a twinkling of the eye, she had perceived God, his world and the males in it as just that demonic conspiracy which Professor Mary Daly has worked so long and hard to express.

Professor Reuther sees that any 'enemy-making' of men must in the end subvert the feminist aim. 'The dehumanization of the other ultimately dehumanizes oneself'. After all, if there are no distinguishing marks of temperament then women are not wholly secure against those temptations to domination to which men have succumbed. Women may forget their own experience and collapse into male perversions.

It is not entirely clear where Professor Reuther would locate the Church of her future. Something of it is recognizable in socialist and communist states, but 'socialism, like liberalism, operates under an unstated androcentric bias', assuming that the male work role is the normative human activity. Women are to be given the chance to do men's work. That may be an improvement on the ecclesiastical state in which so many women are denied male jobs, but it is still to accept the perverse as the norm. 'Should we not take the creation and sustaining of human life as the centre and reintegrate alienated maleness into it?' This is the necessary *metanoia.* And its liturgy is the twirling dance of the old Shaker folk. I am sorry that those who presently wear the Shaker clothes and make the Shaker cheeseboards on Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, did not thus explain to me the meaning of their happy chorus-line:

To turn, turn, will be our delight
'Til by turning, turning, we come round right.

Professor Reuther sees a sign of the recovery of blessedness 'within the mortal limits of covenantal existence' in the circle of the Shaker dance. A feminist theology does not, in the end, require a personal existence beyond the dancing-floor.

Her final chapter, 'Eschatology and Feminism', which deals with the old questions of immortality, includes an extended reference, again, to Near Eastern cults, and a comment upon the epic of Gilgamesh which exhibits more clearly than anywhere else in her impressive work that element of her theology which seems to me most alienating. She recalls the scene in which the woman who makes wine, or the 'alewife' as Professor Reuther chooses to call her, tells the hero that his quest for immortality is futile. Gilgamesh should give up such dreams and get on with the business of living. 'The epic', Professor Reuther says, 'confirms this advice in an ironic way'. 'Ironic'? Well, certainly, Gilgamesh, having achieved the quest, is robbed of the plant of immortality that he was bringing to his people; and, certainly, the whole poem is revealed to be Gilgamesh's epitaph, extolling his care for the walls within which his people may live at peace. But 'ironic'? After the verse where he has sung of the snake snatching the sprig of life, the poet has placed the simple phrase

And Gilgamesh wept.

It is the only designed half-line of the poem as we now have it. The poet knew not only that he would need a moment to pull himself together after the recital of such sadness, but that his listeners would feel as keenly in that moment the fragility of human life, the frustration of human friendship, the fallenness of human experience. They would weep too. This, as much as the battle-cry and the missile-count, is the male tradition. '*Sunt lacrimae rerum, et mentem mortalia tangunt*'. 'Alas poor Yorick, I knew him, Horatio'. 'I am the enemy you killed, my friend'. 'And Jesus wept'. It is a part of our memory of Jesus that the death of the young, the promising, the unfulfilled, was for him as for us, a sadness. And a sadness whatever practical advice the alewife may offer. The death of any other may be a sign for each one of us, that, however aged, each may die before anything she or he attempted has been brought to completion.

It cannot be enough to say, in the face of this sign, that, 'to the extent to which we have transcended egoism for relation community', we can accept our deaths as 'the final relinquishment of individuated ego into the great matrix of being'. It seems to me that there is something ungracious in such talk of relinquishing or transcending the *locus* of my experience. Especially when Professor Reuther has told me at the very start that 'consciousness is ultimately individual'.

I may, by all this, simply prove myself to be a typical 'White Male-System person' and properly placed by Dr. Anne Wilson Schaef against 'Female-System persons', of any colour, who realize that 'immortality is not a genuine possibility', and spend little or no time worrying about it. In defining this distinction of persons Dr. Schaef simply proves herself unable to sympathise with those members of the human race who so far transcend the individuated grief of particular deaths as to regret our general conditions. *Mortalia,* the things that are not simply going to end in death, but have an inbuilt death from their beginning, are evidently experienced differently, but if human experience is indeed 'the starting point and the ending point of all theological reflection', experience of the tears of things may enjoy a like theological dignity with the experience of little or no worry. I would be loathe to term it either a male experience or a female experience. I have heard the Goddess weep.

It is not that I hanker after immortality. To hear Demeter weep is not to expect the *epopteia* of the Greater Mysteries of Persephone. I rather entertain the thought that if there is a further world it would be too great a triumph of hope over experience to look for anything very splendid. It is only that I am amazed at the generosity, nobility and

courage which women and men have shewn even in the midst of their uncertainty about what was and what was not a 'genuine possibility'. And that I am almost as much amazed that anyone, but particularly anyone as concerned for universal humanization as Professor Reuther asserts herself to be, should show so little sympathy with them in this uncertainty, and so little sensitivity to the beauty of the art they have made to express that uncertainty.

All this rough, tough, talk suggests, along with the shopping-trolley used as a weapon in the supermarket, and the prams advanced side by side like tanks across the width of the pavement, that women, must, indeed, guard themselves, as Professor Reuther herself warned, from taking on the ruder aspects of the males whose world they mean to change. 'That's a nice hat auntie', I said when I was four years old and susceptible to the slant of a well-placed feather. 'Yes, my dear, it's a hunting hat'. 'Oh, what are you hunting auntie?' 'Men, my dear, men'.

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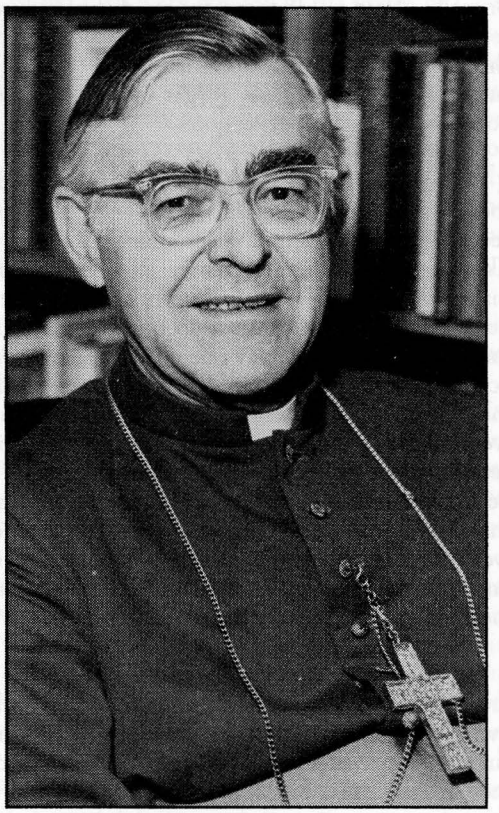
GRAHAM LEONARD
Bishop of London



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