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# Christian Feminist Theology in Global Context

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# Christian Feminist Theology in Global Context

## **Abstract**

Rosemary Radford Ruether's lecture calls white Christian feminists to be mindful of their "single-issue western... critique is false and dangerous." The rich diversities of women's experience demand a diversity of issues, priorities and tactics. It is, as Professor Ruether reminds us, in the dialogue of western Christian women with "third world" Christian women, that "white western feminism becomes clearly one feminism among others, rather than... 'feminism as such.'"

## **Comments**

Boardman Lecture XXX. Edited and Foreword by Jacqueline Z. Pastis.

The Boardman Lectureship in Christian Ethics

(Founded 1899)

**XXX**

**CHRISTIAN FEMINIST THEOLOGY  
IN GLOBAL CONTEXT**

Delivered Before  
The University of Pennsylvania  
October 2, 1991

By

**Rosemary Radford Ruether**

Including Questions and Responses  
Following the Lecture

Edited by  
**Jacqueline Z. Pastis**

Philadelphia  
Published for the Department of Religious Studies  
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## Foreword

The thirtieth Boardman Lecture in Christian Ethics at the University of Pennsylvania was delivered by Dr. Rosemary Radford Ruether, Professor of Theology at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. Her presentation was the seventh since the reinauguration of the series in 1984 by the Department of Religious Studies. Professor Ruether's pioneering feminist critique over the last three decades has challenged the boundaries of traditional Christian religious discourse. She has cogently exposed the sexism, racism and anti-Semitism within Christian history, theology and liturgy. Her prolific scholarly contributions include Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions (edited, 1974); New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation (1975); Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism (1979); Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology (1983); Womanguides: Readings Toward a Feminist Theology (1985); Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities (1985). More recently she has published The Wrath of Jonah: The Crisis of Religious Nationalism in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (1989) and edited Beyond Occupation: American Jewish, Christian and Palestinian Voices of Peace (1990).

The 1991 Boardman lecture was sponsored by the Religious Studies Department in cooperation with the Christian Association. Professor Ruether's lecture, delivered on the afternoon of October 2, 1991, also served as the opening lecture in a series planned to celebrate the centennial of the Christian Association at the University of Pennsylvania. Professor Ruether slightly revised her lecture, for this publication, to incorporate comments from the Question and Answer period immediately following her presentation.

It was a singular pleasure to attend Professor Ruether's lecture. Her writing has had a profound and monumental impact on my own thinking as a white Christian Feminist. Her work calls me to mind that single-issue western white Christian "feminist" critique is false and dangerous. The rich diversities of women's experience demand a diversity of issues, priorities and tactics. It is, as Professor Ruether reminds us, in the dialogue of western Christian women with "third world" Christian women, that "white western feminism becomes clearly one feminism among others, rather than . . . 'feminism as such.'"

I would like to thank Marie Hudson and Professor E. Ann Matter for their assistance in the preparation of this publication. I would also like to thank the Reverend Dr. Beverly Dale, Executive Director of the Christian Association at Penn, for providing an audio-cassette of Professor Ruether's lecture and the revised copy of her paper.

Jacqueline Z. Pastis  
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**CHRISTIAN FEMINIST THEOLOGY  
IN GLOBAL CONTEXT**

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## CHRISTIAN FEMINIST THEOLOGY IN GLOBAL CONTEXT

Feminist theology has often been labeled as being a 'white Western middle class women's' movement. Liberation theology is seen as the normative 'third world' theology, springing from the anti-colonial struggles of Latin America, Asia and Africa. However, increasingly women from Latin America, Africa and Asia are discussing what Ghanaian feminist theologian, Mercy Amba Oduyoye has called "the irruption within the irruption"; that is, the irruption of 'third world' feminist theologies within the liberation theologies of these regions. (The term 'third world' has long been problematic, and, with the collapse of the 'second' or communist world, is totally obsolete. But since these groups have adopted this label for themselves, I am not at liberty to change it until such time as they themselves adopt a new term).

One of the major vehicles of dialogue between 'third world' liberation theologies has been the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians. When this association began its meetings in the early 1970's, women were almost entirely absent and liberation theology was still seen as a primarily Latin American phenomenon. But Asian and African theologians were developing their own contextual theologies, seeking to relate Christianity to their own cultures and liberation struggles. The dialogue between Latin American, Asian and African theologians was not always easy. Asians and Africans insisted that they had to give attention to inter-religious and cultural issues that had not been prominent in Latin American theologies. As minority churches in predominantly non-Christian societies, they had to dialogue with the historic Asian and African religions and cultures.

Toward the end of the 1970's a few women, such as Mercy Amba Oduyoye, now Deputy General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, began to appear at EATWOT meetings and to point out the need to take women and women's issues seriously within liberation theologies. There was resistance to feminist issues from 'third world' male theologians. It was said that feminism was a 'first world' issue, a diversion from 'third world' liberation struggles and foreign to 'third world' cultures. But the women persisted and began to ask for a Women's Commission



within EATWOT.

In 1983 EATWOT met in Geneva in a joint meeting with European and North American theologians concerned with liberation theology. The meeting was organized so that the delegations from each of the five regions would be as close to fifty percent women as possible. At this meeting, which I attended, the women from all five regions gravitated to each other and claimed their right to meet together on women's issues, despite the protests of some 'third world' men, who tried to bring 'their women' back in line.

At the conclusion of the conference, the women from Asia, African and Latin America stood up together and declared that "feminism is our issue, and we will define what it means for us. It is not for 'first world' women to define it for us, nor is it for 'third world' men to tell us that it is not our issue." As Mercy Oduyoye and Virginia Fabella, a Filipina and the Asia Coordinator of EATWOT, put in the book they edited, With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology (Orbis, 1988):

We, the women of the Association, were just as concerned to name the demons and to have them exorcized. Sexism was one such demon, and it existed within the Association itself. Our voices were not being heard, although we were visible enough. It became clear to us that only the oppressed can truly name their oppression. We demanded to be heard. The result was the creation within EATWOT of a Women's Commission, and not a Commission on Women, as some of the male members would have it. Rather than see ourselves solely as victims of male domination, we formed a sisterhood or resistance to all forms of oppression, seeking creative partnership with men of the Association. (pp. ix-x).

Over the next five years a series of assemblies on 'third world' feminist theology took place through the organizational initiatives of the Women's Commission of EATWOT. The assemblies were planned to take place in four stages: first, national meetings; then continental/regional meetings; then a 'third world' global meeting. Finally there would be a global meeting of 'third world' and 'first world' women theologians (now scheduled for 1993). The continental or regional meetings took place in late 1985 and early 1986.

The all-Asia meeting assembled in Manila and the Latin American one in Buenos Aires. There were two African meetings, an Anglophone gathering in Port Harcourt, Nigeria and a Franco-phone one in Yaounde, Cameroun. During December 1-6, 1986 delegations from all three continental regions met together in Oatapec, Mexico.

These meetings stimulated ongoing networks nationally and regionally, as well as a flow of publications. The resolutions from the Asian, the Latin American and the two African assemblies, together with the resolutions and major papers from the global meeting, were published in the book edited by Fabella and Oduyoye mentioned before. The Latin American papers were also published in a book edited by Mexican New Testament scholar, Elsa Tamez, El Rostro Femenino de la Teologia (1986) (English translation: Through her Eyes: Women's Theology from Latin America (Orbis, 1989).

Asian women are particularly active and well organized, with on-going national groups in most countries, especially strong in Korea, India and the Philippines. They have founded the Asian Women's Resource Center, currently located in Seoul, Korea. Book publications and a quarterly journal, In God's Image, edited by Korean feminist theologian, Sun Ai Park, emanate from this center. Drawing on papers from regional meetings, the resource center published We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women (1989, also Orbis Press). Asian women have organized several all-Asian gatherings, such as the one in Singapore in November, 1987, whose papers were published by the Resource Center under the title Asian Women Doing Theology (1989). During December 14-21, 1990, delegations from seven Asian countries gathered in Madras, India to share papers from each of the seven national contexts on feminist hermeneutical principles. The papers from this gathering are being edited for publication.

What are the distinctive issues of 'third world' feminist theology? How do feminist religious thinkers from such diverse regions as Brazil and Mexico, from India, Korea and the Philippines, and from Ghana, Nigeria and the Cameroun and South Africa contextualize feminist reflection in their ecclesial, social, cultural and historical situations? Despite such enormous diversity, there are many similarities between feminist writings on Christology, God-language, church and ministry coming from these many contexts.

These similarities reflect the fact that these women are all Christians who have received their Christianity from Western European and North American missionaries. In India, of course, Christianity has been present since the second century, but the dominant Christian churches today reflect the Catholic missions of the sixteenth century and the Protestant missions, together with British colonization, of the nineteenth century. Christianity also came to the Philippines with the Spanish in the sixteenth century and was reshaped by American colonialism of the last hundred years.

These predominantly colonial origins of Asian Christianity mean that these women have been educated in Western European or North American Catholic or Protestant cultures. Their languages of communication came to them from missionaries and colonialists, Spanish or Portuguese, French or English, sometimes German. In order to become Christians they or their ancestors were uprooted from their indigenous cultures and religions. They all share similar problems that come from this history of cultural and socio-economic colonialism and its contemporary expression in neo-colonial dependency and exploitation.

One can detail several characteristics of 'third world' women's development of feminist theology. One aspect is an appropriation of feminist theology and social analysis of North America and Western Europe. Anglophone women in Africa and Asia read North American writers, while Latin Americans often draw from French feminism. German writers also are read. It might seem that such heavy use of Western feminism belies the thesis that 'third world' women are making their own contextualization of feminism. But it should be recognized that much of the critique of patriarchalism that has been done by Western women is quite relevant to 'third world' Christian women because this same patriarchalism, including its Christian sacralization, has been exported by the West to the 'third world'.

Women in Mexico, in India, in Korea, in Nigeria or South Africa find themselves with colonialist and missionary versions of Western patriarchal economic and political patterns and Christian male clericalism. They hear versions, often in a heavy-handed and fundamentalist tone, of the same Biblical and theological arguments which declare that God has created male headship and has forbidden women ordained ministry in the



Church. Thus when a Korean woman or an Indian woman does feminist New Testament exegesis, drawing on the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, she is criticizing, not just patriarchal Biblical interpretations in the West, but ones which she has had to confront in her own church and theological school in Korea or in India.

In the Asian feminist hermeneutic papers from the gathering in Madras in December of 1990, the authors define a double dialogue that situates their own contextualization of feminist theology. On the one side they make clear their debt to 'first world' feminists, but also the inadequacy of this work to their own context. 'Third world' women have to translate feminism into their own social and cultural context.

The second dialogue is with the male liberation theologians of their countries, or in the Filipino context, what is called 'the theology of struggle'. Although the women feel their feminist work is within the struggle for national liberation, deepening that struggle by making visible the oppression of women, what they have found in virtually every country is the inability of the male liberation theologians to incorporate feminism. This is not necessarily a question of hostility, but simply of an inability to understand women's experience and to take gender oppression seriously on a par with class oppression. Thus it becomes evident that this analysis must first be done by women.

'Third world' feminist theology, like liberation theology, typically begins with story telling from women's experience and social analysis of women's stories. The paper presented at the EAT-WOT Asian feminist theology meeting in Madras in December, 1990, "Toward an Asian Principle of Interpretation: A Filipino Woman's Experience," begins with brief first person stories of five Filipinas: Lucy, a factory worker; Norma, a college student and victim of incest; Elisa, a former political detainee who has been tortured in prison; Lolita, a bar girl, and Sister Jannie, a religious sister from a tribal region.

The paper then uses these stories to analyze Filipino women's experience. Their vulnerability to sexual abuse both at home and on the job, their low wages and the double exploitation of their labor at home and in the paid labor market are put in an over-all analytic framework. The paper also shows how Christianity has validated women's subjugation, as well as the cultural uprooting

of Filipino people.

This paper, in common with most of feminist thought in Asia, Africa and Latin America, is keenly interested in reclaiming women's history within the history of their nation. The paper moves to a discussion of the roots of patriarchy in the Philippines. It shows evidence that women in pre-colonial Filipino society held a more equal status. The introduction of Catholic Christianity by the Spanish broke up the communal, extended and matrifocal family system. The Christianized Filipina was made into "her father's meek daughter, her husband's faithful subject, the church's obedient servant," as well as "a slavlike toiler who worked the rich man's land for a pittance."

This exploitation is seen as extended with the introduction of capitalism by American colonization, despite new educational skills made available to women. The use of Filipinas as a cheap reserve labor force, as well as commercial prostitution connected with the presence of the American military bases characterize the American colonial and post-colonial periods.

But there is also a reclaiming of women's experience as resistance leaders against oppression. These historic figures serve as role models for contemporary women engaged in resistance to subjugation. Gabriela Silang, who led a rebellion against the Spanish in the 18th century, is one such role model. The Filipino women's organization, Gabriela, has named itself in memory of this heroic woman. There were also women who organized and led strikes against exploitative factory conditions that can be traced as far back as the 1880's.

The Filipino women's suffrage movement of the period from 1912-1935 is seen as a more ambivalent phenomenon, serving partly to separate women's energies from a more unified national liberation struggle. The current feminist movement has sought to avoid this mistake, reaching out to connect the issues of women across classes, as well as with the national issues. This movement arose in the early 1970's, gaining wide-spread development in the mid-1980's.

The paper presented in Madras by Indian women, "Breaking the Silence: Indian Women in Search of Hermeneutical Principles," similarly reclaims a pre-patriarchal past, but in this case must look back to an era before the Aryan invasion of the second millennium B.C. Patriarchy is seen as having been introduced by the

Aryans, subjugating not only women but also the non-Aryan indigenous people, introducing both gender and racial-social caste systems.

Indian women also reclaim heroic women from their past, such as Amirtha Devi, in the village of Khejadali, in Rajasthan, who in 1730 led a movement of women, men and children to prevent the Maharaja's soldiers from cutting the trees by wrapping their bodies around the tree trunks. This movement has inspired the contemporary Chipko movement in the Utharkhand region of the Himalayas where women over a twenty year period have led groups into the forest to cling to the trees, in order to block the lumber companies that were deforesting the area.

This process of analysis of women's subjugation in each society consciously reaches beyond a middle class feminism of 'equality' to a liberation feminism. That is, it locates gender oppression, historically and socially, in relation to the structures of class, race and national oppression. It looks at women's situation within class hierarchy and in relation to colonial/neo-colonial domination from outside powers. For 'third world' feminists solidarity with the oppressed and preferential option for the poor takes on a more specific focus. It means particularly a solidarity with the most oppressed and exploited poor women of their societies. These are the poorest of the poor, the *minjung* of the *minjung*, as the Korean feminists put it.

'Third world' feminists are very aware that exploitation of women cuts across class lines. This is particularly true of sexual abuse. There is rape and incest of the female child in the home, wife battering, denial of the rights to reproductive decision-making and the danger of rape for even the most affluent woman. All women bear the burdens of sexual stereotyping and responsibilities for domestic labor. But these burdens are greatly aggravated for poor women. The wealthy woman can employ the poor woman as servant to alleviate her work in housecleaning and childcare, while the poor woman has to neglect her own children to labor for miserable wages and in demeaning conditions in the houses of the rich. The poor woman also faces much greater dangers in the streets, where she may be robbed and raped, as well as sexual harassment and health hazards in the work place, as she struggles to earn money to support the children she may have to leave unattended at home.



Although this pattern of women's oppression could be duplicated in most societies, including Western ones, 'third world' women have also focused on particular elements of women's oppression that are culturally specific or take on particular aspects in the context of their societies. For example, in India a major focus of feminist organizing has been on behalf of the tens of thousands of Indian women who have died or been severely maimed in dowry murders or attempted murders.

In India the dowry has become a way of exploiting the economic relation of the bride's to the groom's family. The low view of women as an expendable commodity, to be valued only for the goods that she brings with her, is greatly aggravated by Western consumerism. It has become common for the groom's family to demand both large sums of money and expensive consumer goods, such as stereo sets and motorcycles, as the price of taking the bride into the family. If the groom's family is dissatisfied with these gifts, in some cases kitchen accidents have been contrived to burn the hapless bride to death. The groom and his parents then go shopping for another bride. The high price of marrying daughters has also encouraged wide-spread female foeticide in India.

For Korean feminists, the forcible division of their country into two halves after the Second World War, North and South, communist and capitalist, each repressive examples of the two antagonist systems on which they have depended during the Cold War era, has become a specific focus of theological reflection. Korean feminists have widened the discussion of national reunification to include other antagonistic dualisms that divide Korean society; the class dualisms of urban and rural, rich and poor, in both their feudal and now their capitalist expressions, and also gender hierarchy, rigidly defined by traditional Confucian teachings.

In a special issue of In God's Image (June, 1988), Korean feminists discussed how all these dualisms of gender, class and divided nation cohere in the foundational paradigm of patriarchy. National reunification must go beyond the South-North, capitalist-communist split. It must encompass all these antagonistic dualisms, not setting one against the other, but finding a new harmonious synthesis, symbolized by yin-yang unity, where the

wholeness of each person and group can be affirmed in the unity of the whole.

A particularly sensitive issue for 'third world' Christian feminists in relation to the Christian churches lies in the situation of religious pluralism, particularly the relation of Christianity to the earlier religions which still largely shape the national cultures. In both Africa and Asia there have arisen indigenous cultural or contextual theologies which have appropriated into Christianity positive traits of traditional religions. In Africa John Mbiti has explored the views of time, space, relation to nature, community and death of traditional African thought as positive resources for African Christianity.<sup>1</sup> In Sri Lanka Jesuit theologian Aloysius Pieris explored the resources of Buddhism for an Asian theology of liberation.<sup>2</sup>

However these explorations of relationships to indigenous religions become more explosive when carried out from women's perspectives. 'Third world' feminists have criticized some of these efforts of male Christian theologians to appropriate the indigenous culture as being, not only romantic and unhistorical, but also as overlooking or even justifying oppressive aspects of these traditions toward women. The patriarchy of Hindu or Confucian systems of society and culture thus are reinforced by claiming that these patterns are part of the indigenous culture, which presumably is to be reclaimed by the anti-colonial movement.

Feminists in India and Korea particularly have shown the way in which Christianity, instead of liberating women from traditional patriarchy, has become a tool to reinforce the patriarchalism of traditional Hindu or Confucian culture.<sup>3</sup> Thus women in these countries find themselves suffering from a double layer of cultural and religious justifications of sexist domination, one layer from the traditional religion, reinforced by a second layer brought by Western Christianity. For example, ideas such as women's impurity during menstruation have been revived in contemporary Indian Christian churches, using Biblical sources, thereby reinforcing traditional Hindu (and Muslim) notions of women's ritual impurity.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, however, 'third world' feminists are seeking positive and recoverable elements from indigenous religions and cultures. Latin American women are exploring the pre-Hispanic Peruvian goddess Panchamama, in whom the divine



female is revered in a more wholistic relation of human society and nature. Indian women reclaim the Indian concept of Shakti as the female divine creative force of the cosmos. They link their own empowerment in the struggle for liberation with a revived experience of Shakti permeating nature.

Korean feminist theologian Chung Hyun Kyung has reached out to the Korean shaman tradition, in which women predominate as worshippers and leaders, as a positive tradition for women.<sup>5</sup> Dr. Chung shocked the assembly of the World Council of Churches when she began her address on the theme of the Holy Spirit's liberating power with a shaman dance. She also brought in a picture of a Buddhist woman bodhisattva as a female image of the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup>

Christian feminist theologians also claim the liberating traditions of the Bible and Christian tradition as foundational to their vision, despite the failures of the Christian churches to develop these liberating traditions and to apply them to women. Thus Filipina theologians, in their hermeneutical paper, lift up the themes of equality in the image of God, liberation from the hierarchies of gender, class and race through Christ and the continuing liberating work of the Biblical God who leads God's people out of slavery into freedom. They claim stories from Hebrew Scripture, such as that of Hagar, as well as the women of the gospels, as exemplars of the positive possibilities of the Gospel for women.

Filipino women claim the right to read all texts from the tradition, including those of the Bible, from a critical perspective, judging whether "they 1) promote the authentic personhood of women, 2) foster inclusive communities based on just relationships, 3) contribute to genuine national sovereignty and autonomy and 4) develop caring and respectful attitudes, not only among human beings, but toward the rest of creation as well."<sup>7</sup>

On the basis of these criteria, the authors of the Filipino paper project a comprehensive revisioning of theology. They seek a wholistic cosmology that overcomes mind-body, human-nature dualisms and an understanding of humanity, male and female, that transcends dualism and hierarchy. These principles are similarly applied to the transformation of Christology, Mariology, moral theology and spirituality. A concern for ecology has become a major emphasis in current 'third world' feminism. Women, who have been both socially and symbolically linked with the

subjugation of nature, must take the lead in a new spirituality, theology and social morality that seeks to overcome the violation of nature, as well as the domination of women.<sup>8</sup>

In conclusion, 'third world' feminists are establishing a relation to the injustice of their societies, as well as to the plurality of their cultures, that is complex and dialectical. They refuse to repudiate either Western or Christian culture in the name of anti-colonial liberation, and refuse to reject their indigenous heritages in the name of Christian exclusivity. They wish to excise the patriarchal elements from both of these cultures, while bringing together the liberating elements of Christian thought with wholistic cosmologies, often manifest in reverence for the sacred female, of indigenous culture.

Why is it important for women theologians, such as myself, from the dominant Euro-American culture, to be in dialogue with the emerging feminist theologies of Asia, Africa and Latin America? The obvious reason is that the work of these women is very exciting, and energizing. One sees both parallels and differences from one's own context in a way that is mutually revealing. One is also called into solidarity with the work they are doing, and, at the same time, made aware of the relativity and particularity of one's own work. White western feminism becomes clearly one feminism among others, rather than covertly or unconsciously, 'feminism as such'.

One powerful example offered by 'third world' feminists is their ability to hold a practice across class lines together with theoretical reflection. Also, with far fewer resources than we, they seem less plagued by cynicism. 'Third world' feminists face staggering problems of many-layered social violence and oppression, experienced in its most virulent form by women of the poor. But they have also caught a world transforming vision and an energy that fuels a bold creativity, shattering the taboos that have held and continue to hold these fetters in place. In the words of the Indian women, "They cannot destroy our Shakti."

## Endnotes

1. John S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1970).
2. Aloysius Pieris, An Asian Theology of Liberation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988).
3. See the national papers in In God's Image (September, 1987).
4. From discussions with women seminarians studying at the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College in Madras, India in January, 1991, I learned the extent to which purity taboos were informally enforced in the more fundamentalist Christian congregations in India.
5. See Chung Hyun Kyung, "Han Pu-ri: Doing Theology from Korean Women's Perspective," in We Dare to Dream (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), pp. 135-146. Also her book, Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990).
6. The videotape of Dr. Chung's talk at the World Council in Canberra, "Come Holy Spirit: Renew the Whole Creation" (2/8/91) is available from Lou Niznik, 15726 Ashland Drive, Laurel, Maryland.
7. "Toward an Asian Principle of Interpretation: A Filipino Woman's Experience," EATWOT Asian Feminist Theology Meeting, Madras, India, December 15-20, 1990, p. 18 (unpublished).
8. In the Indian context this union of feminist theory and ecology has been particularly modeled in the book by Vandana Shiva, Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1988).

## QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

*Are third world women interested in ordination in the Church and are they ordained?*

### **Professor Ruether**

Yes they are interested in ordination and they are being ordained in various churches although more slowly and in fewer numbers than here. For example, in Korea, which is about 35% Christian, there are large numbers of Presbyterians, most of whom do not ordain women. Only a small, kind of "left" group ordains women. The Methodist Church ordains women but they have to be single. You drop out when you marry which was a regulation of early Protestantism. In the fifties and sixties that was quite common. So you have these patterns which persist there, which have been dropped here. So you have a few. In India, the Church of South India which has an Anglican base, although it is a United Church, has ordained women for a while. The Lutheran Church just went through a huge struggle about it and just ordained three women. I happen to know these women and they have received death threats. So there is a real struggle there and it's at a very early and rather difficult stage. But they are certainly interested in it.

*I wonder if you could comment about third world women doing theology from within the belly of the beast? Puerto Rican, Native American, African American women in the western context.*

### **Professor Ruether**

[to restate the question] She's asking about third world women doing feminist theology in the belly of the beast which is the United States. I really think that I need to hear from them. I would be hesitant to say exactly how they see that and that would be rather different. Some Afro-American women have had access to seminary and even doctoral work and of course have created a very powerful tradition of Afro-American literature. So it's very common for a lot of the ethical and theological thought that is being done among Afro-Americans to interface with dialogue with black women's literature as a resource. I think Native Americans have a whole different situation, in a sense more like the Asians



and the Africans in that they have to cross the religious lines and dialogue with their own indigenous traditions that are not Christian. So those are just a few comments. But I think that the people in the Philippines and Korea and so on, feel they are in the belly of the American beast too.

*Since the majority of the people in this audience are not from the third world, why is the work of third world feminists important for members of the dominant culture in the United States?*

### **Professor Ruether**

Well I actually have another piece of the talk which I did not give, but I talked about what I think white women from the dominant culture need to hear and dialogue with. They told me I had forty minutes so I had to cut the talk down. But I do want to develop this part more. Basically every form of imperialism essentially, as Enrique Dussel likes to say, creates a totality in which the dominant group assumes they are the whole of reality. The others whether they be women, subjugated classes, races and so on, simultaneously disappear and at the same time are incorporated as a part within the dominant structure. Obviously feminist theology has criticized that kind of pattern in terms of male patriarchal theology. But, in effect, white women can do their own version of that. They can do their own version of simply forgetting that white women of the dominant class are not women in general. In a certain sense I have sometimes said that women of the dominant class find it very easy to think that sexism is their only issue because sexism *is* their only issue. In other words, they are much less aware, obviously, of poverty, of racial discrimination, because it is not their immediate problem.

I would say that the first reason why it is absolutely essential for white women to dialogue and to be in contact with theologies coming from these other contexts is precisely to demystify the tendency to think that somehow feminist theology is theology coming from white women of the dominant group. So it deuniversalizes and makes us recognize that it has something to say. It has something to say to women in Asia, Africa and Latin America but they have to translate it, re-contextualize it to make it helpful for themselves. So this reveals the particularity and the limits of feminist theology done in the white, dominant, cultural context.

So I think that is one very essential thing.

And then there comes other kinds of aspects which I hope will flow out of that. Not only solidarity. I wish that women who have more resources really enter into solidarity and support for women in other contexts. But that we recognize, in the process, our own limitations. That we become in the process enriched and see all kinds of dimensions that we are not going to see in our own contexts.

I'll just give you a little vignette that for me always illustrates the difference. I went, about fifteen years ago, to a double conference in Australia. The first half of the conference was going to be white women from Australia meeting in their own group, discussing their own issues. And then women from the Asian islands, including Australian Aborigines, meeting together and discussing their problems. So they were going to have these two separate conferences and then the two conferences were to come together. In the first half of the conference which of course I was attending as a visitor, the issues were very oriented to the Church; women's problems in the Church. We all sat rather tightly in our seats. And then in the second half, the two conferences flowed together and two things happened immediately. First of all, a hell of a lot more movement irrupted. People suddenly began to dance and to move around and just to liberate their bodies. So that was one level. The other level was that a much more serious, social analysis entered immediately. Suddenly we stopped talking about the problems in the Church and we started to talking about the structures of colonialism. So this to me has always illustrated how in this little white women's world, a tiny little world, they did not see most of the world in which they themselves were embedded.

*The language of "first" and "third" world just reeks with patriarchy. But I guess for the lack of better terminology we will stick with that. Some of the liberation theologians both here and abroad impose the framework of "third world" on people of color in this country. Some of the women, African American women, in their response to a critique of feminist theology, say that feminist theology fails to apply a race analysis as it relates to the African American situation here at home. How do you respond to that criticism?*

## **Professor Ruether**

[to rephrase the question] I think there's a comment about the language of "first" and "third" world which, as I said, was problematic from the beginning and is now quite obsolete. We don't even know if there even is a second world. It seems to have been slipping into the world of poverty as a matter of fact. But the problem is that these organizations in Asia, Africa and Latin America themselves adopted the term "third world." And so, in a certain sense, I don't have the prerogative to create another language until they create it. So I hope they'll do that at their next meeting. This is not just a casual, terminological question. It really has to do with, in a sense, asking what are the structures of colonialism now that there is really not this kind of communist world in the same way.

I just came back from England, from a meeting of the Women European Theologians for Feminist Research. One of the talks was given by Marie de Lourdes Pintasilgo who was the Prime Minister of Portugal and is also a member of the Grail [an international Catholic women's organization]; a very interesting woman. She basically says we have to really do a whole recasting of our analysis of what's happening globally. What you have now is one hegemonic, political, military and economic center which is the United States and its western allies. And everybody else is basically now exploited; an exploited periphery including increasingly now, Eastern Europe in relationship to this hegemonic center. This is the new world order which is basically just a kind of victory of neo-colonialism on another level. So what I am saying is that this is very serious to really re-think this kind of language.

Now in terms of racism in white western feminism, obviously there have been some feminists who have been quite blind and a number of others who have tried to work an analysis of sexism within the context of race and class virtually from the beginning. I've attempted to do that partly because I actually started out primarily working on the issues of race. Having spent my first ten years of teaching at Howard, the race issues were very central for me. And I actually started doing feminism later. So I always have attempted to see race, class and gender as dimensions within a whole system of oppression. But clearly no matter how much I may be well intentioned or whatever, I still suffer from the myopia of my race/class location. So I have to continually hear that kind of critique from other people who are at different social locations.