

## **Editorial**

### **Special Issue – Hearing the Other: Feminist Theology and Ethics**

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*Guest Editor*

Feminist theology and feminist theological ethics raise particular issues for public theology, both on the grounds of their content and in terms of the ambiguous position they occupy in relation to what is regarded as mainstream theology and theological ethics. In the last fifty years substantial progress has been made in the fight for equal rights for women and men, and yet in most of the world women occupy a status in society and in religion that is substantially less than that of their male counterparts. Only some branches of some religions ordain women, and while women in the so-called developed nations are wrestling with unequal pay, domestic violence and reproductive rights, women in the two-thirds world often lack access to basic health care, nutrition and respect. Arguments in favour of female subordination based on religious texts are far from clear cut, and yet the place of feminist scholarship in university degree programmes is often peripheral and optional or even non-existent. It is time that public theology took seriously the equal treatment of women, both in terms of the roles women are given and in terms of the impact that religious teaching has on women's status in their families and in their religious communities.

It is fitting, therefore, that a special issue on feminist theology and ethics in the *International Journal of Public Theology* should start with a contribution from Rosemary Radford Ruether. As a leading light in the field of feminist theology, Ruether's work has held a primary place among interested scholars and students, in numerous places around the world, for decades. As one who has participated in the struggle of feminist theologians for over forty years, Ruether is able to give a first-hand account of both success and backlash. Moreover, as a woman scholar well-versed in the often overlooked connection between the exploitation of women and the destruction of the environment, Ruether reasserts her conviction that a public theology concerned with ecological sustainability, peace and justice must reassess its teaching on women. Ruether's article offers a clear account of the development of feminist theology – from its introduction in seminaries in the US, through its incorporation of ethnic and sexual diversity, to international and interfaith debate and transnational feminism – and makes explicit the need for public theology to include feminist concerns in environmental ones. Her contribution to this issue of the journal serves as a useful resource for readers who are less familiar with feminist theology, a reminder to others of where we have travelled and how we got here, and a challenge to us all to examine our religious, economic and ecological beliefs and practices from the perspective of feminism and the vast inequality, especially for women, that persists both locally and globally.

Ruether's article is aptly followed by Heather Walton's assessment of her own theological journey. In a remarkably candid portrayal of her feminist and political affinities and yet expressing a certain discomfort surrounding much of what is labelled as 'public theology', Walton assesses the proponents and critics of feminist and public theologies in order to come to terms with the difficulties of 'speaking of God in public'. In particular, Walton acknowledges the debt that public theology in Scotland owes to Duncan Forrester, while highlighting the necessity of critiquing the gendered Habermasian model on which Forrester's public theology relies. By bringing Rebecca Chopp and Bonnie Mann into conversation, Walton hints at a way forward through a 'disruptive and threatening form of poetics' that brings forth a form of transcendence that public theology has been lacking thus far.

Likewise, Cuban Ada María Isasi-Díaz, pioneer of Hispanic and Mujerista theology, presents her account of reconciliatory justice and praxis from her own experience of marginalization as a member of the Latina community in the USA. While drawing on the option for the poor found in liberation theology, Isasi-Díaz is critical of the way this has, at times, been interpreted as a 'preferential' option for the poor that appeases the wealthy. Hence, she challenges the so-called First World to a genuine recognition of the inescapability of enjoying the privileges and opportunities it contains, and, in so doing, to be truly mindful of the exploitation of the majority of the world that this involves. For Isasi-Díaz, the individualistic concept of justice at work in western liberalism is intermingled with the reality of injustice for the majority of the world and for the biosphere. Solidarity with the marginalized, therefore, means using our privileges to improve the conditions of the poor, until we reach a time when our privileges are more equitably shared out and thus cease to be privileges. Further, Isasi-Díaz employs the notion of 'present-future' to explain that reconciliation must override revenge as a feature of justice: reconciliation occurs in the fleeting present that builds a common future between oppressed and oppressor. In addition, the building of a reconciled community requires dialogue, since consensus is to be found through dialogue based on lived experience, where all voices are heard and no one is dominated, subordinated or manipulated by the others. In the aftermath of the destruction of the World Trade Center and the seeming futility of the war in Afghanistan, Isasi-Díaz proposes that a reconciliatory praxis of care needs to be taken seriously.

More specifically concerned with an issue of primary importance in reproductive ethics, the article by Tina Beattie provides an erudite and challenging account of both feminist and Catholic perspectives on abortion. As a feminist Beattie critiques the brand of liberal feminism that is excessively permissive of abortion, while taking seriously the realities of women faced with unwanted or problematic pregnancies. As a Roman Catholic, Beattie investigates the teaching of the church and the Scriptures in respect of abortion and teases out the principles at work that are at odds with the historical tradition and with teaching on other issues of life and death. From her lucid and incisive discussion, Beattie reaches an equally forthright conclusion that refuses to call a fertilized egg a person, but equally refuses to grant moral acceptability to third trimester abortions.

In a similar vein, Heather Widdows develops the theme of bioethics with her examination of New Reproductive Technologies (NRTs). While the feminist debate on reproduction focused on the extent to which it empowered or enslaved women, NRTs do not fall easily into either of these camps. On the one hand, NRTs make it possible for

women to have children without male partners, enlarging traditional conceptions of the patriarchal family. On the other hand, NRTs may encourage women to seek assistance with reproduction later in life and to focus on genes more than ever before. The very possibility of assisted reproduction, therefore, does not guarantee that women have more choice; on the contrary, it may mean traumatic medical procedures and the exploitation of poor women who sell eggs to buy food. While feminists grapple with the complex debates surrounding NRTs, theologians have barely begun to address these issues. Reproduction is upheld in theological tradition, leading to contentious debates over the status of the embryo, but neither the status of the pregnant woman nor that of the infertile woman have received proper theological attention. Moreover, as Widdows points out, the debate over NRTs has emphasized individual autonomy over the common good and this is where both feminist and public theology provide useful resources. It is time for feminist theology to engage in a serious discussion of NRTs and for public theology to consider the needs of women alongside the common good and what might constitute an ethical use of NRTs.

Finally, this special issue concludes with a contribution by Ann Loades. Loades was the first woman to be given a personal Chair at the University of Durham, UK (1995) and she has been awarded a CBE (2001) for her services to theology. In this centenary year of Simone Weil's birth, Loades offers a fluid discussion of Weil's perspective on the interaction between religious faith and public life. In particular, Weil's concerns over the relation between government and divine justice, during and after war, as Loades reveals, have much to say to contemporary conflicts. Moreover, whether or not we agree with Weil's opinions, her efforts to speak from genuine experience, to improve the lot of humankind through engagement with dehumanization in the workplace, to be a part of the resistance and to promote non-violence on the basis of a religious faith that could not but be involved in public issues is a stark reminder of the practical commitment required of an effective public theology.

Overall, the articles in this issue remind us of the importance of hearing other voices, including the perspectives of women, minority groups and the infertile. It is of primary importance that public theology hears and responds to the voices of the marginalized. I hope that the articles in this issue of the journal will further the development of feminist theology as public theology and in so doing will assist in mainstreaming feminist theology and feminist theological ethics in religious and theological communities.