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Communities of Resistance and Solidarity

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COMMUNITIES OF RESISTANCE AND SOLIDARITY. By Sharon Welch. New York: Maryknoll, 1985.

Sharon Welch's *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity* is an original, exciting attempt to formulate a feminist theology of liberation, from the point of view of a white, middle class American woman. This consciousness and frank admission of her class origin is a refreshing honesty which gives the book a distinct perspective. She writes in her preface:

For me to be a Christian is to become aware of the degree to which I am a participant in structures of oppression, structures of race, class and national identity. As a woman, I am oppressed by the structures of patriarchy. Yet as a white I benefit from the oppression of peoples of other races. As a person whose economic level is middle class, I am both victim and victimizer of others. As an American, I live with a nation whose policies are economically, politically and environmentally disastrous for far too many of the world's peoples (p. ix).

The author starts by pointing out the fundamental crisis of liberal theology which consists of two elements: linguistic and moral inadequacy. It suffers from the difficulty of delineating the reality of its form of discourse and its lack of credibility in claiming as referent of its discourse a loving and just God in the face of the "atrocities of Christian complicity with injustice and hatred throughout the centuries" (p. 4).

Liberation theology offers a way out of this crisis by making praxis, namely, the process of liberation in history, the criterion of liberational faith. However, it is itself challenged by the "dangerous memory" of those who have suffered without apparent liberation. The feminist theology of liberation takes recourse in casting one's lot with those who resist, and in continuing to affirm life in the midst of systematic denial of life. The novelty of the feminist insight is considered by Welch not in its resolution of the crisis of liberal theology but in its acceptance of itself as a concurrent event with this crisis, a part of the epistemic shift in western knowledge and action that is systematically and genially delineated in the works of Michel Foucault.

Taking this epistemic shift as a starting point she attempts to point these shifts in the emerging theologies. She clarifies her main objective of developing a liberating mode of theological reflection within her oppressor-oppressed situation. This is what she refers to as a "feminist theology of liberation" which consists of two poles: the nihilistic pole, which expresses itself in a sense that "truth is the outcome of power struggle, therefore the inability to claim that Christianity is true in any significant sense outside the realm of its becoming actually true in history (p. 14). It reflects the author's skepticism and fear that the human race might not be capable of active conversion in a truly significant social dimension. The second pole is the commitment to re-

sisting oppression, the affirmation of liberation, the attempt to understand the nature and the conditions of freedom. It is therefore a theology of despair and hope.

While acknowledging her indebtedness to liberation theologians especially to the open and consistent commitment to solidarity with the oppressed, she nevertheless differs from them in that she grounds feminist theology in the liberating experience of sisterhood, in the process of liberation from sexism rather than in either scripture or in the person and work of Jesus. Feminist Theology of Liberation does not ground itself in historical absolutes as liberation theology does. Feminist liberation theology keeps the alternative open, understanding the validity of its perspective not in terms of some *a priori* element of the human being but in terms of practice—the actual occurrence of social and political emancipation.

With liberation theology, feminist theology shares the realization of the power and peril of discourse. Discourse is transitory and fragile, and yet has an undeniable power because it has a way of shaping our world.

The author takes up Metz' category of "dangerous memory" of oppression and suffering which criticizes existing social structures and exposes established religion as a religion of and for the middle class. It enables the oppressed to speak for themselves and reinterpret church symbols and unite with theologians to reformulate Christian faith and evaluate tradition and forge solidarity.

This theology is created primarily by activists and not by scholars, because it is strategic rather than speculative. It has to struggle against dominant forces of discourse. This necessitates an analysis of specific oppressions (classism, sexism, and racism) and a specific critique of each of these. It also involves a shift in its questioning: The feminist for example will not ask about the ideological misuse of Christian symbols and concepts; rather she will examine the ideological nature of the Christian faith and symbols, asking what it is about Christian faith itself that makes the oppression of women actual in history. She aims to show that patriarchy is not a distortion but constitutes the substance of the Christian tradition. She examines what in Christian tradition itself justifies and perpetuates sexism. She further shows the function of sexism in Christian tradition.

Since the proposed feminist theology of liberation is a redefinition of the Christian faith in a concrete context of oppression, it emerges from the tension the author experiences between skepticism and resistance to oppression and domination. The skepticism is rooted in the awareness of the peril of discourse as well as in its intrinsic power. It focuses on the particular rather than the universal, on the relative rather than on the absolute, on the practical rather than the theoretical: "The primary challenge of liberation is not to construct the correct theory but the struggle to achieve freedom in history," (p. 80) and "The aim of a feminist theology of liberation is to seek the

ground for resistance not on the level of the universal but on the level of the particular and historical" (p. 83). Feminist liberation is committed to the relative to practical. It thrives on the creative tension between relativism and qualified nihilism. It refuses to gloss over the suffering and tragedies of people by the comfort of Christian hope. In her own words:

Awareness of human suffering, as awareness that impels me and others to work for revolution, carries with it the dangers of madness and the frightening conclusion that even if we win now, even if injustice is eradicated, something irretrievable has been lost. Christian hope is a shallow and a callous lie if it fails to be silenced or at least chastised by the voice of all those who suffer and die without relief (p. 89).

Feminist theology sees the truth of faith not in the theoretical certainty about the necessary victory with the help of the Christian project but rather in struggle— "in living within the fragile force of absolute commitment and infinite suspicion" (p. 91).

In her methodology, Sharon Welch takes as a starting point the presupposition and insights of liberation theology: its insistence on contextualization, its emphasis on praxis, its option for the oppressed, its political concern.

However she transcends liberation theology by reflecting on it in the light of Foucault's archaeology of knowledge as self reflection which liberation theology has not yet succeeded in doing. Concretely she deviates by refusing to ground feminist theology of liberation in the authority of tradition and scriptures:

I agree that it is important to identify one's perspective and to choose to enter the "battle for truth" on the side of the oppressed, yet I do so for reasons different from those given by some liberation theologians. Rather than grounding this choice on some atemporal or non-contingent structure—tradition, revelation, the person, work of Jesus. I understand this choice to be a moral one, a choice not free from the concomitant element of risk (p. 26).

She chooses to understand the validity of her perspective not in terms of *a priori* elements, but in terms of practising the actual occurrence of social and political emancipation.

This refusal is an aspect of her theoretical framework, which is most open to critique since she still claims her framework to be "Christian." It is not clear in what way she relates her reflection to the life and work of Christ if she does not accept these as a grounding of her theologizing.

She also refuses to claim that liberation theology or feminist theology of liberation represents the essence of Christianity. Rather, she believes that there are different options within the Christian tradition and one of them is liberation theology and the feminist theology of liberation.

Welch's book is indeed an original approach to feminist theology and is quite daring in its effort to be consequent in the presupposition she adopts. It is not only a strong critique of liberal, traditional theology, but even goes beyond the accepted presuppositions of Latin America liberation theology. As a delineation of the basis, framework and methodology of a Feminist Theology of Liberation it is a well-thought-out reflection. It has however, still to be applied, in the actual theological reflection of the women issues that are actually being faced and will continually be faced by women belonging to different classes, races and cultures. It is still therefore to be tested in the actual experience of struggling women. Only then will it reach maturity as a theological framework capable of giving significance to actual struggles, and of charting perspectives for the continuing struggle that will only end when the domination of the prevailing patriarchal system would have come to an end.

It is a book I would highly recommend to women's groups, but most especially to those who are in the process of articulating theology from the perspective of third world women.

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