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## Feminist Ethics

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# *Feminist Ethics: Bridging the Gap between Ethics and Pastoral Theology?*

VERA SINTON

There are some phrases in common currency among pastoral counsellors: 'He's intellectualizing'; 'She's speaking from the head'; 'You were retreating into the cognitive'. The words the pastor was hearing may have been true in the sense that they refer with some accuracy to external events. They may be rational and moral, summarizing conventional wisdom. They may be relevant to the current situation of the speaker. But the counsellor is aware of a mismatch. The words are in deep contradiction to the feelings of the speaker about the situation. The real response appears to be something like panic, rage, naked grief or unholy glee, feelings possibly so frightening to the speaker that he or she is barely conscious of them. Words which express them are being censored out of the conversation and yet the feelings leak through. From bodily signals or verbal hints the listener deduces what is being said does not ring true. It is not coming from the heart; the client is not being real.

Ethics is a robustly intellectual discipline, exploring how we answer the questions of what is right and good and how we ought to behave. What do we mean by words like love and justice and faithfulness? What line of rational argument will take us from general moral precepts to suggest a course of action in this specific set of circumstances? It is usually deemed to involve standing back from the situation and being able to look at it with enough emotional detachment to ask how it looks from the point of view of the various participants and whether what we are concluding in this case can be universalized. The Christian ethicist at times appears detached, even callous, in the face of mind-numbing horror, discussing whether the use of a modern weapon bringing injury and death to thousands of trapped and frightened young soldiers in their bunkers could be deemed to be a 'proportionate' or 'discriminate' response to an aggressor's attack. At other times the discussion seems to be one of ultra-sensitivity. Are those tiny cells in a glass dish to be accorded all the respect and care which we tenderly lavish on a young and vulnerable human being? Like a cross between intrepid explorers and laboratory scientists the ethicists press steadily on examining the issues of the day. They look for the family likeness between the experiences of our generation and the contexts in which moral imperatives are explicit or implied in God's revelation. They study the continuous tradition of Christian people applying those truths to their changing situations. Too much anger, terror or despair are not conducive to their task.

That is not, of course, the full story. Ethics is about human experience and can never be an exact science. It involves making judgements about the relative importance of human feelings. We can never be impartial observers of the human scene. Our own individual counter-transferences will always be in operation. Some evil things stir my indignation and disapproval instantly. Others I view with more compassion; they tend to remind me that forgiveness is at the centre of my faith. Interaction with others whose responses and blind spots are different is necessary to reveal my bias. In this article I shall consider some of those voices, especially women's voices, which are asking whether much of our ethics has become an exercise in intellectualizing. Does the tradition genuinely express the nature of truth and love as revealed by God in Christ through the Spirit. Is it coming from the heart of the body of Christ?

### **How do we develop moral muscle?**

My starting point is the question, 'What is moral maturity and how do we develop it?' Anglican ethics has tended to have an orientation towards the discipline of philosophy. Meanwhile a growing field of pastoral theologians are looking more in the direction of psychology and probing how such cognitive activity relates to emotional responses and to behavioural change. We are not born ready-made ethicists, though some level of moral reasoning is so universal in our species that apologists continually put it forward as an argument for the existence of God.

Conscience had long been a key term in the Christian understanding of the human soul or psyche. As such it had a sacred quality, the heart of a person where the divine imperative makes its impact in a human life. When Freud suggested that conscience could be explained in biological and social terms and that the development of the superego, as he called it, was strongly related to sexual feelings in early childhood, many Christians were deeply outraged. Part of that indignation was aimed at the moral relativism that any social-learning theory of moral development appears to contain. Another part was a revulsion against talk of sexuality being allowed to impinge on matters of spiritual importance or to invade the 'innocence' of childhood.

Building on the work of Piaget in *The Moral Judgement of the Child* (1932), Lawrence Kohlberg formulated a theory of moral development which assumed a universal moral order embedded in social structures. He posited six stages of moral reasoning:

1. Heteronomous morality: one-sided obedience to authorities, with punishment and reward.
2. Instrumental purpose and exchange: following rules when it is in your own interest, getting a good reciprocal deal.
3. Mutual interpersonal expectations: conforming to what people around you expect of you and your role.
4. Social system morality: fulfilling agreed duties, keeping the laws in order to maintain institutions and gain self-respect.
5. Human rights and a social contract morality: recognising that many rules and values are relative to your own group and looking beyond to

values which apply to all social groups.

6. Universal ethical principles: being guided by self-conscious, universal reversible principles of justice. Much of Kohlberg's success lies in the way he identified clearly recognisable categories of ethical activity. A large body of research over forty years has substantially confirmed his sequence. In the early 1980s, however, this work inadvertently gave a major impetus to feminist ethics.

### Listening to the voices of women

Kohlberg based his original work on a twenty year study of eighty-four boys. By 1969 he was implying that women tend to exemplify stage three of his sequence. Only if they enter the public arena of traditional male activity do they progress to stages four to six. The adult home-making woman exercising gifts of care and responsibility for the needs of others was being categorized as morally immature. One of his colleagues, Carol Gilligan, decided to examine the sources of this conclusion from a woman's point of view.<sup>1</sup>

An important factor at this stage was that psychodynamic accounts of human development had moved on a long way over the century from Freud's focus on sexuality as a biological drive, to a broader concept of intimate human relationships, subject to object, I-Thou, with growth coming through experiences of attachment to and separation from the significant adult figures in the infant's world. Freud's major contribution remained. A wealth of data confirmed that such relationships have a strongly physical component, that infants have genital experiences and that experiences with a physical and emotional content in infancy can have traceable connections to patterns of sexuality in intimate adult relationships. But the specifically sexual aspect takes its place within the wider set of components of an attachment bond.

Gilligan and a number of other feminist writers of the 1980s accept an account of gender differences which emphasizes that women grow up and develop their identity in a social situation which has a stronger emphasis on attachment and weaker emphasis on separation and autonomy than their brothers. They have less anxiety about intimacy and more anxiety about isolation than men. On the whole, the primary caregivers they encounter are women and they can model their identity on them. Boys have to cross a divide, recognise that they are not like mother and find their identity as men. There are elements of this model which are applicable world-wide since the biological roles of women and men are fixed. But the extent to which men are absent or involved in the early life of their children will provide significant cultural variation in how men and women perceive their roles.

In the evangelical world a similar account is given by the psychologist Mary Stewart van Leeuwen who examines biblical material in the light of these insights. She sees the distortions of the Fall as giving men a bias towards domination and women towards social enmeshment.<sup>2</sup>

1 C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1982, pp 18-23, 151-174.

2 M. S. van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace*, IVP, Leicester 1990

Gilligan's work led to much debate and research. According to Snarey empirical evidence shows no significant difference between men and women on the Kohlberg standardized scoring.<sup>3</sup> Women handle principles of justice as well as men. But the controversy over gender differences highlighted a form of moral maturity which has to do with handling increasingly complex forms of mutual care. Men operate in this mode as well as women but are less prone to be aware of it. Kohlberg had simply overlooked it in his account. The word 'connectedness' became a popular term to describe the attachment element within relationships. A number of feminist theologians began to develop connectedness as their key ethical theme.

### **An ethic of connectedness**

No one could claim that this is an entirely new concept. The Christian doctrines of creation and redemption emphasize our responsibility to cooperate and care for one another in covenants of fellowship and love. On the other hand, the doctrine of the Fall highlights the dangerous and destructive forces of selfish competitiveness and aggression which we have to take into account as part of the reality of life in a fallen world. What kind of balance do we strike between the two? Is our dominant mode to be one of trusting and encouraging each other and taking risks for the sake of love? Or do we take up a defensive stance and try to curb evil and gain control? The long running debate over the Christian view of war with its many shades from absolute pacifism to those who justify the use of some nuclear weapons is witness to the complexity of the choice. Each year I watch a new generation of evangelical ordinands struggle with this diversity. The fact that they have a strong view of the authority of Scripture and are determined to do 'biblical ethics' does not resolve it at all.

There are many such issues in ethics where opinion does not divide along traditional church party lines. It often seems to boil down to, 'Who are we prepared to trust and on whose behalf are we willing to take risks?' A South African student commented this year in an essay, 'In my childhood I was taught that every adult I met in the street was to be viewed as my parent.' Note the basic stance of security and solidarity in which this man's moral thinking was formed. It is salutary to think how our young people could write, 'In my childhood I was taught that every adult I met in the street might be a sexual abuser.' Male and female experience may be one factor in whether we have an orientation towards separation or connectedness but there are many other cultural factors in the equation.

### **A feminist analysis of neighbour-love**

Many feel it is not very clear what practical gain there can be from the proposed ethic of connectedness. It highlights the tension between rights and fairness versus relationships and care; but has that not always been there? Are there not carefully built-in elements in the Christian tradition that keep the balance? The centre of Christianity is the command to love one

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3 J. Snarey, 'Moral Development' in R. J. Hunter, ed., *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counselling*, Abingdon Press, Nashville 1990.

another. In the light of that, relationships can hardly be ignored.

Linda Woodhead has recently given a telling critique of a traditional Christian definition of neighbour-love. She claims that, not just in written theology but in hymns, in preaching and in the lives of innumerable saints, love of neighbour is presented as 'self-sacrificing equal regard which is indifferent to the value of its object'.<sup>4</sup>

Christianity has had a hierarchy of loves in which the top level is a one-way respect without emotional attachment which provides no threat to the other person's autonomy. Friendship comes further down because of the alleged selfishness of the reciprocal relationship. Erotic love more or less drops off the chart because it involves emotional attachment, satisfaction of physical desires and loss of cognitive control. Maternal love hardly gets a mention at all.

There is of course some linguistic justification for connecting the New Testament Greek term *agape* with a cool and universal concept such as regard or respect. A study such as C. S. Lewis' in *The Four Loves* comes from the pen of a classicist. But if we assume that the Christian authors of New Testament books were steeped in the language of the Old Testament, and if we notice what Old Testament words are being translated by *agape* in the Septuagint then a different picture emerges. Passionate parental and marital metaphors abound in the context of God's love for us. To claim too much discontinuity between God's love for us and our love for others is to cut away the ethical arteries of our Christian life. God can have a passionate and partial love for us and for our enemies and contain both because he is infinite. We struggle within the boundaries imposed by our finiteness.

Woodhead boldly defends some of the positive aspects of partiality and loving one another as unique individuals and in a reciprocal way. She reconstructs a hierarchy of human loves with marital love as the fullest expression of love for embodied persons. The generalized respect or regard which in some Christian formulations is the pinnacle of neighbour-love becomes for her the lowest rung of the ladder. Respecting each other's space for freedom and autonomy is important. There can, however, be a pastoral quality to that unconditional regard which might be described as attention or appreciation. Other levels of love include friendship with its various forms of mutual affection, loyalty, desire and happiness, and maternal love which has a built-in inequality. The parental task is to begin with an attachment involving total care and move on towards separation and eventual reversal of the role of care.

So giving each other both space and attention, appreciating one another's unique gifts, forming various kinds of intimate attachments, culminating in a full mutual expression of our sexuality, these are all important elements in our growth in Christian neighbour-love. Woodhead's revised definition reads,

'an active desire for the well-being of the neighbour, and for communion with him or her, based on a recognition of the neighbour's unique worth.'<sup>5</sup>

4 L. Woodhead, 'Love and Justice', *Studies in Christian Ethics*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, vol. 5 no. 1, pp 46.

Self-sacrifice has dropped out from the starting point because women who have more experience on the underside of life are well aware of what a fine line there can be between self-sacrifice and depressive self-hatred and self-abuse. In the Christian life we are called to know and accept our place as sons and daughters in God's household before we humbly respond to his gracious invitation to take a servant role and give our lives for the welfare of others.

### The importance of embodiment

Underlying the discussion above is the struggle going on in all branches of theology this century to try and root out the dualism which is always creeping into Christianity in the form of negative attitudes to the human body and to do it without damaging the delicate flowers of the Christian faith. The Yale professor, Margaret Farley sums up the concerns of feminist ethics in three categories which could be described as *equality* (though in the relational sense of equitable sharing, not self-protective freedom), *embodiment* and the *environment*.<sup>6</sup> All of these touch on sensitive areas within the evangelical constituency. On equality, we are all agreed that men and women are equally human and equal before God but some hold that equality can be compatible with a relational pattern of dominance and submission between men and women. Others hold that it cannot. The discussion quickly leads on to the second theme, embodiment, since the differences that are undeniable are differences of the body.

Embodiment, however, turns out to be a difficult theme to pursue because to consider it we have to talk about sexuality and that is something we find very hard to do. When Michael Saward tried to query aspects of the tradition in the 1970s no evangelical publisher would touch the contents of *And so to bed*. Gerald Hegarty has recently suggested that a key characteristic of evangelical spirituality is 'reticence' in this area. Some of the other Christian traditions will discuss the powerful sexual imagery in the Song of Songs. Some encourage approaches in prayer which uncover links between what is going on in our intimate relationships and what we are thinking and feeling about God. Within the evangelical tradition devotion, ecstasy or desire are expressed with an aesthetic reticence of metaphor which steers well away from the human body. 'In sorrow and love flow mingled down', the overwhelming image is the blood of Christ, the touchstone of evangelical spirituality. But the word 'blood' is never mentioned: a triumph of the reticence in the finest evangelical spirituality.<sup>7</sup>

This may cause a wry smile among women who are frequently the ones left to mop up the blood. Reticence can be an important way of protecting the precious significance of intimate experiences. It can also be a form of denial, a hiding place where fears and prejudices lurk unexamined. In response to Linda Woodhead, Michael Keeling said that if we are to consider according

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5 Op. cit. p 56.

6 M. Farley, 'Feminist Theology and Bioethics' in A. Loades, ed., *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, SPCK, London 1990.

7 G. Hegarty, 'Evangelical Spirituality' in R. T. France & A. E. McGrath, eds, *Evangelical Anglicans*, SPCK, London 1993, p 65.

the place she has suggested to sexual love then we must first be open about the fact that sex is a different experience for men and for women. He highlights the pressure for performance that cannot be produced to order and wonders if sexual insecurity lies behind the male preference for business, politics and sport, governed by rules and justice, where effort generally guarantees performance.<sup>8</sup>

### Bringing true masculinity to light

An evangelical initiative to open up the subject of masculinity has come from Roy McCloughry of the Kingdom Trust. Having hammered out some of the issues both in mixed groups and in an all-male group he is convinced that there is a problem for men as well as for women in the assumption that men are the human norm from which women are a deviation. Men's understanding of their manhood is obscured by this equation. Assumptions of superiority and a bias towards power and control are often imbibed undigested from the culture and rarely come to light to be challenged by the gospel. Here the theme of self-denial is more pronounced as McCloughry calls for men to move from power towards love. 'It is possible for men to become Christians and then resort to a life of playing games with one another, but the man who has a passion for being like Jesus Christ, in laying down power to express self-giving love, can never be the same.'<sup>9</sup>

While McCloughry is calling for a change in perception of masculinity from power towards love, another new evangelical initiative is looking outwards into traditional power structures of society such as democracy, business markets and the justice system. Michael Schluter and David Lee of the Jubilee Centre are trying to draw attention to the 'R' factor. Their work attempts to give content to the idea of connectedness or 'relationality' as they prefer to call it. They examine some of the factors which make up relational proximity, what we might call in Christian terms, being a neighbour. How directly physical is the contact? Is there continuity in time? Do people know each other in more than one sphere of life? Is there parity in levels of power? Have they a common purpose? Increasing levels of relational proximity will increase the quality and stability of our communal life.<sup>10</sup> The arguments are addressed to an audience beyond the Church and are largely consequentialist, though the authors concede that the starting point is an inner conviction that human life should be lived in a relational way.

### God and environment

The third of Margaret Farley's themes, the environment, may seem at first sight to be taking a turn away from the relational issues of equality and sexuality though it is perhaps an extension of the theme of embodiment. Clearly it is an issue of the moment and men and women are equally concerned about the urgent problems which technological advances are creating for the planet we live on. Some feminist writers are taking the opportunity, however, to launch an attack on the basic creation doctrine of

8 *Studies in Christian Ethics*, op. cit., p 63.

9 R. McCloughry, *Men and Masculinity*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1992, p 260.

10 M. Schluter & D. Lee, *The R Factor*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1993, pp 68-90.

God as totally other, creating a material universe out of nothing. So Grace Jantzen writes: 'The mind-body dualism and the male-female dualism generate an ecological crisis of incalculable proportion as the technological dominance of nature proceeds; and in the background is the old theological rationalization of a cosmic dualism between a God of ultimate value and a material universe of no intrinsic worth.'<sup>11</sup>

This is a trend which we can vigorously resist both on biblical grounds and using the central feminist concerns themselves. It is a lack of belief and trust in the powerful creator, not an overemphasis on such a God which lies behind the abusive rape of the earth. It is with the moral formation of human beings and human cultures that hope for the environment lies. Power and otherness play an important part within the developmental process of attachment and separation. Maternal love is powerful and it is in relating to that love that we grow up to be autonomous persons capable of trusting others and exercising responsibility over things. Even in sexual relationships the sense of merging boundaries is fleeting and we remain in awe at the encounter with the sexual other. It may be true that at times we overemphasize the transcendence of God and neglect the presence and involvement of the Spirit alongside and groaning with us in our weakness.<sup>12</sup> But even in pain we need the safety of God's mysterious majesty. Frances Young wrote a moving reflection on suffering based on experience of mothering a handicapped child. Her final chapter defends the pastoral relevance of the transcendent otherness of God.<sup>13</sup>

### Working it through

I began with the client struggling in the counsellor's chair to connect thought with feeling and gain the freedom to find a genuine and realistic way forward in the current situation. 'Working it through' is a familiar process in pastoral care and the first lesson is that there are few short cuts. It takes people time to overcome anxiety and work new insights into their patterns of response. In some areas of the Church there is a more positive attitude towards the body, more awareness of how sexuality patterns our feelings and responses and an eagerness to build relational structures in which the gifts of men and women are able to find full expression. In others, to begin to discuss the issues is to occasion a flight behind a defensive stockade. The boundary lines between two academic disciplines, ethics and pastoral theology, have sometimes made it easier for the timid to hide. It is a good pastoral principle to be gentle with each other's defences but ultimately we are committed to bringing the cleansing light of Christ's truth to bear on the secret places of hearts and in our life together.

The Revd Vera Sinton is the Director of Pastoral Studies at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford and also teaches Christian Ethics.

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11 G. M. Jantzen, 'Who Needs Feminism?', *Theology*, vol. 93 (1990), p 341.

12 Romans 8:26.

13 F. Young, *Face to Face*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1990.