A FEMINIST CRITIQUE

By SUSAN DOWELL

Do you think I have not heard what they say? Do you think I have not read what the Fathers have said about women? – what men have said about women – since the beginning of the world? Do you think it is easy for a woman to read over and over again that she is man's perdition?

Peter Abelard, Helen Waddell

THIS ARTICLE WOULD HAVE BEEN considerably easier to write twenty years ago. The feminist critique of celibacy I have been asked for could, without too much simplification, have been summarized in Heloise's *cri de coeur*. Along with countless others across time and space feminists saw Heloise's story as a scandal of blighted love: blighted of course by Christianity's anatagonism to sex in general and women in particular. In some senses, then, feminism lent greater authority to the 'this-worldly' sex- and body-celebrating strand of Christianity (which triumphed, as some see it, with the Reformation). 1970s feminists, however, were more inclined to regard Heloise as a dupe, a colluder in her own oppression, than to mourn her as a tragic heroine. In either case you could safely have expected a healthy modern feminist to be about as interested in celibacy as a beef-cow in vegetarianism (not an inapt analogy in the light of some of the Fathers' statements about us). We may not much have liked the way things were down on the farm but we could hardly engage in meaningful dialogue with those who would put us out of production altogether.

As a Christian feminist, I would of course have gone on to propose some modifications to this picture and to suggest that there is a great deal in Christian teaching on celibacy that women could reclaim. I would for example have pointed to other women monastics who were by no means tragic figures. But I have been upstaged: by 1980 the old picture had been shattered not just by feminist theologians but by 'secular' feminists too (so much so that I find myself wishing to restore parts of it, which feels a little odd in this context!). Twelfth-century abbesses have become all the rage in some feminist circles and we have now seen a number of attempts to reclaim celibacy for feminism and for modern holistic thought in general. Sally Cline, for example, whose book *Women, celibacy and passion* (André Deutsch, March 1993) aroused considerable attention on its publication, proclaims that:

> Through celibacy a woman learns to take risks, to grow up, to make decisions to live on her own, to value other women. It is about simplicity. It is about dissatisfaction with sex. It is about freedom to work or study. It is about freedom from sexual anxiety and beauty problems. It is about freedom from the consequences of violence. It is about re-gaining or taking control of one's life. It is about anti-consumerism. It is about non-genital passion. It is about spiritual growth.

And alongside all this we have seen a radical reassessment of celibacy taking place among the monastic fathers and mothers themselves.

This essay will ask what these new reconstructionists might have to say to one another. I believe there must be a good deal that is of interest. If, for instance, we check Cline's list of the benefits of celibacy against those taught by the Church, we would find a far closer match than has commonly been supposed; given some adjustment of order and emphasis we can safely say that the Church has declared all these to be spiritual as well as social 'goods'.

But we cannot just say along with today's 'New Agers', 'Whoopee, let's get all these strands together and build a new woman- and body-affirming sexual culture'. Insights do undoubtedly overlap but we need to remember that we are talking about separate – indeed deeply separated – strands; they come from entirely different places and represent entirely different interests. Most people engaged in reclaiming celibacy today have little or no personal investment in Christian theories and practices thereof and many deeply resent the Church's assumed 'ownership' of this calling.

Feminism owes its origins and discourse to a much later shift in human consciousness than that which occured at the Reformation: it is a product of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment which did far more than just turn away from the Church's preoccupation with virginity; it asked whether Christianity itself, both Catholic and Reformed, might not be the enemy of human development. The broad-based approach, tolerant of all positions, we see in Cline's and other recent reclamations of celibacy, is an expression of this later consciousness and, while we may welcome it, we cannot take it as an endorsement of Christianity's teaching on celibacy-as-charism. Cline includes testimonies by male and female religious celibates but as witnesses rather than authorities on the subject. More importantly, as Cline makes clear, it is women's celibacy, not men's, that interests her and she asserts women's needs over against those of men, which can hardly be said to be a Christian perspective. Indeed it is one that has no historical precedent at all.

Having said all that, it is to history I shall now turn. The developments in feminist and theological thought that have brought these

concerns together in the most realistic and coherent way have been, in my view, historically based. Feminism itself is deeply historically-minded and despite the considerable distance from and sometimes hostility they may display towards the Church, feminists are the last people to underplay its formative role in shaping western culture in general and its sexual thought in particular. In analysing this process feminists have shown that a proper consideration of this topic demands nothing less than a full-scale historical analysis of western sexuality, which I have neither the skill nor the space to offer here. I can safely begin to narrow down the field by saying that the more positive view of celibacy we see among today's feminists has been brought about through the extensive retrieval of women's history that feminist scholars have undertaken over the last twenty years. Recognizing that most of the women who made a significant contribution to pre-Reformation culture were either nuns or women living in celibacy within or after marriage, feminists also came to see that for many centuries cloistered chastity provided women with freedom and opportunities that the marriage market plainly did not.

Conversely, unhelpful defences of celibacy have been unhistorical. Roger Ruston OP[1] points out that the religious orders have commonly adapted the vows of poverty and obedience to particular historical and social circumstances, but have clung to an idealized de-historicized view of chastity with 'the consequent belief that, morally speaking, you either keep it or you don't – that there is a single scale of success or failure'. This individualistic approach has prevented celibacy from fulfilling that which the vows were instituted to do – to build up the *whole* body of Christ. Ruston's proposition that 'the material is there' – in both scripture and tradition – for celibacy to operate as an instrument of charity has been endorsed by a number of feminist theologians and other contributors to this journal, so I will pass on to the question of whether it has ever functioned in this way.

It would not be invidious to single out Peter Brown's *Body and society*[2] as a work that has transformed our understanding of the origins and early development of Christian celibacy. Brown gives convincing evidence that celibacy was conceived and practised in non-idealistic, non-individualistic, indeed highly pragmatic ways in the early Church. For many converts celibacy was a subversive – and costly – proclamation of Christian freedom. Why should the new Body of Christ replicate within itself the marriage-and-property patterns of a corrupt and crumbling society, they asked. Their *dissatisfaction with sex*, to which I return shortly, was by no means a total denial of sex as a meaningful and godly expression of love.

As we all know, however, it soon became just that – an exaltation of virginity which, in turn, created a rigid two-tier system of holiness. And it is this combination which, feminists claim, has inflicted a very particular damage upon women, over and above that which it inflicted upon the natural affection of women and men. But if we concede – and Brown has made perhaps the most convincing case to date for doing so – that élitist, body-rejecting notions were not built into the Christian system but, rather, were a perversion of it, then the how and why of this perversion becomes a more crucial question than ever before.

The answer lies in a single word – dualism. The idea of celibacy as an absolute value in itself was first preached by groups and individuals for whom the pragmatic (or material) and the spiritual were irreconcilable opposites: an idea that, as Christians are (rightly) careful to emphasize, ran entirely contrary to the biblical world-view.

Perceiving dualism to be inherently sexist – after all, when the body itself is getting a bad press, then those most directly and intimately involved in the production of bodies might expect the same – feminists have taken a keen interest in its deconstruction. This more complex intellectual task has inevitably undermined the hard-line feminist critique which reduced celibacy to 'the Church's hatred of women'. However, a good word or two for the old feminist hard line seems in order at this point. By drawing attention to some of the Fathers' colourful diatribes against women, feminism exposed a *level* of misogyny which had been insufficiently acknowledged in the Church's own historical and hagiographical texts and hence in its accounts of celibacy, positive and negative. For example, we find that the Church has overwhelmingly chosen to remember the Desert Fathers' struggles with imaginary lascivious damsels inflaming their lusts, and to forget the far more real and immediate demons – like hunger, persecution and social injustice – that they were wrestling with. Why? The true record has long been available in this case.

My reasons for pressing the question are emotional and intellectual. I do not apologize for the former. It is hard to describe from this distance women's dismay on first reading 'the things they said' about us. (I read Heloise's story when I was a student in the 1960s and it has never left me.) Frankly I am not much interested in theologies which *depend on* textual gnosis and which cannot hear and incorporate the heartbreak of the girl who hears these things for the first time. The medium is the message and repentance, not careful explanation, is in order.

In terms of popular consciousness, 'hardline' feminists brought home the degree to which it had been shaped by this kind of material – far

more than by official orthodoxy. On a more academic or intellectual level feminists exposed a major flaw in the Church's diagnosis and treatment of dualism.

There has been a strong tendency to treat a negative evaluation of female sexuality as an unfortunate side-effect of the impact of Hellenistic thought upon post-apostolic Christianity. While this is indeed true, it is also deeply connected to the way men have thought about and acted towards women 'since the beginning of the world'. Or, in more theological language, the 'spiritualistic' dualism Christianity inherited from the outside world became inextricably intertwined with the sexist dualism which was present in all religious cultures. Christianity perpetuated and sanctified this combination of dualisms in a number of ways.

The most helpful reassessments of celibacy by the male 'insiders' have been those that have heard and responded to the feminist charge – whether it was presented in its 'extreme' or its more scholarly forms. Ruston begins by confessing the ease with which male celibates slip back into 'temptress' language when they are having difficulties with celibacy. They could not do so, of course, if such language had not been somehow validated by the Church. But rather than distancing himself from such politically incorrect terms, Ruston goes on to ask 'what [they] tell us about the injured relationships between men and women, which *we celibates have to live out as much as anybody else*' (italics mine). If celibacy is to serve as an instrument of justice it must, says Ruston, encompass sexual justice, for this is an issue which has been 'under constant historical revision' and is, today, inescapable.

Brown tells us that recent developments in the study of medieval women's religious perspectives led him to write a 'different book' from the one he would have written ten years earlier. With regard to the period under his own review, though, Brown warns us that 'given the harsh values of the Greco-Roman world, it is a comforting and dangerous illusion to assume that, in much of the evidence, the presence of women is even sensed' (Brown, xvii) by those who set it down – a matter that had previously been taken for granted, unworthy of comment. This made it possible, if not inevitable, for men to continue to speak of women in the alienating terms Ruston describes. Brown concludes his momentous book by asking us to decide for ourselves whether the Fathers' 'strange tongues . . . say anything of help or comfort for our own time' (p 447), and it is that question I now go on to address. Again I would emphasize that what follows is not an 'official' or complete feminist perspective; it is my own, based on what I have picked up and found useful.

Women's invisibility did not, even in the earliest times, prevent them from receiving high praise and honour as consecrated celibates. But if we wish to reclaim something of celibacy as an instrument of sexual justice we need to be clearer about the terms under which they received this honour.

Let us take Jerome as our guide to the early period, for he lays down the terms more clearly than anyone. His life spanned the desert period and Christianity's establishment, both in Rome and the Holy Land. When Jerome assured one of his would-be followers that she was 'not his to whom you have been born, but His to whom you have been born again', he was doing more than honouring the women under his guidance; he was making a highly subversive statement about their social and spiritual condition.

Self-chosen consecrated virginity for women was a totally new idea and one that had to be vigorously defended, particularly in the case of the high-born Roman ladies under Jerome's tutelage who were under extreme pressure, from fathers and the state, to marry and bear children. Five children per woman was the number required to keep the Empire's population at an acceptable level. Nor could marriage remotely be said to be an honourable estate in fifth-century Rome; Jerome knew of one Roman matron who married her twenty-third husband, becoming his twenty-first wife.

Here we can discern some useful parallels between ancient and modern reclamations of celibacy for women. Feminists have looked at the 'marriage and family norm' of our own (post-Reformation) times and wonder if it has served us as well as its champions claim. Twentieth-century feminists arose in opposition to a sexual culture which many women came to see as coercive and cynical. It would be absurd to draw direct parallels between our own times and those of Jerome but in so far as the 1960s 'sexual revolution' made sex *de rigueur* for all – as Cline quipped, 'No sexual activity is considered freakish today except *no* sexual activity' – we can concede a degree of undue sexual pressure upon women. It is certainly the case that for all our modern reverence for sex and meaningful relationships, such relationships – including marriage – have become quite alarmingly unstable in our society. Under such circumstances, as Jerome was deeply and compassionately aware, sexual activity seriously undermines women's capacity to 'grow up, take risks . . . make decisions'. Jerome warmly defended women's 'freedom to work and study' and treated those who did so as co-workers. But only when their feet were set firmly on the path of lifelong continence.

Here is the rub, of course. The opposite of the good virgin was the strumpet; there was no middle path, no grace at all accorded to the

faithfully and virtuously wedded. While we may, and in my view should, praise Jerome for defending women's right to opt out of marriage in times when it was possibly a more serious 'occasion for sin' than ever before, this spiritual downgrading of all sexually active women has had a long and destructive legacy. While the Church officially teaches three orders of sexual expression – debauchery, faithful Christian marriage and total chastity – for long periods there seemed to be only two which, given women's altogether higher investment in sex and marriage, has not benefited those of us who neither can nor wish to 'opt out' of marriage.

Turning to the other 'goods' on Cline's list, namely 'anti-consumerism' and the 'freedom from beauty problems' we find Jerome to have been somewhat over-zealous in his advocacy! He urged his trainees to practise the most rigorous mortifications in matters of dress, diet and deportment. Modern commentators have noted that Jerome's fasting programme would have induced amenorrhoea (cessation of the menstrual cycle) in the average woman and it is abundantly clear that the programme was designed to blot out any vestige of sexual allure. This is surely something the most ardent reclaimer of celibacy must object to, yet the idea undoubtedly survives. Celibate women 'lose' their sexuality. Celibate men do not, they are more 'manly'. (In my 1950s childhood I remember people contrasting hard, unfeminine 'career' women with 'womanly' wives and mummies.) This notion that women require disciplines over and above those required of men wishing to live chaste, holy lives did not, however, originate with Jerome. The idea is rooted in a reassertion of Eve as 'first fallen' which can be traced back to Tertullian in the late second century. Although reputedly far more moderate than Jerome in his advocacy of celibacy, it was Tertullian who named women as 'the Devil's gateway', 'the destroyer of God's image, man'; nor did he simply see marriage as a barrier to holiness: he denounced marriage 'the concupiscence whereof the Lord put on the same footing with fornication'.[3] St Ambrose (fourth century) took up this equation of femaleness with faithlessness: 'She who does not believe is a woman and should be designated with the name of her sex whereas she who believes progresses to perfect manhood, to the measure of the adulthood of Christ'.[4] This strange idea took root, too, for a motif of de-sexed female spiritual progression appears throughout hagiography from Perpetua's dream (202) where she becomes a male athlete to beat the devil, right through to the warrior St Joan. Feminists have, like the Church, loved and honoured these heroines but we are less than happy about the implied devaluation, nay denial, of adult womanhood. Can we not be heroes too, without turning ourselves into men?

Jerome's colourful polemic was modified in the later and post-patristic period. Augustine, for example, was more positive about the possibility of friendship between husband and wife. At the same time though, we also see an erosion of the countercultural theories of celibacy. Augustine himself wavered on women's freedom to abjure the marriage bed. Rosemary Ruether records his correspondence with an African matron

> who had exacted a vow of continence from her husband and had begun to act with that liberty to dispose of her person and property autonomously befitting one whom the converted life had restored to equivalency with the male.

Augustine begins the letter by defining the essential subjugation of woman to man as natural law and decreeing that 'It is a sin to refuse the debt of your body to your husband'.[5] It feels mean to pick on Augustine for a pastoral slip-up when he had so much else on his mind – like keeping the Church together on the brink of the Dark Ages. Others believed and taught as he did but because he was such a towering figure it is inevitable that he has come to personify the Church's accommodation with the old biblical and patriarchal idea that women really belong to men. One does not need to spell out the implications of this belief; it has authorized all manner of evil from the cattle-market practices of the feudal marriage system to ancient and modern justifications for rape and battery.

By the time of Aquinas – who produced scientific 'evidence' for women's inferiority – this idea intersected with the already established assumption of maleness as the true *imago dei* which was applied to all, including those who 'opted out' of femaleness through celibacy. Women's celibacy was, had to be, different from men's because women themselves were – well – different, less 'like God'. And of course theory was firmly backed up by practice. Male religious celibacy could continue to be seen as a form of freedom because male religious orders have been more active, less restricted and truly self-sufficient. Female celibacy on the other hand has been more strictly enclosed and dependent on the male-only priesthood for the sacrament, the very heart of community life.

It goes without saying that the 'difference' was not perceived in particularly positive ways but feminists have reversed this situation by conducting their own investigation into the ways female sexuality itself operates, biologically, physically and socially. This can, I submit, add something important to the present debate about celibacy. The most

important contribution feminism has made to this whole debate has been to reveal the degree to which definitions of sex are male-derived. This applies as much to the ancient 'experts' I have been speaking of as to modern gurus like Freud. Augustine, for example, is known to have been deeply disturbed by the anatomical facts of male lust (and, as is less well known, by the social consequences of the same). He believed that the seat of 'disordered affection due to sin' is the penis, which by having what might be called a life of its own was for him a literal embodiment of the 'law of the members that was against the law of the mind' (Rom 7:23). However, neither he nor his followers apparently considered the possibility that women, lacking this troublesome organ, might experience sexual desire in a less dramatic and troublesome way. The difference begins in the body itself, with the 'lack' of a penis. Most of us do not regret this lack. As feminists have pointed out in answer to Freud's theory of penis envy, it is not the organ we envy, just the privileges that go with it. (A revealing example of the way sexuality continues to be male perceived, even by pro-feminist radicals, is their use of the term 'the tyranny of genitality' to describe the pressures of our sex- and couple-obsessed society. Women's reproductive organs may cause us a few problems but they do not 'tyrannize' others.)

The aforementioned studies of medieval women religious bear out some of these perceptions. Caroline Walker Bynum[6] has shown us that significant differences of viewpoint existed between men and women on central issues of Christian faith and practice, most notably on the different importance women gave to food renunciation which was far more central to women's piety than sexual renunciation. Bynum is writing about a period in which the ideal of mendicant poverty was reborn and attracted a strong following among women (though they met with great resistance when it came to taking part themselves). It was, moreover, during the period under her review (late twelfth to fourteenth-century) that women religious moved into positions of real power and influence in the Church.

As I said earlier, recovering women's history has been central to the more positive assessment of celibacy we see today. It is a development I wholeheartedly welcome: for far too long we have all been locked into defensive postures of either vilifying or defending the tradition. The 'strange tongues' have proved not so strange and alien as we thought; nor are the intractable problems they wrestled with – of sex, gender, inequality and deprivation – unrecognizable to us.

But while we may recognize them, would they recognize us? Would they recognize feminists' reclamation of celibacy which appears, in

much of the popular writing, as a consumer choice in a well-stocked supermarket of sexual options? Cline retains her option to exchange her chosen brand of feminist autonomy at some future date, for which I do not condemn her, but rather stress that her reclamation bears all the marks of her own post-Christian position.

But we also need to ask whether our foremothers would recognize the terms in which we Christian feminists have reclaimed them? It has been necessary to show that the Christian faith did provide an impressive and important 'alternative' for women but we often do this in a way that reduces faith to a vehicle for life-style. In qualifying our condemnation of past patterns we often fall into the opposite trap which is to romanticize them, to make these women and men over in our own image and look to them for answers to our own problems (which is precisely what experts in the field like Brown and Walker Bynum plead against). This does not invalidate our search for answers to the pressing and perplexing problems we have with sex and sexism, but it does demand that we realize that these are problems in which our foremothers themselves showed only a limited interest. It was God who interested them and to whom they gave their whole lives.

Perhaps I can best explain my difficulties with all this by looking at another group of celibates, a group whom nobody has been in any hurry to honour and reclaim. I am thinking of the women who taught me in the 1950s, many of whom were lifelong celibates. Born with the century, the men they might have married were wiped out in the trenches. We did not value their freedom to devote themselves to our education although we undoubtedly benefited from it.

We can quite justly say that the Church has not served these women well: it has developed no language in opposition to the label 'spinster' which we girls scornfully applied to them, despite the fact that many of them, like countless other women throughout history who have lived chastely not by choice but through circumstance, were devoted Christians. This is odd when we remember that many revered monastics were given as oblates. The Church has only acknowledged the charism of those whose work and prayer have been enclosed or were in some other way totally under its jurisdiction. And yet the material is there in scripture for a wider, more inclusive view. In Matthew 19:12 Jesus teaches us that freely chosen celibacy has removed the curse from those who have no choice, who have 'been made eunuchs' by men or wars. This is the only reclamation of celibacy whereby it can truly serve as an instrument of justice and charity and one in which all women should have a particular and passionate interest. And we can only be part of this

reclamation if we live as our foremothers lived – in the Body of Christ through which God's own redeeming work is done.

NOTES

[1] Roger Ruston, 'Religious celibacy and sexual justice', *New Blackfriars* (June 1982), pp 260–74.
[2] Peter Brown, *The body and society: men, women and sexual renunciation in early Christianity* (Columbia University Press 1986, Faber 1987). It has further been demonstrated by Brown and others that the physical separation of celibate communities from the married Christian household – the norm and the core of the Christian community until well after AD 200 – was also envisaged as a temporary strategy.
[3] Quoted in S. Dowell, *They two shall be one* (notes on contributors), p 87.
[4] Ambrose, *Expos. evang. sec Lucam*, Bk X no 161, quoted in Marina Warner, *Joan of Arc: the image of female heroism* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1981, Penguin 1983), p 154.
[5] Augustine *De Sermone in Monte* 41, quoted in Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Virginal feminism in the Fathers of the Church' in Ruether (ed), *Religion and sexism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), p 159.
[6] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast: the religious significance of food to medieval women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, and London: Regents of the University of California, 1987). Bynum does not suggest that celibacy was a peripheral discipline for women, rather that it assumed a different importance in their lives than in those of male celibates. Food was the one resource over which women – as wives and daughters as well as religious – had real control and used in radically redistributive ways. It is possible then to see these women as direct heirs of the desert ascetics, to whom many of them were deeply devoted.