

WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITY

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Introduction

AN INCREASING NUMBER OF COURSES on spirituality have come into existence in the USA, Britain and elsewhere. This is an exciting development, well documented in this number of *The Way* on 'Teaching spirituality'.¹ Yet when one scrutinizes existing course contents and publications, it is obvious that most teaching on spirituality is confined to the Christian tradition without taking into account wider, comparative perspectives or recent developments in critical women's and gender studies. The University of Wales at Lampeter has just begun to advertise an 'MA in Comparative Spirituality' concerned with 'the spiritual traditions of China, India, the Middle East and the Christian West' where at least the comparative element is taken care of, but apart from a reference to 'the concept of the holy man or woman', gender perspectives are still not referred to in the modules on offer.²

Yet the theme of spirituality figures very prominently in the activities and writings of contemporary women. Not so long ago the *Women's Studies Quarterly* devoted an entire issue of its journal to the theme 'Spirituality and religions'.³ However great the diversity and internal differences among feminists around the world, the rise and development of the women's movement can itself be seen as a sign of spiritual creativity in contemporary culture. The current interest in spirituality as a path to personal and social transformation, and also a search for God and transcendence, is strongly reflected in women's experience and quest, so that women's explorations of and reflections on spirituality bring together some of the most important political and spiritual dimensions of contemporary life. However, outside Women and Religion courses the important developments of women's spirituality seem to be little studied or understood.

The field of women and spirituality is now so rich and diverse that it is simply impossible to give an adequate overview in one article. All I can do here is to explore certain aspects and interpret some major

trends. I begin with some general observations about contemporary spirituality, then discuss women's critique of traditional spirituality and their own spiritual quest and resources, followed by a section on the most prominent general themes in women's spirituality, which in turn will lead to a discussion of spirituality among Christian women around the world.

Spirituality in a global context

Spirituality is an ambiguous concept, open to a wide variety of interpretations and meanings. Deeply rooted in Christian experience and theology, the word spirituality has been used cross-culturally since at least the middle of the nineteenth century, although many western writers on spirituality do not seem to be aware of this. In their debates with Christian missionaries, nineteenth-century Hindu reformers highlighted and praised the specific contribution of Indian spirituality as an important resource for the West.⁴ The word spirituality is now widely used with reference to all religious traditions and also outside them, in a secular context. Spirituality has become a universal code word pointing to the meaning and purpose of human life, but for many it also refers to something which is wider than the religious or at least not contained by it, whereas others see it as the deepest and most central element of religion itself. Among the different definitions which have been proposed, spirituality can refer to a lived experience of faith, a praxis or discipline within an ancient or new religious tradition, but it can also refer to the spiritual teaching which a particular person or school imparts, and it can mean the systematic, comparative and critical study of different spiritual experiences, disciplines and teachings.

All these definitions can be related to some of the debates about spirituality in the women's movement. It is important, however, to recognize the global dimensions of this movement, and also the global context in which spirituality is discussed today. Women in North and South, West and East are encircling the globe in a world-wide web and network. This does not mean that all women are in contact with each other, but that the ideas and ideals of the women's movement have a world-wide diffusion and are increasingly changing the consciousness of women everywhere, enabling them to reflect critically on their own particular and local experiences. Among Christian women around the world it is especially the women in Asia who speak of a 'newly emerging spirituality' in the context of women's experience. In Asia this is closely linked to women's experience of religious pluralism,

especially that of the great Asian wisdom traditions. Latin American women refer to spirituality as 'the struggle for life', a very wide definition full of rich resonances, but particularly relevant to the work of women.

Before discussing these ideas further, it may be helpful to look at some other possible definitions. Spirituality can be understood as primarily a deeply personal, and also solitary, experience of God and the Spirit. But spirituality can also be experienced through many different human relationships, and it can be lived and expressed in new community and thus relate in a new way to the traditional experience of the Church. From an institutional perspective spirituality can be seen as demarcated by the boundaries of tradition – it then appears like a *fortress*: solid, reassuring, almost unchanging – something to be proud of and hold on to. But others prefer the image of spirituality as a *journey*, something to be explored, a great adventure into the unknown, a process of growth, transformation and change. We find this image in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures: the journey of the Exodus, the 'way' of which the Acts of the Apostles speak, the 'walking according to the Spirit' as described by St Paul in Rom 8:4. All these ideas can be brought to bear on spirituality as practised by women today, but one also has to ask, what is specific about contemporary women's spirituality? Where is it different and distinctive? What is its significant new contribution, important for the teaching of spirituality?

Women and spirituality

Spirituality, as traditionally understood, has often been cast in a dominantly patriarchal and hierarchical mode, where the spiritual quest was primarily the prerogative of a male intellectual, social and religious élite. In spite of this predominant pattern there have been numerous women in the different world religions who have pursued the spiritual quest, sometimes under most difficult conditions and faced with great obstacles. If one examines the spiritual counsel available in different religious traditions, one can see that the search for spiritual perfection and holiness was often related to men's contempt for the body and the world, and this frequently included a specific contempt for women. The history of renunciation and asceticism is responsible for a great deal of misogyny, because spirituality can be seen as deeply dualistic in separating men from women, from each other and from the world, in dividing the experience of the body, work and matter from that of the spirit.

Women's new consciousness and sense of identity, their search for liberation and fulfilment, has led to a critical re-examination of past

forms of spirituality as well as an awareness of new possibilities for the spiritual quest and for spiritual transformation. Thus many women feel that they can no longer simply practise a spirituality handed down to them from the past, whether Christian, Jewish or other, but that they must develop their own spirituality rooted in the awareness of their own power from within, in a newly felt sense of empowerment which helps them to work for personal, social and political changes, and for changes in the Church.

The fast-growing women's spirituality movement has been described as spiritual or even metaphysical feminism. Radical secular feminists tend to ignore these developments or consider them a soft option in comparison with the activist struggle for women's causes. But this is in many respects a false dichotomy, for the development and inherent dynamic of the women's movement with its search for liberation from oppression and subordination, its aim to achieve the full humanity of women, its work for peace, justice and the reverence for life, implies many spiritual goals. It is thus for good reason that some consider the women's movement itself a spiritual revolution. I have argued in my book *Women and spirituality*⁵ that there exists an important implicit spiritual dimension in contemporary feminism in addition to the explicit spirituality themes found among many women writers.

Strictly speaking, it is not quite correct to refer to women's spirituality in the singular; one ought to speak of women's spiritualities in the plural, because this exciting new field is like a rich tapestry consisting of many different, colourfully interwoven strands of which only a few can be mentioned here. In the whole area of spirituality there now exists a marked shift from the former emphasis on transcendence to a spiritual exploration and deepening of all aspects of immanence. This includes everything that pertains to human-experience-in-the-world and focuses in particular on finding a spiritual centre and more authentic ways of being. In the women's movement this is closely linked to women's discovery of their own self and its agency, but also to a creative re-imagining and renaming of the sacred, and a sense of the interdependence and sacredness of all life-forms as well as the importance of our special human relationship to the whole earth and the cosmos, and our ethical responsibilities deriving from this important bond.

The discovery of women's self and women's spiritual quest is a process, a journey of exploration, discovery and adventure which has been mapped by many contemporary women writers whose novels

explore in many imaginative ways women's new experience, questions and insights. These may be concerned with women's search for independence, strength and self-assurance, but also with women's intimacy and mutuality with others, revealing deep connections between embodiment, sexuality and spirituality through the use of metaphor and story, which often reveal a more powerful picture than can be conveyed through abstract academic analysis.

In her ground-breaking study *Diving deep and surfacing: women writers on spiritual quest*⁶ Carol P. Christ examines Kate Chopin, Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing and Adrienne Rich. Their works make her divide women's spiritual quest into four distinct stages. The first consists of an experience of nothingness, linked to the emptiness of many women's lives, their self-negation and frequently also their self-hatred, especially when they experience themselves as victim. This nothingness is an experience almost analogous to the dark night of the soul found in Christian mystical literature. But if lived through and accepted, it can lead to a new birthing process, to the next stage, an awakening which then in turn can produce new insight (third stage) empowering women to create new naming (fourth stage).

This and similar processes describe the distinctive form of women's spiritual quest in contemporary fiction and poetry. Much of it also finds expression in new songs, mime, dance, drama and ritual, and also in painting and music. This quest follows a trajectory from initiation to awakening and insight and on to transformation and wholeness. Looked at from a traditional religious point of view, such experiences might initially appear to be locked, not to say imprisoned, in a circle of immanence which remains too narrow, too 'immanentist', without allowing for a piercing through to a transcendent dimension. But on closer examination this does not seem to be true, because the spiritual is always connected to a larger horizon which transcends the individual, particular and personal. This larger, open-ended dimension is also evident if one examines some of the prominent themes of women's spirituality.

Themes and resources of women's spirituality

Women today are developing a more woman-defined and woman-oriented spirituality which draws on female experience and feminine metaphors, and is more inclusive in its language and thought than traditional, male-defined spirituality. Some writers refer specifically to 'feminist spirituality', which can be understood in a wider sense as the spiritual quest and creativity of contemporary women nourished by

both traditional and non-traditional resources in spirituality. But the term has come to mean more specifically a new spirituality movement outside traditional religious boundaries, whose primary source is women's own experience. This newly created feminist spirituality mainly celebrates the rhythmic cycles of life and nature and has led to the creation of new rituals drawn from wicca and folk traditions, many of which centre on the worship of the Goddess as a powerful, independent, female form of the divine. Much of this spirituality is deeply experiential and experimental, some of it is distinctly odd, but it deserves serious critical attention and must be valued for its imaginative creativity and its affirmative power and inspiration, pointing to intimations of alternative forms of humanity and divinity.

The rich and diverse patterns of this new feminist spirituality are evident from the essays edited by Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, *Weaving the visions: new patterns in feminist spirituality*,⁷ as well as many other publications. They clearly show that many spiritual resources come from women's own experience, the recognition of their inner power and strength, and their need to create rituals which address the different stages and resultant crises of women's lives. As Judith G. Martin has argued in her article, 'Why women need a feminist spirituality', patriarchal spiritual practices have to be overcome to provide a spiritually life-giving environment with teachings and practices

[which] enable women, as well as men, to gain access to the liberating power of the divine that dwells within them. On the one hand this will mean excluding traditions that foster a negative self-image, hinder the recognition and use of one's gifts, discourage personal development, undermine assertiveness, and otherwise inhibit full participation in life around them. On the other hand it will mean encouraging the creation of new forms of religious expression that acknowledge women's experience as primary source for 'doing theology' and for developing the notion of spirituality.⁸

In another publication, entitled *The spiral path: explorations in women's spirituality*,⁹ numerous women writers, and some men, relate the understanding and growth of spirituality to a wide range of human experiences, from food, health and nature to self-image, freedom, sexuality, relationships, marriage, motherhood, creativity and art, but also to Scriptures, prophecy, prayer, renunciation and suffering. The list appears to be endless for it encompasses the whole of life, all of reality, and this makes spirituality a subject difficult to teach since its boundaries cannot be fixed. As the editor of this collection of essays, *The spiral path*, says:

. . . change is the law of life; nothing stays the same. Everything changes, and then again, everything returns . . . That is why I believe the most apt symbol for spiritual growth is the spiral. It is a symbol of change as well as integration in chaos, of unity as well as diversity, of dynamic movement as well as stability. It pulls together all the world's spiritual quests as well as all its daily struggles into a meaningful journey carrying us back to the source of our being.¹⁰

In an article on 'Christian feminist spirituality', Sally B. Purvis¹¹ mentions some patterns commonly shared among different Christian feminists which are also present among women spiritual writers outside Christianity. These include the search for inclusivity in language, ritual and church practice, and for the femaleness of Godhead. There exists also a search for a new connectedness in contrast to the traditional hierarchical, patriarchal pattern with men and an androcentrically presented God put at the top. Feminist spirituality lays greater emphasis on immanence and correlations than on separateness. It also stresses concrete embodiment and advocates an embodied rather than an idealized, abstract spirituality divorced from everyday experience. Thus many women reclaim the power of the erotic as a feature and source of spiritual energy. Another important ingredient of women's spirituality is the theme of liberation, which means so much more to women than the traditional Christian notion of salvation. To become liberated from oppressive situations and structures, both external and internal, to be freed from rigorously prescriptive codes of behaviour, to experiment with and experience the freedom of the spirit, can be seen as a profoundly liberating and exhilarating *metanoia*, almost like a fresh baptismal immersion into the great wonders and feast of life. But to experience such freedom and joy, women have to struggle, often against immense odds, crossing the waters of suffering and pain to become healed, whole and holy. Meeting the women involved in such struggles, yet affirming a spiritual strength and power which comes from deep within and beyond them, can itself be a strongly inspiring and spiritually uplifting experience for others.

Quite some time ago Sara Maitland argued in one of her books¹² that we need 'women map makers of the interior country'. We do indeed need such women. The current literature on women's spirituality bears witness that such women exist in growing numbers. By exploring their own spiritual and creative potential, women possess many resources within themselves to explore new roads and pathways, to draw new and different maps of spirituality. But they can also be inspired and nourished by the examples of female spiritual seekers of both past

and present, of women saints and mystics, found in all religious traditions. Furthermore, there are iconographic and visual resources existing besides written texts, whose rediscovery makes visible the hidden tradition of women's history and spiritual heritage.

Much of women's spirituality centres on the exploration of a feminine dimension of the divine, and especially on the figure of the Goddess and the question of how far past symbols and forms of goddesses, present in many religions, are meaningful and spiritually empowering for women today.¹³ There is also a rich literature on women saints and mystics, ranging from historical and theological to biographical and devotional studies.¹⁴ Another fast growing area is concerned with perspectives of ecofeminism, theology and spirituality.¹⁵ Among Christian women, whether writing from their experience of working at grass-roots level or doing theology in a more formal sense, the theme of spirituality figures regularly, although it is perhaps more prominent and articulated with more passion and commitment among women from the so-called 'Third World' than women elsewhere. One of my graduate students recently wondered whether the topic of spirituality was perhaps more attractive and important to feminists in countries with a predominantly Catholic tradition than those in Anglo-Saxon countries whose culture has primarily been shaped by Protestantism. She had noticed that even among French secular feminists spirituality was a theme to engage with, whereas some of the internationally well-known Roman Catholic feminists of the USA do not seem to pay particular attention to spirituality but are much more attracted to political and social questions. Another student, a male Methodist minister, wondered whether Christian feminists in the Third World were perhaps better Christians than those of the West because of their much greater emphasis on the community and the place of the Church in their lives. These are interesting and quite complex questions, but to tackle them seriously would require a wide range of data and a more detailed analysis than is possible in an article. Here again I can only draw attention to some general strands in contemporary Christian women's spirituality.

A newly emerging spirituality among Christian women

In Christianity, as in other religions, women's spirituality has traditionally been much constricted. All too often it has been confined to what Dorothee Soelle has so aptly described as an 'ideology of obedience', frequently linked to recommendations of self-negating service and the false glorification of women's sacrificial suffering for

others. Christian women today who wish to combine their faith with feminism seek to develop a new, more woman-defined and woman-oriented spirituality which speaks to their needs and nourishes integrity and wholeness. They do this by creatively joining together different elements from the rich resources of the Christian tradition and from within themselves, and by entering into dialogue with other women around the world.

Here again, a great deal of literature has come into existence¹⁶ which unfortunately remains mostly unacknowledged among writers on Christian spirituality in general. As in so many other fields and disciplines, writers on spirituality and mysticism seem to be prone to gender blindness, neither noticing the differences between women and men in the understanding and practice of spirituality nor recognizing the distinctive contribution which the newly emerging spirituality among women makes to Christian life in terms of the embodiment of and witness to the fundamental values of the gospel.

It is true of course that the Christian story is not mainly about self-development in the strikingly individualistic sense found in much contemporary feminist spirituality, but it is fundamentally much more community-oriented and centrally concerned with the universal paradigm of death, resurrection and life, a story which belongs to both sexes. Incarnational Christian spirituality is truly holistic, in principle widely connected and empowering for both women and men, but in practice the lived embodiment of the Christian vision often falls far short of the hope for wholeness and holiness which is such an integral part of its foundation and of the continuing appeal of its message about divine presence, saving grace and healing transformation.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who reflected a great deal on the nature of Christian spirituality and lived it to an extraordinary degree, wrote in 1943: 'Unless it receives a new blood transfusion from matter, Christian spirituality may well lose its vigour and become lost in the clouds'.¹⁷ Teilhard understands matter in a very wide sense, including all of the world, the whole cosmos. It is not separate and divided from spirit, but matter is the very crucible of spirit. On another occasion Teilhard described the feminine as the most virulent form of matter, a statement very much made from a man's point of view, but he also firmly believed that spirituality would further advance and develop through the special contributions of women, a view shared by some other male writers. I think there is no more convincing example of the 'new blood transfusion' which Christian spirituality is receiving today

than the extraordinary energy, commitment and experimentation visible in the actions and reflections of Christian women from the Third World.

I have tried to document this through the selection of texts included in the Reader on *Feminist theology from the Third World*.¹⁸ The voices of women from Africa, Asia, Latin America, of black and hispanic women in the USA, and minorities in Israel and the Pacific, demonstrate vividly how contemporary Christian women reinterpret biblical stories and traditional Christian teachings so that they become for them sources of spiritual empowerment. A fifth of the book is devoted to reflections on spirituality and its meaning for women in very different social, cultural and economic situations. It is truly a spirituality for life – the life of women, men and children, the life of very different communities, the life of many local and regional churches which are all part of the one global Church.

More recently, the vibrant voices of Christian women working for transformation and renewal around the world have been recorded by Ofelia Ortega (ed) in *Women's visions: theological reflection, celebration, action*.¹⁹ Although it does not explicitly address the theme of women's spirituality, this book documents the valuable resources which women have developed in conjunction with the WCC Ecumenical Decade – Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988–98) whose practical and concrete aims²⁰ are based on strongly spiritual goals, quite apart from the explicit mention of affirming women through spirituality.

Even more explicit references to fostering the development of a new spirituality among women are found among the aims of the Women's Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). Founded in 1983 in Geneva, this commission of women worked out a fourfold programme of work where 'Emerging forms of spirituality' are listed as an integral part, following on from 'Theological reflections'. This task has been seriously taken on board: the EATWOT women's project, as formulated during their first inter-continental conference in Mexico in December 1986, included the aim to 'discover the vital aspects of women's experience of God in emerging spiritualities'²¹ and many individual women members have written on spirituality, especially in Asia. Most recently the EATWOT Women's Commission organized a long-planned international dialogue between EATWOT and non-EATWOT women theologians from all parts of the globe on the subject of 'Women struggling against violence: a spirituality for life', whose papers will soon be published by Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York.

'Spirituality of the Third World' was the important theme of the 1992 EATWOT Assembly in Nairobi. The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians is largely led by men, yet it is gratifying to see how many women theologians are now active in this association, probably a higher percentage than in comparable theological associations in the western world. Particularly interesting is the fact that among the published papers of the Nairobi conference five deal with 'The search for spirituality', and three of these are written by women from Africa and Latin America.²²

The expression 'spirituality as struggle for life', used by some Third World women, emphasizes how spirituality is not something apart from, over and above life. On the contrary, for many women the practice of spirituality is a force for survival, a power to inspire struggle and resistance. The struggle for life can also be interpreted quite literally as women's immense labour and their ever renewed pain in bringing life into this world and nurturing its growth so that it can develop into a fuller and more abundant life.

But women's spirituality is not simply a struggle *for* life but also a spirituality *of* life whereby women are nourished and strengthened by the experience of the processes of life itself, its great energies for renewal, sustenance, new birth and further growth. By strongly trusting life, through faith and hope in the powers of the Spirit acting in and through all the experiences of their daily life, women are strengthened and grow to experience a vision of the dignity, beauty and fullness of life – a vision they can share and transmit to empower others in today's world.

Whilst some post-Christian writers maintain that the trenchant critique of feminism represents the death knell of Christianity, I would argue that the rise of the women's movement with its new spiritual insights, its strong potential for empowerment and transformation, as well as its necessary critique in search for renewal and reconstruction, are not only of the greatest importance for contemporary women and men, but herald a promising horizon of hope for Christianity in today's world. Women's spirituality is making a significant contribution to the resurgence and creative reinterpretation of contemporary spirituality. This contribution must not be ignored by the Christian churches nor must it be overlooked in any teaching programme on spirituality.

NOTES

¹ It would be helpful to have a complete listing of current courses on spirituality now available in

Britain. Some may contain elements on women's spirituality (as for example the 'Religion and Gender' course in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Bristol), and I know of a number of dissertations written in this area, but to my knowledge nothing like the Women's Spirituality Master's Program and the Women's Spirituality Doctoral Program offered by the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco exists in Britain.

² The quotations are taken from a publicity sheet which, in addition to a 20,000-word dissertation, lists three compulsory modules for study: 1. Sanctity: The Structure of Holiness; 2. Interiority: Patterns of Spiritual Practice; 3. Community: Love and Ethical Being. This presents a clearly structured course of study, but unfortunately does not include any theoretical component where methodological and critical questions, especially with reference to gender issues, would be dealt with.

³ See *Women's Studies Quarterly* vol XXI, nos 1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 1993).

⁴ I have discussed this at greater length in my article 'Spirituality, society and culture', *The Way Supplement* 73 (Spring 1992), pp 14–23.

⁵ See Ursula King, *Women and spirituality: voices of protest and promise* (second edition, London and University Park PA, 1993).

⁶ Boston, 1980.

⁷ San Francisco, 1989. Cf also Joan Leonard, 'Teaching introductory feminist spirituality: tracing the trajectory through women writers', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* vol 6, no 2 (1990), pp 121–35.

⁸ Cf *Women's Studies Quarterly* vol XXI, nos 1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 1993), p 115. The article is on pp 106–20.

⁹ Cf Theresa King (ed), *The spiral path: explorations in women's spirituality* (Saint Paul MN, 1992).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 9.

¹¹ In Louis Dupré and Don E. Saliers, *Christian spirituality: post-Reformation and modern* (London, 1990), pp 500–19.

¹² Cf Sara Maitland, *A map of the new country: women and Christianity* (London, 1983).

¹³ Cf Anne Carson, *Feminist spirituality and the feminine divine: an annotated bibliography* (Trumansburg, New York, 1986), which lists 739 entries. Cf also Elinor W. Gadon, *The once and future Goddess: a symbol of our time* (San Francisco, 1989).

¹⁴ The area is far too large to list publications here. Very perceptive questions from a contemporary perspective are raised in Mary Giles (ed), *The feminist mystic and other essays on women and spirituality* (New York, 1982). Cf also the engaging testimonies in Anne Bancroft, *Weavers of wisdom: women mystics of the twentieth century* (London, 1989).

¹⁵ Cf Carol J. Adams (ed), *Ecofeminism and the sacred* (New York, 1993); Judith Plant (ed), *Healing the wounds: the promise of ecofeminism* (Philadelphia, 1989); Anne Primavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis: ecology, feminism and Christianity* (Tunbridge Wells, 1991); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: an ecofeminist theology of earth healing* (San Francisco, 1992).

¹⁶ I would only like to mention three titles here, though the field is steadily expanding: Joann Wolski Conn (ed), *Women's spirituality: resources for Christian development* (New York, 1986); Kathleen Fischer, *Women at the well: feminist perspectives on spiritual direction* (London, 1989); Katherine Zappone, *The hope for wholeness: a spirituality for feminists* (Mystic CT, 1991); cf also note 5 above.

¹⁷ The quotation is taken from his essay 'Reflections on happiness' in P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Toward the future* (London, 1973), p 128.

¹⁸ Cf Ursula King (ed), *Feminist theology from the Third World: a reader* (London and Maryknoll, New York, 1994). The Introduction (pp 1–20) gives an overview of the major developments.

¹⁹ World Council of Churches (Geneva, 1995).

²⁰ Cf U. King, *op. cit.* (see note 18), p 45.

²¹ Cf U. King, *op. cit.*, p 36.

²² Cf K. C. Abraham and Bernadette Mbuy-Beya (eds), *Spirituality of the Third World* (Maryknoll, New York, 1994).