

Sister Insider/Outsider: On the Use Of Feminist Theology in Religious Studies

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The academic discipline of religious studies is purportedly a “disinterested” and “objective” practice,¹ and differentiates itself from the practice of theology on this basis.² However, to examine religions from a theological perspective is a necessary part of the ideology critique that is essential to religious studies.³ As one who has an interest in theology, the question of the application of theology within the discipline of religious studies is one that is of interest for me. That being said, this paper is not going to address the methodological issues related to the insider/outsider debate, nor the question of whether insiders have the authority to speak on behalf of their tradition. My point, rather, is that theological material as a whole should not be discounted as a possible source of religious studies scholarship and critique.

To this end, I have selected one chapter of a feminist theological text—Melissa Raphael’s chapter “Reading post-Holocaust Theology from a Feminist Perspective” in The Female Face of God in Auschwitz—and will use it to demonstrate that it is possible to find theological scholarship that conforms to the requirements of religious studies discourse. For the purposes of this paper, I will use June O’Connor’s five-point framework for the creation and analysis of feminist critiques of religion to analyze Raphael’s work. The five components of a feminist

¹ Admittedly, this emphasis on distance is the traditional view of how religious studies scholarship should be done. In recent years, there has been increased emphasis on self-reflexivity and personal reflection in scholarship. For example, see the work of McCutcheon or Jenkins.

² Carol P. Christ, “Embodied Thinking: Reflections on Feminist Theological Method,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5 (1989): 15.

³ Marsha Aileen Hewitt, “Ideology Critique, Feminism, and the Study of Religion,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 11 (1999): 59.

critique that O'Connor proposes are: the application of a hermeneutic of suspicion, the retrieval of the history of women, the critique and transformation of established concepts, the rejection of exclusionary modes of scholarship, and active self-reflection through the acknowledgement of one's own assumptions and ideology.⁴ This paper will test a fragment of Raphael's work against each component of O'Connor's framework and will show that the first chapter of Raphael's text does conform to the requirements of a feminist critique of religion.

Hermeneutic of Suspicion

O'Connor's first criterion for a feminist analysis of religion is the use of a hermeneutic of suspicion in order to recognize the androcentric content and context of sources. Other authors, such as David Kinsley and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, also support this practice. Kinsley states that it is important for a feminist analysis to acknowledge and "look beyond" the androcentric bias of sources and scholars that have traditionally equated men's religion with world religion.⁵ Raphael grounds her work in the assertion that gender difference can—and in the case of the Holocaust did—produce different accounts of an event.⁶ Throughout the chapter, and particularly in her critiques of Emil Fackenheim's⁷ and Ignaz Maybaum's⁸ texts, Raphael repeatedly reminds the reader of the problematic nature of the existing sources in terms of their androcentricity. According to Raphael, the vast majority of post-Holocaust Jewish theology is presented solely on the strength and authority of men.⁹ Raphael applies her concern to Fackenheim's work—which she demonstrates as problematic in its frequent treatment of women

⁴ June O'Connor, "The Epistemological Significance of Feminist Research in Religion," in *Religion and Gender*, ed. Ursula King (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 46.

⁵ David Kinsley, "Women's Studies in the History of Religions," in *Methodology in Religious Studies: The Interface with Women's Studies*, ed. Arvind Sharma (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 9, 10.

⁶ Melissa Raphael, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 3, 26.

⁷ Emil L. Fackenheim, *Quest for Past and Future: Essays in Jewish Theology* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1970).

⁸ Ignaz Maybaum, *The Face of God After Auschwitz*, (Amsterdam, Polak and Van Gennep, 1965).

⁹ Raphael, 24.

as less than human—and questions what effect such a view can have on (Jewish) women.¹⁰ Her critique of Maybaum falls along similar lines. In addition to arguing that Maybaum's construction of the divine is patriarchal—a point Raphael returns to later—her primary concern is Maybaum's assumption that “violence is the only language power understands,” which Raphael argues discredits and ignores the experiences, relations, practices, and beliefs of women.¹¹ Raphael problematizes and wants to change patriarchal and androcentric constructions such as the one Maybaum presents. Such a shift in construction is, according to Schüssler Fiorenza, a component of the application of a hermeneutic of suspicion,¹² and something that Raphael works with within the chapter.

According to Raphael, it is necessary for her feminist critique and theology to attend to the power relations and inequalities reinforced by a religious ideology that facilitates patriarchal discrimination and abuse.¹³ Raphael takes further issue with traditional post-Holocaust theologies that support an inherently patriarchal ideology and states that as such they are of no use to feminist scholars.¹⁴ Further to this, Raphael states that these “traditional” theories cannot “critique the world that produced [the Holocaust] because [they enjoy] discursive and religious privilege within that world.”¹⁵ Instead we must, as Schüssler Fiorenza states, shift from an androcentric to a feminist model.¹⁶ One component of this shift, apart from using a hermeneutic of suspicion as already discussed, is facilitated by O'Connor's second point—the retrieval of the history of women. It is through the application of a hermeneutic of suspicion that one may

¹⁰ Ibid., 30.

¹¹ Ibid., 34.

¹² Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Roundtable Discussion: On Feminist Methodology,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1 (1985): 73.

¹³ Raphael, 40.

¹⁴ Ibid., 37.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Schüssler Fiorenza, 73.

realize the need to use women's voices and experiences to construct and critique models of religion.¹⁷

The History of Women

To retrieve, reclaim, and otherwise reconstruct the history and experiences of women is O'Connor's second required component of a feminist critique of religion¹⁸ and something that Raphael seeks to achieve in her work. A precedent for this reclaiming exists within Christianity: as Carol P. Christ states, scholars and adherents have worked "to transform Christianity through reclaiming the history of women."¹⁹ Raphael's goal is no less revolutionary. Her aim is to make women (both past and present) "speaking subjects" whose voices are heard within sacred and secular arenas.²⁰ The official histories of religion are frequently bereft of women's voices and are often "silent on women."²¹ Raphael agrees, and argues that in light of that critique, it is Jewish women who have not responded to the gap in their religious history.²² Raphael's proposal to ameliorate this error is through the use of women's stories. Thus, in her attempt to find the history of women who experienced the Holocaust, Raphael employs unconventional sources for academic work.

Raphael's emphasis lies within experiential and relational accounts.²³ Like other feminist scholars of religion (Serinity Young,²⁴ Robbie Davis-Floyd,²⁵ and Robert Orsi,²⁶ for

¹⁷ Kinsley, 10.

¹⁸ O'Connor, 46.

¹⁹ Christ, 9.

²⁰ Raphael, 22.

²¹ Kinsley, 6.

²² Raphael, 19.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1, 39.

²⁴ Serinity Young, *An Anthology of Sacred Texts By and About Women* (New York: Crossroad, 1993).

²⁵ Robbie E. Davis-Floyd, "Ritual in the Hospital: Giving Birth the American Way," in *Readings in Ritual Studies*, ed. Ronald L. Grimes (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1996).

²⁶ Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

example), Raphael employs narrative to convey the history of women.²⁷ Admittedly, the use of personal narratives – i.e. memoirs and diaries – poses a challenge regarding the appropriateness of sources and the legitimacy of using explicitly gendered accounts of events. Raphael addresses both of these concerns, and justifies her use of memoirs by illustrating the differences in the accounts of religious services within Auschwitz taken from mainstream scholarship and one woman’s memoir. According to accepted accounts of Jewish religious services in the concentration camps, these services offered a way for inmates to reconnect with their religious lives and provided consolation and hope.²⁸ In rather stark contrast to this, Raphael provides a woman’s view of these services. For this woman, “the services became congregations of the deceased,”²⁹ and did not function as positive events. Thus, through the reclaiming of women’s “individual and social history,”³⁰ Raphael provides an alternative view to traditional scholarship and fulfills O’Connor’s requirement.

Critique and Transformation

The third criterion O’Connor provides for the creation of a feminist critique of religion is the critique and transformation of established concepts. According to Anne Barstow, “the power of feminist thought [is] to criticize, shake up, and transform” and it is the task of feminist scholars to “question the methods and values of every discipline.”³¹ This is echoed by Marsha Hewitt’s statement that any critique of religious ideology includes an examination of sources and traditions.³² Raphael claims that the work of a feminist theologian is distinct from the task of the

²⁷ Raphael, 4.

²⁸ Ibid., 39.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Schüssler Fiorenza, 76.

³¹ Ibid., 88.

³² Hewitt, 49.

theologian because a feminist theology actively works to critique the tradition,³³ and she therefore aligns herself with the practice of religious studies.

Working within this critical framework, Raphael states that the existing traditional patriarchal post-Holocaust theologies remain within the ideological construct that produced the Holocaust and therefore are unable to move beyond those structures.³⁴ Thus the use of feminist theology is the only appropriate method for analysis of the Holocaust.³⁵ However, Raphael's aim is to do more than point out the problems with existing post-Holocaust theology that she believes must be critiqued from a feminist perspective. To this end, Raphael works with Hewitt's assertion that feminist critical theory should examine and expose those components of religion that encourage the subordination of women.³⁶ In this vein, Raphael provides a number of criticisms of post-Holocaust theology, particularly with regard to the patriarchal nature of existing theories. According to Raphael, current post-Holocaust theology is patriarchal, and thus problematic, because of the androcentrism of the models of God in history, the assumption that masculine experience and activity is what forms the "essence of human personhood," the apparent promotion of the interests of an exclusively male social and religious elite, the claim that the God of these theologies "has not been patriarchal enough," and the function of each of these claims to assert the sovereignty of God above all else.³⁷ Raphael's argument then, is that each of these elements are problematic not only for feminists, but for all women, Jewish or otherwise. As a result, she questions the value of existing theories and examines what she sees as the most problematic in terms of gender issues. One example of this is Raphael's critique of the way Dan Cohn-Sherbok presents women in his work God and the Holocaust. According to

³³ Raphael, 15.

³⁴ Ibid., 36.

³⁵ Ibid., 37.

³⁶ Ibid., 51, 52, 60.

³⁷ Ibid., 28.

Raphael's reading, the women in Cohn-Sherbok's theology are shown as "crazed" and less than human in contrast to the intellectual and stoic presentation afforded to the men.³⁸ This potentially transformative analysis fulfills O'Connor's requirement. Additionally, Raphael's questioning and commitment to a feminist agenda also requires that she reject exclusionary modes of scholarship.

Rejection of Exclusionary Scholarship

O'Connor's fourth element of a feminist critique of religion is the rejection of exclusionary modes of scholarship, which is an ideal that Raphael strives to achieve. This rejection entails more than a simple tacking on of information by or about women; it is an integration of women's knowledge into scholarship and academic discourse.³⁹ One method to achieve the equality that Raphael proposes is to attempt an empirical analysis. According to her, all claims made in contemporary scholarship are subject to justification and verification through empirical tests.⁴⁰ Raphael shows that within existing post-Holocaust scholarship it is the men who speak for the religion in the first hand accounts, and that the women are at best reduced to "background noise" or biological creatures (defined by their role as mothers or at worst presented as "quasi-animals").⁴¹ Linked to this is Raphael's claim that even in the most analytical texts, women, if they appear at all, are placed in the realm of the secular or profane and are presented as being exclusively emotionally and biologically driven. Additional to this is Raphael's statement that Jewish theology "is founded upon a systematic injustice," namely the "assumption of the lesser humanity of women".⁴² Within a feminist critique of religion, the

³⁸ Ibid., 21.

³⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza, 79.

⁴⁰ Raphael, 35.

⁴¹ Ibid., 22, 23.

⁴² Ibid., 27.

solution to the problems highlighted by Raphael is to work to overcome these and similar issues presented in traditional academic works.⁴³

Ideally, a feminist critique does not seek to privilege any perspective or combination of perspectives.⁴⁴ Certainly, Raphael rejects existing exclusionary academic interpretations. Her proposed solution is “the 11th commandment” that according to Raphael, influences much of Jewish feminist thought, analysis, and critique.⁴⁵ This commandment states that “Thou shalt not lessen the humanity of women” and informs Raphael’s specific account of women’s experience of the Holocaust. Granted, by virtue of focusing solely on the experiences of women, Raphael is being exclusionary; however, she is aware of her bias, and as her own bias is in direct opposition to the bias presented in traditional scholarship she considers it a justified exclusion.⁴⁶

Nonetheless, Raphael is working against the traditional exclusionary modes of academic reporting, and as such fulfills O’Connor’s requirement.

Self-Reflection

The fifth and final component of a feminist analysis of religion, as prescribed by O’Connor, is self-reflection—the author’s acknowledgement of her/his own assumptions and ideology (46). Cheryl Gilkes states that the conception that “good scholarship must be ‘objective’ and ‘value-free’ is an obstacle” to the creation of feminist scholarship.⁴⁷ In addition to being problematic with regards to the construction of a method, the ideal of “intellectual neutrality” is, according to Christ, impossible.⁴⁸ Every piece of writing has an agenda and an

⁴³ Schüssler Fiorenza, 76.

⁴⁴ Kinsley, 1.

⁴⁵ Raphael, 27.

⁴⁶ Linda Tuhiwa Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York: Zed Books, 2005), 38, 116; Ursula King ed, *Religion and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 41; Raphael, 1, 4.

⁴⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza, 86.

⁴⁸ Christ, 15.

audience, which necessitates a specific slant being imposed on the work.⁴⁹ Scholars would be naïve to assume that they are impartial, and according to Schüssler Fiorenza, feminist scholars should aim to create a “conscious partiality” in their work.⁵⁰

In her work, Raphael both acknowledges her own perspective and goals and is conscious of the limited nature of her approach and analysis. In describing the methodological framework for her text, Raphael notes the limits of her own analysis.⁵¹ Additionally, she claims that there is “no unmediated experience”⁵² and as such there are numerous possible readings of her sources and post-Holocaust theology as a whole. These differences are accepted and “celebrated” by feminist scholars of religion.⁵³ Particularly, what Raphael aims to accomplish, and what feminist religious scholarship – both theological and secular – aims for, is to work with the power of different voices and perceptions.⁵⁴ Through Raphael’s self-reflection on her method and perspective, she concludes that what she has accomplished in her feminist analysis of post-Holocaust theology is more of a “literary and rhetorical exercise” than a theological one.⁵⁵ Given that “theology presents a generalized, unified scheme”⁵⁶ while religious studies expects particularization, it is clear from Raphael’s individualized approach and acknowledgement of assumptions and ideology that her work conforms to O’Connor’s requirement of self-reflection.

⁴⁹ Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 22; Kinsley, 10.

⁵⁰ Schüssler Fiorenza, 75.

⁵¹ Raphael, 5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

Conclusion

Within the study of religion, it is appropriate to examine both the “repressive and emancipatory impulses which structure religion.”⁵⁷ However, in doing such an examination it is necessary to avoid imposing a new ideology on that which is being studied.⁵⁸ In her work, Raphael states that she is presenting a “feminist criticism of post-Holocaust theology,” not a new theology.⁵⁹ Upon closer examination of part of Raphael’s work, it is clear that her approach easily conforms to the components of a feminist analysis of religion as described by O’Connor. Raphael applies a hermeneutic of suspicion through addressing the androcentric constructions of existing post-Holocaust theologies such as those presented by Fackenheim and Maybaum. She also works to retrieve the history of women through the use of writings by women as her primary sources. Additionally, she aims to critique and transform existing scholarship through the analysis of existing patriarchal theories. In line with this, she rejects previous exclusionary modes of scholarship and proposes a move towards empiricism and equality as a manner of reclaiming women’s humanity within the tradition. Finally, Raphael acknowledges her own bias and the limits of her interpretation. Clearly, her theological text engages with each of the criteria required for a feminist critique of religion. This essay is by no means an exhaustive study, and leaves many questions unanswered. In light of the fact that all writing is influenced by the context and perspective of the author, two of the areas that would be fruitful to address are how other scholarship traditionally deemed ‘problematic’ should be used, and whether authority should be afforded to ‘confessional’ works. However, I hope that I have demonstrated the necessity of reconsidering the place of theology in religious studies. These texts should not be immediately disregarded, as critical theologies – such as feminist theologies like Raphael’s – can

⁵⁷ Hewitt, 49.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 50, 55.

⁵⁹ Raphael, 27.

use methods and include analysis that conform to the critical academic standards within religious studies.

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