



# GCE

## Religious Studies

**RS3 CHR:  
Studies in Christianity (A2)  
Topic 3**

*by Gordon Reid*

## *Topic 3: Feminist Theology*

### AIM

#### At the end of this topic you should:

- understand the main views of feminist theologians
- be able to evaluate the extent to which these views have influenced structures and traditional beliefs within the Christian Church
- understand theories of biblical interpretation which include issues of male dominance
- be able to evaluate these theories
- understand feminist theories relating to religious belief and patriarchal authority
- be able to evaluate arguments concerning the gender of God and Jesus Christ
- be able to evaluate critically a variety of different views concerning the ordination of women and draw conclusions, based on reasoning and evidence
- be able to see connections between this topic and other topics in this unit.

### *Introduction: What is Feminist Theology?*

Feminist theology is a movement which examines religious traditions, scriptures, practices and beliefs from the feminist perspective. In this way, feminist theologians seek to reconsider the role of women in religion, and to reappraise what many see as male-dominated authority structures and the use of masculine imagery and language, when speaking about God.

Feminist theology began at the end of the nineteenth century with the publication of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's 'The Women's Bible', which challenged traditional assumptions about the 'maleness' of God. Since then, feminists have demanded equal rights for women within the Church and have called for major reform of church authority structures. They have also challenged traditional theological language. For instance, the study of God took the word 'theo' in the masculine form, whilst many feminists prefer to use the female term 'theology'. Others speak of God/dess or God as a no-gender s/he.



### *For reflection:*

Should we call 'God' a 'goddess' too?

Feminist theologians have come into conflict with Christianity, because many of them believe that, as a faith, it treats women as second-rate humans in terms of their role and in the way in which they are understood to be in the image of God. In '20<sup>th</sup> Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age' (IVP 1993) Grenz and Olson noted:

*'Feminist theology was developed in three distinct steps... they began with a critique of the past... they seek alternate biblical positions... and set forth their own unique method of theology which includes revising Christian viewpoints.'*



### *Seminar Topic:*

Is it right to revise religious ideas or should they always stay the same?

## *Patriarchal structures: the male emphasis of Christianity*

Feminist theologians argue that Christianity has a male-dominated (patriarchal) structure of authority and that God and the teachings of the Bible are presented in a masculine way. Feminist theologians claim:

- Traditional sources of religious authority such as the Bible and the priestly tradition are masculine. Feminist theologians believe that God should be known not from gender, but from personal experience.
- We use masculine terms when speaking of God (e.g. 'Father') and this affects our perceptions and beliefs about God. Feminist theologians seek the use of non-gendered language.
- God is seen as being male and having mainly male qualities such as authority and discipline. Instead, more emphasis should be put on feminine qualities such as nurture, care and creativity.
- Women's role in historical religious traditions should be more emphasised, as many women have had a great influence on religious belief.
- Noted feminist Sojourner Truth (taken from 'Ain't I a Woman' by P. Mckissack (1994 Scholastic Press) declared:

*'And how came Jesus into the world... through God who created him and the woman who bore him. Man, where was your part?'*



### *For research:*

Make a list of examples in everyday language which use sexist terms. Which terms do we use in everyday life that seem to give authority to one sex over another – for instance, ‘chairman’ or ‘master’?

There are three main, but very different viewpoints within Feminist theology:

- The ‘rejectionist’ view, which argues that the Bible promotes an oppressive, male-dominated (patriarchal) structure, with a male view of God at the summit. This view questions the whole of Christian tradition and calls for a radical re-evaluation of the Christian church. Supporters of this view claim that the Bible is overtly masculine and out-dated with little or no relevance today, and urge a return to seeing religion in terms of a feminine deity or goddess.
- The ‘reformist’ view agree that there is too much emphasis on male dominance in Christianity, but do not advocate a rejection of the Christian tradition and instead, call for a greater emphasis on equality. Supporters of this perspective are sometimes called liberal feminists and operate within the Christian framework. However, they believe that the patriarchal nature of the scriptures is coloured by a wrongful interpretation from many male writers, who deliberately covered up the role of women in biblical times.
- The ‘loyalist’ view argues that there is no oppressive sexism in the Bible, and many accept the traditional approach that the woman’s place in God’s creation is fulfilled in her role of submission and dependence on church and family. Male leadership, they claim, does not diminish the freedom and dignity of women. Supporters of this view, often called evangelical feminists, generally accept the tradition teachings of the Bible as authoritative.



### *Seminar Topic*

Which of these three views is the most convincing and why? Which is the least convincing? Give reasons.

For many feminist theologians, the starting point is women’s experience and the rejection of ‘patriarchy’, which is the authority structure whereby men rule over women. They argue that women will only become truly human, with the ending of patriarchy. In particular, the Bible must be re-evaluated because the text can be seen as oppressive to women. Feminists argue that the role of women in the scriptures should be given greater emphasis.



### *For reflection:*

Can the Bible really be re-evaluated?

### *Male-orientated theological language*

Feminist theologians believe that the subordination of women stems from the biblical account of the Fall of Adam and Eve, and that subsequent male biblical writers and leaders, wrongly interpreted the rest of the scriptures in that light. They argue that the masculine imagery of God as Father, comes from the Old Testament's use of male-orientated language and that many scriptures highlighting the feminine side of God, have been ignored: For instance:

*'As the eyes of a maid look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord.'* - Psalm 123.2

E. Margaret Howe in 'The positive case for the ordination of women' (Grand Rapids 1979) wrote:

*'We are in the realm of mythology when we conceptualize God as male, rather than female, just as we would be if we considered him to be female rather than male. The being of God transcends the limitations of sexuality.'*

The Bible seems to offer contradictory views of women. Under the Law of Moses, there were some clearly male-orientated rules:

*'A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days.'* - Leviticus 12:1

*'If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, he writes a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from the house.'* - Deuteronomy 24:1-2

Yet again, within the Law of Moses, there were many laws that specifically protected the interests of women and promoted equality:

*'Honour your father and your mother.'* - Exodus 20:12

At other times, God was depicted in a very masculine way:

*'You are my King and my God... through your name, we trample our foes... you give us victory over our enemies.'* - Psalm 44:4-5

Yet elsewhere, God appeared in a feminine light:

*'Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she forget, I will not forget you.'* - Isaiah 49:1-5

Interestingly, in Old Testament times, women held high office in Hebrew society as prophets, judges and rulers, and in the New Testament, Mary, the mother of Christ, is held in the highest esteem and it is to women that the risen Christ is first revealed.



### *For research:*

To what extent does the Bible present a contradictory view of God? Give examples.

Mary Daly argued that Christianity, with its masculine symbols for God, its male saviour figure and its long history of male leaders and thinkers, is biased against women and incapable of being salvaged and she urged women to leave the faith. In 'Beyond God the Father' (London 1973), she challenged the very notion of God being 'Father', saying that this was a product of male imagination:

*'If God is male, then male is God.'*

She claimed that God cannot be seen in human terms (anthropomorphism). God, she said, was a verb, not an object - a way of what she called 'Be-ing'. She went on to say that God does not have a plan, he is not the judge of sin and does not determine the after-life. In a sense, everyone finds their own god within them:

*'To exist humanly is to name the self, the world and God.'*



### *For reflection:*

Is this compatible with Christian belief?

Daphne Hampson in 'Theology and Feminism' (Oxford 1990) went further and claimed that she was a 'post Christian' who rejected traditional Christianity, because it was incompatible with her feminist views. She claimed that Christian morality was sexist and invalid. In a lecture in 1997 she declared:

*'The (Christian) myth is not neutral, it is highly dangerous. It is a brilliant, subtle, elaborate, male cultural projection, calculated to legitimize a patriarchal world and to enable men to find their way within it... We need to see it for what it is. I am a spiritual person, not an atheist... I am quite clear there is an underlying goodness, beauty and order, that it is powerful, such as we can draw on it, while we are inter-related with it. I call that God.'*



### *For reflection:*

Is this view of God compatible with traditional Christianity?

For Hampson, feminism was incompatible with Christianity, because the God of the Bible is 'other', in that he existed before creation. Feminism, she claimed, saw God not as 'other', but as that which is connected to everything that is.

In a similar vein, Rosemary Radford Ruether in 'Sexism and God Talk' (London 1983) wrote:

*'The crucial principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women.'*

She went on to suggest that those parts of the Bible that oppress women or emphasise male authority should be rejected, citing such examples as:

*'Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord, for the husband is the head of the wife.'* - Ephesian 5 v. 21-23

*'Adam was not the one deceived, it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.'* - 1 Timothy 2:11



### *Seminar Topic:*

If the Bible is the word of God, then can it ever be right to reject parts of it?

Ruether argued:

*'These texts have lost their power over our lives. We no longer need to apologize for them or try to interpret them as word of truth, but cast out their oppressive message as expressions of evil.'*

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza in 'Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation' (New York 2001) claimed that Feminist theology was a freedom movement, seeking to abolish patriarchal structures of domination – Christians must abandon traditional convictions – including the view that a masculine God wrote the Bible.

*'Engaging in a feminist biblical spirituality... means learning how to read and understand the Bible from that standpoint of a feminist theory of justice and a feminist movement for change.'*

She claimed that:

- those parts of the Bible which are oppressive should be rejected
- biblical women who were victims of patriarchy should be honoured
- biblical text should be re-written to affirm women.

### *Writing Task:*

(a) Examine the view that the Bible and the Church encourage patriarchal structures.

(b) 'Christianity has a male-emphasis'. Assess this view.

### *The Person of Christ and the implications of his gender for Christian ministry*

Feminists are divided over the person of Jesus Christ. For liberal and evangelical feminists, Jesus is seen as very supportive of women in the Bible and treated them as equals. For example, in Luke 10, Jesus allows Mary to sit with the men and listen to his teaching and in John 21 it is Mary Magdalene who is the first to see the risen Christ.

They argue that the death and resurrection of Jesus ended the 'curse of Eve' and that women are no longer required to endure male domination. They say that female subordination was the result of sin, which has now been dealt with by Christ. In 'Beyond sex roles' (Grand Rapids 1985), Gilbert Bilezikian observed:

*'It is proper to regard both male dominance and death as being contrary to God's original intent in creation. Both are the result of sin...'*



#### *For reflection:*

What does the 'curse of Eve' mean?

Consequently, for feminists, with Christ's death and resurrection, this domination is now over for, as Paul observes:

*'Through Jesus Christ the law of the Spirit of life has set me free from the law of sin and death.'* - Romans 8:2

Howe (ibid) notes:

*'The death of Christ released humanity from the curse brought about by sin. Woman is no longer to be subjugated under male headship. The mutual and complementary relationship that Adam and Eve enjoyed may now be restored.'*

This is supported by St. Paul:

*'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.'* - Galatians 3:28

Other feminists, however, are more critical of the Person of Jesus. Naomi Goldenberg in 'Changing the Gods' (Boston 1979), argued that the use of the masculine gender for God and the male portrayal of Jesus were both unacceptable, because they make the male world-view seem superior. She believed that this largely stemmed from the Judeo-Christian concept of God and this traditional view must be abandoned, in favour of a gender-neutral view of God and, perhaps, a new religion:

*'We women are going to bring an end to God... the feminist movement in Western culture is engaged in the slow execution of Christ.'*



### *Seminar Topic:*

To what extent does Feminist theology reject traditional Christian views?

In 'Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Theology' (Boston 1984), Mary Daly went further, claiming that the term 'God' should be rejected altogether, as it was full of masculine imagery and that the incarnation of Christ was the:

*'...symbolic legitimisation of the rape of all women...'*

It is clear that within Feminist Theology there are a wide range of opinions of patriarchy and the person of Christ. Many feminists have condemned traditional female Christians who support the church and the traditional view of Jesus Christ as ignorant. However, less extreme feminist views include the notion that, although the Bible was written with a patriarchal framework, nevertheless, Jesus Christ taught the principles of freedom and equality and that men and women were created as equal, but have different roles.



### *For reflection:*

Is the fact that Jesus was a man helpful or harmful to Feminist theology? Give reasons.

Some feminists have called for a more far-reaching *hermeneutic of suspicion* – namely, that the Bible ought to be re-defined, so that women can once again occupy a place of importance, as they did in early Christian history. Rosemary Ruether suggested that Christology itself is the basis of many sexist attitudes within Christianity and the maleness of Jesus has been used to forward the idea that only males are truly in the image of God – that the

norm for humanity is male, whilst the female is seen as a less than ideal human being.

Judith Plaskow in 'Sex, Sin and Grace' (UPA 1980), argued that the Christ-like notions of sin, salvation and sacrifice were essentially male. She suggested a highlighting of the feminist ideas advocated by Jesus, of non-competitive relationships, caring and nurture, which avoid the traditionally submissive role of women in a male-dominated society.

### *Writing Task:*

- (a) Examine the teachings of Christ which show (i) male dominance and (ii) male and female equality.
- (b) 'The fact that Jesus was a man has had important implications for traditional Christian ministry.' Assess this view.

### *Exclusion of women from ecclesiastical authority*

For many feminist theologians, the main problem is that the Christian Church has a patriarchal structure, with men occupying virtually all the senior positions of power and authority. This, they say, leads to a Church which is mostly concerned with masculine issues and sees things in a masculine way, thus limiting the input of women and denying their spiritual gifts and the feminist perspective.

Christianity has traditionally given men positions of authority in the Church and in society and marriage generally. Women have usually been depicted in submissive roles and have been, until recently, excluded from church leadership and, specifically, roles of ordination. Today, the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches and some Protestant denominations, still maintain that only men can be ordained. For them, the male role is not one of authoritative control, but responsible care, decreed by God. As St. Paul controversially observed:

*'The head of every man is Christ and the head of every woman is man... for man did not come from woman, but woman from man, neither was man made for woman, but woman for man... for as woman came from man, so also is man born of woman. But everything comes from God.'* - 1 Corinthians 11:3, 8, 11



### *For reflection:*

Is St. Paul right? Why / why not?

By way of example, the Roman Catholic Church has a pyramid structure, with the (male) Pope at its head – he has supreme authority as the representative of Christ and the successor to St. Peter the apostle, the first leader of the Church. Indeed, the Pope is sometimes known as God’s vicar on earth.

In this patriarchal structure, the Pope is assisted by a group of all-male Cardinals, who in turn have authority over the all-male archbishops, bishops and priests. They claim that Jesus only had male disciples, and through the doctrine of ‘apostolic succession’, claim God’s authority to act in this way too. As Paul wrote:

*‘Women should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man; she must be silent.’ - 1 Timothy 2:11*



*For reflection:*

Does Paul mean that women should not be allowed to speak in church?

Yet the fact that Jesus picked male disciples may not have been as significant as it seemed, for as Aida Spencer pointed out in ‘Beyond the Curse’ (Nelson 1985):

*‘If Jesus’ choice of twelve male disciples signifies that females should not be leaders in the church, then, consistently, his choice also signifies that Gentiles should not be leaders in the church... since Gentiles are allowed to be leaders in the church, the same should be true for women.’*

A number of Protestant denominations disagree with this patriarchal view of authority and take the Christian feminist view that men and women were created equally by God in His image, and consequently, believe that women should be in roles of authority, alongside men. Indeed, some Protestant denominations, including Methodism and the Salvation Army, have a long tradition of allowing women to preach and to minister.

Today, in the Church of England, women have been ordained as priests since 1994 and in the Church of Wales since 1997, although all the archbishops and bishops in both churches are male. There are moves to allow women to become bishops. Howe (ibid):

*‘A woman appointed to a leadership position in the church is not adopting a male role... she stands before God as man’s equal, with authority invested in her by God.’*



*For reflection:*

If women can be priests, then is there any reason why they should not be bishops?

Yet there are still deep divisions among feminists. Some claim that the prominent women followers of Christ, namely the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, were marginalized by patriarchal church writers in the past – for instance, Mary Magdalene was deemed to have been a prostitute, though there is no real scriptural evidence of this, and the Virgin Mary was said by some, to be herself, divine and not, in a sense, a truly human woman at all.

This male domination of the scriptures, has led many Christian feminists to believe that gender equality within the Church, will never be achieved without re-thinking the entire biblical portrayal of God as a masculine being. They have developed the concept of 'Sophia', which replaces the 'masculine' Holy Spirit, with the desire to use symbols which reflect women's religious experiences – Sophia is not static, but full of emotions and expressions and highlights the search by women for a gender transcendent God and the female aspects of God – and utilises such religious figures as the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, Eve and Esther.

On the other hand, one group of Christian feminists takes the position known as 'complementarianism', which states that men and women are equal, but different and that God created them to have different roles in the church. Thus men have the responsibility to lead, and women have responsibility to affirm and nurture. In 'Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood' (1991), Puper & Grudem suggest that:

*'At the heart of mature masculinity is a sense of benevolent responsibility to lead, provide for and protect women in ways appropriate to a man's differing relationships... at the heart of mature femininity is a freeing disposition to affirm and nurture strength and leadership from worthy men.'*

Christian Egalitarianism is a term given to a number of Christian female groups who feel that Christian feminism goes too far. They argue that all humans are equal before God, in terms of personal worth and moral status – each has a personal responsibility to use their gifts for the glory of God and are called to different roles by God:

*'Now you are the body of Christ and each of you has a part in it. And in the church, God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing and those able to help others.'* – 1 Corinthians 12:27-28

Thus, they claim, as men and women are equal, then Church leadership should fully include women. They argue that Jesus abolished gender discrimination in the Church – he spoke with women, taught them and treated them in an equal way.



## Seminar Topic:

Is the ordination of women supported by biblical teaching or not? Give reasons for your view.

### *Has Feminist theology been successful in initiating change?*

Feminist theology has attempted to offer a new interpretation of Christian tradition and the Bible. It has suggested that the message of the Bible is not about male dominance, but about God's relationship with all of humanity. In the creation story, Eve is Adam's equal partner and she has the same unique qualities as he does. In the New Testament, women are described as '*the glory of man*' (1 Corinthians 11:7) and a woman is called on to pray with her head covered, not as a sign of inferiority, but as a sign of authority, because her worth is so great, that it must not distract from the glory of God. Moreover, both sexes are created equal and men and women are made in the '*image of God*' (Genesis 1:27) and both are called to serve God and fulfil his purpose.

Yet, there are controversial teachings in the Bible, which block the path to equality. For example, there are Paul's comments on the dominance of the male and his prohibition on women in Church: '*...women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says*' (1 Corinthians 14:34).

So what is the situation today? In March 2008, the Vatican decreed that God must always be regarded as '*Father*', and that anyone who has been baptized with the name of God being used in a gender-neutral way, such as 'Creator' 'Redeemer' or 'Sanctifier', would have to be re-baptized in the traditional way.

In the same way, marriages using these terms are invalid. Cardinal Urbano Navarette declared that any priest using gender-neutral terms would be penalised, as such words were '*illegitimate and unjust*' (Daily Telegraph 1.3.2008).

Earlier, in 'The Ratzinger Report' (Ignatius Press 1985 and 2005), the present Pope wrote:

*'I am, in fact, convinced that what feminism promotes in its radical form is no longer the Christianity that we know. It is another religion.'*

In reply, Feminist theologian Rosemary Ruether (ibid) said that, among liberal Catholics '*...the Pope is not our Pope.*'



## For reflection:

Is the Pope right? Why / why not?

Elsewhere, in many Protestant denominations, including the Churches of England and Wales, gender-neutral language is accepted, as it avoids what many regard as obstructive use of masculine imagery. Indeed, the Pope's reluctance to allow the ordination of women is seen by many Protestants as an obstacle to closer ties between the two Churches.

In conclusion, it is certainly true that Feminist theology has called attention to the invaluable role of women throughout Christian history. Equally, it has served to highlight the failure of many men throughout the ages, to fulfil their God-appointed roles. It has shown very clearly, the abuse and oppression that many women have suffered under male domination in the church.

However, perhaps the biggest drawback to Feminist Theology is the great disagreement amongst Feminist theologians themselves and the lack of a common purpose and goal. Quite simply, the message of Feminist theology is not clear enough and many of their theological responses are not strong enough. Great strides have been made, but there is still a long way to go.

### *Writing Task:*

- (a) Examine the reasons why some Churches have excluded women from ecclesiastical authority whilst others have not.
- (b) 'Feminist theology has failed to bring about any significant change in the Christian Church. Assess this view.