What do feminist approaches to interpreting scripture have to contribute to the church as a whole?

Introduction

Over the history of the church the Bible has been used to legitimise patriarchy in society and in the church. However, in the last two hundred years there has been an ever increasing call from women for the situation to be changed. In this essay we sketch the history of this change and categorise the different feminist approaches to scripture. We argue that feminist approaches to interpreting scripture can teach the church in the areas of doctrine, justice, women’s leadership, use of language and biblical doctrine. We do this primarily by engaging with the work of four feminist writers: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Phyllis Trible and Elaine Storkey. We will critically challenge the feminist approach at various points and argue that especially problematic for the church is the rejection of the authority of scripture found in many feminist writings.

Feminism and Feminist Biblical Interpretation

Feminism is hard to define as there is not a single feminism, but a diversity of feminisms. Loades describes the main emphases of feminism as:1

- Seeking for justice for women through overcoming patriarchalism
- Attention to women’s perspectives
- Removing “… androcentricism which defines males and their experience as the normal or neutral standard and females and their experience as a variation on or even deviation from that norm.”2

Feminism is essentially a liberation movement and Tolbert identifies two general approaches.3 Firstly, the ascendency of women approach which calls for revolution, but this is coupled with the danger that it tends to lead to the exclusion and oppression of men. Secondly, the egalitarian approach which seeks the equality and reconciliation of men and women. It affirms the full humanity of women but not at the expense of men. This approach tends to be the dominant one in Christianity. The danger is that the desire for reconciliation ends up supporting the status quo. A major criticism of Feminism is that it is a movement which is biased to the middle class western woman.

Feminist principles came to be applied to biblical interpretation and Thiselton describes the different waves of feminism within Christianity.4 The first wave was focussed on Britain and America from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century. It was concerned with women’s right to vote and women’s legal and economic rights.

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1 Loades, ‘Feminist Interpretation’, pp.81-82
2 Ibid., pp.81-82
3 Tolbert, Defining the Problem, p.116
4 Thiselton, Hermeneutics: An Introduction, pp.283-287; See also Clifford, Introducing Feminist Theology, Chapter 1
Someone who was active in this first wave and who also anticipated the feminist biblical hermeneutics of the twentieth century was Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902).\(^5\) Stanton revised the Bible through focussing on texts which either related to women or the exclusion of women. Any biblical texts which did not fit into this category were dropped from her bible and commentaries were added opposing the misogyny and androcentricism of texts which were left. The result was published as ‘The Woman’s Bible’ and it had popular appeal even if it was denounced by the mainstream church and some of those women who were seeking greater rights. Today it is widely recognised that Stanton’s approach was flawed because of its lack of scholarship but it is also acknowledged that women in Stanton’s time had few educational opportunities.\(^6\)

According to Thiselton the second wave of feminist hermeneutics appeared in the 1960s in tandem with the wider feminist movement in society following the Second World War.\(^7\) This wave is characterised by a more systematic application of hermeneutical theories to the bible in the service of feminism and a deepening of feminist theological thought. This wave also saw a dramatic increase in publications. We shall concentrate on writers from the second wave onwards because their theology and biblical interpretation is more developed than the first wave which means they will have more to contribute to the church.

Thiselton notes the beginning of the fragmentation of the second wave in the 1980s as prominent figures like Mary Daly, Daphne Hampson and Rosemary Ruether begin to move away from orthodox Christianity and others begin to move beyond feminist concerns.\(^8\) Another contributor to this fragmentation is the rise of Womanist interpretations. Womanist interpretations argue that feminist hermeneutics is western middle classed. They tend to originate from female Afro-American and African writers and explore a larger range of subjects\(^9\) from a non-western middle class perspective.

**Categorisation of Feminist Interpretations of the Bible**

The diversity of feminisms is mirrored by a diversity of feminist approaches to interpreting the Bible. Feminist hermeneutics involves the “reading of a text in the light of the oppressive structures of patriarchal society.”\(^10\) Its basic assumption is that the texts of Christianity and the interpretations of those texts are patriarchal, androcentric and oppressive. This has led to the subordination of women to men in both the church and Christianised society.

We have noted above how womanist interpretations grew out of feminist interpretations, but Nordling helpfully summarises the three other approaches of Feminist hermeneutics.\(^11\) Firstly, there is the rejectionist (anti-Christian or post-Christian) approach. The biblical texts

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\(^{5}\) For a fuller discussion see Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, pp.46-49

\(^{6}\) For further discussion of the limitations of Stanton’s Women’s Bible see Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, p.48

\(^{7}\) Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction*, p.284

\(^{8}\) *Ibid.*, pp.294-295

\(^{9}\) eg. HIV and violence as well as patriarchy

\(^{10}\) Tolbert, *Defining the Problem*, p.119

\(^{11}\) Nordling, ‘Feminist Biblical Interpretation’, pp.228-229
and the Christian tradition are irredeemably patriarchal and therefore must be rejected. Secondly, there is loyalist (or evangelical) approach where the Bible is accepted as authoritative and God’s revelation. In this approach there are two different ways of defining the male-female relationship. Either the male-female relationship is hierarchical or it is egalitarian. In the hierarchical view there is hierarchy in creation, marriage, the family and the church. Leadership is male but this does not negate love and the right treatment of women. This is not generally considered a true feminist approach. In the egalitarian view male and female are equal and there is mutual submission. The patriarchalism of the texts is not normative in the light of other egalitarian scriptures. Any normative patriarchal interpretations are misunderstandings of the text. Thirdly, there is the reformist approach, which is the largest in feminist hermeneutics. Its foundations lie in the experience of oppression, patriarchalism and androcentricism which becomes an external criteria by which to judge the texts and history of Christianity. The reformist approach seeks to remain within the general boundaries of Christianity whilst also seeking to transform it.

Following Tolbert we can divide the reformist approach into a further three categories whilst acknowledging that feminist reformists may straddle two or all three of these categories at times in their writings. Firstly, there is the reformist-prophetic approach in which the prophetic tradition of the Bible is used as a model for the feminist struggle against women’s oppression. Secondly, the reformist-remnant approach seeks to identify the remnants of the positive stories and ideas about women in the Bible. These remnants are counter-cultural to the patriarchalism of the biblical text and may have even been distorted by a patriarchal history of interpretation. Thirdly, the reformist-reconstructionist approach avoids engaging with the biblical texts as much as possible and seeks to reconstruct the role of women in the histories of Israel and Christianity. It argues that women had a greater role in the religions than the biblical texts present. The foundational idea of the reconstructionist approach is that not only have the biblical texts been interpreted patriarchally, but the texts as we have them today were shaped in their writing and transmission by patriarchy.

As can be seen from Figure 1 the scope of feminist hermeneutics is diverse and cannot be easily summed up by one movement. It consists of different streams flowing out of the same concern regarding patriarchalism, androcentricism and the oppression of women. In considering what feminist interpretations can contribute to the church we will focus on writers from the loyalist and reformist groups. Rejectionist writers like Daphne Hampson and Mary Daly have left the church because they have come to believe that Christianity is irredeemably patriarchal. For them feminist interpretations of scripture can have no role in the transformation of the church, all they can do is show the true nature of the church as being misogynistic. These writers will therefore have little that is positive beyond critique to contribute to the church and so we do not consider them here. Womanist interpretations generally move beyond feminist issues and so we also do not consider them here.

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12 Tolbert, *Defining the Problem*, pp.122-123
Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza

Fiorenza is a prominent figure in Feminist hermeneutics and is a prolific writer. In her works we find much that can be appropriated by the church. Fiorenza wants to use feminist theology as a hermeneutic of liberation. In the first two chapters of her book *In Memory of Her* she seeks to provide the basis for her reconstruction of the role of women in the early church. She wants to critically analyse the biblical and early Christian patriarchal texts to provide a revised history of Christian origins. We shall concentrate here on five issues in Fiorenza’s hermeneutics.

Firstly, Fiorenza assumes that the biblical texts are fundamentally products of an androcentric and patriarchal culture. The lack of information about women in the biblical texts is due to what she calls androcentric traditioning and redaction. A patriarchal culture canonised patriarchal texts. The problem however goes beyond the androcentric nature of the texts though and extends to androcentric interpretation of the texts in the present. She notes the bible has been used to legitimise patriarchy in society and the church, but for her:

“Biblical revelation and truth are given only in those texts and interpretative models that transcend critically their patriarchal frameworks and allow for a vision of Christian women as historical and theological subjects and actors.”

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14 Fiorenza, *In memory of her: A feminist theological reconstruction of Christian origins*, p.52
15 Ibid., p.30
Women’s experience of patriarchalism therefore becomes the final authority for judging claims of revelation and whether an interpretation is appropriate. Revelation is found in Jesus’ life and ministry but this is recorded androcentrically in the texts, so it should not be assumed that the text presents an objective view of reality. This means that the Bible should be considered as a prototype (beginning point) rather than an archetype (fixed timeless pattern) to follow. Here Fiorenza’s view becomes problematic as she rejects the inspiration and authority of scripture, as well as scripture being God’s revelation. She promotes experience as the authority for theology and ends up seeking to remove embarrassing texts from scripture (eg. 1 Corinthians 11, 1 Corinthians 14) without good evidence because of this commitment to experience as theological authority. Women’s experience of patriarchy becomes the highest authority and we end up with “a canon outside of the canon.” Fiorenza’s focus on women’s experience climaxes in her the idea of the ‘women-church’, by which she means “the movement of self-identified women and women-identified men in biblical religion.” It is the gathered community who seek the religious liberation of women and stands opposed to patriarchy. The women-church then becomes the place where divine revelation and grace is found. This does lead to the question: Why should this single experience of women become the hermeneutic key for Christianity above all others? Whilst we would affirm the patriarchal and androcentric tendencies of Scripture, Fiorenza’s approach to scripture is not helpful as it enables the removing of foundational traditions of the church. We shall return to the question of the authority of scripture when we look at the feminism of Elaine Storkey below.

Secondly, more helpful to the church is Fiorenza’s ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’. The texts of a patriarchal culture are not value free and this means all texts must be tested to show how much they transmit or have been used to transmit patriarchy, androcentricism and the oppression of women. We start with a suspicion that this is the case until shown otherwise. Scholer calls feminist hermeneutics the “most stunning challenge … to the evangelical myth of objective hermeneutics and interpretation.” Fiorenza’s hermeneutic of suspicion reminds us that the biblical text and interpreter of those texts are culturally bound. A hermeneutic of suspicion helps us to hear texts anew and helps us see more clearly the problems already contained in the biblical texts that have been ignored, glossed over or even accepted as indicative of the ontological reality of male-female relationships. The usefulness of the hermeneutic of suspicion is shown in challenging androcentric interpretations of Romans 16:1-3 where Phoebe is called the diakonos and prostatis of a church. Fiorenza notes that scholars “downplay the importance of both titles here because they are used with reference to a woman.” Women of the bible described by the word diakonos are interpreted to have a lower position or more limited role of helper in the church than men who are described by the same word. Fiorenza comments “… the text does

16 Ibid., p.34
17 Thiselton, Hermeneutics: An Introduction, p.291
18 Ibid., pp.291-292
19 Storkey, Created or Constructed: The great gender debate, pp.96-99
20 Fiorenza, ‘The will to choose to or to reject: Continuing our critical work’, p.126
21 Ibid., p.128
22 Ibid., p.56
23 Scholer, “Feminist hermeneutics and Evangelical biblical interpretation”, p.412
24 Fiorenza, In memory of her: A feminist theological reconstruction of Christian origins, p.47
not permit such a feminine stereotyping of Phoebe.” Those who advocate Christian patriarchalism are not necessarily more objective than those who advocate feminist positions. The hermeneutic of suspicion helps us to approach the text with an awareness of the potentiality of androcentric bias and then encourages us to seek to combat this. However, we should not let a hermeneutic of suspicion go to the extreme of being transformed into a hermeneutic of ‘paranoia’ ie. believing there is an androcentric bias hidden somewhere in the text even if there appears to be none. The hermeneutic of suspicion needs to be used in a balanced and judicious way so that it helps the church as a whole challenge androcentric biblical interpretation.

Thirdly, Fiorenza assumes that women were active in the early church movement but their role has been predominantly erased from the texts and early history of Christianity. Remnants of egalitarianism however do still exist, which calls for a reconstruction of the hidden role of women. For example, Fiorenza comments that arguments against women preaching in the writings of the early church fathers shows that the patriarchalisation of church leadership was not unopposed. She also tends to interpret silences in the texts as pointers to the egalitarian nature of the early Christianity which has been removed. Here we criticise her because an argument from silence is no evidence because it could be used to prove anything. Fiorenza also draws on the role of women in the various movements which came to be considered heretical, for example Gnosticism and Montanism, as positive support for an egalitarian start to Christianity. Notwithstanding the problem of using heretical movements as normative for Christianity, we are left with the question as to how much the role of women in these early heretical movements truly mirrored that in Christianity. There is not enough historical evidence to determine an answer. Does she read too much into the early history of Christianity? The answer is probably yes. Even if we can challenge Fiorenza’s methods and evidence in relation to the role of women in early Christianity, she does contribute to the church the challenge to re-evaluate the ignored role of women. She comments at the start of her book In memory of her on the story of the woman who anointed Jesus. Jesus said “wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.” For Fiorenza, even though the name of this woman has been lost, this story shows that the role of women needs to be remembered if we are to truly proclaim the gospel. Women are not to be ignored but affirmed. In terms of the biblical texts we are challenged to recover the positive role of women in the New Testament churches. There is also the recovering of the positive role of women throughout church history which has been suppressed or ignored eg. Paula and Melania in the fourth century. We also need to positively affirm the role of women in the church today. This is especially important given that, for example, in the Baptist Union after ninety years of recognised Baptist women’s ministry only 11.6% of ministers are women.

25 Ibid., p.47
26 Ibid., p.54
27 Ibid., p.41
28 Thiselton, Hermeneutics: An Introduction, pp.287-288
29 Loades, ‘Feminist Interpretation’, p.90
30 Mark 14:9 (NRSV)
31 Fiorenza, In memory of her: A feminist theological reconstruction of Christian origins, p. xliii
32 See Thiselton, Hermeneutics: An Introduction, pp.282-283
33 Woodman, “A report to Baptist Union Council regarding women in leadership among the churches of the Baptist Union of Great Britain”, p.2
Fiorenza’s hermeneutics challenges the church to affirm the leadership of women and to break down barriers to women’s leadership in the church.

Fourthly, Fiorenza considers the problem of androcentric translation of bible from the original languages. She notes issues around differentiating between male-generic and gender specific language in greek.\(^{34}\) She also highlights the fact that every translation includes interpretation and this can lead to androcentric or patriarchal translations.\(^{35}\) Fiorenza’s approach therefore not only highlights the androcentric nature of interpretation, but also the androcentric nature of biblical translation and Christian language. The bias towards androcentric language in biblical translation has become recognised in the church today due to feminist hermeneutics, but the challenge still needs to continually be heard. More modern translations of the Bible such as the NRSV seek to use inclusive language in place of male-generic of the original languages.\(^{36}\) Use of inclusive language translations of the Bible in academic settings is now generally standard, however this usage has yet to fully filter down generally into the church. The use of inclusive language however does not end with translation. In liturgy and hymns it is important to affirm the presence of women in the congregation. This goes beyond simply swapping male-generic language for inclusive language, it also involves balancing references to gender and using language to challenge stereotypes.\(^{37}\) Fiorenza, arguing from a Catholic point of view, goes as far to suggest the creating of a liturgical cycle and feast days celebrating the foremothers of the faith.\(^{38}\) Evangelicals may not go this far but would want to affirm the use of inclusive language where appropriate and a more balanced use of gender language in the congregation.

The last issue from Fiorenza’s hermeneutics we examine is the idea of the Sophia-God. The Sophia-God is the picture of god as a goddess that Fiorenza claims is found specifically in the gospels and the Jewish wisdom literature.\(^{39}\) She uses the feminine gender of the word ‘wisdom’ (Sophia) in Luke 7:35 to argue for a goddess picture with Jesus being her child and prophet. The God of Israel is pictured using goddess language in early Christianity but is then lost through the patriarchalising of the traditions. Fiorenza wants to recover this goddess picture of god. However, Thiselton points out that an accident of the structure of the language that makes Sophia feminine is not a firm foundation for a religious idea.\(^{40}\) Phyllis Trible, whose theology we shall look at later, is on firmer foundations when she seeks to examine feminine metaphors for God which tend to go unnoticed in the biblical texts.\(^{41}\) Feminist hermeneutics, like Fiorenza’s, challenges the predominant use of male centred God-language and identifies the need to draw on some of the feminine pictures of God from the biblical texts, especially in worship.\(^{42}\) Whilst we would want to insist theologically that God is neither male nor female, it would be affirming to women if the church was more balanced in its use of male and female metaphors for God.

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\(^{34}\) Fiorenza, *In memory of her: A feminist theological reconstruction of Christian origins*, p.45

\(^{35}\) *Ibid.*, p.46

\(^{36}\) See Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, pp.52-54

\(^{37}\) Proctor-Smith, ‘Women and Worship’, p.476

\(^{38}\) Fiorenza, ‘The will to choose to or to reject: Continuing our critical work’, p.135

\(^{39}\) *Ibid.*, pp.130-140

\(^{40}\) Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction*, pp.292-293

\(^{41}\) Loads, ‘Feminist Interpretation’, p.84

\(^{42}\) Proctor-Smith, ‘Women and Worship’, p.476
Rosemary Radford Ruether

Ruether has similar insights to Fiorenza but takes a different approach to hermeneutics from Fiorenza. She outlines her hermeneutics in a paper called *Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation*. Like Fiorenza she notes the androcentric nature of both the Christian texts and the male interpreters of those texts.\(^{43}\) Also in common with Fiorenza she makes women’s experiences of alienation and being dominated a key to hermeneutics. In becoming aware of and criticising an androcentric culture women begin to affirm themselves.\(^{44}\) She says the “...critical principle of feminist theology is the affirmation and promotion of the full humanity of women.”\(^{45}\) This principle can be worked out negatively, that which diminishes the humanity of women is rejected as redemptive, or positively, that which promotes the humanity of women is seen as holy and an authentic message of redemption.\(^{46}\) Ruether sees egalitarianism as the true expression of Christianity and we can remove the androcentricity from its traditions.\(^{47}\) Ruether is clear that any liberation for women should not lead to the diminishing of the male.\(^{48}\)

Ruether’s approach to feminist biblical hermeneutics is based on the idea that just as there is a liberating principle in feminism, so there is a liberating principle in the biblical prophetic-messianic tradition.\(^{49}\) These two liberating principles are similar and should be correlated or connected together. Ruether is not referring to specific biblical texts but to the general principle of the prophetic-messianic tradition which involves the evaluating, criticising and transforming of distorted religious practice and belief. She says:

“This biblical principle of prophetic faith parallels the critical dynamic of Feminism, which likewise examines structures of injustice toward women, unmask and denounces their cultural and religious sanctifications, and points toward an alternative humanity, an alternative society, capable of affirming the personhood of women.”\(^{50}\)

Ruether admits the critique of Tolbert who argues this prophetic view cannot deny that the prophetic material of the Old Testament did not argue for women’s liberation and was deeply misogynistic.\(^{51}\) Ruether however rejects this critique by arguing that the prophetic tradition is not a set of closed texts which defines the limitations of what liberation looks like.

“Continuity with the prophetic tradition, then, is not simply restatement of past texts but the constant renewal of the meaning of the prophetic critique itself ... In this process of renewal, one must also examine the limitations of past statements of

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\(^{44}\) Ibid., p.114

\(^{45}\) Ibid., p.115

\(^{46}\) Ibid., p.115

\(^{47}\) Storkey, *Created or Constructed: The great gender debate*, p.100


\(^{49}\) Ibid., p.117

\(^{50}\) Ibid., p.118

\(^{51}\) Tolbert, *Defining the Problem*, p.123
prophetic consciousness, which have been limited by the social consciousness of the their spokespersons.”

Ruether therefore moves beyond seeing all biblical texts as authoritative. It is the general prophetic principle coupled with a feminist outlook that becomes authoritative. Positively, we would want to affirm that Ruether seeks to find her principle of liberation in the Bible and not only in the experience of women. However is Ruether’s principle of correlation really adequate and why should the experience of women become the key in this liberating principle? Ruether does contribute to the church the idea that there can be found principles within scripture which can contribute to the liberation of women. The resources are there if we seek them out. An example would be Galatians 3:28 which radically equalises the relationship between men and women in Christ in salvation.

Ruether’s hermeneutics is on firmer ground when she speaks about Christology. In a paper called The liberation of Christology from patriarchy Ruether argues that a reading of scripture that makes Christ’s maleness essential to his being leads to the view that women are less human than men. It also leads to a male clergy because women become unable to represent Christ, for example in the Catholic denomination. However an egalitarian reading of scripture leads to both male and female sharing the image of God and both being fully human. The maleness of Christ becomes not an essential part of his being which opens up the way for women to represent him in church leadership. Ruether shows clearly that doctrine can influence interpretation and interpretation can influence doctrine. A patriarchal interpretation can lead to patriarchal doctrine. She challenges the church not just to root out androcentric interpretation but also to root out oppressive doctrine that has been formulated on androcentric interpretation. The feminist approach to interpreting scripture therefore necessarily leads to us re-examining the formulation of doctrine and especially those doctrines which have been used to support a patriarchal reading of biblical texts.

Problematic in Ruether’s hermeneutics is that revelation becomes dynamic and not static and therefore is constantly being revised under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This leaves us with the question: What does this mean for the unique revelation of God which is found in Christ? The majority of the church would reject Ruether’s dynamic view of revelation because this contradicts the teaching of Christ and the foundations of Christianity become a moving morass on which there is no solid ground to stand. This is exemplified in Ruether’s later works which move away from an ‘orthodox’ Christianity. The church could not accept Ruether’s works as whole but needs to judiciously appropriate them in the service of the liberation of women.

52 Ruether, Feminist Hermeneutics: A method of correlation, p.118
53 Storkey, Created or Constructed: The great gender debate, p.100
54 Ruether, ‘The Liberation of Christology from Patriarchy’, p.140
55 Ibid., p.146
56 Ibid., p.147
57 Storkey, Created or Constructed: The great gender debate, p.101
58 Thiselton, Hermeneutics: An Introduction, p.295
Phyllis Trible

Trible takes a different direction in feminist hermeneutics compared to Fiorenza and Ruether. We mentioned above that Trible examines feminine metaphors for God. She also focuses on stories of women in the biblical narratives using rhetorical or literary criticism and seeks to find in them that which is useful to challenge the subordination of women.\(^{59}\) We shall focus on this aspect of Trible’s hermeneutic method here.

In her book *Texts of Terror* Trible retells, using literary theory, four stories from the Old Testament (Tamar, Hagar, the Levites concubine and the daughter of Jephthah) where women suffer as victims at the hands of men. Trible does not want us to theologise away the horror of these stories but to hear them in the hope that they may lead to repentance. Although she does not allow theologising, she does allow the use of scripture to interpret scripture through the evoking of associations with other biblical texts.\(^{60}\) Trible looks at the text through the eyes of feminism drawing out the misogyny and the critiques of patriarchy in the texts.\(^{61}\) She uses this to retell the stories of terror *in memoriam*, by which she means interpreting the “… stories of outrage on behalf of their female victims in order to recover a neglected history, to remember a past that the present embodies, and to pray that these terrors shall not come to pass again.”\(^{62}\) Telling these stories allows Trible to connect past misogynistic biblical stories with present misogynistic treatment of women in society. The church can draw from interpretations like Trible’s a call for justice for women not just in the church but in wider society. Due to the fact that the church accepted a patriarchal exegesis it has been slow at engaging in a call for justice for women in society. The so called texts of terror have been not been read in a way that criticises the actions of men in society and using literary theory Trible challenges this. The church at times has even helped perpetuate injustice in society, for example insisting women should stay in an abusive or violent relationship. Reading texts *in memoriam* helps highlight where the church has been complicit in furthering injustice for women in society and they challenge the church to take up the call for justice. Criticising Trible’s approach we could ask: Is it always possible to find something useful to challenge subordination in the texts of terror? Some are doubtful whether this is always possible.\(^{63}\)

In an article called *Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Reread*\(^{64}\) rather than focussing on texts of terror Trible uses literary theory to see if there are resources within creation stories which can help overcome patriarchal interpretations. An example being, Eve being created from Adam’s rib is read as symbolising woman’s solidarity and equality with man rather than her dependence on him.\(^{65}\) Trible’s use of literary theory challenges the assumption that we can objectively ground androcentricism ontologically in the text. It reminds us that we do not read the creation stories objectively but come to them with preconceived ideas. Basing

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\(^{59}\) Loads, ‘*Feminist Interpretation’*, p.83  
\(^{60}\) Trible, *Texts of Terror*, p.2  
\(^{61}\) Ibid., p.3  
\(^{62}\) Ibid., p.3  
\(^{63}\) Loads, ‘*Feminist Interpretation’*, p.83  
\(^{64}\) Trible, ‘*Even and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Reread’*, p.76  
\(^{65}\) For a summary of Trible’s arguments see also Clifford, A. M., *Introducing Feminist Theology*, pp.66-71
ontological statements about the nature of male of female on Genesis 2-3 needs to be done very carefully, if at all.

Trible can be commended for the fact that she engages with specific biblical texts at a deep level and it is this which enables her readings of scripture to be appropriated by the church to greater degree than Fiorenza or Ruther, even if there is disagreement with parts of her method. Trible helps the church to read biblical stories anew and exposes where patriarchy has been supported or ignored.

**Elaine Storkey**

Lastly we examine the work of Elaine Storkey. Her book *Created or Constructed: The great gender debate* lays out her own evangelical feminist hermeneutical strategy. She is committed to the belief that God is revealed in the scriptures and more uniquely in the person of Jesus Christ. She also affirms the authority of the biblical texts in defining the nature of humanity. Hermeneutically, for her “… the Bible contains its own hermeneutical tools; it holds the truth to its own meaning and interpretation.” Storkey’s grasp on the authority of scripture is in contrast to the other feminist writers. She contributes to the church the idea that it is possible to hold to the authority of scripture whilst espousing a positive view of women. Feminist hermeneutics challenges us to re-examine the nature of the doctrine of the authority of scripture. Some feminist theologians go down the road of rejecting the authority of scripture because of its androcentric nature. For example, Russell argues for an authority that is found in the consensus of a community and not in the text of scripture. However, this opens up the door for the community moving away from the Christ as witnessed to in the scriptures. A large proportion of the church would not want to endorse this move away from the authority of scripture. Alternatively, some locate the authority of the text in the words and therefore a patriarchal passage becomes normative. However, others take on board the critiques of feminist hermeneutics and argue for a nuanced doctrine of the authority of scripture. Scholer for example argues for a difference between the authority and normativeness of a text. A text can be normative in different ways at different times. Even though a text is authoritative we still have to discern its meaning. Scholer goes on to say:

“… I continue to believe it is theologically, philosophically and methodologically important and historically valid to affirm that the locus of authority is in the text, such a position is an abstraction that has no significance apart from the reality that the locus of meaning for all of us as actually experienced or practiced is found in individual interpreters, communities of faith, or ecclesiastical and theological traditions.”

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66 Storkey, *Created or Constructed: The great gender debate*, pp.112-113  
67 Ibid., p.113  
68 Russell, ‘Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation’, pp.143-146  
69 Scholer, “Feminist hermeneutics and Evangelical biblical interpretation”, pp.412-413  
70 eg. Romans 16:16  
71 Scholer, “Feminist hermeneutics and Evangelical biblical interpretation”, p.413
Scholer says that scriptural authority only becomes significant when a text is interpreted, apart from that it is an abstraction. The individual words of a text should not be seen as authoritative on their own, but only in the context of interpretation. This means that a patriarchal text may not necessarily be normative in a patriarchal way. Storkey calls the church to hold the authority of scripture in a nuanced way that it does not necessarily tie itself to patriarchalism.

Storkey also sees sexual differences as part of the “rich complementarity which God has breathed into creation.” She acknowledges a difference between sex and gender, but does not want to see gender as a totally cultural phenomenon. For her, gender has to be shaped in response to God and so this leads us to address issues of injustice, violence, stereotypes etc. Storkey asks the question of what the Bible says about the relationship between male and female. Here she says the Bible does not give one answer but four. Firstly, there is the idea that men and women are different. Secondly, there is the idea of similarity demonstrated in their equality (Galatians 3:28). Thirdly, there is the idea of complementarity. Fourthly, there is the idea of a union or unity of male and female in God. Storkey says that all of these dimensions of the female-male relationship need to be held together if we are not to distort the biblical message:

“…when we work with all four, then we see the sweep of the biblical revelation and the space and scope it gives to us to develop relationships faithfully and creatively.”

For Storkey this avoids the problem of hierarchy and the subordination of women. The gospel is then that which makes all things anew and brings the liberation of women. Storkey contributes to the church an acknowledgement that biblically the relationship between male and female is complex and cannot be reduced to one aspect.

However, whilst presenting a positive view of male and female relationships in a biblical framework and seeking to hold to the authority of scripture there are limitations to Storkey’s work. Does she really deal with the problem of patriarchalism, androcentricism and the oppression of women in the biblical texts? She makes no attempt to apply her proposals in depth to specific texts, such as the texts of terror, and therefore it is not clear if her method handles the problem of patriarchy in the texts effectively.

Conclusion

We acknowledge the androcentric bias in Christianity, but we also acknowledge that this need not necessarily be the case and judicious use of feminist interpretations may help us in overcoming this bias. From the writings of Fiorenza, Ruether, Trible and Storkey we have seen that feminist interpretations can contribute to the following to the whole church:

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72 Storkey, Created or Constructed: The great gender debate, p.113
73 Ibid., p.114
74 Ibid., pp.115-117
75 Ibid., p.117
76 Ibid., p.119
77 eg. see Galatians 3:28
1. A challenge to androcentric biblical interpretation
2. The challenge to re-evaluate the role of women in the church
3. A call for the use of inclusive language in biblical translation and worship
4. The critique of doctrines which are used to support patriarchalism eg. Christology and the authority of scripture
5. A call for justice for women in wider society

We have affirmed the use of feminist hermeneutics whilst also acknowledging in this essay various problems of feminist hermeneutics. Especially problematic is any move away from scriptural authority as it allows theology to move beyond what may be considered the essentials of orthodox Christianity. Feminist hermeneutics needs to be appropriated critically so that this does not happen.

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Bibliography


Storkey, E., *Created or constructed?: the great gender debate*, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000)


