

## *Jenny Dagers*

### **The Emergence of Feminist Theology from Christian Feminism in Britain\***

#### **Christian Women's Information and Resources (CWIRES) in Context**

The CWIRES project came into being in 1978, which was a significant year in the development of Christian feminism in Britain. By 1978 a broad constituency of concern with the position of women in the churches had emerged from a number of sites of activity. First, the nineteenth century women's movement, often referred to as the "first-wave" of feminism, had made an impact upon the Christian churches in Britain,<sup>1</sup> giving rise by the end of the century to a discernible "Church feminism".<sup>2</sup> The issue of women's ordination, which first surfaced in Britain early in the twentieth century, was always located within this wider concern with "the service and status of women in the churches".<sup>3</sup> Currents set in motion in the first two decades of this century moved slowly forward during the inter-war years, to be enlivened by new activity which came into being in the post World War II world.

Second, during the 1960s and 1970s, the "second-wave" women's movement came into being, amid the enormous cultural shift in the Western world begun in the 1960s. As had occurred with "first-wave" feminism, the broad

\* This article is written from the perspective afforded by my doctoral research into the origins and development of feminist theology in Britain between 1960 and 1990, as documented in the Christian Women's Information and Resources archive. References to sources held within the CWIRES archive include the CWIRES reference, in the form [CW Ann].

<sup>1</sup> See: Sheila Fletcher, *Maude Royder: A Life*, Oxford 1989; Sean Gill, *Women in the church of England from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, London 1994; Brian Heeney, *The Women's Movement in the church of England, 1850-1930*, Oxford; Jonathan David Francis Inkpin, "Combating the 'Sin of Self-Sacrifice'?: Christian Feminism in the Women's Suffrage Struggle, 1903-1918," Unpublished PhD thesis University of Durham.

<sup>2</sup> The term is Heeney's, coined in his study of the Church of England, but in my view it is applicable also to events in the Catholic and Free churches, as documented by Inkpin.

<sup>3</sup> The term is used in the 1952 World Council of Churches publication, Kathleen Bliss, *The Service and Status of Women in the Churches*, London 1952.

social effects of the women's movement raised the aspirations of women in the churches. Three sites of church activity – post-Vatican II Catholic renewal, the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Anglican debate concerning the ordination of women – saw the development of concern with women in the churches during this period. Finally, radical Christian pursuit of social justice, by groups such as the Alliance of Radical Methodists and the Catholic justice and peace organisation, Pax Christi, provided further contexts where women's issues were raised.

The broad constituency gained its identity through informal networking between groups. Organisations formed early in this century, notably the Catholic St Joan's International Alliance, the Anglican Group for the Ordination of Women and the ecumenical Society for the Ministry of Women in the Church, continued their activities. New groups formed during the 1970s. The Women's Project of the European Student Christian Movement was active in Britain, through the work of Mary Condren, Jo Garcia, Trish Marsh, and Caroline Smith. Catholic women's activity occurred in Oxford, in Ianthe Pratt's Christian Women's Resource Centre in Dulwich, London and in the Roman Catholic Feminists, initiated by Jackie Field. Christian feminist groups formed during the latter 1970s in London and Oxford, where Garcia initiated a Christian feminist group alongside already-existing Catholic activity. Finally, the Christian Parity Group was founded by Una Kroll, in 1972.

Links were forged between members of these old and new groups, some of whom were simultaneously involved in radical Christian groups such as the Alliance of Radical Methodists and Pax Christi. During 1978, Christian feminists in London and Oxford sought to strengthen existing links between women involved in these various sites of activity. The CWIRES project, based in Oxford, was set up for this purpose. The recently launched *Christian Feminist Newsletter*, founded and edited by Sheila Robinson of the London Christian Feminists, was a linked venture.

The CWIRES project and the *Christian Feminist Newsletter* set out to strengthen, facilitate and extend informal contact by sharing information and resources throughout the network. The CWIRES worker, Mary Pepper, wrote to American feminist theologians requesting donations of books and the project invited deposit of newsletters, books and papers from interested groups, so accumulating resources for the use of its membership, including via postal loan. By the close of the project in 1992, a significant archive had been collected.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Now housed in the John Rylands University Library, Deansgate, Manchester, UK.

1978 marked a high point of optimism among those wishing to see the Anglican ordination of women. Prior to the 1978 Church of England Synod debate on the matter, Canon Sister Mary Michael Simpson, who was ordained within the American Episcopal Church, made a visit to Britain. Invited by Una Kroll, her visit occasioned co-operation between component groups of the broad constituency in the organisation of her tour. The subsequent Synod refusal of women's ordination led directly to the founding of the Movement for the Ordination of Women. CWIRES, the *Christian Feminist Newsletter* and the Movement for the Ordination of Women may be seen as linked crystallisations of the broad constituency, which together sought to further its concerns.

### **CWIRES and “Second-wave” Christian feminism**

CWIRES and the *Christian Feminist Newsletter* stimulated the formation of new Christian feminist groups, so that in the early CWIRES years, an ecumenical Christian feminist network came into being extending across Britain. Archive accounts – particularly newsletters – describe the raising of a distinctive “second-wave” Christian feminist consciousness within the constituent groups of the network. This consciousness was marked by an engagement with women's sexuality. Lesbian voices made a significant contribution to the rise of this new consciousness. This contribution was made both through specifically lesbian groups – such as the Catholic Lesbian Sisterhood and the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement – and through lesbian facilitation of reflection on lesbian and heterosexual experience, in groups spread across the wider network.

Christian feminist consciousness was continuous with feminist consciousness within the women's groups of the wider women's movement. It was also discontinuous with wider feminism in its attention to Christian theology and practice, which was expressed in reformist activism within the churches. This attention was shared with other components of the broad constituency arising within post-Vatican II renewal, the WCC, the Anglican ordination debate and radical Christianity. Christian feminism as evident through CWIRES also continued the earlier concerns of “first-wave” church feminism, under the changed conditions of the late 1970s and 1980s.

In the early CWIRES period, Catholic feminist activism was engaged with the Laity Commission and the National Pastoral Congress. Contemporaneously, Christian feminists within member churches of the WCC were involved in the “dialogue between the churches and the women's movement,”

which arose from the WCC study, the Community of Women and Men in the Church. Janet Morley played a key role in facilitating this dialogue.

Apart from the Oxford and London groups and new groups linked through the *Christian Feminist Newsletter*, a Quaker Women's Group and a Unitarian Women's Group came into being during the early CWIRES period, each linking memberships across the country.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Judith Jenner founded the fixed term Feminist Theology Project, which drew participants from across the Christian feminist network.<sup>6</sup> By 1983, a second phase of Christian feminist activity is discernible, in the respective launch of Women in Theology and the Catholic Women's Network.

Women In Theology (WIT) originated as a Christian feminist offshoot of the Movement for the Ordination of Women, with the founding aim of creating women's theological education appropriate for the training of Anglican priests and laity. From its inception its membership was ecumenical, being linked as a network through a mailing and participation in WIT-organised events. A related initiative was the Hartlebury weekends, which gathered a group of women at the home of Deaconess Diana McClatchey to explore issues of women's sexuality and spirituality. Later the St Hilda Community was set up to encourage experiment in liturgy and allow the experience of the ministry of women. The Catholic Women's Network was formed from those linked informally within the broad constituency who were concerned with the position of women within the Roman Catholic Church. From their inception, the two groups worked co-operatively and employed the methods of Christian feminist networking and consciousness-raising already developed in the early CWIRES period.

Both Women in Theology and the Catholic Women's Network sought to create within themselves models of a renewed church, and to continue more effectively earlier engagement in reformist activism within the Anglican and Catholic churches respectively. Both groups were involved in linked projects of liturgical practice and theological education. In liturgy, feminist theology emerging from "second-wave" Christian feminism was given expression. The practice of liturgy in these Christian feminist groups also itself

<sup>5</sup> *The Quaker Women's Group Newsletter* and the *Unitarian Women's Group Newsletter* were each exchanged with CWIRES, and group activities also featured in the *Christian Feminist Newsletter*.

<sup>6</sup> The Feminist Theology Project produced *Our Stories* as a record documenting the project, which aimed to encourage further similar projects (Feminist Theology Project. n.d. [CW B40]).

gave rise to feminist theology. Further, liturgy was a meeting point of activism with theology.

### **The Emergence of Feminist Theology in Britain prior to 1990**

The first reference to the term “feminist theology” occurs in the 1976 Student Christian Movement pamphlet, *For the Banished Children of Eve: An Introduction to Feminist Theology*.<sup>7</sup> Condren introduces feminist theology as a means of contesting women’s exclusion from the altar, from humankind and from rational thought.<sup>8</sup> This exclusion is figured in Eve. Condren’s title expresses a recurrent motif within British feminist theology, wherein Eve appears as a symbol of the contest between the patriarchal exclusion of women in church and theology, and the feminist rehabilitation of Eve. Whereas patriarchal exclusion is justified theologically by the legacy of Eve, her feminist rehabilitation presents Eve as a positive figure of (contemporary) women’s autonomous sexuality and knowledge.

Condren invited Joan Morris of the Saint Joans’s International Alliance and Una Kroll of the Christian Parity Group, together with three American authors, to contribute further articles to the pamphlet. She thus encouraged members of the broad constituency to conceive of their writings as “feminist theology”.

In 1978, the year in which CWIRES was formed, two special issues of radical Christian publications gave space to feminist perspectives on women in the churches and theology. In “Churchwomanship in a Man’s World”, alongside articles by Condren, Kroll and Marina Warner,<sup>9</sup> Diana Collins – a future founder member of the Movement for the Ordination of Women – writes a piece entitled “The Rehabilitation of Eve”.<sup>10</sup> She argues such rehabilitation is necessary if women are to take a full role in the life of the contemporary Church. The second pamphlet, “Sisters of Susannah”, includes an article by Ruth Windle, the first woman to be ordained within the Methodist Church, which advances a similar argument.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Mary Condren, ed. *For the Banished Children of Eve: An Introduction to Feminist Theology*, Movement Pamphlet 24, Bristol 1976 [CW B15].

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-2.

<sup>9</sup> Author of the mariological study, *Alone of All Her Sex*, London 1985.

<sup>10</sup> Diana Collins, “The Rehabilitation of Eve”, in Freda Champion and Una Kroll, eds, “Churchwomanship in a Man’s World”, Supplement, *Christian Action Journal*, Spring 1978, 4-5.

<sup>11</sup> Ruth Windle, “The feminine in the Pattern of Redemption”, in Jan Pickard and Ruth Windle, eds, “Sisters to Susannah,” Special Issue, *ARM Reporter* 11 (Summer 1978), 9.

The early years of the CWIRES period were largely concerned with building the Christian feminist network, rather than with the construction of feminist theology. The various newsletters, with their accounts of meetings and activities provide the principle written record. However, in "Sisters to Susannah", Jenner gives an introduction to feminist theology based on her reading of the (American) Grailville papers.<sup>12</sup> When Jenner later founded The Feminist Theology Project, it was based on the Grailville model of feminist theology expounded in her article. The Feminist Theology Project publication, *Our Stories*,<sup>13</sup> documents this British experiment in "doing theology" from women's experience. However, it gives expression to an imported model of feminist theology which did not predominate within the British cultural context. British Christian feminism with its strong association with reformist activism, gave rise to feminist theology which was addressed to the churches.

Three books of relevance to feminist theology were published during the early years of CWIRES. Susan Dowell and Linda Hurcombe's *Dispossessed Daughters of Eve*,<sup>14</sup> the first book in feminist theology published in Britain, was conceived within the Anglican ordination debate. Their title amplifies the theme already identified in Condren and Collins. (Later in the 1980s, further texts were published in relation to the Anglican ordination debate, notably collections edited by Furlong, *Feminine in the Church* and *Mirror to the Church*,<sup>15</sup> and by Peberdy, *Women Priest?*<sup>16</sup>)

Sarah Maitland's *Map of the New Country*<sup>17</sup> originated within the pre-CWIREs broad constituency, and is based on her study of American Christian feminism, supplemented by contact with the British Christian feminist network of the late 1970s. Garcia and Maitland's *Walking on the Water*<sup>18</sup> is made up of contributions by a number of women involved in the British women's movement, with only a minority of writings from women

<sup>12</sup> Jenner, "An Introduction to Feminist Theology", in Pickard and Windle, eds, "Sisters to Susannah," 8.

<sup>13</sup> Feminist Theology Project, *Our Stories*, n.d. [CW B40].

<sup>14</sup> Susan Dowell and Linda Hurcombe, *Dispossessed Daughters of Eve: Faith and Feminism*, London 21987.

<sup>15</sup> Monica Furlong, ed., *Feminine in the Church*, London 1984; also, ed., *Mirror to the Church*, London 1988.

<sup>16</sup> Alyson Peberdy, ed., *Women Priest? Is the Ordination of Women Contrary to Christian Faith?*, Basingstoke 1988.

<sup>17</sup> Sara Maitland, *Map of the New Country: Women and Christianity*, London 1983.

<sup>18</sup> Jo Garcia and Sara Maitland, eds., *Walking on the Water: Women Talk About Spirituality*, London 1983.

involved in the evolving Christian feminist network. In my view, these three books better express concerns of the pre-CWIRES broad constituency than those of the developing Christian feminist network of the early CWIRES period.

However, during the years before the formation of Women In Theology and Catholic Women's Network, members of the Oxford Christian feminist groups were generating feminist theology in the form of papers to the various constituent groups, articles for publication and sermons given at the monthly women's mass. The most prolific author was Angela West, whose pre-1990 publications include "Genesis and Patriarchy"<sup>19</sup> and "Sex and Salvation".<sup>20</sup> Morley too wrote a number of papers and gave a number of talks in connection with the WCC dialogue. Both West and Morley continued to write as the Christian feminist network later developed in the form of Women In Theology and Catholic Women's Network.

Morley made a major contribution in writing liturgical material and writing about liturgical language, publishing *All Desires Known*,<sup>21</sup> and contributing material to other collections such as *Celebrating Women*<sup>22</sup> and *Women Included*.<sup>23</sup> The Christian feminist exploration of women's sexuality is reflected in its associated feminist theology in articles published in the context of the ordination debate, in Morley's work, in the theological education pioneered by Women In Theology and Catholic Women's Network and also in Hurcombe's *Sex and God*.<sup>24</sup>

Feminist theology articulated in theological education events organised by Women In Theology and Catholic Women's Network, was made available to a wider public in the latter 1980s through extra-mural study courses throughout the country. The Wisdom of Christian Feminism, held at Heythrop College in London, provides a good example. The origins of feminist theology within Christian feminism is epitomised in early papers from the Heythrop

<sup>19</sup> Angela West, "Genesis and Patriarchy": Part I: "What has feminist discourse got in common with the language of biblical theology?" in *New Blackfriars* (Jan 1981), 17-32; Part II: "Women and the End of Time," in *New Blackfriars* (Oct 1981), 420-32.

<sup>20</sup> Angela West, "Sex and Salvation: a Christian Feminist Bible Study in I Corinthians 6:12-7:39," unpublished manuscript 1984 [CW D28]. Later published in *MC*, 29/3 (1987), 17-24, and reprinted in Ann Loades, ed., *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, London 1990: 72-80.

<sup>21</sup> Janet Morley, *All Desires Known*, London 1988.

<sup>22</sup> Janet Morley and Hannah Ward, eds, *Celebrating Women*, London 1986.

<sup>23</sup> St Hilda Community, *Women Included: A Book of Services and Prayers*, London 1991.

<sup>24</sup> Linda Hurcombe, ed., *Sex and God: Some Varieties of Women's Religious Experience*, London 1987.

study days being published under the title *The Wisdom of Christian Feminism*,<sup>25</sup> whereas later lectures appeared as articles in the journal, *Feminist Theology*.<sup>26</sup>

The origins of the post-1990 British and Irish School of Feminist Theology and of the journal, *Feminist Theology*, are clearly visible in the educational work of Women In Theology and Catholic Women's Network, and in the initiatives taken by Dorothea McEwan within Catholic Women's Network. McEwan's collection, *Women Experiencing Church*,<sup>27</sup> gathers critical testimonies of women's experience within the Catholic church, which provide the raw material of her own feminist theological critique and vision.

### Conclusion

My principal concern is with the nature and further development of feminist theology, both during the already elapsed time of the 1990s and during the coming millenium. The legacy of the CWIRES project in the remaining CWIRES archive captures a particular historical moment, when Christian feminism developed as a (largely unacknowledged) component of the "second-wave" women's movement. The feminist theology emergent from that movement uses then contemporary "second-wave" feminist theory as a critical tool in the forging of new Christian theology and practice. This feminist theology was expressive of a reformist activism directed towards the churches.

As that historical moment passes, my view is that feminist theology is best conceived of as a form of feminist theory, which needs to employ the new tools of now contemporary feminist theory in its engagement with postmodernism. Such a feminist theology will move forward under the changed conditions of the new millenium.

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<sup>25</sup> Kathleen Fedouloff, ed., *The Wisdom of Christian Feminism: Papers on Wisdom and Human Sexuality*, London 1988; ed. *The Wisdom of Christian Feminism: Papers on Violence and Peace and Women We Learn From*, London 1989.

<sup>26</sup> See for example, Susanne Fageol, "Women in the Church: Claiming our Authority," in *FT* 1 (Sep 1992), 10-26; Ronwyn Goodsir Thomas, "Authority in the Church: Fraudulen Fabrication-Larceny from the Laity," in *FT* 1, 27-57; Pat Pinsent, "Christian Feminism in the Seventeenth Century," in *FT* 1, 58-73; Judith Rose, "Stereotype and Shadow in the Work of Christina Rossetti and Gwen John" in *FT* 1, 97-106.

<sup>27</sup> Dorothea McEwan, *Women Experiencing Church: a document of alienation*, Leominster 1991.