

Daphne Hampson

Exodus or Not?*

I remember as though it were yesterday standing in the kitchen of Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, when my friend Diane burst in to tell me the news. It must have been November 1971. She had been at the morning service at Memorial Church in Harvard Yard and one Mary Daly - of whom I had never heard - had delivered a sermon inviting women to exodus from the church - and women and men had poured out into Harvard Yard. History had been made; and I had been absent! Diane became a priest. Mary Daly left the church. I myself could not at that time have conceived of leaving the church and Christianity behind me. For twenty years I wanted to be ordained. But I have left.

So we are considering the fact that it is twenty years since Mary Daly's epoch-making book "Beyond God the Father" was published. It always strikes me as astonishing that the first major book in feminist theology has remained the most radical and the most imaginative. I still dialogue with it and my students are still enthralled by it. It remains as pertinent as ever. What I want to do today is to consider the theme of 'exodus'. Why leave the church? And why remain in the academy?

'Exodus' can have different meanings. Mary Daly that day left the church, as have I and others. Exodus can mean literally leaving, going out into a new existence. Over the years since the rise of feminism innumerable women have walked out on marriages in which they were being abused, jobs in which they were discriminated against, or the church in which they were unable to be ordained. 'External' exodus - as we may call it - is sometimes necessary. But there is another kind of exodus which is more subtle. Let us call it 'internal exodus'. Daly indeed hints at it when she speaks of being present, yet absent,

* This text is based on a talk given in a series in the Spring of 1994 at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands, to mark twenty years since the publication of Mary Daly's "Beyond God the Father".

at a male committee meeting, thinking one's own thoughts while physically present. Why should one - as I believe - leave the church (an 'external' exodus); yet remain within the academy, performing, when necessary, an 'internal' exodus?

One should leave the church because Christianity is necessarily sexist. It is below one's dignity to belong to a religion, or the institution which proclaims that religion, which discriminates against one. Why do I say that Christianity is, necessarily, sexist; that it cannot be reformed? That is a question which I have addressed at length in my book "Theology and Feminism" (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) which some of you will know. The heart of the matter is this. Christianity is what I have there called a 'historical' religion. By 'historical' I mean that Christianity is not simply an idea which has arisen in history (all ideas arise within history and bear the marks of the time of their origin) but that Christians believe that God was uniquely present in a certain tradition in a certain age in a certain person, Jesus of Nazareth. Christians are those - this is a good definition - who hold Jesus to have been unique, to have been the Christ, however differently in different ages they may have chosen to express that uniqueness. To say that someone who thinks Jesus to have been a good human being with a fine moral teaching (and that is the end of it) is a 'Christian' is considerable nonsense; one could be an atheist, or Gandhi, and think that. Christians have always proclaimed not simply Jesus' message, but a message, a kerygma, about Jesus. They have not always, of course, held to Chalcedonian orthodoxy. Jesus' uniqueness has, as I have said, been understood in different ways in different ages. The earliest Christians proclaimed their belief in the catchword ICHTHUS, an acronym in Greek for the words 'Jesus Christ God's Son Saviour'. They held this of none other.

But here in this proclamation of uniqueness lies the problem for feminists. For Christians cannot but look back to this particular human being, since they believe that in him was a unique revelation of God. They must then read the (patriarchal) scriptures which tell of the history of this man and of the nation to which he belonged. They cannot just forget this period in human history, nor relate to it as one might to all other past historical epochs. Though Christians may live in the present and consider present problems, they must at some point in their discourse, if they are to be Christians, make reference to one particular past, and make reference to that past as in some way normative, as the point at which there was a revelation of God. The images and the symbols, the stories and the history of that past period will then be transposed into the present. They will be heard, in church or synagogue, as

'Scripture'. That will have its effect. It will be absorbed by the hearers, consciously or subconsciously, that women have a certain position in society and in religion and that that position is secondary to that of men. The 'concretion' of religion, as I have called it in "Theology and Feminism", is powerful.

Nor does it help to look to the stories of women in that past episode of human history. For - as feminist biblical scholars have made abundantly clear over the past decades - the position of women in that society is inferior to that of men. Why should one want to associate with those women? If what one strives for is the equality of human beings - feminism - then what we must do, men and women alike, is to move on from the past. Of course it will be useful to undertake historical scholarship; to show that women had an influence in the past, or that they were profoundly discriminated against. We cannot be free of our past. But Christians do not simply relate to the past as one might in another other discipline, drawing on the past where it is useful and leaving behind the norms of a society which have become irrelevant. Christians belong to a historical religion, a religion in which a certain past must necessarily figure. To read such literature as scripture will, at a subconscious level at least, as I have said, draw the past into the present so that it continues to have its effect. I would find it simply offensive to hear stories in which women were in inferior positions proclaimed within a religious context. Such a context is not one in which I could find God.

Moreover as a person living in an age after the Enlightenment I cannot possibly credit that God (whatever God may be) could be differently related to one age or to one people than God is related to all human beings in all ages. God is not a kind of anthropomorphic agent who intervenes in human history. I understand that in the past people could have thought that it was possible that someone could have stood in a different relation to God 'the Father' than do all other human beings. But I cannot credit that this could be the case. Thus I am not a Christian quite apart from anything to do with feminist issues. To call Jesus 'the Christ' must be a declaration of faith, and such faith is incompatible with all that we now know about the world. I find no reason to take such a step. Moreover I should have a theodicy problem were it to be the case that God had related to this person differently than to all other humans. Given what such a supposed 'revelation' has done to western history, distorting it so that men have ruled over women, I could not call such a God good. As a human being who wishes to live in the modern world, her religion compatible with all else that she believes, I must deny

that Christianity can possibly be true. As one to whom an ethics of equality is fundamental, I must deny that the God of Christianity, as that God has been understood, could be called good.

It is inevitable then that I should exit from the church and from Christianity. Why? Because nothing else is intellectually honest or morally possible. If one wishes to be a religious person, not least - as I do - one must have a certain integrity. I do not admire women who try to twist Christianity to mean anything that they would have it be. Christianity must mean something. What Christians have always stood for in human history is the claim that there was a unique revelation in Jesus as the Christ. What I believe we should do in the West is to separate the question as to what it means to be a religious human being from the particular myth, Christianity, which has carried human religious consciousness in our society. For it is indeed the case, one may think - unless one is an atheist, and I am not - that Christianity has been that vehicle through which people have gained a sense as to what it is that God may be. Christianity has shaped the sense which people have had of God. The two are intricately interwoven. Yet it must be possible to say that one does believe in God (one is a theist), while considering the particular myth which has carried the sense of God in the West to belong to another age and to be mistaken. Thus what concerns me as a theologian is to think out how one should speak of God in a world in which the Christian myth can no longer serve; a theme I pursue in my forthcoming, "After Christianity".

To exit from the church is not without its effect. People notice. Once it is the case that there are women (or men, but they are mostly women) who are saying that no I am not a Christian, Christianity is a patriarchal religion, but yes indeed I count myself a religious and a spiritual person, standing within the Western tradition, that raises questions about Christianity. That religion comes to look partial. Christians have ever proclaimed that in Christ there is no East nor West; in him there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is no more male and female. Once one has said that this is not the case, that to be 'in Christ' is different for a man than for a woman, in that the second person of the trinity is wedded in one persona to the human Jesus of Nazareth who was a male in a particular society, one undermines Christology. It is no more the same thing if it is seen to be non-inclusive. Women are raising the profoundest challenge to Christology and to Christianity which has ever been raised. That challenge will not go away. Christianity is now not simply embattled, in making its claim to uniqueness, by our consciousness in this day and age of other world religions, but by women in the heart of Christianity, indeed

who are theologians by profession, proclaiming themselves not to be Christians.

Why then remain in the academy? Because there is no reason to leave. The university is not, by definition, biased against women. It proclaims itself to be neutral. One has every right there to pronounce what one may think, whatever that may be. It would be extraordinarily foolish of women not to take the opportunity to do this. I realise that I am perhaps in an unusual position here. For I belong to the Divinity Faculty of an ancient university, St. Andrews, founded in the early fifteenth century, the oldest university in Britain after Oxford and Cambridge and the first Scottish university. The faculty to which I belong has taught theology, exclusively, in the same buildings, since its re-foundation in the mid sixteenth century. No one, I imagine, envisaged that one who is not a Christian would come to teach theology there. St. Andrews is however, as are all universities in Britain, a state university, not tied to the church. I am paid out of tax-payers money - and tax-payers are women as well as men (and atheists as well as Christians). Through my term as president of the European Society of Women in Theological Research, I realise how unusual is this situation. In many European countries theology faculties are tied to the church, Protestant or Catholic; and one has to see a bishop, or otherwise be licensed by the church, before one may teach. It is an invidious position for women to be in. But that is not here the case.

Given that the university proclaims itself to be neutral, one must exercise one's responsibility to say what one will: to follow truth wherever truth may lead. It is not always comfortable. For although the university in theory allows anything to be thought, it may be a very male institution. I well remember, when I was a young woman recently appointed, sitting down to a dinner with about fifty theologians which was correctly addressed by the speaker that evening 'Dear Madam and Sirs'! Recently I was sent a survey - by a man, interestingly - undertaking research on the rise of feminist theology within the academy. 'Since when has theology been taught in your institution?' 'The mid sixteenth century' I replied. 'When was the first woman appointed?' I thought back to the date of my own appointment. '1977'. That said it in a nutshell! Nor does this situation only pertain in Britain. When, in 1971, I heard of the Harvard Exodus, I was myself the only woman studying in the advanced programme in theology at Harvard Divinity School (though there had been others) and there was no woman member of staff on the faculty at Harvard. No wonder, in retrospect, I found

it so difficult to express myself in seminars (and then felt discouraged as a result). It is a difficult journey that we, the first generation of women to gain a theological education, have trodden.

Here we may well speak of 'internal' exodus. Let me describe the institution in which I work. [In the lecture which I gave in Groningen I showed slides. St. Mary's College is in part a sixteenth century building. It is, almost uniquely in Britain, French renaissance, having been designed by those who came to Scotland to build Falkland Palace for Mary Queen of Scots during the Scottish-French alliance. On its tower it sports a fleur-de-lys. I showed a slide, the building in the background, with all the college assembled in their gowns, the staff including myself, seated in the front row, the students standing on a raised stand behind them. I also showed a picture of the annual boules match, an ancient tradition which has been inaugurated in recent years, since it is supposed that Mary Queen of Scots, who is supposed to have planted a tree which still survives in the quadrangle, would, through her French connection, have played boules! This amused the audience very much: it was such a happy scene of people, students and staff, again all dressed in their gowns, enjoying themselves. A third picture showed the entrance to the College with coat of arms and above it the words 'In principio erat verbum'.]

Internal exodus is a situation of extraordinary complexity. One is an outsider, and yet an insider; an outside insider. If I did not love my College, if I did not know myself to be part of this community in which I shall have spent the greater part of my working life, it would not be so complex. Were the situation simply awful, I should have had to leave many years ago. If I have found myself up against it as I stood for different values, if I have been shouted at (as I have been) and excluded, if I have at times retreated to my office to cry; this has also been the place where I have drunk innumerable cups of hot chocolate in the common room, where I have danced on Burns night, and posed for the annual college photograph. Above all it has been the students who have kept me here. What greater privilege could there be than to teach eager young minds, opening up for them something of the Western tradition and watching people learn and grow and come to express themselves articulately. There is a richness present in the classroom which revives me whenever I am low.

So internal exodus. It is that moment when one knows oneself apart; when one cannot evade the fact that one stands for different values. I will illustrate it graphically. Not long ago I was sitting in the senior common room alone, munching my sandwich, fuming at the fact that the secretary had said that we

should need to get the 'permission' of 'the principal' whom she had referred to as such, in hierarchical language, about some trivial matter. I could stand no longer the photograph of the past principal of the college, in gown, bowing in deference to the Pope, likewise in costume, during his visit to Scotland. I put it in a drawer. Returning to my seat and gazing out of the window, my eye fell on a small niche which is true François I, and which would have had a statue in it when it was built. I considered François I going to the Field of the Cloth of Gold to meet Henry VIII, and wondered when that was (1520?). Then I thought, remembering that occasion, 'more men parading around in silly costumes: Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose'. I was grinning, seated as I was on my own having lunch! It is in that moment of release that, with a sense of humour, it is possible to continue. I had taken the distance that I needed to. I had analysed the world from a feminist perspective; that which, through explaining circumstances to one, alone allows one to continue.

Simone de Beauvoir comments in "The Second Sex" that what distinguishes sexism from other forms of discrimination is that women are bound to men in the closest of bonds. They are also, she comments, often divided from one another. It is this which means that one is constantly involved in a process of negotiation with oneself. Sometimes one is just part of the company; then suddenly one looks at what transpires askance, knowing oneself to have a another judgement, a divergent ethic. As I sit in the College Hall, the fathers in their portraits on the walls looking down on me from out of their golden frames, I cannot but know that I am different. They, too, are various, from the sixteenth century to the twentieth. One, from the early nineteenth century, seems to have a bemused look on his face, for which I have often been grateful as I sat, the only woman, at Faculty Council. How should one know when to accede to what is happening, which one may think misjudged, unimaginative, or indeed discriminatory; when on the other hand must one speak up and perhaps stand alone - something which at a younger age it took all my courage to do? I have noticed over the years that it has been I who have stuck up for other women; the librarian who was about to have a wall built which would block her only window, the cleaner who is forced to clean the male lavatory. I look at the world differently, I have other connections - the world of women. 'God give me serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference' as that Chinese student's prayer runs. The complexity arises from the fact that I also feel myself a part of these people; I laugh with them.

What of the theology which one teaches in such an institution? I am employed as a 'systematic theologian' (the term used in the advertisement to which I responded and got the job). I should not have applied for a post in 'Christian dogmatics'. Of course one could perhaps, in a university, legitimately teach Christian dogmatics holding oneself any position. But I want to be quite clear that one should be able to speak about God, systematically, from any perspective, not simply that of Christian dogmatics. There is nothing to say that one should be Christian. I speak about God, when I speak for myself, from within the Western tradition; the tradition in which I was trained and to which I belong. Thus one has the same dialectical relation to the western theological tradition as that which I have described in relation to the institution in which one teaches. I am part of it, yet not part of it. At times I recognise in the texts of the theological heritage that other human beings loved God, as I too love God. At other times I must look at their conceptualisation of God, through the tenets of the Christian tradition, askance. Again, when one speaks of 'love of God', I must acknowledge that the power by which a person (say Jesus of Nazareth) healed so many years ago is the same power by which today I believe that people are healed from illness, whether mental or physical. On the other hand, I must acknowledge that the way in which Jesus conceptualised God, good monotheistic Jew that he was, to whom it would never have occurred that there was anything problematic about calling God 'Father', is very different from how I think that it is legitimate to speak of God. Feminists are part of the Western tradition, yet also not part of it; the excluded other. It is this to which so much of the most worthwhile feminist scholarship (think of the work of Luce Irigaray) has pointed in recent years. We must wend our way; it is indeed a dance through a minefield.

Sometimes my office has become a hotbed of revolution. Situated in the midst of that venerable institution, the door shut behind us, women have given expression to their hopes for the future and to their vision, to their frustration with their patriarchal surroundings and to their despair at male thought forms. That we are situated in such a setting gives an edge to our deliberations. If it were just plain sailing, were there feminism all around us, there would be nothing to come up against, nothing in relation to which we should define ourselves. One has to know the face of patriarchy if one is to speak to it. The contexts feminists dream up, the theology which we proclaim, would after all change our world so radically that - so one sometimes thinks - not one stone of the Western intellectual tradition would be left upon another. Monotheism, and Christianity, are not marginal to that

tradition; they have been the linchpin which have held it together. They have been that which has given the ordering of society its legitimacy; which, quite literally, has given the impression that it was the will of God. Yet one cannot just jump outside that tradition, for where would one be? How could one think? I teach Schleiermacher by choice because here was a man, whom I can admire, who commenced from human awareness of God, of which I also wish to speak. In that he went on to conceptualise this awareness in Christian form, Schleiermacher took a path that I cannot follow. But his work is a starting point. I do not teach women from the past (there were no great women theologians), though I do incidentally teach the thought of some present day feminist theorists.

We live in extraordinary times. For those of us who are women belong to that generation who have consciously articulated our thoughts as women. If Adam named the world, and (it must be noted) the woman and her reality as well, women must rename it. The talk of naming I take of course from Mary Daly, who embarked on such a course twenty years ago. If it is twenty years since the publication of "Beyond God the Father", it is also only twenty years. Much water has flowed under the bridge in that time. A new generation of women has come upon the scene, a generation that does not remember what it was like to be so alone. Times change. They have changed markedly in the College to which I belong. Now there are feminist women, a whole group of them, who pursue my thoughts with me, with whom I can inter-change ideas. It is not automatically easier that there are women. Sometimes women have found it more difficult to tolerate the differences between themselves than to negotiate their divergence from men whom they expect to be different. We need to give one another space; the space that has so often been denied to women as a whole within patriarchal institutions. But most of the time it is of course greatly supportive to have other women around one.

We must seize our opportunity. Europe cannot revert, we must hope, to being Christian, the Christendom of old. If it does, women will suffer. (Look at what has happened in Poland as a result of the attempt there to institute a theocracy in place of a secular state.) We should welcome the Enlightenment and the consequent division of church and state which it has brought about in the last two hundred years. It is an intolerable situation that, in some countries, being a member of a university theology faculty is still tied to holding certain (Christian) beliefs. We see what hegemony male thought has had when the academy is in this wise enmeshed with the power of the church

and of the state. Women are opening up a chink of light; they are placing a wedge between Christian thought and the question as to what it might mean to be religious or spiritual. There must, they are saying, equally be a place for them to think out how it is that they would conceptualise God. (The most difficult thing is to believe it of oneself that one has a right to be there, to think one's thoughts whatever they may be.) The changed situation which this demands we can only accomplish in unison, as there are many of us, such that we reach a critical mass.

I believe also that in this women in different disciplines can profoundly help one another. Feminist thought does hold something in common; certain modes of analysis, insights and values. I learn more from women working in feminist theory in other disciplines, which I can then transpose to my own discipline, than I do from people of a very different outlook than my own working within theology. Take for example the consideration of monotheism. How could one begin to think today about monotheism apart from the insights which have been provided by French thought into the nature of singularity, of phallocentrism, of the tendency to create a One which in turn gives rise to that which is Other to it. Again, how could one critique the fact that sin has in the West been understood primarily as pride, as hubris, were it not for the work of American thinkers who have told us of the need for women to come into their own, while men by contrast must overcome an enclosed sense of self which has set itself over against others? One is not alone, even if one feels isolated in one's discipline. Women are providing a new ethic, a new way of conceiving of the self, a new vision for one. How exciting, in such circumstances, to be working in theology; that discipline within which people have always expressed their highest aspirations.

So we should take heart. We should not exodus from theology and leave it to the men. The task before us is too important. European universities have been the citadels of power, for they have been the crucibles of new thought forms, which in turn have so profoundly affected the way in which we live. True it is tempting at times to go and do something with one's life which is more obviously needed, to work in a women's refuge or to address oneself to the many pressing problems of the world. But those of us who are attracted to the academic life, who find in abstract thought forms and in developing ideas our *métier*, should not despair of the relevance of our work. It may be crucial to the future of humanity. Driving away some years ago from the University of Leipzig, then in the former East Germany, my host who was a professor at the theology faculty there, repeated to me a remark that a colleague of his had just made to him, subsequent to the lecture which

I had given on 'Die Herausforderung des Feminismus für das Christentum' ('The Challenge of Feminism to Christianity'). His friend regaled him: 'Da hast du wieder eine kleine Bombe gelegt!' (There you have once again gone and laid a small bomb!). Feminism is more than a small bomb in the history of the West; it is a rather big bomb - if bomb is the right metaphor for a feminist to use. It has already begun to shake to its very foundations the world as we have known it. There is no reason on earth for us to quit. Rather should we dedicate ourselves, in our generation, to commencing on the task before us. Feminism will change theology.

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