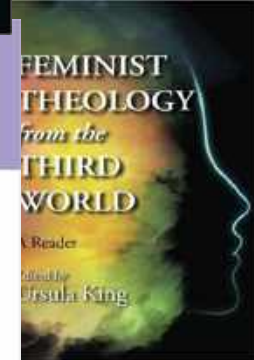
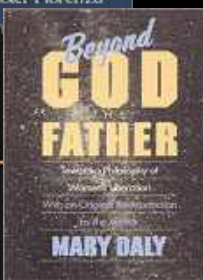
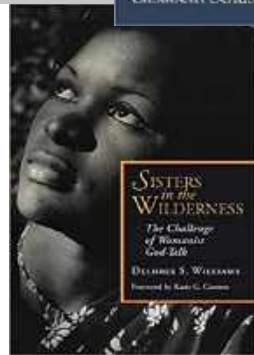
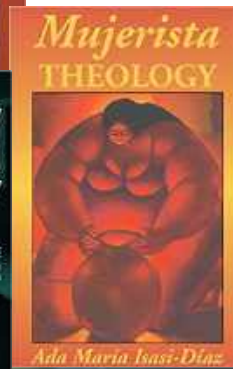
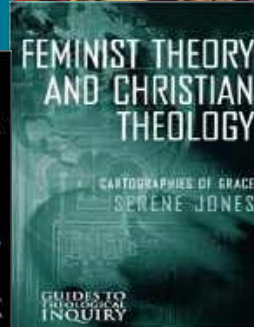
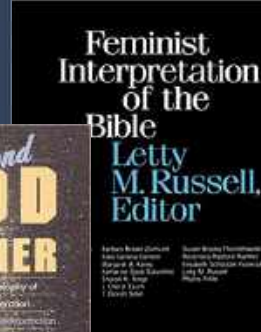
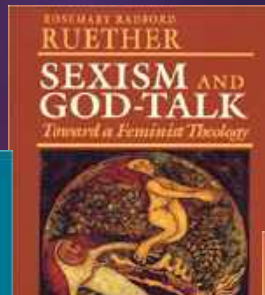
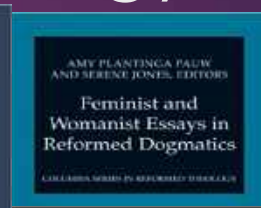
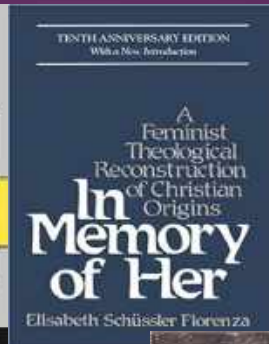
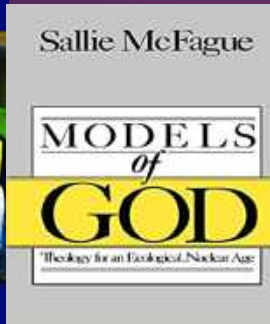
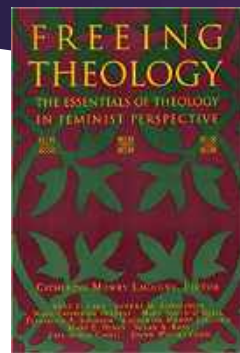


Feminist Theology and the Historical Christian Faith

DR. RACHEL BAARD

Definition of Feminist Theology



Maria José Rosado-Nunes:
radical critique
of patriarchal reasoning
in the field of theology.”



Patriarchal reasoning

- ▶ **Patriarchy:** “rule of the father” – but classically is a complex hierarchy of domination that includes domination of some men by other men (often along class or racial lines), through which male domination of women runs as central feature.
 - ▶ **Androcentrism:** patterns of thought that take (ruling) men as the norm, and women and ruled-over men as the outsiders.
 - ▶ **Sexism:** patterns of thought that designate lesser qualities and status to women.
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Christian theology

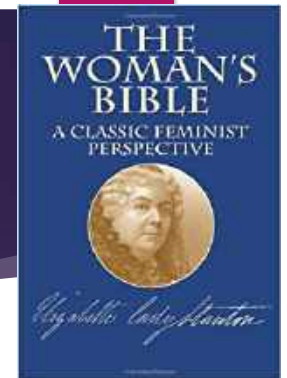


- ▶ Christian theology is a continuing conversation about the things of God, rooted in Scripture.
 - ▶ But Scripture itself is very diverse. And after the canon was closed, the conversation continued (e.g., Christological and Trinitarian doctrine, etc.) This conversation was largely engaged in by men, but it was ongoing and diverse in terms of opinion. The only difference now is that people of color, people from the "Third World," and women are also entering that ongoing conversation.
 - ▶ Reformers: *Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda* (the church Reformed, always reforming)
 - ▶ One could use the analogy of a river: both the stability of the riverbed (aka the essential tenets of the historical faith) and the running water coming from new sources (aka new voices being added to the ongoing theological conversation) are needed.
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Radical critique – or critical retrieval

- ▶ Feminist theologies exist on a spectrum, ranging from:
 - ▶ post-Christian “radical” feminist theologians who have left the Christian tradition and church behind and moved into Goddess spirituality, on the one hand;
 - ▶ To more conservative or at best reformist feminist theologians who largely uphold the classical Christian tradition but try to create more room for women within it, on the other hand;
 - ▶ To the vast majority of feminist theologians who occupy a middle position of both being quite critical of aspects of the Christian tradition that have been harmful to women, yet at the same time try to retrieve life-giving aspects of the Christian faith. In short, they engage in **critical retrieval** of the Christian tradition.
-

Origins of feminist theology



- ▶ In Catholicism, there are four female Doctors of the Church (i.e., people whose teachings may be considered authoritative (Theresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena, Therese of Lisieux, Hildegard of Bingen, etc.), but they are the exception.
- ▶ 1895: The Woman's Bible (Elizabeth Cady Stanton) - strong feminist critique of traditional Christian religion, but it was suppressed because the feminist movement feared it might harm their cause.
 - ▶ **For the same reason, this First Wave feminist movement also distanced itself from the struggle of African-Americans, and this cowardice still has lingering effects.**
- ▶ Feminist theology as a scholarly dates back to only 60 years ago with the publication of Valerie Saiving's 1960 essay, *The Human Situation: A Feminine View*. Subsequently, other feminist voices joined the conversation to do the following:
 - ▶ Critically examine classical Christian doctrine and Scriptures;
 - ▶ Retrieve silenced female voices in Scripture and tradition;
 - ▶ Address practical issues such as gender violence, ecological concerns, etc.



Women's experience

- ▶ Women's experience is the starting point of feminist theology.
 - ▶ This is not positing women's experience as a norm alongside Scripture, but simply recognizes that experiences of being relegated to second class citizenship, gender violence, etc., shape women's understanding of God and the things of God.
 - ▶ Essentialism: the risk of positing a universal female experience based on essentialist assumptions about who and what women are. This is critiqued by:
 - ▶ Constructivism which recognizes the constructed nature of gender identity
 - ▶ Women of color who point out that white women's experiences should not be universalized.
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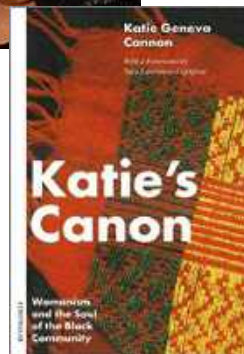
Womanist and *mujerista* theology



- ▶ A **womanist** is a “black feminist or feminist of color” who is “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male or female (Alice Walker).
- ▶ One of the most famous womanist theologians was Katie Geneva Cannon, who taught at Union Presbyterian Seminary until her death in 2018.
- ▶ Ada María Isasi-Díaz: a **mujerista** “is a Latina who makes a preferential option for herself and her Hispanic sisters, understanding that our struggle for liberation has to take into consideration how racism/ethnic prejudice, economic oppression, and sexism work together and reinforce each other.”



- ▶ **By making race and class explicit parts of feminist reflection, womanist and mujerista theologies offer a broader perspective than some of the earlier (white) feminist theologies, and in fact challenge feminist theologies to be more mindful of the intersections between gender and other identity markers such as race.**



Global feminist theologies

- ▶ Alice Walker: “**Womanist** is to **feminist** as **purple** is to **lavender**.”
- ▶ In order to recognize the broader feminist conversation across the globe, I propose the image of a purple (purplish?) quilt made of various shades of purple, lavender, lilac, mauve periwinkle, violet, and more, in order to grasp the sheer complexity and multiplicity of feminist theology – or rather, feminist theologies and related conversations that broaden the feminist critique of domination to address the multilayered dimensions of patriarchal reasoning which also oppress men from colonized and oppressed settings.

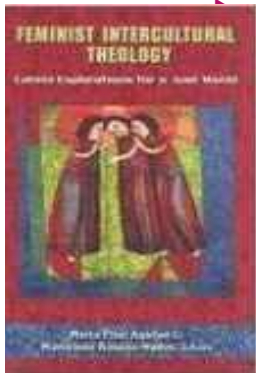
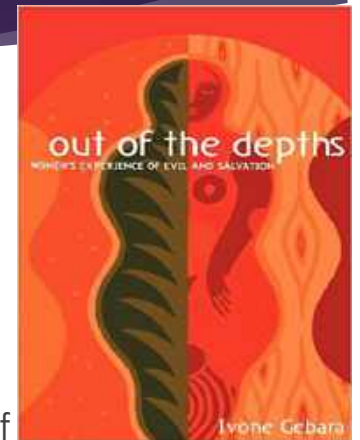




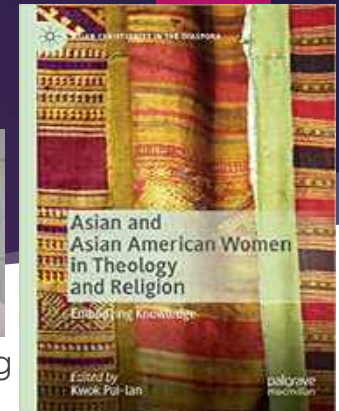
Latin American feminist theology

- ▶ María Pilar Aquino holds on to the term “feminist” but counters the idea that feminism is a white endeavor in the first place.
- ▶ Latin American feminist theology shares with other Latin American liberation theologies a focus on poverty, but also focuses on issues that pertain specifically to women.
- ▶ Like *mujerista* theology in the US, it is furthermore often characterized by an intercultural focus, and the concept of *mestizaje* to express the experience of people living in in-between physical and psychic spaces.

María Pilar Aquino and Maricel Mena-López (in *Feminist Intercultural Theology*): “we proclaim and we celebrate **the diversity of the faces of feminism**: African American, Amerindian, Latina, Latin American – and every other frontier feminism that is open to the intermingling of wisdoms...”



Asian and Asian-American feminist theologies



- ▶ Kwok Pui Lan (Hong Kong, now US): decenter white women's experiences by including women's voices from Asia in the feminist conversation as part of a postcolonial perspective.



▶ Asia is not one place, but Atola Longkumer is correct to identify 4 common issues that women theologians in Asian contexts often focus on: *gender inequality*; *economic concerns*; *peace building*; and *inter-religious dialogue*.

- ▶ E.g., Marianne Katoppo (Indonesia), writes about her experience as a Christian woman living in a predominantly Muslim society, thereby enriching our understanding of the Christian experience.



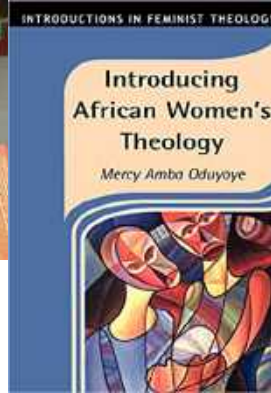
Korean-born (now in the US) theologian Chung Hyun Kyung shifts the focus to poverty as the lived reality of many Asian women, thus highlighting a further central theme in Asian feminist theologies.

Asian and Asian-American feminist theologians frequently examine the doctrine of Christ, as illustrated in books such as Grace Ji-Sun Kim's *The Grace of Sophia* and Wonhee Anne Joh's *Heart of the Cross*.





African feminist theologies

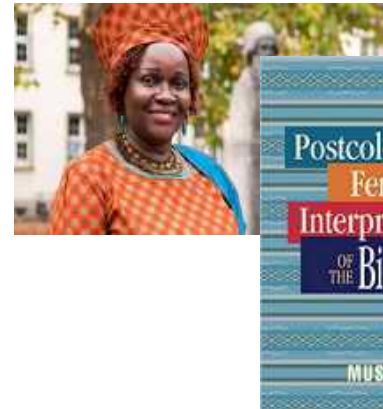


- ▶ **The Circle:** The mother of African feminist theology is Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Ghana), who started the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, which addresses issues of sexism, racism, gender violence, education, poverty, and the impact of HIV/AIDS on African women, as well as revisiting Christian Scriptures and doctrine in light of the specific cultural contexts in Africa.

A distinct feminism: Roxanne Jordaan (South Africa) speaks of African feminist theologies as a distinct black feminist theology that "is lived in the streets of downtrodden Soweto."

Terminology: Alice Yafeh (Cameroon/US): the term "womanist" transcends the United States context due to a collective consciousness of race, but it is rooted in the distinctive history of slavery in the United States, and as such does not address the specific concerns of African women (She opts to describe her work as "Afro-Womanist-Feminist," affirming both the key feminist principle of the full humanity of women, and the womanist broadening of that principle to include race and class, but also moving beyond both in order to speak from the colonial experience of women in Africa.

- ▶ **Biblical scholarship and African concerns:** Musa Dube (Botswana): developing African perspectives on the Bible, and has made significant contributions on the conversation around HIV/Aids.



The doctrine of the image of God: Critique



- ▶ Mary Catherine Hilbert: "a source of oppression and discrimination against women."
- ▶ Ideas about women either not made in the image of God or only being the image of God in connection with their husbands (Augustine).
- ▶ Moreover, ideas about the meaning of the doctrine have tended to exclude women.
 - ▶ Imago Dei as *reason*: a trait classically associated with men
 - ▶ Imago Dei as *domination*: a trait classically associated with men
 - ▶ Imago Dei as *relationality*: a trait classically associated with women, but not when coupled with the Trinity.
- ▶ Feminist theologians are very critical of ways in which the doctrine of the Imago Dei has often excluded women, and have argued that this has dehumanized women and played a role in the justifying gender violence and other forms of oppression of women.

The doctrine of the image of God: Contribution

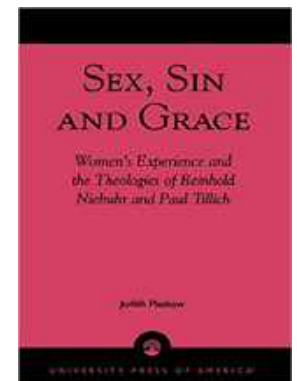


- ▶ In their constructive retrieval of the doctrine of the image of God, feminist theologians are concrete rather than speculative: they use it as a metaphor for the affirmation of human dignity, instead of focusing on the locus or nature of the *imago Dei* in human beings.
 - ▶ Why this is retrieval and not a new invention: this is not an entirely new approach!
 - ▶ Mary Catherine Hilker: in the Roman Catholic tradition, the doctrine of the *imago Dei* “undergirds the social teaching of the church protecting the most vulnerable members of society from extinction or harm.”
 - ▶ In the Reformed tradition, we see John Calvin use the *imago Dei* as an argument for social justice, especially when he claims that its affirmation of human dignity is such that no one can hurt any neighbour “without wounding God himself,” that God indeed “deems himself violated in their person.”
 - ▶ The “radicalism” of feminist theology lies in its insistence that women are fully the image of God, and that the ethical implications of this doctrine be taken to its conclusion.
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The Doctrine of Sin: Critique



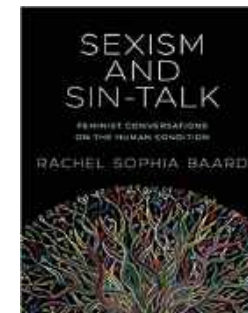
- ▶ Two central critiques:
- ▶ 1. Traditional emphasis on **pride** as the root of sin excludes women's tendency to sin in the form of self-negation, and even encourages women to accept abuse, since it carries with it an emphasis on the virtues of humility and self-sacrifice.
- ▶ 2. Traditional **blaming** of women with sin (daughters of Eve). E.g., Tertullian, women are "the devil's gateway." This theme has played a role in the historical witch hunts, as well as arguments in favor of domestic violence.



The Doctrine of Sin: Contributions

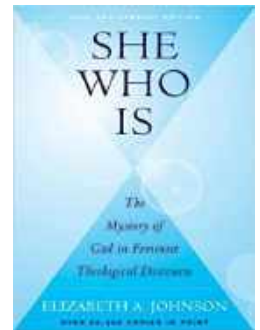


- ▶ Feminist Theologians also retrieve the doctrine of original sin – i.e., the idea that sin is not just a individual problem, but a more systemic, universal human one in which all humans participate in various ways. Both original sin and the systemic sin of patriarchy are:
 - ▶ 1. contingent, not natural
 - ▶ 2. nevertheless have a radical hold on us
 - ▶ 3. affects a fundamental distortion of our personhood
 - ▶ 4. is (somewhat) universal
 - ▶ 5. the outcome is death
 - ▶ 6. created, bodily life is from God and not the source of our problems
 - ▶ 7. essentially consisting of **broken relationality**



Language about God: Critique

- ▶ Official church teaching has held that God is spirit and so beyond identification with either male or female sex, but the daily language of preaching, worship, catechesis, and instruction conveys the message that God is male.
- ▶ Feminist theologians argue that this domination of male God-language “functions to support an imaginative and structural world that excludes or subordinates women.” (Elizabeth Johnson).
- ▶ In conjunction with the association of women with sin and evil, feminist theologians ask: what kind of world are we creating when males are associated with the highest good, God, and women with evil?
- ▶ Their general conclusion is that this kind of association not only betrays the best insights of the classical Christian faith, but that it supports patriarchal reasoning that justifies male domination of women, even to the point of normalizing gender violence.





Language about God: Contributions

- ▶ Feminist theologians have argued for more inclusive language for God.
 - ▶ This would reflect the fact that classical theology has always insisted that God has no gender. If male language for God does not denote something ontological about God (i.e., about God's inner being), it might be understood as either metaphor or analogy.
 - ▶ Some proposals: replacing the language of "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" with functional terms such as "Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer" (this is not without problems, so in the end it should be an addition rather than a replacement).
 - ▶ Relatedly, feminist theologians have also considered new ways of speaking about Christ: not necessarily in female terms alone, given that he was a historical male, but in terms of retrieving the OT figure of Sophia, God's personified Wisdom with which Christ is associated in the NT, and tapping into the prophetic tradition in which Christ stood.
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Conclusions

- ▶ Feminist theology is a widely divergent field that enriches the Christian conversation, brings to the fore forgotten voices from the Christian tradition, helps to lift out the best insights of the classical tradition, while critiquing the ways in which Christian theology has at times been deeply oppressive. It affirms, in short, against narratives that are death-dealing to women, the God of life who wants women and men to flourish, not only beyond death, but also in this world.
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