

Weaving a Questing Spirituality

By Coralie Ling, © November 2005

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Feminist theology has many strands, it includes a political edge, a refusal to accept women as second class citizens or second class members of the various religions and denominations. Women are equally created, redeemed, and called to be theologians/theologians. Problems already arise and a quest is already before us with this statement.

In the orthodox and catholic churches and in orthodox Judaism women are excluded from leadership and decision making, in other religious groups there may be full equality or partial acceptance in leadership. Very rarely are women's wisdom, experience, theological/theological thinking fully accepted as essential to spirituality. Since the 1970's there has been a huge volume of women's work in theology - within Christianity women have been writing, and publishing as well as being practitioners in liturgy, theology, church history, biblical studies, pastoral studies -every area of theology.

When I was doing theological studies back in the sixties and thinking about ordination I desperately searched for books written by women in theology. I was really glad to find just one - by Dorothee Soelle (Christ the Representative) - she went on to write many more and is a great spiritual leader for me. A renowned feminist biblical scholar Elisabeth Schfissler Fiorenza tells of how in the 70's and 80's she could more or less keep up with everything published by women in her field but now she finds it impossible to keep up even with her highly specialized interests because so much work in theology is being done by women.

One of the reasons I have called this lecture 'Weaving a questing spirituality' is because of the many strands of work by women that go to make a questing spirituality. In most parts of the world there are circles of women theologians and different cultural contributions add to the richness of the weaving. Within Australia there are many different feminist theological voices coming from orthodox and liberal perspectives, from Aboriginal, Asian, and European backgrounds. My own strand is AngloAustralian, Uniting Church and as a feminist theologian I work from a liberation perspective.

I am going to discuss briefly, two doctrines that have been seen as central to Christianity from some feminist perspectives and then go on to discuss two more themes that feminist theologians are developing for our times.

Firstly **The Cross** - central symbol of Christianity.

From the time of the development of the Christian scriptures, many meanings have been drawn from the story of the cross. The meaning strongly rejected by most

feminists is the one that states that a just God had to exact punishment for the sins of humankind by sending his son to die and offer a perfect sacrifice for sin.

Some years ago one of my friends who was chaplain at the women's prison told me how this story of the cross was told in the prison chapel by a visiting male preacher. The women prisoners immediately got up and walked out saying 'that's child abuse!' For these women child abuse was the very worst of crimes. Dorothee Soelle, (Suffering pp 26-32) in her critique of the male theologian Jurgen Moltman's book 'the Crucified God' agreed with these women prisoners and said Moltman's thesis was approving a brutal God who set about slaying his son – theological sadism. Later Rita Nakashima Brock an Asian American theologian was highly critical of another version of the story of the cross – the version that says the cross is a demonstration of God's love. Any story that approves violence in the name of love is wrong. Intimacy and violence cannot belong together. Can feminists draw any positive meaning from the cross?

There are varying strands of feminist theology here. I have heard some Afro-Americans say there is no meaning in the cross. We savour life and if we Afro-Americans had been there with the first century Jesus we would have helped him escape. Another strand of feminist theology honours resistance, a theology that resists oppression and injustice and asks questions about in whose interests a particular story is told. Is the story of the cross told in such a way as to induce submission and obedience or can it be told as a way of resistance? I think there are possibilities in telling Jesus' story as an act of resistance to religious and state oppressors. A number of women artists have drawn attention to violence against women by doing paintings and sculptures of a woman on the cross. The Fitzroy congregation where I was minister has a very powerful crucified woman done by the artist Gay Hawkes. Not everyone could look at this sculpture – it reminded us in a dramatic way of women's suffering, it spoke for those who had been silenced or were voiceless – a sculpture of resistance. (An excellent analysis of some of the work of male theologians and feminist perspectives can be found in Nancy Victorin - Vangerud's book - the Raging Hearth chapters 7,8).

Much more could be said about the Cross but I want to move on to the other central doctrine of Christianity – **the Trinity**.

Traditionally in Christianity the divine has been named as Father, Son and Holy Spirit but as one feminist theologian Phyllis Bird has stated 'God is much more than two men and a bird.' God is much more than any naming of her, and much more than the mathematical formula of three in one and one in three. Dorothee Soelle and many other feminist theologians say 'in the beginning was the relation.' We understand the divine as a communion of mutual relations, as an interweaving dance of equal partnership, as a jazz band where different voices are heard separately and together. A lot of work has been done by feminist theologians in the area of metaphor. Metaphors can open up new visions of the divine or obscure or damage one's growth in spirituality. Some of the problems of constantly using 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' are a reinforcing of the divine as masculine, a

reinforcing of the divine as hierarchical, the father at the top of the ladder, then the son a few rungs down and then the spirit, down again. Some people have had abusive fathers and constantly imaging God as father could make it impossible for them to know the divine as a mutual relationship of love.

The Uniting Church has just published a new worship book. While it still uses much traditional patriarchal language for God, the Trinity, there are here and there some real gems – some feminist subversion has crept in.

The prayer of invocation on page 251 says
"Come to us Mother of the ages,
weave us into faith.

"Come to us, Wisdom in humanity,
Spin us into freedom.

"Come to us, Nurturer of community,
Stitch us into your tapestry of life,
That we may know the colour of hope,
Experience the texture of grace,
And celebrate the fabric of wholeness
In the mystery of your creativity.
Amen.

Mother of the ages, Wisdom in humanity, Nurturer of community are examples of different metaphors woven into 'a fabric of wholeness', the metaphor for the divine trinity. There are many more both old like Julian of Norwich's - Maker, Keeper and Lover, and new, like those images used in the prayer, though the images have links with ancient tradition.

There is much, much more, could be said about feminist perspectives on the Trinity – for example two feminist theologians who have written about the trinity are Catherine La Cugna with her 500 page volume *God For Us* and closer to home Dr Ann Hunt of ACU campus Ballarat, has a smaller book 'What are they saying about the Trinity?'

Sallie McFague who has developed a metaphorical theology speaks of how some metaphors which are used frequently become models. They encompass a wide understanding of the divine. Father with a capital is an example. Some feminist theologians, myself included, are developing Sophia as a model of the divine. Sophia is the greek word for wisdom and also a girl's name. 'God is not a boy's name' has been a saying on the MOW sweatshirt, but Sophia is a girl's name, a saint's name, a goddess name, a church (Hagia Sophia) and college (sancta Sophia) name.

There is a whole stream of literature in the Bible known as Wisdom literature. This literature was largely ignored in the first half of last century as male theologians emphasized the redeeming acts of God symbolized by escape from Egypt, a later return from exile, and a deliverance understanding of the Cross and Resurrection. In

the later part of the 20th century some male theologians and some feminist theologians have paid much more attention to Wisdom/Sophia as she is found in the Scriptures and elsewhere. The literature comes from the time when the Hebrew people are rebuilding after the exile (5th century BC -2nd century AD). There is a focus on the home and on questions about every day life and there is the influence of scholars from Alexandria and the multi-faith context there. 'Where shall wisdom be found?' the author of the book of Job (Job 28: 12) asks and tells us its price is greater than the gold of Ophir and the chrysolite of Ethiopia. In the book of Proverbs we find Wisdom out in the marketplace and discover that she has built a house with seven pillars where the winds of searching and questing can blow freely. Into this house, to share her bread and wine, she invites the young and foolish that they may gain wisdom.

The book of Wisdom written in Greek, probably 1st century BC uses language for Sophia that could also be used for the Egyptian Isis -'She deploys her strength from one end of the earth to the other, ordering all things for good.' (Wisdom 8:1) The God of Israel takes on Wisdom and Isis characteristics and is named Sophia. The author of the book of Wisdom goes on to retell the story of the Hebrew people with their starry and flame guide Sophia taking them through the desert to the promised land.

Jesus is born into this wisdom milieu and his parables and teachings are in the wisdom genre. According to Matthew Jesus names himself as Sophia and certainly the apostle Paul calls Christ the Sophia of God.(1 Corinthians 1:24). The book of Wisdom calls Sophia 'the breath and power of God'. In the Christian scriptures the Spirit is understood as the One who will give wisdom and guide into truth. Trinitarian theology developed later than the Christian scriptures of the first and early second century but Trinitarian theology has drawn on the Scriptures. So with Sophiology or the understanding of Sophia. Elisabeth Johnson who wrote a classic text in feminist theology 'She Who is' develops a Trinitarian sophiology – Sophia Creator, Sophia Jesus, and Sophia Spirit. At the heart of Sophia Wisdom is relationship.

There are some differences amongst those developing a sophiology. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza calls Jesus Sophia's prophet rather than Sophia herself. There are many issues for male theologians about what is the relationship of Jesus and the Christ. Feminists have not resolved these issues but can point to a scripture assigned to Jesus when he called himself Sophia (Matthew 11:19) and to a scripture where Paul called the Christ Sophia/wisdom.

In the centuries that followed the writing of those books that were accepted into the canon of Christian scripture, the Sophia tradition continued. A Christian writer such as Clement of Alexandria speaks of Sophia speaking to Moses in the burning bush and of guiding the people through a cloud. But other writers particularly of the documents discovered in the last century at Nag Hammadi, documents that date back to second, third and fourth centuries did not give Sophia such an honoured place though she is connected with creation in some way. In The Sophia of Jesus

Christ she is consort of the Father, in the Gospel of Phillip she is mother of the angels, in the Apocryphon of John she is an aeon who brings forth a monster.

Sophia makes her presence felt in the early Christian writings and that remarkable woman of the 11th century Hildegard of Bingen writes

“O Power of Wisdom
You encompass the cosmos,
Encircling and embracing all in one living orbit
With your three wings;
One soars on high,
One distils the earth 's essence,
The third hovers everywhere,
Praise to you, Wisdom, fitting praise!” (p64 Sister of Wisdom Barbara Newman)

In much mediaeval thought Sophia is conflated with Mary the mother of Jesus. Mary receives the title Seat of Wisdom. Though Sophia still has a prayer addressed to her in the mediaeval advent antiphon:-

“O come thou wisdom from on high
Who orders all things mightily
To us the path of knowledge
show and teach us in her ways to go
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel Shall come to thee O Israel.”

But in later centuries Sophia was pushed to the edges in Christian theology, though sought by mystics Jacob Boehm, Lady Jane Leade, Mother Ann Lee of the Shakers and later again by Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Merton and in the Eastern orthodox tradition Soloviev and Bulgarkov.

And then we come back to feminist theologians of the last 40 years and the development of a model of the divine as Sophia. This has been done both within the Christian tradition and beyond. Caitlin Matthews in her book on Sophia develops a model of Sophia that brings together the goddesses of many cultures.

She says

“Sophia's task as an interim or bridging Goddess, has been a difficult one. She links us to the ancient Goddesses through the shared symbolism of Isis and Mary, as well as to the native creation Goddesses of Europe. Present in the apocryphal incident, in song and story, in the visions of the mystics and philosophers, disguised in both transcendent and earthy images, Sophia comes into our lives and bids us follow her into the Sophianic millennium when the Divine feminine will no longer be so veiled.”

Staying within the Christian tradition Elizabeth Johnson can speak of Sophia as breaking the sexist knot in male theology. She can point to gender fluidity when we speak of Sophia Christ, and she can undo that patriarchal chain of being and command where a male God at the top of the chain hands down commands to men as his representatives and they in turn command women, children and the earth. The

male relationship of father and son can be decentred in Christian theology when our model of God is Sophia/wisdom. The dualistic tendency to opposition between God and the world can also be decentred for wisdom pitches her tent and dwells among us. Whether hidden or recognized Sophia's mysterious presence is with her creation not separate.

In 1993 I attended a conference called 'Re-imagining' in Minneapolis USA. This conference was a celebration of being midway through the World Council of Churches ecumenical decade of the churches in solidarity with women.

The conference organizers drew on Sophia theology/sophiology for the liturgies and a number of the speakers also referred to Sophia. I give you an example of one of the liturgies that later caused a huge backlash in the USA. This is part of an agape meal where we all drank milk and honey mixed - The blessing over the milk and honey was:-

L: Our mother Sophia, we are women in your image:

With the hot blood of our wombs we give form to new life.

With the courage of our convictions we pour out our life blood for justice

R: (sung) Sophia creator God, let your milk and honey flow, Sophia Creator God, Shower us with your love.

L: Our mother Sophia, we are women in your image:

With the milk of our breasts we suckle the children;

With the knowledge of our hearts we feed humanity.

R:

L: Our sweet Sophia, we are women in your image:

With nectar between our thighs we invite a lover, we birth a child;

With our warm body fluids we remind the world of its pleasures and sensations.

R:

L: Our guide, Sophia, we are women in your image:

With our moist mouths we kiss away a tear, we smile encouragement.

With the honey of wisdom in our mouths, we prophesy a full humanity to all the peoples.

Imagine 2,500 women seated at round tables joining this affirming feast and liturgy which finished with a circle dance! This and the other liturgies had a profound effect on me. My head knowledge of Wisdom/Sophia moved to my heart and I experienced her in the gathering of these people from USA and many parts of the world, and in the liturgy, the words, the music, the dance and the milk and honey.

This was a mainstream conference of the world council of churches - I got some funding to attend from the VCC. And it was in the mainstream churches in the USA that there was a backlash. Some criticism was that we were worshipping a goddess and mocking the rituals of the Christian church. Several women who had been organizers lost their jobs with their respective churches. Right wing people demanded that the funding made available for the conference be repaid. None of this happened here as most people were totally unaware of what was happening in the

USA. The positive side was that it led to many more Bible studies and liturgies that centred on Sophia. Though again very few of these resources have been used in Australia.

As minister of Fitzroy Uniting Church I introduced Sophia liturgies there and while some people found them strange – Who is Sophia? they asked. Once introduced to her, many people found these liturgies liberating and life giving. And so I have a Sophia model of the divine.

It is a Sophia model of the divine or other metaphors for the divine that are not hierarchical that have been very helpful in developing ecotheology and our relationship with the earth. If the earth is at the bottom of the chain of being and command then there will be little respect. Hierarchical models of God as Lord and King and Father, separate from creation, reinforce a lack of respect for the earth we share with so many creatures.

Shirley Wurst, South Australian, and one of the co-editors of the five volume Earth Bible speaks about Sophia's credentials for ecotheology in her article Woman Wisdom's way. Wurst says because Sophia is described in chapter 8 of Proverbs as being there when the sea, the earth, and the sky are conceived, when the whole earth community is conceived and she delights in all that is created, these are the source of her wisdom way in the world.

Wurst goes on to say:

“Woman Wisdom is the Earth Mother. She is the spider of ancient indigenous wisdom, spinning and weaving and webbing together Earth. She is the creative Rainbow Serpent of indigenous traditions: she shapes the earth with her body. Her knowledge of Earth and Earth community is physical and embodied: in this shaping her body is imprinted with Earth, and imprints Earth. She herself, in her body, knows and understands earth. She is a ‘hands-on’ creator. In her creative shaping, spinning, weaving and webbing earth, Woman Wisdom knows in every way all there is to know about earth community; bodily, spiritually, intuitively, intellectually she knows Earth wisdom.”

Shirley Wurst like Caitlin Matthews has a model of the divine Woman Wisdom/Sophia crossing cultures and the centuries.

In Proverbs besides being located at the beginning of creation Woman Wisdom is located both outside and inside the cities, in the streets and in the high places. By her those in power learn how to live and dispense ecojustice and she has a strategy for people to learn her way of ekinship. She builds her house at the heart of the ancient power system and focuses her teaching on the young women and men who will be the future leaders. Her teaching involves respecting, listening, observing, reciprocal sharing – she herself teaches and learns. She delights in surprises, challenges, innovation and recreation and she shares her insights freely with human beings and other members of the Earth community. Wurst introduces us to the way of ekinship for our relation with the divine and with the whole earth community.

Aboriginal artist Jasmine Corowa in her painting of the creation of human beings – shows women, men and children of different sizes and ground colours in the image of the Divine rainbow Spirit. With these colours she depicts the land, the creatures and human beings all being kin. With different imagery her paintings also draw us to the way of ecokinship. (The Rainbow Spirit in Creation)

Dorothee Soelle also, though not using the model of Sophia speaks of our interdependent relation with the earth and the divine.

“North American feminists use a lovely expression, ‘the web of life’. In the early 80's, some of these North American feminists contributed to a book titled *Reweaving the Web of Life*. I often feel that the web of life carries me, all those many threads that stretch among women in particular, but also among men and women. Even though I sometimes feel miserably lost in West Germany, I always felt at home among those who have a part in this process of reweaving. According to a basic assertion of feminist theology, God is no absolute sovereign who, independent of us, decides and governs. The creator of heaven and earth also needs us, is dependent on us, as every form of life, so God too is interdependent.” (p95 *Against the Wind*).

Through her metaphorical theology Sallie McFague also challenges us to the way of ecokinship. She says imagine using the metaphor/model ‘the body of God’ for the earth and doing all our theology from this perspective. It will call for rethinking of all theological categories. It will also call for a recognition of our interdependence as bodies in the Body of God and in her context of North American, white, privilege, it will call for making changes both in personal lifestyle and in working for systemic and global change.

New metaphors, new theological thinking, new ethics and practice all contribute to the weaving of a questing spirituality. This spirituality from some feminist perspectives weaves together inner and outer lives with recognition of our interdependence with the earth, its creatures and all humanity. It is a spirituality that engenders healing and transformation on the ongoing way of Sophia's ecokinship.

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