

C. Gender theology and conversion

Elizabeth Johnson's *She Who Is*⁸ enables me to put the argument I have presented into sharper perspective at the points where it relates to feminist theology in general. I support Johnson in advocating a theology which starts 'not with ... the "first person" of the Trinity, but with Spirit, God's livingness subtly and powerfully abroad in the world', and also her recognition that Christian experience begins with the awareness of God's closeness and gentleness, although it is somewhat disturbing to read that she introduces the word 'hostile' as if we have reason to be suspicious of Father and Son being identified in scripture (see her page 123).

Certainly the Church has very often presented both Father and Son in ways that are open to grievous misunderstanding and this has justified feminist theology in repudiating patriarchal habits, but it is unfortunate that Johnson has not escaped from the conventional treatment of the divine 'persons' as if they were different agents. Her attention to the Spirit, however, has the great advantage that it takes a step towards affirming that God's trinitarian action in the world is the One Person's self-giving. The role of the Spirit in created persons has to be stressed, for by his presence in the believer the Spirit is effecting both God's parental embrace and participation in his filial response, that these may shape the substance of the believer's life. We have to be frank about it: God's cohesion as Trinity has never yet been made clear enough. Moltmann stressed that God's distinct character requires the Church to explain the three hypostaseis to be of different 'shapes', but he did not acknowledge that they constitute together one single personhood. Here too psychological scrutiny of what the doctrine says makes the matter clearer. When we say that God is Father, Son and Spirit we are acknowledging the activity of his Spirit as his touch impinges on us in heart, mind and will in these three different but complementary ways, for the purpose of enabling us to live in God's Trinity. In trusting the Trinity we are allowing the Spirit to fashion us, little by little, in the likeness of the Father's Son, who gives himself to his Bride, the believing community, in the *koinonia* of the Spirit.

A trinitarian psychology of human nature

Trinitarian doctrine as it arises from its NT roots has a two-fold value as revelation. It reveals the character of God who is Love; that is to say it states what is particular about God in his own eternal

and infinite being. But it is equally indispensable in enabling us to understand our own nature and the way God relates himself to us and gradually deepens our union with himself. This gift of life in God *involves human participation in God's activity* as people make response to initiatives of the Trinity, albeit in a strictly creaturely way. We can easily be misled by the notion that the Spirit binds together the Father and the Son, or *is* their relationship. Because of this it is understandable that little progress has been made in developing a coherent doctrine of the third hypostasis. The way to get out of that confusion is to be more attentive to the reality that all three hypostases are One God who always acts as One. What we seek to understand is not three distinct sets of relations but one complex of three eternal modes of being One divine Spirit – an understanding that is not 'modalism'. Certainly we cannot make sense of the Holy Spirit at all accurately if we treat him as some special sort of 'thing', a force, a power, even an influence. None of those words is good enough for the purpose of understanding how God works within us to make us members of Christ.

In thinking of the psychological development whereby human persons participate in God's mysterious life the emphasis is on the extraordinary exaltation of humanity made known through the incarnation. The whole cosmic process has its beginning and end in the divine Son/Daughter, the One who becomes flesh in the historic Christ Jesus, and then takes human nature into a much greater depth of communality as the corporate Christ. Inevitably Paul and his contemporaries could only see the Christ in masculine terms, but we can now see that the revelation points us beyond that limitation. It is the initially passive and inherently receptive (or feminine) nature of humanity which God has entered by the Spirit's gentle incursion of Mary's body. From that initiative of God's Spirit the life of Jesus becomes God's embodiment so that Jesus may be 'the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation' in whom 'all things hold together' and also 'the head of the body, the Church' (Col.1. 15,17,18).

As a result of being able to discern God's life in Jesus, human beings are also able to recognise the three forms of God's presence – within which they themselves have the strange privilege of sharing. This human participation in God begins unconsciously but it is launched into consciousness through new birth as the person is enabled to respond with some awareness that God is present in his three-fold being.

Humanity created to be receptive

I see the most substantial value of Johnson's book to lie in the extensive way in which she identifies the many features of revelation in which divine femininity appears alongside the masculinity, and not in any mere additional or secondary sense. Not only do I support this aspect of her thesis but want to put even greater stress on the central point that God revealed in Christ requires a theology which affirms that there is nothing at all of God's sovereignty that is not entirely shaped by his mercy, his long-suffering, and his redemptive self-sacrifice. This is where her interpretation of female imagery in the scriptures and in the Church's tradition is so valuable.

There is, however, a matter of potential confusion to be cleared up at this point concerning the Spirit. If I have been right to identify divine masculinity with the Spirit why was it that in the biblical tradition God's wisdom was perceived to be female? The explanation, I think, clarifies and safeguards God's transcendence because he upholds the created order by acting entirely in it. In doing so the Spirit not only upholds but also sanctifies people from within their humanity. What Johnson describes is comprehensive: there is the responsive and vicarious life of God's Child (the 'Son'); the penetrating and enabling activities of the Holy Spirit; and the Father's embracing and upholding of his children. She also makes reference to the penetration of humankind in connection with the *Veni creator Spiritus*, in which, as I see it, the masculine Spirit is serving the feminine work of facilitating the development of interpersonal relationships through which humanity is able to serve the Kingdom in being the Body of Christ.

In penetrating the human order, God's Holy Spirit supports God's feminine activities, reflecting his Fatherly and Motherly gentleness. Because God's action is always unitary there can be no proper separation between the masculine and feminine features of his presence in the world. We are able to distinguish in our humanity what participates in God's masculinity and what in his femininity, while at the same time we see that life as a whole is structured on the Trinity. We can also say, however, that because God is love, the creation of humanity culminates in *a complexity of union which gives the feminine continual precedence over the masculine*, because the masculine serves the feminine. So I take the view that human personhood and spirituality should be regarded as in a real sense fundamentally feminine, in that people are created with the predominant capacity for receptivity that they may find their own fulfilment within God's life. Accordingly we can say that Father and Son share both gender characteristics directed in this particular way.

Thus it is on the ground of his character, marked by that feminine bias, that God gives his creatures a real participation in his own life, the life of Father and Son together as One Spirit, who is the transforming gentleness of Love. This means that the temporal impetus of human nature, showing itself day by day in its unredeemed dimensions as competitive, aggressive and self-advertising, is being disciplined and transfigured for eternity.

Standing against domination

Johnson speaks of feminist theology's critical task being to unmask the 'ruling-male-centred partiality' in Christian history. I agree this must be dismantled if the truth of the gospel is to be communicated, yet venture to doubt whether Johnson's positive approach is adequate. Like other feminist theologians she has in view 'the flourishing of all creatures', but writes as if the celebration of difference and the participation of all were a sufficient model of the divine purpose. It seems to me significant that this view has little sense of human life in God. If, as I have argued, every creature's dependence on the presence of the One who is Other than all creatures is the outstanding feature of the cosmos, and of human beings in particular, our account of ourselves has to envisage more than each one being true to his own nature. We can then recognise that the developmental process of creation has its climax in a human community of persons which can adequately embody and display the character of the triune Creator, who chooses to be at the heart of it himself.

What I have written earlier qualifies the patristic position and proposes that what the Fathers saw in terms of the several relations between the three hypostaseis may be better expressed as one of a multiple relationship in which the three encompass each other, because in their cohesion they constitute the divine being which is Love. This, I think, is where the proper significance of the co-inherence and perichoresis doctrines lie.

The human-divine relationship perceived in Christ

Besides drawing attention to the very necessary critique of patriarchy, Johnson also indicates why femininity must not be left out of our account of human nature in the way it has been for most of Christian history. Her stress on 'an intrinsic connectedness' in women's personhood is important, for she is identifying a schizoid individualism which is often characteristic of men but also of many people of both sexes in today's world. This outlook is certainly to be condemned as incompatible with the biblical faith and stands in

marked contrast to what was already being clarified in the earliest days of the Church's life. In considerable degree the New Testament and early Church testimony to God's non-dominating ways was betrayed as her life and mission developed in an uncongenial world. Feminism's protest has therefore been well justified, although perhaps not always well conducted. Building on the work of feminist theologians and historians before her, Johnson summarises how in later Christian history 'women were relegated to secondary status in nature and grace', and even thought of as 'representative of evil tendencies in the sin-prone part of the male self' (p.70). But while I agree with her against defining leadership in narrowly masculine terms, the way she sees women standing within the process of spiritual growth seems to me to be significantly inaccurate and misleading. The critical question is, *how is human identity in relation to God actually affirmed?* In respect of women, Johnson's answer is emphatically by self-assertion. In distinction from men, they have been realising their identity by rejecting 'the sexism of inherited constructions of female identity' (p.62). Misgiving about this is strengthened when her account continues under the subtitle of *conversion*. It is not that the political and moral struggle against sexism is not necessary. Certainly women's courage, hope and determination is slowly accomplishing a change 'in attitude and practice', but this is not conversion. She acknowledges that she uses the word in a different sense, but her distinction between ruling males and humiliated females in respect of conversion is far from satisfactory. She supposes that the 'language of conversion as loss of self, turning from *amor sui*' robs people of power, and subordinates them 'to the benefit of those who rule' (p.64). This argument, I suggest, is based on a misunderstanding of Christianity and of the psychological barriers to real conversion. The theological task here is to uncover the fact that if the distinctive character of conversion is missed, a self-concern is encouraged which can be just as damaging to human wellbeing as male sexism. Instead NT Christianity exposes the unfashionable truth that humanity's fulfilment is reached by way of dispossession. Accordingly there are three aspects of conversion to be considered.

Conversion a matter of grace

First it must be acknowledged that no one can be converted except from a position of some personal strength. We cannot surrender our independence and give our allegiance to God, so as to be possessed by him, unless our self-confidence is sufficiently real for it to be surrendered. We cannot love God more than ourselves and care for

other people as we love ourselves, unless we are already secure in the knowledge of being loved. Feminists are rightly aware of their own disadvantaged position for they campaign not just from their disadvantage but from a properly strong sense of their humanity. The enslaved Israelites in Egypt could only respond to Moses' leading because of their inner assurance of being a people who ought not to have been oppressed. The word conversion does not apply to any group of people simply in being convinced that they have a just cause and deserve to be vindicated. Conversion in the Christian sense is revolutionary for all, in being concerned with the process of dispossession, whereby people learn to look away from themselves so that they may no longer centre their lives on themselves but on God. Thus conversion is something that God initiates by his self-gift, thereby facilitating repentance on the foundation of new birth. It is not something that we do for ourselves, nor is it initiated simply by our own choice. This radical movement into the converted state on God's initiatives distinguishes the non-religious Christianity towards which Bonhoeffer was being drawn. I do not mean to deny that all religions are in some measure responses to God's presence; I believe they are, but rather to point out that churches as institutions, whether on the small scale or the large, are characteristically self-driven, and to that extent hystero-schizoid and unfaithful. To the extent that this is the case, Christianity as we often find it has ceased to be the response to divine grace leading to dispossession, which is its distinctive character.

When resistances melt

A second aspect of conversion concerns the hostility that stands in its way. The divine gift in conversion builds on an already existing but largely buried sense of being loved, which will have been overlaid with negative emotions and the withdrawal of attention to the Creator's goodness. Since God never fails to respect the personal integrity of his children we can be sure that he will not convert people without their consent. So before conversion can take place God has to do something to restore the people concerned to some sense of his loving presence. What we call faith is reliance on his presence first given in each one's origin. According to the Fourth Gospel and 1 Peter, Jesus calls this restoration of access into the relationship of faith being born of the Spirit, born from above, or new birth. Being prior to conversion this new birth occurs on the initiative of the Spirit. Although it will not happen to anyone who is not already in a frame of mind to welcome this inner change, new birth is

often unrecognised as an event. In this people become conscious that they are now inwardly free to believe; hence Jesus' answer to puzzled Nicodemus, 'you must be born again'. Being born of the Spirit re-starts a process of growing awareness of God.⁹ With faith enabled afresh through new birth, conversion becomes possible, for without faith conversion has no meaning. Whether in a man or a woman conversion is submission to God. However startling it may or may not be it is always a matter of degree, for believers go through many moments of conversion in the process of spiritual growth. After one's initial conversion, however, repentance can begin to be increasingly real, whereas without conversion it can only be shallow, more a matter of remorse than the God-directed change of heart that is repentance. These distinctions between new birth, conversion and repentance, their relation to faith, and the order in which they come, are of great importance if we are to understand God's work of sanctification. *Experience* of God's personhood becomes conscious when we have been born anew, and then converted. From that point we can acknowledge who God is, and amend our wills accordingly. The grace of God that is being released in us reactivates the sense of divine love that once was given but in the meanwhile has been partly or totally obscured. The fresh experience of grace often appears unexpectedly, even with no sense at all that it has a precedent, but my account of the baby's personal origin (in chapter 1) explains why in reality the experience is not entirely new.

Here we should face the question: if conversion is a divine activity why does it appear to be relatively rare, partial, and delayed even in those people who seem naturally disposed to believe? The answer is in the very strong unconscious resistances, the disturbance of which opens up our vulnerability. Resistances come from two directions; on the one hand the pressure from buried or feared memories of pain, and on the other the preference to hold on to forms of lifestyle shared in community with others. Those defensive patterns of behaviour and thought, sometimes markedly contrary to the way of Christ, are often taken to be consistent with Christian living, and so may be tolerated in the Church. But to live in Christ on God's terms, the human person is invited to move on, beyond what she already knows of God's beauty, into a maturity of relationship which can appear alarmingly threatening to her present understanding of the faith.

It is here that the dispossessive character of Christian living comes into view, and the need to remember the sequence of spiritual growth. The newly born-again person, awakened to faith, will characteristically

begin to enjoy a blessedness of joy and security, and this is seen for example in the many traditional and recent hymns and worship songs that are me-centred. For many Christians this is typical of the first stage of their life in the Church, and it is likely to be long-lasting. In being led towards a deeper conversion the person will need, during that period, to be convinced that the 'loss of self' will be real but not harmful, in the sense that the person no longer has to hold on to her own independence. She does not need to claim ownership of her own life nor be particularly concerned to assert her rights. When the claim to own oneself is given up, there is the beginning of a service which is perfect freedom. Consequently there is no call for the individual to grasp her own 'power' because she has been given share in a power which belongs to the One to whom she has surrendered. It is crucial for the Church to recognise that conversion at sufficient depth does enable the believer to let go his defensive possessiveness, but it is an on-going task, involving gradual healing.

Being released from animosity

Thirdly in respect of conversion the questions arise, what is the nature of the good-enough sense of identity, of personal being, that is a sufficient base from which to respond to God? How are we to understand the way in which the marginalized and oppressed can be converted, despite being materially dispossessed and emotionally humiliated? Evidently it is difficult to answer precisely, since in the nature of the case God gives his grace in ways we cannot prescribe. But we can say from observation that poverty and deprivation do not always prevent people being open to grow in holiness. Indeed awareness of need, if it is not compulsively tied to a sense of grievance and self-pity, seems to be the proper ground on which to live in openness and receptivity towards God. Therefore conversion does not mean a repudiation of *amor sui* despite its goal in dispossession. What makes it distinctive and liberating is that the change of heart towards God will include the recognition that the Creator himself has not been instrumental in making them victims. It seems that release from bitterness is a necessary part of the change that conversion effects. When those who perceive themselves to be victims are healed and converted, they recognise at the same time that God is on their side and always has been, having chosen to be a victim himself.