



Women's Theologies

Before You Begin

This topic focuses on contemporary North American women's contributions to theological discourse. We confine this section to an introduction to North American Women's theologies because of the limited space and the numerous categories of women's theologies worldwide. Throughout Christian history it has been male theologians who have determined the content of theological study and debate and male theologians who have shaped our concept of the Godhead. But we have entered a new era.

Understanding contemporary women's theologies is important in our modern world where we understand God to embody both feminine and masculine qualities and where women's voices and men's voices together illuminate a more complete understanding of the divine nature. You will find a bibliography of women's theologies included in the supplemental materials.

This topic primarily focuses on information sharing rather than personal exploration. We recommend that you use this section in conjunction with the Faith and Feminism topic, which focuses on how our personal faith development can merge with our commitment to the empowerment of women. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) continues to discern how these theologies should best be incorporated into its own public witness.

Background Information and "Her" Story

Women in the Christian tradition have been engaged with theology since the time of Jesus. Women like Mary and Martha, Mary

References

Refer to "Small Groups 101" in the Creating WomanSpace section for tips on leading a small group.

Refer to the "Faith in Action" sections of Remembering Sacredness for tips on incorporating spiritual practices into your group or individual work with this topic.

Refer to the "Honest Questioning and Dialogue" section of the Introduction for reminders about creating safe space for sharing and the intersection of denominational social witness with the integrity of the individual conscience.

theology

"Literally, theology means 'God-talk'; more broadly, it can be taken to mean disciplined reasoned inquiry and reflection on ultimate meaning and value. Theology interprets scripture and tradition in particular historical, social (i.e., political, economic, technological), and cultural situations for particular faith communities" (M. Shawn Copeland, in Russell and Clarkson, *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, p. 283).



Magdalene, the woman with the flow of blood and the Canaanite woman were involved in the life and ministry of Jesus. The women who were witnesses to the resurrection, the women at Pentecost and women like Lydia, Phoebe and Prisca were crucial to the ministry of the early church. Throughout Christian history women in every part of the world have explored, taught and practiced their own theological understandings and beliefs in their work, in their communities and in their homes. This work includes ordained ministry, social service work, grassroots activism, teaching, working within academia, planting gardens, mothering and much more. Just as women's theologies are as diverse as the women of the world, the ways women continue to do theology are equally as diverse.

Most of the Christian theology of the last 2000 years has been developed, interpreted, organized and canonized primarily by European men who had some degree of wealth and/or power. As a result, their lenses of experience neglected and even dismissed the theological insights not only of women but also of indigenous peoples, people of color and the poor. Recent developments in women's theologies, liberation theologies (rising out of experiences of the poor, the colonized and the oppressed, primarily in the two thirds world) and theologies from people of color have developed into strong movements and areas of study within academia.

In many North American churches, including the Presbyterian denominations that merged to form the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), women who were left out of the decision-making structures and official theological discourse responded by organizing women's groups within "the prevailing definition of proper work of women, ... to be responsible participants in the religious community" ("History of Presbyterian Women," pp. 1-5). Presbyterian Women, rooted in spiritual growth, service to God's people and support of the mission of the church, became a leading voice in advocating for inclusiveness, women's issues and the ordination of women.

Mary and Martha

Luke 10:38-42; John 11:1-45; John 12:1-8

Woman with the flow of blood

Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48; Matthew 9:20-22

Canaanite woman

Mark 7:24-30; Matthew 15:21-28

Mary Magdalene

Luke 8:1-3; John 19:25; 20:1-18; Mark 15:40-41, 47; 16:1-11; Matthew 27:57-61; 28:1-10; Luke 24:1-11

Women at the resurrection

Matthew 28:1-15; Mark 16:9-11; Luke 24:1-12

Women at Pentecost

Acts 1:12-14; Acts 2:1-18

Lydia

Acts 16:11-15, 40

Phoebe

Romans 16:1-2

Prisca (Priscilla)

Acts 18:1-3, 18-19, 24-28; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Romans 16:3-5; 2 Timothy 4:19

For Journaling or Conversation

How were these women, individually or collectively, crucial to the ministry of the early church?



How Faith Speaks

With a few exceptions, the leaders of the Reformation shared their culture's bias that women had little to add to biblical and theological discourse. However, the Reformed tradition emphasizes the principle of a church that is reformed and always being reformed. Because we are always being reformed, our understandings of God, the world and our communities are ever changing. This reforming has led to the eventual recognition of women's voices in denominational discussions, though women's voices are still not always equally heard and nor always valued in current discussions.

Contemporary women's theologies that are rooted in the Reformed Christian faith understand the gospel as a Living Word through which God once addressed and continues to address communities of faith. Essential to the reformers was the accessibility of the Bible to all people and its centrality in worship. The reformers believed that the Bible is the self-revelation of God and that believers come to the biblical text with something to ask, that questions need to be posed and concerns and ideas voiced. Contemporary women's theologies bring to the biblical text questions and concerns from the specific experiences of women. Reformed women's theologies believe that, although the biblical text is often patriarchal, patriarchy is not essential to Christianity. They also recognize that, ironically, the patriarchal text also brings to us the Word which can redeem and change the structures of patriarchy and other oppressions.

Contemporary Women's Theologies in North America

There is a lively, growing body of theological discourse by women who theorize and examine the gospel, Christian tradition and the world from the diverse perspectives of empowerment and oppression — conditions which women face in relationship to gender, race, class and sexual orientation. Historically, middle and upper class European-American feminist theologians have dominated the conversation, excluding the voices of women of color and lower income women. While this is changing, European American feminist theologians need to continue to address the racism and classism in their own communities.

Similarities

Contemporary North American women's theologies are deeply rooted in the Christian tradition but examine those traditions and read the Bible through the lens of women's experience. The lenses of race and class also shape their perceptions. These theologies emphasize praxis; that is, the actual doing and learning of and from theology by engaging with the world. (The praxis approach is differentiated from the theoretical approach which develops theology in isolation from the real-life situations of people.) Women's theologies are actively seeking, listening, speaking, voicing, questioning, encountering, sharing and responding to action. They are marked by the commitment and orientation toward personal and social transformation. Women's theologies are dynamic and pluralistic and develop through analysis of experience and feeling as well as knowledge; they recognize wisdom as well as science. They are theologies made not only with the mind but with women's entire beings. Each one of these theologies links the salvific work of Christ to liberation from discrimination as well as sin and seeks to empower the community of women through shared experiences of resistance, naming of oppression and commitment to the flourishing of all God's people.



Differences

Johanna W.H. van Wijk-Bos writes in her book, *Reformed and Feminist*, that every part of who we are — including our age, gender and social conditioning — what we have experienced and what we believe play a role in textual study. In other words, when we come to church, discuss biblical texts and pray to God, we do so from the contexts of what has shaped and formed who we are. Therefore, each theology comes from a unique history and culture. Even today women are often viewed as a “category” united by gender, which overlooks the many differences among women’s experiences, including those created by race and class differences. Women’s theologies are as unique as the diversity of women of faith.

Each perspective of women’s theologies brings unique understandings to important theological questions such as: who Jesus was and is, what is sin, what is the basic character of humanity, what/who is the Trinity and what is the meaning of the crucifixion/resurrection? Biblical stories as well take on different meanings within these theologies, as communities relate to biblical texts from the context of their own experiences. There is a wide diversity of thought and ideas within each particular field of women’s theologies (not every African American woman believes the same thing, nor does every Asian American woman or European American woman).

Exploring One Aspect of Each Theology

Asian Pacific American Women’s Theology. While most people identified as Asian Pacific American or Asian-American historically defined themselves in terms of their particular nationality (Korean, Japanese, etc.), “Asian Pacific American Women” is used to identify women whose ancestry includes East and Southeast Asia, as well as the Pacific Islands and South Asia. Rita Nakashima Brock and Nami Kim, in their essay “Asian Pacific American (APA) Protestant Women,” identify key theological themes for APA Women theologians, including “concerns for justice, women’s rights, the meaning of marginality and cross-cultural identity, and the interrelationships of individuals with families and communities.” Since Asian women historically came to the United States through sex-trafficking, as picture brides or as war brides, and because of the exotic stereotypes of APA women in the United States, sexuality also becomes a key theological issue for APA women theologians. Additionally, “Asian-looking people have been viewed as foreign nationals, regardless of American citizenship and the number of generations [their families have lived in] North America”; therefore, concepts of identity and “home” emerge as important theological issues for Asian Pacific American Women theologians.*

European American Feminist Theology. Initially an attempt to bring the woman’s perspective to theological discourse, European American feminist theologians now

For Journaling, Drawing or Conversation

Tackle one or more of these theological questions.

- » Who was and is Jesus?
- » What is sin?
- » What is the basic character of humanity?
- » What/who is the Trinity?
- » What is the meaning of the crucifixion and the resurrection?



recognize their work as but one contribution of the wide variety of women's experiences. European American feminists have focused on critiques of the traditional notions of sin (claiming that self-abnegation, rather than pride, is the primary sin of women), language and imagery for God and the implications of a male savior. The story of Esther is important to many women across the spectrum of women's theologies. One particular element of the story that continues to be important to European American feminists is the different roles of Queen Esther and Queen Vashti in the book of Esther. For many, this story forces women to ask themselves how they deal with power-dynamics in their modern-day work world. Women with white privilege can stay within the system and try to work for the betterment of others (like Queen Esther), or they can abandon the system entirely and be ostracized by the dominant community of power (like Queen Vashti).

Evangelical Feminist Women's Theology. Evangelical feminism, also known as Biblical feminism, starts from the Scripture, wrestling with the interpretation of biblical texts. Evangelical feminists believe that the Bible is a central component to faith and claim that the Bible, properly interpreted, teaches the fundamental equality of men and women. Focusing on Galatians 3:28, and paying particular attention to texts that deal with women and Jesus, evangelical feminists understand the New Testament as being about equality, with women having the same rights to teach and learn as men. Evangelical feminist theologians also read the creation stories in new and empowering ways. Some argue that both Genesis 1 and 2 teach the equality of men and women because God created both women and men in God's image and created Adam and Eve to be equal partners in God's creation. Others question and rethink Eve's role in the supposed "fall" of humanity and emphasize her role in bringing enlightenment to all people.

Indigenous Women's Theologies.

These theologies see the world in terms of relationships and see creation as being inherently spiritual. They are as diverse as the different communities labeled indigenous and explore what it means to be aboriginal, women and Christian. Drawing on the wisdom found within their cultural traditions,

indigenous women are re-envisioning the meaning of Christian faith for themselves and their people. A lot of the work done by indigenous women has been related to exposing how biblical texts and doctrines have historically been used to impose a European-American patriarchal social order that "pacifies indigenous people, suppresses their culture and subjugates women" (Russell and Clarkson, *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, 293). Indigenous women's theologies are grounded in the daily struggle of their communities and people and continue to be shared primarily through the oral tradition.

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."
Galatians 3:28

Express through art, poetry or music the vision of this verse.

Mujerista Theology. The 137th Psalm has been particularly important to mujerista theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, a Cuban woman exiled to the United States since the early 1960s. She interprets the psalm about exile from her experience of being exiled from her homeland as a Cuban, a Christian and a woman. Throughout her writings she explores the Hispanic garden her mother helped plant in her that continues to grow in a foreign land. She writes that she came to realize from her mother's ongoing experience of the presence of God with her and those she loves that it is the life one leads as one goes about doing the work of



God, the praxis of faith, that matters. Another gift from her mother was the understanding of “la vida es la lucha” (“life is struggle”). This understanding made Isasi-Diaz realize that for the vast majority of women life is struggle, and that struggle is in her own life as she works for justice. The third significant gift from her mother was an understanding of the importance of family (Cannon et. al., *Inheriting Our Mother’s Gardens*, 91-106).

By the rivers of Babylon — there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion ...

How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

Psalm 137:1, 4-6

Theologies Related to Sexual Orientation (Queer Theology)*. While homosexuality continues to be debated in the church, theologies related to sexual orientation bring the insights, stories and biblical reflections of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people into theological discourse. These reflections generally identify with Jesus’ experiences of marginalization as a reflection of their own and embrace Jesus’ love and compassion for the marginalized through his understanding of hospitality. Historically focused on the experiences of gay men, women theologians have brought insights similar to those mentioned in other categories to the theological discourse related to sexual orientation and gender identity. (See our next chapter for 2012 entitled “Sexual Orientation and Faith” for further discussion.)

Womanist Theology. Most womanist theology is developed from the perspective of African American women who speak from the foundation of the evils of slavery and racism and from the experiences of women’s survival in the wilderness. Hagar’s story historically has been of particular importance to many womanist theologians. Delores Williams writes that when Genesis 16:1-6 is reread with the slave woman Hagar at the center of the text, it illustrates what history has taught African American women — that the slave woman’s story has been shaped by the issues, problems and wants of her owners. In her book *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Williams identifies four similarities between Hagar’s story and the story of African American women: 1) motherhood as a forced condition; 2) survival; 3) surrogacy roles and wilderness experience; and 4) homelessness and economic realities.

Write a play about Hagar.

Divide up the roles and read it.

Presbyterian Church Response to Contemporary Women’s Theologies

The *Book of Confessions*, which is part of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), contains various statements and creeds that spell out the church’s understanding of the meaning and implications of Christian belief. The 1983 Brief Statement of Faith intentionally “underscores the role of both men and women in God’s covenant, uses feminine as well as masculine imagery of God, and affirms ordination of both women and men” (*Book of Confessions*, 264). This statement marks the groundbreaking shift in thinking

* “Queer theology” is the academic term most often used to describe theologies that rise from the experience of being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered.



from the 16th-century Second Helvetic Confession, which teaches that “baptism should not be administered in the Church by women or midwives. For Paul deprived women of ecclesiastical duties” (Ibid., 5.191, 101). Since the 1960s the predecessor denominations of the PC(USA) became increasingly aware of the role language plays in determining the way people think about God and about women. In 1985 The General Assembly adopted “Definitions and Guidelines on Inclusive Language,” encouraging congregations to use “language which intentionally seeks to express the diverse ways the Bible and our theological tradition speak about God” (*Minutes*, 1985, 419-420).

The 1994 General Assembly of the PC(USA) affirmed “in the strongest possible terms that the body of Christ is made up of women and men. God calls both women and men to ministries in the life of the church. Any attempt to silence or marginalize any voices is not worthy of Christ’s body. We reaffirm our church’s commitment to solidarity with women, especially in the important task of thinking theologically. ... We affirm the importance of women’s voices and work in the church and the important task of developing and articulating our theology” (*Minutes*, 1999, 86-90).

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) continues to debate issues raised by theologies related to sexual orientation.

FAITH IN ACTION

Choose among these suggested activities.

1. Pray a litany of naming. As you begin this session, your group might want to create a litany giving thanks to God for the women who are or have been important in each participant’s life. Encourage each participant to name the teachers, friends, biblical women, ancestors and other women who have made a difference, such as Rigoberta Menchu (Guatemalan human rights activist) and Sojourner Truth. Before participants arrive, you might put a simple, colorful cloth in the center of the circle where you will be sitting. You might also have a vase with a few flowers and/or candles, or lots of rocks. Each participant can use a petal or rock to represent each woman she names. Use the following prayer, or your own prayer that is specific to the group.

“Creating, birthing God, we give you thanks for the women in our lives whose love, actions and words have nurtured and challenged us to grow. We pray that we too may have the courage to name, claim and share their visions as well as live out our own. We come here, God, as women of faith and as daughters of the women who have gone before us. Hear us as we name the women in our lives. (Allow time for naming.)

We give thanks to you, O God, for the blessings of these women. We thank you for the movement of the Spirit in their lives and in ours, your Spirit which has touched them and touched us. Amen.” (Prayer by Kate Holbrook)

2. Remember these women. This activity is a trivia game about women who have shared their theological gifts, expressed dissent and/ or tried to change the church. The purpose of this exercise is to give attention and voice to part of women’s Christian heritage, particularly North American women’s Christian heritage and theological contributions to the church and society. To play this game, write the answers (names of the women) on a large sheet of paper where everyone can see them. Then choose someone to read off the questions while the group then tries to figure out who it is.



Q1. This woman historically known as an “American Jezebel” was excommunicated from her congregation in Boston and banished from the colony in 1638 because she held weekly meetings in her home to discuss the Sunday sermon and to discuss her theological views. Who is she? (A: Anne Hutchinson)

Q2: This outspoken Quaker woman, who supported Anne Hutchinson, was a preacher. She was hanged in Boston Common in 1660. Who is she? (A: Mary Dyer)

Q3: This woman was born a slave in the 1790s. In her speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” she challenged the notion that women should not have as many rights as men because Christ wasn’t a woman. “Where did your Christ come from?” she declared. “From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with it.” Who is she? (A: Sojourner Truth)

Q4: This woman expressed her theological reflections and thoughts by writing *The Woman’s Bible* between 1895 and 1898. She was a founder of the women’s suffrage movement. Who is she? (A: Elizabeth Cady Stanton)

Q5: These women taught Sunday school, worked as nurses in the congregation, organized service and community groups and much more. Who are they? (A: Many women whose names we will never know. Some we call grandmother, or mom. Others we know and have observed their ministry.)

Q6. This woman was the first African American woman to be ordained in the Presbyterian Church. Who is she? (A: Katie Cannon, in 1972)

Q7. This woman was the first Hispanic woman ordained in the Presbyterian Church. Who is she? (A. Rebecca Reyes, in 1979)

Q8. This woman was the first European American woman “officially” ordained in the Presbyterian Church. Who is she? (A. Margaret Towner in 1956)

Q9. This woman was the first Native American woman ordained in the Presbyterian Church. Who is she? (A. Holly Haile Smith in 1987)

Q10. This woman was the first woman “unofficially” ordained by the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in 1889. Her presbytery was later ordered to remove her name from the roll of ministers. Who is she? (A. Louisa Woosley)

Q11. Approximate number of years women’s ordination was debated at Presbyterian General Assemblies before it was finally recognized. (A: 60)

3. Identify experiences we bring to theology. Spend a few minutes brainstorming with the group about the different experiences each woman brings to a theological discussion.

4. Tell stories of women in the Bible. This activity is designed to encourage the group to engage in theological reflection. Read a biblical story out loud three times from three different Bibles. Then ask a few different women to retell the story from the perspective



of one of the women characters. Reflect on the insights revealed from this exercise — how the women’s words or actions reflect their own theology, the theological questions that are raised, the emotions that are evoked.

5. Role-play stories of women in the Bible. After reading the story and telling it from a woman character’s perspective, invite women to play the roles of the different characters in the story, male or female. How does the story expand? What new theological questions emerge? What feelings do the role-players experience? How is the Bible story like stories of women today?

6. Journal or draw about faith and identity. Spend some time in journaling or drawing. Ask the women to express how race, ethnicity, class and gender shape their experiences of God, faith, the Bible and the church. If the group is having trouble getting started, reflect on the stories of women in the Bible activity. Ask the women to share the different ways the Scripture spoke to them and then ask them to reflect on why it spoke to them in that way. The question can be part of the journaling exercise. If the group is comfortable sharing their reflections, allow time to do that.

7. Be inspired by images of God. Before the gathering, write several different images and names for God on note cards: Mother/Father God, Redeemer, Midwife, Weaver, Rock, Protector, Creator, Painter, Dancer, Spirit, Savior, All-Knowing, etc. At the gathering, hand a card to each woman and have her spend 10 to 15 minutes contemplating this image of God. Then have her write a prayer inspired by this image. Share the prayers and discuss the impact these different images of God have on your understanding and worship of God.

For Further Study

Campbell, Cynthia. *Theologies Written from Feminist Perspectives*. Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1987. Commended by the General Assembly to all congregations for study. Includes characteristics of feminist theologies and perspectives and their relationship to the Reformed tradition. \$1.50. Order from PDS. Item #OGA-88-069.

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Fule, Aurelia T. *Should Women Keep Silence in the Church?* Louisville: Women’s Ministries Program Area, National Ministries Division, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1992. Addresses biblical passages used to oppose the ordination and ministry of women and provides positive reinterpretation. \$2.00. Order from PDS. Item #284-92-002.

Garcia, Magdalena I. *Hacia una fe liberadora: Introducción a la teología mujerista/Toward a Liberating Faith: Introduction to Mujerista Theology*. Louisville: Women’s Ministries Program Area, National Ministries Division, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2001. Bilingual.



Free. Order from PDS. Item #72-700-01-003.

Justice for Women Working Group of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. *Sing Out New Visions: Prayers, Poems and Reflections by Women*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1998. Published as a celebration of the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women. \$8.00. Order from Augsburg Fortress: (800) 328-4648, code number 69-9791-6-00001-0597-5.

Rogers, Isabel. *Toward a Liberating Faith: A Primer on Feminist Theology*. Louisville: Woman's Ministries Program Area, National Ministries Division, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1999. A resource you can suggest the next time someone asks, "What is feminist theology, anyway?" This primer is the first in a series of introductions to women's theological perspectives. Free. Order from PDS. Item #72-700-99.

Well Chosen Words. Louisville: Women's Ministries Program Area, National Ministries Division, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1999. This brochure offers reasons for and variations of inclusive language about God. Available in English and Spanish. Free. Order from PDS. Item #7270099003.

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