

Religion and the Complications of Personhood for Women

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Abstract: There is often a problematic relationship between personhood and religion. Is religion a choice at all? Some suggest that many people hold religious beliefs without the benefit of choice, such that to abandon the “faith” would be to abandon the “self.” Is liberation from sexism only applicable to women in environments where liberalism and agency are prized? No one answer will satisfy each individual’s religious and non-religious sensibilities. However, different perspectives provide opportunities to understand more closely how feminism brings out the dual dynamic of womanhood; that is, woman as individual and woman as part of the collective ‘women.’

Keywords: women, personhood, religion, feminism, feminist theology

I was recently challenged to expand my thinking on interfaith religious dialogue and education when I was presented with the idea that religion is a personal manifestation of both selfhood and belief. From this perspective, to hold the position that religion is a personal choice is actually to hold a narrow and privileged view of the religious dynamic, since many people hold religious beliefs without the benefit of choice. Further, because some beliefs are so closely tied to a sense of self through cultural identity, to abandon the ‘faith’ would be to abandon the ‘self.’ This is a fascinating and troubling idea for me, but it makes for an interesting and potentially lively discussion with respect to women and the problematic relationship between personhood and religion.

Philosopher John Dewey refers to the idea of achieving full personhood as becoming an “integral unified being.”¹ This idea is tied to both the person as individual and the individual as inseparable from the community through education, a democratic government, social activity, etc.; in other words, through the cultural whole. He argues that in order to become a full person, the individual must be so committed to, and involved with, the community, that she holds positions of authority, direction, and responsibility. Additionally, personhood must include the fulfillment of one’s potentialities and preferences, which requires levels of both autonomy and respect that historically have not been available to women. Only through understanding the self as an active and equal contributing part of a greater whole can one make sense of the self as individual. Dewey articulates a created individual self through relation, not through strict individuality. Importantly however, Dewey does not maintain that this requires consensus in thought or belief.

My feminist and philosophical work deals with whether women are able to become full persons according to Dewey’s standard, but I would like to set this aside for a moment in order to think about a different question. Namely, is religion, in fact, a choice at all? The ‘obvious’ and rather ‘knee-jerk’ reactionary answer is that yes, of course, religion is a choice. This is borne out in the fact that many people do

¹ This idea requires the unification of the body with the mind—resulting in “an integral unified being” who is able to recognize his own place within society through his being an active contributor to it. Therefore, “He must have the power of self-direction and power of directing others, power of administration, ability to assume positions of responsibility.” School, consequently, is not simply an institution for learning how to read, write, and do arithmetic. It is the place where democratic individuals with senses of purpose, progress, and duty to participate, are developed. Curriculum becomes the vehicle through which a child’s understanding of himself and his environment grows into his ability to add to the vitality of the nation, through individual personhood. Larry A. Hickman and Thomas A. Alexander, editors. *The Essential Dewey*, Vol. I. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), 246-247.

religiously affiliate voluntarily through conversion, while others, opt out altogether. But what if we take seriously the argument that this opinion emanates from a privileged, Western idea of liberal autonomy in thought and action? As a secular feminist who is a product of a Western, liberal, and democratic framework, I believe that religion effectively can be articulated as containing dangerous, limiting, and sinister expectations for and authority over, women. It is reasonable, therefore, to argue that women are better served and better able to live as full persons without the toxicity of patriarchal religious influence. However, if this is the only position from which I engage feminism, am I perpetrating as great a violence against women from other cultural frameworks as I claim patriarchy does to my own?

Scholars must address the tension that exists here to begin to understand what is possible for feminism to mean within religious discourse. Specifically, does feminism have a responsibility to 'look the other way' when it comes to sexist religious injustice against women if those women claim that their identity is inexorably linked with the cultural framework surrounding their faith? In other words, is liberation from sexism only applicable to those women who live within an environment where liberalism is prized?

There is no one answer, which will speak meaningfully to everyone and satisfy each individual's religious and non-religious sensibilities. However, each perspective on this issue provides an opportunity to come closer to understanding how feminism may be able to bring out the dual dynamic of womanhood; namely, woman as individual and woman as part of the collective 'women.' While I would like to maintain sensitivity to each individual woman's sense of agency and self,

larger philosophical and theological issues of possible structural abuse lead me to take a specific stance on the subject of women and personhood within religion.² To this end, my discussion in this paper is one perspective, emanating from a liberal, democratic framework, which benefits from and relies on both Western feminist theology and feminist philosophy of religion.

There are three basic assumptions that undergird my thoughts. First, that at this time in our history, there exists no such thing as human equality. Men and women do not stand on equal footing in legal, religious, or philosophical conceptions of humanity. Second, that philosophy has perpetuated the notion that women are not able to be fully human due to their alleged lack of rationality and inability to free themselves from their base physical work (for a simple and clear example think of child bearing and rearing). Third, that religion has taken the structure of traditional philosophy to create and make sacred a male God and hierarchy of the family and state in relation to the ideal of rationality. This combination of efforts has made woman not only subservient to man and man-God, but unable to be heard and, consequently, to claim her full personhood. Importantly, she is unable to seek justice

² Elizabeth Cole Browning provides a clear explanation for the goal and view of feminist philosophy with which I agree and in which I situate my work. She says, "Thus feminist philosophers diverge from the traditional or stereotypical image of the philosopher in two ways: (1) They address themselves to particular historical situations, avoiding the flight into abstraction wherever possible; and (2) Their philosophical thinking is oriented toward a specific goal: the liberation of human beings from all forms of oppression, foremost among which stands the oppression of women; crossing race and class boundaries, spanning known history, gender injustice is the great constant of human experience." Eve Cole Browning, *Philosophy and Feminist Criticism: An Introduction* (New York: Paragon House, 1993), 2.

as she lacks the fundamental tools to initiate and sustain meaningful communication with 'Him-God' and 'him-man' in the first place.³

Feminist philosopher of religion Grace Jantzen asks, "But if the subject, human and divine...is a male subject, then what has become of women...can women become divine...indeed can women even be admitted as subjects?"⁴ She is referring to the pernicious grip that the masculine figure has on our conceptions of what it means to be a subject and to be in the world, our understanding of what it means to occupy human space, and our ideas about how the self is identified and put in relation to the world around it. A certain subjectivity is assumed in philosophy simply because we are all subjects and are necessarily subjective. However, a gender-specific component to subjectivity has become so natural, so obvious, that it has been subsumed as part of the subject itself; that is, that subjects are masculine.

Feminist Theologian Daphne Hampson argues that ultimately, "the fact that God has in the west been conceived as 'male', and the world of the bible [sic] has been considered to be normative for human relations, has served to legitimize the place which women have occupied in western culture and to thwart their striving for equality. To question the social order was to be disobedient to God."⁵ This makes

³ In accord with how many feminists understand politics and gender biases, Dewey explains that, "...philosophy did not evolve in an unbiased way. It had a mission to perform...It became the work of philosophy to justify, on rational grounds, the spirit, though not the form, of accepted beliefs and traditional customs." Philosophy holds itself out as an authority on matters of the highest significance—especially what constitutes knowledge itself. Philosophy is believed to have a responsibility to float above matters of the everyday or physical in order to get all the real truths or first truths. In this way, it has always sided with religion and theology. Philosophy has received much authority by aligning itself with the absolute truth of God. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), 17.

⁴ Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 32

⁵ Margaret Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 3

clear that something within the structure of the system has caused the feminist movement to hit a decisive roadblock. In my opinion, to be a feminist is to be a fearless champion: a necessarily heretical, undeniably revolutionary, and antagonistically questioning she-beast stationed ever ready to be accused and condemned. To stand up for the rights, needs and desires of women is to place oneself at the crux of dominant traditions and patriarchal thinking. Furthermore, it can mean a necessary disassociation with the past in order to combat the inequalities of today. Hampson argues again, "It may be far more powerful to live free from the past, weighed down as little as possible by how women have been perceived, or have perceived themselves, in that past."⁶ This is what feminist theology and feminist philosophy of religion do, leading to the questioning of some of the 'big-ticket' items within theology and philosophy.

Ultimately, we are speaking of a struggle to locate and overcome the masculine roadblock, by conceiving of it and its remedies in different ways. However, no matter the difference in approach, there are certain similarities in thought that speak well to the main goal. First, there is the issue of the unheard female voice. Feminism within theology has been very apt at recognizing the absence of 'her' perspective, her thoughts, and her ideas. Second, there is a recognition of bias and inequality; a bias not only in favor of the male, but honestly and openly against the female. 'She' has been made the theological scapegoat for sin, suffering, and eternal damnation. 'She' has been associated with everything that is not 'him,' and therefore alienated from status, power, and authority. Third, and most

⁶ Ibid, 36

important to the work of philosophy, is a general discomfort with transcendence. Transcendence has been identified appropriately, based on its 'otherliness,' as a way to keep women from God and God from women. In its worst manifestations, it removes accountability for suffering from the people and perverts the idea of justice so that human suffering is not only acceptable, but also required.

Regarding transcendence, I argue that once philosophers and theologians determine that the physical world is not the only world or the most real world, then the physical world necessarily becomes second best and irretrievably broken. It is nothing more than a dim reflection of what is ultimate and true. Since ultimate reality and pure reason are tied together (an added distinction), the dichotomy of mind and body is fused to this same sense of ultimacy. The mind, with its ability to reason, is closer to ultimate reality than the body, since it is the only way to access glimpses of the supposed transcendent. Grace Jantzen's shows the gross negligence involved with this reasoning when she writes of salvation that, "...the Western intellectual tradition is obsessed with death and other worlds, a violent obsession that is interwoven with a masculinist drive for mastery."⁷ There are issues of masculinity, rationality, classical theism and of course, epistemology and metaphysics wrapped up in her thoughts on "the Western tradition" that need unpacking.

First, it is important to note that she sees this intellectual tradition obsessed with not just death, but death AND other worlds. The link with the transcendence of other worlds gives death its sinister vibe. The key here is to remember that

⁷ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 129

masculine rationality is also linked to transcendence in its most perfect form, which is the necessary opposite to physical existence. This means that physical existence, in other words, life, is made into a necessary evil so that the rational and transcendent can survive. Furthermore, the obsession with the assumed purity of reason due to its attachment to transcendental space, creates a violent backlash against everything presumed not reasonable.

Knowledge is tied to reason, reason is tied to metaphysics, death is tied to transcendence, and women are tied to life. Jantzen explains it this way, "If humans are to find meaning in a life which moves inexorably towards death, one strategy for dealing with anxiety is to postulate immortality and a God who guarantees it especially if that God also authorizes mastery over that which reminds of mortality; women, bodiliness, and the earth to which we all return. Death, therefore, defines life."⁸ If death defines life and is prized for its closer relation to transcendence through the prioritization of masculine rationality, what can 'salvation' be other than a tool for the perpetuation of physical suffering? Moreover, wouldn't salvation necessarily entail the specific suffering of women, as they are bound to life and earth in ways that their 'rational' counterparts are not?

The role of salvation in classical theism takes all of the responsibility to work together to create a just, stable, and healthy environment off of humans and places it on otherworldly recompense. This gives death power over life in ways that thwart life from thriving or flourishing from the start. Further elucidating this ethical debacle, Jantzen says,

⁸ Ibid, 131

The world is full of poverty, refugees, starving and sick children without a future or a hope: where does their salvation lie? Yet about this the philosophy of religion is deafeningly silent. It is a glaring example of its investment in necrophilia;...But when 'salvation' is about what happens after death, when philosophers consider it their business to ponder the eternal destiny but not the living hell of people's lives, then they are in fact colluding with rather than challenging the oppressive structures which 'deprive the living of the power to live.'⁹

If feminism is a movement which allows us to identify real injustice, as well as to provide the means with which we can measure the level of equity within personal relationship, and furthermore to articulate a way to remediate abuses through clearer thinking and physical change; we can consider feminism to be a truth—or justified belief in itself. As a truth, there is correlative ethical imperative toward immediate remediation of the abuses. Dewey argues, "In the first place, philosophy did not develop in an unbiased way from an open and unprejudiced origin. It had a mission to perform, and it was sworn in advance to that mission. It had to extract the essential moral kernel out of the threatened traditional beliefs of the past."¹⁰

It is interesting that the strength and tenacity of philosophy and theology's most fundamental arguments have been attached to that which is most abstracted, most absent, and most unverifiable from the physical world. This is particularly obvious regarding arguments concerning reality, truth, and wisdom. A deep and abiding relationship developed between philosophical transcendental reality and deity, which created a necessary symbiotic alignment between philosophy and

⁹ Ibid, 146-147

¹⁰ Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 18

theology. It is no wonder then, that philosophers assumed this relationship and manufactured various epiphanies over the composition of the self, relation of the self to the divine, and the corresponding structure of knowledge. This thinking maintains and binds most religions in substantive ways, commonly referred to as metaphysics.

Dewey suggests that philosophers have used metaphysics as a substitute for customs and social values in order to turn emotional and social prejudices into irreproachable truth. Many philosophers believe that metaphysics is philosophy at its best, in its most supreme form. I suggest however, that when we take on the task of discussing abstract conceptions of truth, it is advantageous to ask why. In this case, the 'why' of wanting to separate ourselves from our basis in the real and physical world in order to posit an alternate unverifiable reality stemming from an abstract theory, becomes a juicy feminist question.

This brings me back to the beginning and the question of the possible role for feminism within religious discourse, identity building, and personhood fulfillment. As sensitive as I would like to be to the women who would find it impossible to abandon their faith without abandoning their sense of self, I hit an impenetrable barrier. I cannot help but return to a more philosophical response to structural errors. I argue that whatever sense of self a woman has, in and through her religion, to the extent that it is understood through transcendental metaphysical reality built upon an epistemology of a one-sided mental island of self-identification, she has no real sense of self at all, only a reflection of her own lack. The perspective that Dewey provides on these structural errors is exactly what feminist theologians have been

writing against. It is my premise that the structures of epistemology, metaphysics, and transcendence can be intricately organized and taken for the 'truth' so that women are duped into clinging to that which will consequently be used against them in their struggle to overthrow injustices.

Finally, in every case, these issues become a question of priority. My position is decidedly secular and I will steadfastly hold that gods must be dethroned one at a time, one person at a time. It makes no difference the faith or the culture, I will forever hold women, their freedom, and their ability to become full persons as my first priority— theologically, philosophically, and personally.

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