ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION:
Lesbianism and Feminist Theology

A quantum leap in feminist theory has taken place in the last five years due to the insights of such writers as Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Barbara Smith, and Charlotte Bunch, women who have written about their lesbian feminist experience. A number of lesbian feminists in religion have begun to reflect on being lesbian in the context of harsh patriarchal sanctions against celebrating women's bodies—our own or those of others. As two such theologians, we have come to believe that the significance of lesbianism warrants critical attention by all feminist theologians. Pushing against the structure of heterosexism, lesbian love represents the antithesis of men's control over women's bodies and, as such, signals a challenge to fundamental tenets of patriarchal religion.¹

Our work as white, middle-class, United States-based academic activists bears the stamp of our lives as lesbian feminists. In this essay we begin to explore what we mean by "lesbian," how we understand connections between lesbianism and feminism, and on what basis we contend that lesbian experience is literally essential to the feminist movement. We submit that an analysis of feminism without serious attention to lesbianism is an inadequate analysis, and that we cannot grasp the depth and pervasiveness of sexism unless we have a clear understanding of heterosexism. We recognize that the fact we are two white Christian women gives this conversation a particular bias, but particularity is part of what we hope to illuminate.

In the past twenty-five years feminist theory has elucidated the structural and personal aspects of women's oppression. In religion we have explored this oppression in language and symbols of the divine and of ourselves. We have seen it spelled out in hierarchical/dualistic religious institutions. We have become aware of the erasure of women from history, the rape and disfigurement of women both literally and symbolically. We have come to appreciate the particularity of race, ethnicity, class and age in feminist analysis. We have learned not to generalize from our experience, but to lift up particularity. We have begun to read and reconstruct history on the basis of women's lives and to shape our collective future, making room for increasing diversity as we go.

We have understood as feminist that which puts women's physical and spiritual well-being at the heart of the common good. Feminists recognize women as agents of our collective history as well as of our particular, individual choices about directions of our work, love, and energy. Thus, we have exchanged "biology is destiny" for "gender makes a difference." By this we mean that whereas our lives are not determined by factors beyond our collective capacity to affect or change, the fact of being female—in the historical, social practice of female subordination—makes a difference in which we are positioned in relation to others in the world. The claim that our particularities—our differences—are vital to our work is itself a feminist insight born in the assumption that human experience can be taken seriously and understood only in its particularities. Moreover, these particularities are embodied physically, sensorially in the lives of real human beings. Certainly, if feminist theologians take seriously our own presupposition that knowledge of both human and divine reality is sensual, embodied knowledge, we must begin to see the significance of our sexualities as a locus of theological meaning.

At heart, lesbian experience is the embodiment of feminist sensibilities (whether or not the individual lesbian realizes this). In sexual love between women, the feminist word becomes flesh. Lesbian experience represents the beginning and clarifying of women's love for women, including ourselves, and of women's respect for women's bodies. To live lesbian lives is to be drawn to touch and be touched by those for whom we profess such respect. It is to desire intimate involvement in women's corporate quest for our own possibilities: who we may be, even now, as co-creative agents of our future and of the world itself, stripped at the core of our lives of patriarchal powers over our self-perceptions. While it is true that Ronald Reagan will not change his mind about procreative choice or Nicaragua simply because Mary Hunt and Carter Heyward are empowered by our sexual love for women, it is also true that our personal capacities to contend creatively with this President, this nation, the church and other forces of heterosexist privilege are generational, not in small part, by the "fierce tenderness" we have come to know in lesbian love.

Lesbianism is a transaction between and among women which, in a utopic world (nonheterosexualist, nonmasculist, nonclasticist, and otherwise just), would be recognized as "natural" as eating honey. In this real world, how particular "voice." We would argue that Gilligan herself fails to take particularity seriously: the life of a poor white Appalachian woman working for her husband and three children is different from the life of an affluent Black lesbian lawyer living with her lover in Boston. In both instances, however, we would argue, gender makes a difference. See Mary E. Hunt, Fierce Tenderness: Toward a Feminist Theology of Friendship (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).

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ever, lesbian love is bound up with male control of female lives. (Surprisingly to some, however, lesbians are frequently among those women best able to actually love men, since such female-male relations often are marked more by friendship and less by power-games and sex objectification than is customary between women.) As feminists and less by power-games and sex objectification than is customary between women.) As feminists

Lesbianism is the enemy of the dominant social order, for it embodies the potential collapse of power relations structured to secure men's control of women's bodies, and, thereby, women's lives. Whether or not she intends to represent the demise of heterosexism (i.e., a "political" lesbian) or is conscious of being a representative of women's power (i.e., a feminist), the lesbian woman signals that which our society does not gladly tolerate: women who do not submit willingly to men's definitions of "woman." As representatives of women whose creativity is generated and whose power is called forth in relation to women, the lesbian is outlaw in heterosexist society. This is why the social (and internalized) pressures are formidable to keep lesbians in the closet—ashamed, afraid, silent.

Feminist theological scholarship, we contend, must take seriously lesbian experience since it is here that three socio-historical currents merge: the power of female friendship, women's sexual pleasure, and heterosexist reaction against these woman-affirming phenomena in the form of political, social and religious oppression. Each of these currents carries abundant riches for feminist theological scholarship; together they may hold a key to the liberation of women if studied from cross-cultural perspective. The study of the meaning of lesbianism commends itself to heterosexual women as well as lesbians. Heterosexual women might examine the relationship of lesbianism to their own lives much as Anglo-American women have learned to explore the linkage between Afro-American women's history and their own. As white women are attempting to understand and expunge racism, heterosexual women need to pay critical attention to their heterosexist privilege. What is more, heterosexual women, like lesbians, need to realize more fully the political, theological, moral and other implications of their sexual experience.

How then might the larger feminist theological task benefit from ongoing exploration of issues being raised in particular ways by lesbian feminists? We cite here four questions which, if attended honestly, would strengthen the feminist theological enterprise as a whole:

1. In what ways is women's embodied power veiled, even now, by the sanctions of heterosexist patriarchy? Lesbian feminist research reveals a particular layer of women's power which has been all but written out of patriarchal history. A feminist analysis which does not seek to lift this veil cannot claim to do justice to women's history. What it means to be a woman is enriched by feminist data—both historical and contemporary materials on sexual bonding between women. These stories and analyses cannot be ignored if feminists are to be intellectually honest.
2. What may we see about the politics of our own lives by looking honestly at the virulent reactions of civil and religious institutions to lesbian love? Lesbians have been burned, beaten, drawn and quartered, booted in the throat, mutilated, imprisoned, forcibly hospitalized. We have lost our children, jobs, housing, sanity, and self-respect. The bulk of this violence has been related directly to, even prescribed by, religious teachings. What does this mean to feminists in religion? What are our survival resources and where do we draw the lines of primary accountability in our work as feminist theologians, theorists, activists? We maintain that these concerns should be as vital to the work of heterosexual feminists as to lesbians, because, in a literal and fundamental way, what is at stake is the well-being of all women in heterosexist society. What has been done to lesbians publicly—often in the name of God—represents dramatically what is done daily to all women whom rulers of state and religion perceive as having stepped out of "woman's place."

3. In what ways can our interests in the lives of particular people serve our interest in the common good? What may lesbian experience teach about female experience? How can we, simultaneously, be clear about our particular agendas and bridge-builders in the global work of liberation? The development of mutual accountability among those who seek justice is never quick or easy, but it can be nurtured. The only way to nurture it is to be honest about our specific struggles and perspectives. We cannot collapse our varied interests into one universal heap, but we can weave together, analytically and strategically, our various experiences and efforts in order to produce a deeply intelligent social analysis and to build a potent movement for liberation. Lesbians may bring to this movement a particular perspective much in the sense that Afro-American women bring a "womanist" agenda. The "universal" is a call to include all arms and voices, even those who cannot reach or speak. We find truth in communal cacophony, not in any person's or group's forced silence.

4. On what constructive theological and moral grounds can we radically affirm the goodness of female sexuality? Both of us have been told by friendly feminist critics that our work in the area of lesbian sexuality has seemed to them devoid of sex. We think this charge is valid and suspect it has much to do not only with our liberation perspectives (i.e., emphasizing themes of power and justice) but, even more, with our lingering uneasiness about attempting to explicate theologically the power of the erotic. Like most

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CARTER HEYWARD AND MARY E. HUNT


5 In struggling with this section, a number of feminist theorists have been helpful to


7 Mary E. Hunt discusses this more fully in "Transforming Moral Theology: A Feminist Ethical Challenge," in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Mary Collins, eds., Women—Invisible in Church and Theology, Consolata 383 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1985), pp. 84-90.
Carter Heyward and Mary E. Hunt have concisely stated the centrality of love between women for theology, as well as the value of theological and ethical reflection for lesbian theory. Their questions challenge biblical studies. I wish to take up that challenge and outline several ways in which study of the New Testament can contribute to the discussion.

At first glance it seems that the New Testament speaks of sexual love relations between women only once, in Romans 1:26. ("Therefore God handed them over to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for those contrary to nature.") Most biblical scholars either overlook this verse or consider it to be marginal to New Testament theology. Heyward and Hunt, however, like other lesbian-feminist theorists, point out that the condemnation of women-loving women is part of a larger matrix of male control of female bodies and of attempts to contain female power. Romans 1:26 emerges as a knot in a web of theological reflection. In 1 Thessalonians 4:4, for example, Paul exhorts the believer in Jesus "to acquire for himself his own wife [literally: 'vessel'] in holiness and honor." The metaphor of "vessel" (Greek: skênos) is presumably based upon Paul's acceptance of the one-seed theory of conception, i.e., that only the man possesses a seed, and the wife is a receptacle for it, rather than the two-seed theory also known in antiquity at least since the pre-Socratic Parmenides.

In Romans 7:2-4 Paul employs the metaphor of a married woman who is bound to her husband as long as he lives to illustrate how a person is bound to the Jewish law. The image is one of asymmetry: the woman is "under a man" (Greek: hyppondros), she will be called an adulteress if she attaches herself to another man as long as her husband lives. The image cannot be reversed. A married man is not under a woman, and a man's extramarital activities constitute adultery only when he infringes upon the rights of a male fellow-Israelite (see especially Leviticus 18:20; 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22-29), but not if, for example, he sleeps with a slave, a prostitute, a foreign woman, a virgin, or a divorced woman.

The asymmetrical understanding of marriage exemplified in 1 Thessalonians 4:4 and Romans 7:2-4 is also found in Ephesians 5:21-33. The author, probably a student of Paul's, compares a wife to the church and a husband to Christ. Christ's biological masculinity is elevated to a Christological category, and the root metaphor for Christ's relation to the church is heterosexual marriage. As bridegroom, Christ's masculinity becomes essential, rather than accidental. Women are to be subordinate to their husbands, as to the Lord, and to fear them. The church is depicted as a pure and spotless bride, and Christ as the one who gave himself up for her. As Christ loves the church, so too are husbands to love their wives. This passage has had great appeal and influence throughout Christian history, serving not only as the proof-text for the sacramentality of marriage within Roman Catholic the-
I preface my response by reiterating the position taken by Carter Heyward and Mary Hunt regarding the centrality of lesbian experience for all feminist projects. It is a point also made by Adrienne Rich in her now classic essay on “compulsory heterosexuality,” an essay which scrutinized liberal and radical feminist analysis for its treatment of lesbianism. \(^1\) Rich discovered that the work of feminists through the seventies was sadly inattentive to lesbian experience, and she called all of us to task for this profoundly disturbing void in our work. Perhaps the myopia of the past decade continues into the eighties because feminists have yet to extend our powerful vision of inclusiveness to embrace the fullness of women’s cultural and historical reality. Such absence or incompleteness jeopardizes the women’s movement in every way by unwittingly (or intentionally) continuing traditional exclusionary approaches. Omission in scholarship is bad scholarship, and disregard of some women’s lived reality raises the question of why the denial, the forgetfulness.

I hasten to add that inclusiveness in feminist analysis is more than a compensatory measure. It is not merely a matter of taking into account (that is, adding) lesbianism in one’s work but of posing the questions of how and in what measure lesbian experience modifies understanding of women’s values, aspirations and routine activities. Once again, Rich’s essay indicates that reticence between women about their respective hopes and works promotes division, distance and fear. Rich sees “compulsory heterosexuality” as an invidious ideology and social structure that denies every woman her freedom. I believe that she is accurate in her appraisal of the violence experienced by all women living in coercive relationships. By ending the silence concerning those particular human relationships that are perceived as loving, liberating, satisfying, Rich is asking feminists to take stock of the implications of emotional dependence. Lesbian women (arrayed along a continuum of “no” takers to coercive relationship) offer us all a living critique of emotional submission; the traditional arrangement of marriage and work which overwhelmingly places women in a less active position no longer appears either “natural” or “blessed.” Perhaps lesbianism offers a breakthrough beyond what I term the “scarcity principle” underlying human sexual arrangements. Feminist theology invites holism and implicitly welcomes abundance. Human choice requires opportunity and the capacity to discern genuine desire. It sought to promote movement away from narrow spaces and limited understandings. The critique of “compulsory heterosexuality” might well be the starting point for all feminist activity.

I am highly appreciative of the way Heyward and Hunt grappled with sexuality in their discussion. They write of the embarrassment that sup-

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black heterosexual women in white America have any kind of "heterosexual privilege" above the privilege of white lesbian women. My considerable experience in the white world has taught me that the privileges of white women (lesbian and heterosexual) far exceed the privileges of black women (lesbian and heterosexual). Even in the black world where black men have authority, white women (lesbian and heterosexual) are apt to have more privilege and status than black women (heterosexual and lesbian). However, I recognize the truth in Hunt and Heyward’s claim that lesbians have been brutalized. “...have lost children, family, jobs, housing, sanity and self-respect.” Religious teachings have reinforced this violence against lesbians.

But feminists—whatever their sexuality—must be careful not to imply an exclusive feminism. When Hunt and Heyward overstate their case (“In sexual love between women, the feminist word becomes flesh”) they project an exclusive image of feminism. It seems to me that feminism must affirm the sexuality of all women: lesbian, heterosexual and celibate. Therefore the feminist word must also become flesh through women's experience of heterosexual love and celibacy. Yet, the heterosexual dominance in this culture demands that feminists take every precaution to insure the inclusion of the lesbian voice in feminist articulation.

The final problem with the article is the following parenthetical observation made by the authors: “...lesbians are frequently among those women best able to love men, since such female-male relations often are marked more by friendship and less by power games and sex-objectification than is customary between women and men in heterosexist society.” Does this statement mean to suggest that “sexless” love is a firmer foundation for friendship than sexual love? Or that power games in relationships have only to do with sexuality? Or is the implication that friendship between lesbians is totally lacking in power games and sex-objectification?

Nevertheless, Hunt and Heyward’s questions regarding lesbian issues and the feminist theological task are exciting. I am anxious for lesbian scholarship and research to reveal what women’s embodied power has looked like in the course of women’s history. Such revelations can help us develop a more holistic view of sexual bonding. And the critique of civil and religious institutions from the perspective of lesbianism can show all of our communities how we have excluded lesbian women who have vital, brilliant and necessary skills to bring to our struggle for liberation, love and real human community. Especially important is Heyward and Hunt’s statement that “...feminist theology must learn how to insist that liberation, like oppression, is sexual.” My research on the slave narratives of black women has shown me that the end of slavery entailed not only social liberation for black women. It also signalled the liberation of black women’s sexuality from the brutal and often perverse sexual appetite of the white slave master. New categories are needed in theology to talk about the meaning of this sexual liberation for the black woman’s understanding of her history and of her relation to God. Perhaps lesbian feminist research will provide some significant clues.

Evelyn Torron Beck

Carter Heyward and Mary Hunt invite us to consider feminist theology in the context of lesbian-feminist theorizing. The question for me is not whether lesbianism needs to be included, but how. I take the need for inclusivity as given in every arena of the feminist project. In fact, I would go even further than Heyward and Hunt in insisting that our theories be based on the simultaneous recognition of commonality and difference. I would warn that if the theories we build are not based at their root on the true diversity of women’s lives, then they will be false, partial, skewed, and distorted from the very beginning. In this vein, I would not simply ask how the larger feminist theological task might benefit from issues being raised by lesbian feminists. I would say that lesbianism—as a way of experiencing the world and as a way of knowing—must not simply be viewed as a “special case,” of interest to feminist theology, but must be seen as integral to the pool of knowledge on which feminist theology is based.

In this essay, feminist spirituality is being redefined to include the political and the sexual. In "The Erotic as Power," Audre Lorde expresses the interrelationship of the many kinds of powers accessible to us as women, powers that we have been afraid of, because we have been taught that they are inappropriate to us as women. "The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling." Lesbian sexuality is not separable from female sexuality. Therefore, if feminists who define themselves as heterosexual live with a fear of lesbianism, they live with a fear of their own possibilities. In the early years of the second wave of the women’s movement, Alis Dohkin sang tellingly (and perhaps frighteningly), "Any woman can be a lesbian."”

Many a woman has discovered the literal and theoretical truth of these simple words, whether or not she has chosen to live a lesbian life. By acknowledging all the possibilities within us, we create the space for expression of a deeper, fuller, richer spirituality.

As a Jewish lesbian feminist I would frame the parallels used in this essay differently. As white women need to understand their white privilege and explore their racism, so too Christian women need to understand their Christian privilege and anti-Semitism, as all heterosexual women need to understand their heterosexual privilege and homophobia. As women, we are


still often separated by our differences. Only when we name our differences and look into our fear of the “other” will we be able to get past our fear into a place of true communality. Reaching this place will not erase either our differences or our fear, but it will allow us to free the places that make true communion or community possible.

Hunt and Heyward have provided the beginnings of a framework with which to start. I would want to be sure to locate the process in the domain of social and political history, recognizing the fact that as multidimensional people, we have more than one location in time and space, more than one community in which we would like our spirituality to become whole.

LETTERS

To the Editors:

While I am grateful for Carter Heyward’s kind assessment of my work (“An Unfinished Symphony of Liberation,” vol. 1 no. 1), I must differ with her on two points. The first is merely a factual error. My choice of a title for The Divine Feminine was not The Divine Female but the phrase that became the subtitle: Biblical Imagery of God as Female. Dr. Heyward is correct that the publishers changed my title without asking or even telling me in time for me to make a meaningful objection—an act of patriarchy, certainly, and very much resented because I do not believe in anything eternally “feminine” as Jung’s followers do. Various cultures define “the feminine” in various ways, so for me the term is much too culture-specific to be used without qualifiers concerning God.

My more important point of difference with Dr. Heyward concerns christology. Perhaps I have not always been as explicit about that as I should have been. If so, my timidity has stemmed from my efforts to preserve communication with evangelical women and men. But I also work extensively, in cooperation with Muslim, Jewish, and post-Christian and post-Judaic feminist women, and would not like to be understood as excluding them by my words about Jesus, whom the Christian Scriptures identify as the Christ or Messiah of God. I think that traditional Christianity has made a tragic error by developing a religion about Jesus instead of enacting the vision of Jesus. According to John 17, Jesus prayed that all human beings might be one in the way that Jesus was one with the divine Source of all being and becoming, and that is the prayer that we who call ourselves Christians ought to be seeking to implement.

In the Task Force of Women of Faith in the Eighties, we are able to achieve inter-religious dialogue by recognizing that each person speaks with the symbol-systems of her own religious tradition yet works cooperatively with people of other traditions on the basis of the unity of our common faith-experience. Hence we call ourselves inter-religious, not inter-faith, the idea being that although there are many religions, there is only one profound experience called faith.

Accordingly, when I interpret Paul’s remarks about what it means to be “in Christ,” I understand Paul to be speaking about what it means to be a member of the New Humanity. In the New Humanity which justice-ori-