

LISTENING TO VOICE: REVISIONING FEMINIST PEDAGOGY FOR
CHRISTIAN EDUCATION AND FORMATION

Mark A. Maddix, Northwest Nazarene University
Adrienne Maddix Meier, M.A., Fuller Theological Seminary

“Many [women] are brought up in such a manner as if they were only designed for agreeable playthings! But is this doing honor to the sex? No; it is the deepest unkindness; it is horrid cruelty...And I know not how any woman of sense and spirit can submit to it.”
- John Wesley (1986, 3:396)

Introduction

Women may no longer be considered feeble-minded and weak-willed as during the time of John Wesley’s sermon, but women still encounter obstacles in obtaining a voice in ministry and in theological and Christian education. Though men have dominated theological education for the last couple of decades, more women are seeking theological education now than ever before. Currently sixty-two percent of M.Div. students in the Association of Theological Schools are women.¹ These women face unique challenges, as a result of the patriarchal nature of both the academia and Christianity. It is necessary to evaluate whether education in the academy and current pedagogical practices values the experiences and traditions of women.

Since influences of power, oppression, and social structures affect experiences, these components are integral in understanding the social world and identity of women. In order to empower female learning and evaluate the role these dimensions play in Christianity, feminist studies can be utilized as “a way of recovering an often-overlooked aspect of the Church, including other voices that dominant religious history may seek to silence or treat it as peripheral” (Corley & Blessing 2006, p. 127). Learning and identity development intersect with the social, cultural, and historical influences of experience (Hayes, 2000). Carol Gilligan asserts, “The development of cognition is the process of re-appropriating reality at progressively more complex levels of apprehension, as the structures of thinking expand to encompass the increasing richness and intricacy of experience” (1998, p. 5).

For women, academic and learning ecologies are often experienced as oppressive. The infrastructures of education contain internalized assumptions, networks of unspoken agreements, and implicit contracts that all the participants have often unconsciously agreed to in order to bring about learning (Schuster & Van Dyne, 1995). These paradigms are often patriarchal and organized around power and values. Thus, it is imperative to question “the very foundations of knowledge – how, and by whom, it has been formed” in order to accommodate female experience (Say, 1990, p. 135).

¹ Statistics obtained from the 2009 Association of Theological Schools and the Commission on Accrediting. A look at the ATS 2009 Annual Data Tables reveals that female MDiv students outnumber male MDiv students at sixty-two—or 25 percent—of ATS member schools.

The invitation offered to women in academic contexts is not congenial, as theological and Christian education remains patriarchal. Many of the unique challenges women face in theological education can be traced to the patriarchal origins and foundation of Christianity. Though seminaries are training more and more women, the ranks of faculty and churches rarely include more than a few females. Women will remain in a dual tension of existence and foresight until women's experiences, memories, and traditions are incorporated into the pedagogical practices of theological education (English, 2008).

Women find themselves struggling to find their "voice." The call of women to vocational ministry is often challenged. But even after ignoring these challenges, women are faced with the sexist attitudes of congregations and overall patriarchal structure of the church (Kim, 2002). The strong patriarchal, masculine authority within the church may serve to discourage women from speaking publicly (Jule & Pedersen, 2006). Jule and Pedersen (2006) argue that Christianity includes "codes of silence for women and public voice for men" (p. 54). Thus, "men play the part of knowing, of belonging to, and of participating in power, while women play the part of consistent and supportive audience members" (Jule & Pedersen, 2006, p. 54). As a result women have "for far too long in the history of Christian spirituality unfolded under the guise of a false harmony of male and female religious experience" (Durka, 1982, p. 178).

The use of language and ways Scripture is often interpreted contains assumptions that threaten to challenge the inclusion of women in the Christian faith. Durka (1982) states, "Sexist religious language distorts" and "restricts women from valuing and affirming herself as authentically an image of God" (p. 166). Feminist approaches to education sensitize students to the non-neutral nature of language, help them to critique and investigate the assumptive basis of their own language use, and help them better to understand and act on their practices and beliefs (Wells, 1994). Christianity has historically excluded the experience of females, as evidenced by the Scripture. "Women's whole selves reflect the image of God and by working in cooperation with the healing and transforming power of Christ and the Spirit, women may become wholly human as a historical reality" (Powell, 2006, p. 102-103). By listening to and incorporating female "voice," Christianity can support the pursuits of all children of God to become fully human (Powell, 2006, p. 102-103).

Since the construct of self is dependent upon an individual's memories and experiences, women must embrace their own authenticity to create a unique narrative history (Say, 1990). As a result, narrative theology can be an asset in reflecting upon and re-shaping feminist pedagogy. Through public talk, students can find their voices among the voices of others and develop a language that represents their experiences in religion (Nyhof Young, 2000). Maher and Tetreault (1994) assert that both men and women utilize emotions, tools, and narratives differently and in a variety of voices. Narrative "holds the possibility of mediation between the world of masculine tradition and women's experience" (Say, 1990, p. 119). Women's stories can serve to build a shared experience or memory by which they can understand each other (Say, 1990). It is imperative that the vision and history of women be integrated into the patriarchal culture. Narrative theology is integral in the "recovering of a tradition within which [women] can locate [them]selves to create community" (Say, 1990, p. 124). Thus, narrative theology can create a

bridge between women and patriarchal society, as well as contribute to a growing body of literature and memories to integrate into tradition, and eventually history.

Feminist Pedagogy

Feminist educators argue that feminine values such as caring, cooperation, consensus, intuition, and personal knowledge are systematically repudiated in the masculine rationality promoted by the current educational system (Belenky, 1986; Noddings, 1984; Goodman 1992). Feminist educators promote community, equality, personal dialogue, creating safe spaces for learning in order to generate safe and trustworthy teaching, and learning environments in which all participants are valued and learn to participate equally (Nyhof-Young, 2000). The impact of research on feminist educators provides insight on how to develop appropriate learning contexts by which women have an equal “voice” in the learning process and can learn in more conducive contexts. In order to incorporate female perspectives, experiences, and traditions it is imperative to analyze various aspects of education currently in practice. The inclusion of diverse teaching styles, personal pedagogy, as well as course expectations, assignments, and syllabi must be considered when analyzing academia’s inclusion of females.

In recent years there has been a drastic shift in how seminaries and schools of theology embrace and engage in feminist pedagogical practices. It has been common to shift to using more experiential forms of learning, seminar style classrooms and small groups. The adaptation of a theological reflection mirrors the experiential learning cycle: storying the experience, reflecting on it, theorizing and connecting to the tradition, and acting or planning to act. These approaches are making an effort to incorporate women’s ways of knowing into the learning process. In general, there is a heightened sensitivity to woman as caring and connected knowers. (Belenky, 1986; Gilligan 1982; Hayes and Flannery 2000). That being said, it is important to point out that women do not all fit neatly into one learning style, but rather using a diversity of pedagogies in educational settings allows for learning to transpire.

Understanding women’s ways of knowing provides profound implications for pedagogical practices that can be incorporated in theological education and in Christian education. First, *Attending to Power and Resistance*. Power often rears its head in everyday teaching and learning and educators need to be attentive to the capillaries of power and trace them to the extremities, asking us how educational practices affect the teacher and students. Why do some people resist? Who refuses to follow directions? Lecturing, a teaching method in which the speaker holds power and control is commonly used to convey information in academic settings. Lecturing is typically employed by male educators, and may serve to reinforce stereotypes of feminine silence. This power differential is “uniquely connected w/ seminary students’ future roles of leadership in the church” as lectures serve to support “hegemonic masculinity... that insists on feminine subservience and feminine reverent awe” (Jule & Pedersen, 2006, p. 43). Instead, teachers should organize chairs in circles; provide opportunities for personal sharing and conversation, in addition to providing a greater variety in teaching methods and pedagogies (Jule & Pedersen, 2006, p. 121). It is also important to develop awareness of explicit and implicit power relationships in the “classroom and of the personal

positioning and compromises that are part of our teaching and learning contexts”(Nyhof-Young, 2000, p. 442).

Second, *Recognizing Voice*. The emphasis on women having “voice” is metaphorical and refers to the right to express oneself in multiple ways (Belenky, 1986). “Voice” enables students to begin to see themselves as producers of knowledge. The metaphor describes the experience of many women as learners and knower’s. Mark Belenky (1986) uses it to explain the educative process of women's struggle to move from silence through comprehending the wisdom of various “expert” voices, to the discovery of their own voice in relation to these others” (Kaminski, 1992, p. 3). Educators need to encourage voice by providing options of personal reflection that honor women’s differences. Voice is about choice, literally and figuratively (English, 2008). The way educators “voice” depends on the context and can include creative ways such as using the body. The Christian tradition has a rich history of bodily knowing through labyrinth and gesturing in prayers (English, 2008, p. 122). Also, voice in theological education and congregational formation can include the opportunity to articulate through the arts, music, writing as well as speaking.

Third, *Critically Reflexive Practice*. In developing a contexts where women can have “voice,” educators need to think about how syllabi include or exclude women, enforce gender norms, as well as reflect learning style preferences (English, 2008). Employing peer reviews can also help educators understand the effects of personal positions as pedagogue (English, 2008). It is important that educators continue to examine what we are doing to incorporate women’s voice in our pedagogical practices.

Fourth, *Connecting to the Global*. In order to incorporate women’s voice in our teaching we need to include the larger global scene and international women issues. This can include more interdisciplinary approaches such as feminism, globalization, race, and/or gender issues.

When viewing gender as it relates to learning styles, gender is one of the many factors that influences an individuals’ learning. For example, learning styles were found to be significantly different as a result of the age of the student. Also, cultural influences define what is considered authentic knowledge (the sociology of knowledge) and as appropriate “ways of knowing” or learning. However, Mark Belenky (1986) argues that women generally value relational learning that helps to “connect” people with the subject they are studying, whereas other learning theories favor a more detached, scientific stance.

Holistic learning has often been found to be beneficial to women, which includes transformative and conversational learning. Holistic learning embodies not only cognitive, but emotional and spiritual dimensions and is a process that occurs in formal educational as well as informal integrative settings, such as in the work place, at home, and in the community (Hayes, et al., 2000). Holistic learning focuses on “integrating rational and intellectual thought into their practical and experiential knowing and to develop a new sense of identity” (Kim, 2002, p. 170). This leads to transformative learning or “some type of fundamental change in the learners’ sense of themselves, their worldviews, their understanding of their pasts, and their orientation to the future” (Hayes, et al., 2000, p. 140). Conversational learning is best accomplished in a

democratic environment which embraces shared leadership and collaborative learning by inviting students to join in an equally mutual, connected, and intimate learning environment. It is essential to allow women to take an active role in their own education by creating a democratic classroom. Though primarily seen as feminist pedagogies, these learning approaches can be utilized for both male and female students to enhance their learning experiences.

The pedagogical practices outlined in this paper along with others can enhance learning not only for women but provide a more diverse and holistic approach to learning. They also give females the opportunity to find their “voice” in male dominated educational contexts. As evidenced in the exploration of female identity, voice, and experience in academia, there are many factors of Christianity which contribute to the oppressive conditions in academia. These influences are also present in congregations and negate not only the female experience, but also their participation and inclusion in the body of Christ. Feminist pedagogical findings have implications for how congregations can enhance women’s voice through avenues of formation and discipleship.

Wesleyan Feminist Theology

Even though congregational leadership is dominated by men who serve as priests, pastors and church leaders, there has been both historical and modern concern about the lack of male influence in local congregations. Fundamentalist Protestant leaders of the late 1800’s inherited a feminized church, as women were in control - organizing and planning the church’s activities (Deberg, 1990, p. 75-76). This trend continued as female preachers significantly impacted the Holiness movement of the twentieth century. As a result of this domination, fundamentalist male leaders worked to diminish the influence and power of women by calling into question the legitimacy of women speaking and holding positions of authority within the church. Thus, a more feminized Christianity was replaced with a language of virility, militarism, and Christian heroism (Deberg, 1990, p. 76). This phenomenon is also continuing today in our culture and local congregations. Men are focusing on a “regaining of the church” as expressed in more popular books titled: *Why Men Hate to Go to Church, How to Get Your Husband to Go to Church with You, Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secrets of a Man’s Soul*, and *Manning Up: How the Rise of Women Has Turned Men into Boys*. These books reflect the concern for the lack of male participation in congregations and support the stereotype that the church is more “natural” for women.

With this overemphasis on male dominance as reflected in the culture by empowering male leadership, women continue to struggle to have a “voice” in congregations today. For example, female clergy in the Church of the Nazarene include 765 district licensed ministers and 1,167 ordained women clergy for a total of 1,932. Women clergy make up 10% of ordained clergy in the Church of the Nazarene in the USA/Canada region. There is an increase in women clergy receiving district licenses from 20% in 2000 to 29% in 2009. Even with these increases only about 6% of senior pastors are female clergy.² This is a considerable decline as compared to the 1940’s and 50’s when between 30 and 40 percent of ordained ministers were women.

² Data collected from Clergy Development, Church of the Nazarene, April 2010.

Currently, the problem is compounded because a large percentage of religion majors in Nazarene colleges and Universities are women, but only a small percentage find placement in Nazarene congregations.

The Wesleyan-Holiness tradition has a long history of empowering women to serve in congregational ministry as pastors, educators, missionaries, and as denominational leaders. This heritage is rooted in the example of John Wesley who allowed women to perform responsibilities usually connotative of more traditionally male roles (Leclerc, 2001, p. 151). Women led class meetings, carried on pastoral functions, and preached. These opportunities allowed women to transcend the established social roles for women in eighteenth-century England. These opportunities were given because of Wesley's underlying theological anthropology. His optimistic theology of grace gave women equal spiritual status and overcame any natural essentialisms. His view of prevenient and redemptive grace allowed women to strive in a male dominated society and church. According to Diane Leclerc (2001), "Wesley advocated the restoration of the social equality of women as one aspect of the Christian healing of the damage of the fall" (p. 152). Wesley's theological anthropology provides a framework by which women are to have equal voice in leadership and in aspects of congregational formation and discipleship.

Feminist Theology and Practice

In viewing feminist theology as it relates to women having "voice" in congregational leadership it is important to explore several important theological perspectives. First, the incarnation as expressed in Philippians 2:1-11, the *kenosis passage* as it relates to a feminist critique of kenotic "self-sacrifice." Second, a Wesleyan feminist approach to sin (hamartiology) as idolatry, rather than pride, frees women from language of submission, humility, and silence. Third, a feminist approach to morality and justice is based more on an "ethics of care" instead of logic and reason.

One of the core theological doctrines is embedded in the Christological concept of kenosis, or self-emptying of God as reflected in hymn of Philippians 2: 6-11. The Christology of the incarnation of the God-man provides Christians in general and Christian men in particular, with an understanding of a God who moves from a position of power and hierarchy to a place of humility. Even though many Christians interpret this passage positively, feminine theologians have viewed it as oppressive and degrading of women. There is a long standing critique by feminist theologians of "kenotic" Christology on the grounds that it may affirm forms of "self-sacrifice" and "self-abasement" as normative for women, thus keeping them in subordinate roles and possibly used to condone abuse (Coakley, 2001, p. 207). Whereas some men may need to learn forms of moral kenosis that compensate for their tendency to abuse power, other women can be endangered by an emphasis on "self-emptying" that is already damaging to their sense of identity. Since kenosis theology is a central theme in Christian thought it may represent men's understanding of hierarchy and dominance, whereas for women the theme of self-emptying is more detrimental. Sarah Coakley (2001) argues that the discussion on freedom and kenosis as self sacrifice as subordinating, or even abusing, Christian women should be confused with the attempt to reconsider the status of kenosis as a legitimate spiritual goal for both women and men-

a position held by most theologians (p. 208). Feminist theologians argue that the discussion of kenosis is embedded in God, between divine absence and divine presence that “kenotic” space is made for recognition of the other as “other.” In this regard the “other” relates to gender identity. As Coakley states, “the gendered identity of the child is initially formed precisely in its negotiation of the crisis of recognizing its own difference from the mother, and its introduction into the world of language” (2001, p. 208). In this regard it is “kenotic” because the negotiation of the crisis itself involved deep loss, and thus implicitly summons the hope of a future resurrection. This is evident in early childhood development by respecting “otherness” as a form of identity formation. The feminist critique of kenotic Christology reminds Christian educators and pastors who foster aspects of formation and discipleship in women that using language of “self-emptying” and “self-sacrifice” can damage their sense of identity. Christian educators need to be aware that kenotic Christology language may not be beneficial for the Christian formation of women.

The Wesleyan understanding of sin is another example of feminist theology that impacts the formation and discipleship of women. In Diane Leclerc’s book, *Singleness of Heart* (2001) she offers a helpful understanding of feminine theology as it relates to a Wesleyan understanding of sin (*hamartiology*). She suggests a definition of original sin as relational idolatry to augment the traditional singular theme of Augustine’s view of sin as pride (p. 159-160). Leclerc’s view of sin liberates women in their relationship to God and others. “When sin is defined as a female despair that does not will to be a self, sin is overcome by willing to be self (related to the power that constitutes it). When sin is defined as relational idolatry, or as ‘female devotion,’ since is overcome by having no idols, or as entire devotion to God it provides women with language of holiness that is life giving” (Leclerc, 2001, p. 160). Thus, Leclerc asserts that a Wesleyan holiness feminist hamartiology is best expressed by using entire devotion as the most powerful foundation on which to build a Wesleyan Holiness feminist soteriology. This image of “entire devotion” is crucial in constructing a new image of the contemporary “holy woman” (Leclerc, 2001, p. 160). Leclerc argues that this shift moves the image of a virtuous woman away from images of humility, submissiveness, complicity, and silence. The use of “relational idolatry” and “entire devotion to God” re-imagines the holy woman as strong, vocal, dependent on God alone, and free through grace (Leclerc, 2001, p. 160). This view frees women from denying their relationality, subjectivity, and connectedness to be holy. Rather, as Leclerc states, “relationality, which can be distorted by sin in the form of relational idolatry, is redeemed through entire devotion to God” (2001, p. 160). Thus, a Wesleyan definition of holiness as love is made possible through the overturning of the traditional idolatry of *self* as well as the idolatry of others (Leclerc, 2001, p. 160). Thus, the construction of this new image of the holy woman, offers women theological and experiential space for embodied, active, speaking, and subjectivity.

The change of language in communicating about sin provides the Christian educator and pastor with new language to speak about sin as it relates to women. The movement away from using language about sin as pride to focusing on relational idolatry provides women into viewing entire devotion to God as the mark of a holy person. This view frees women from denying their relationality, subjectivity, and connectedness to be holy. Also, Christian educators and pastors can focus on talking about sanctification as life giving, instead of about dying to self.

A third aspect of feminine theology as it relates to formation and discipleship of women is moral psychology. Lawrence Kohlberg's (1927-87) contribution to the field of moral development is enormous as he almost single-handedly shaped the field of cognitive moral development in American psychology (Gibbs 2010, p. 57). Such work scarcely existed in the early 1960's when Kohlberg began to publish his research. One of the strongest critics of Kohlberg's theory is his colleague, Carol Gilligan (1982), whose primary argument asserts that both Piaget and Kohlberg's theories were biased because they only used studies with men to develop their ideas. Gilligan argues that women view morality differently than men. She did research by interviewing women and found that women are more intrinsically, "subjectively attached" focusing on relationships than men (Gilligan, 1982, p. 29). Gilligan reframes the psychological development of women by focusing on interpersonal relationships, which she calls "ethic of care." For Gilligan, the *ethic of care* resolves moral dilemmas by deciding what care and responsibility are called for in a given situation and includes three stages: 1) care for self (egocentric), in which the primary element is, "I don't want to be hurt." 2) Care for others (maternal morality), which focuses on, "I don't want others to hurt." 3) Caring for truth (morality of nonviolence), which balance care for self and others, "I don't want anyone hurt" (Gilligan, 1982). This approach contrasts Kohlberg's ethic of justice where moral dilemmas are resolved on the basis of what one believes is right and moral (Maddix, 2011).

Martin Hoffman (2001) posits a similar critique of Kohlberg in his book, *Empathy and Moral Development*. Hoffman argues that Kohlberg's view of justice as the primary motivation for morality, being right (justice), is limited. He argues, in the same vein as Gilligan, that morality is motivated by empathy or care. In *Moral Development and Reality*, John Gibbs (2003) goes a step further by stating that the most plausible position of moral motivation is neither "affective primacy" (empathy) nor "cognitive primacy" (justice) but *coprimary* (both empathy and justice as primary motives). Gibbs argues that pro-social behavior includes moral self-relevance or "moral identity," which achieves a life characterized by total integration of self and morality. Gibbs approaches morality with a more integrative approach asserting that morality involves empathy or care, which is not specific to either gender.

The influence of Carol Gilligan's "ethic of care" provides Christian educators and pastors with an understanding on how to approach issues of justice and righteousness. Often language about morality focuses on making moral judgments through reason and logic, whereas women may make moral judgments based more on relationality, subjectivity, and empathy. When talking about issues of justice and righteousness as it relates to making moral decisions, it is important that educators consider the role that these factors involved in the ethic of care play in how women come to moral decisions.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to provide an argument for the necessity of giving voice to women both in pedagogical settings and in congregational formation and discipleship. Women continue to play a significant role in leadership in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition. Creating space for women to have "voice" will require adaptation to how theological and Christian education is delivered in the classroom and in local congregations. The pedagogical practices of

using narrative theology, small group interaction, community, and equality afford women opportunities to have voice. Also, the awareness that language carries meaning, which can inhibit the female voice, needs to be considered. It is important for Christian educators and pastors to recognize that adapting theological language of life-giving instead of self sacrifice as expressed in kenotic Christology, relational idolatry instead of pride when referring to sin, and a focus on the ethic of care which includes what is good or empathetic as compared to viewing justice as doing what is right, can provide more appropriate avenues of education and formation for women. These feminine “ways of knowing” can ensure that women can continue to have a voice and place in leadership in education and local congregations. When seminaries and congregations provide opportunities for women to have a “voice” and consider their experiences, these institutions participate in an aspect of Christian healing represented in the fall of humanity.

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