

FROM THE CONVENOR

By the time you read this the United Nations Women's Conference in Beijing will be over. So will the huge NGO Forum on Women which is expecting 40000 delegates from around the world. It's easy to be cynical about the hype surrounding such gatherings. Let's pray that they will indeed address the issues and foster purposeful follow-up.

Whatever the outcome, women of faith will continue to be at the cutting edge of debate and action at the grass-roots level, as this issue seeks to demonstrate with its mix of stories and theological reflection from women.

It was quite a struggle getting the material in for this issue. Several women around the world were invited to contribute, but were unable. Perhaps they were too pre-occupied with turning their theology into action to have the leisure to sit down with a pen or word-processor. Perhaps they felt inhibited because it is still so hard for women's voices to be heard in the church. But for those who have ears to hear, read on!

LIVING IN HARMONY WITH EACH OTHER: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

A few years ago I was in Punjab in India - in a small township called Gurdaspur where the worst expressions of violence and tension were rampant. Everyday one heard of a few more people killed. We visited villages where violence had taken place and encountered simple unlettered Christian women there. These are people of simple faith living on the edge of insecurity due to their poverty and also due to the violence. Their struggle, as in other cases, had more than religious overtones. These women, without any publicity or acclaim were quietly playing a reconciling role, encountering people of different faith groups and urging them to put down their weapons and negotiate for a peaceful resolution of their conflict. They could not stop the conflict in the whole state, but men and women in those villages we visited attest to the significant role these women have played in ending violence in their own small contexts.

More recently, in 1991, during the Hindu-Muslim riots that followed the razing to the ground of the Babri-Masjid in Ayodhya, in Bangalore city, Christian and other Dalit women in the slums had played an active role in protecting and even hiding in their homes targets and victims of the violence, across religious lines. The sole objective was an end to the violence and a claim for peace in communities which experience enough suffering and violence.

Without romanticising what I would term as "survival dialogical acts" of simple, unlettered women, I think they were in fact ready to "risk Christ for Christ's sake". As M. M Thomas describes it:

"Theology is not just the explication of our faith in Jesus Christ. It involves also putting that faith alongside other faiths and alongside rationality and other human values which we share with others, allowing the examination of each, including our faith, in the categories of others. In this process we, as Christians, risk Christ for Christ's sake. But we also hope to show that rationality, morality, community and other values require grounding in the faith-dimension, and to re-affirm our confession of the ultimacy of Christ as the judge and redeemer of human rationality, community and other penultimate values - as well as of the religiosity of humankind."(1)

India has seen major religious clashes throughout its history. The most recent, and most bloody in the last few decades is the riots, referred to earlier, that followed the destruction of the Babri-Masjid. In this event the Hindus were staking a claim that this was the site of the Ram-Janmabhoomi temple, which had been torn down 500 years ago by the Mughal invader Emperor Babar. Religious communalism is the bane of Indian society. Therefore the demand for the development of a "secular consciousness" by some social thinkers. People like the lay theologian M.M. Thomas have devoted a life time to develop the concept of secular humanism" as the way in which religions, including Christianity, can contribute to social and political change.

While it has to be acknowledged that the women's movement in India is ridden with internal contradictions and that there are reports that some of the groups in Delhi, for instance, were divided along religious lines during the 1991 Hindu-Muslim riots, by and large it has been articulate in its concern over the increasing religious tensions: At all gatherings of the women's movement, since 1985, women of all faiths and no faith at all, who constitute this movement have dialogued on the role women can play to bring an end to the violence. Religious fundamentalism's first target are women - restrictions of time, space and movement are imposed on women in times of tension and the tightening of religious sentiments affects the lives of women, when legal restrictions are imposed. Gabriele Diet-

rich has done the most systematic work in bringing the voices of women to the fore. She writes that an "anti-communalist stand is not necessarily anti-religious and that it is, on the contrary, possible to actively de-communalise religion...There is need to unmask the communalist position which assumes that people have identical political and economic interests on the ground of a common religion, irrespective of class and gender, not only as a "false consciousness" but also as "false theology".(2)

Entering the debate from the perspective of violence against women, Asian women described it this way:

In our naming of the various forms of violence that women in Asia experience and in identifying the roots of the violence we underscored the role that religions have played in perpetuating the violence and in condoning its persistence. The patriarchal content of all Asian religions was reflected on, particularly in a context of growing religious fundamentalism that threatens to destroy the fabric of Asian societies. We reaffirmed the need for dialogue among women of various faith traditions so as to recognise the part played by religion in legitimising the violence women experience. Such a dialogical search will lead women into the discovery of the liberation strands in all faiths and the protest potential that often lies hidden in all religious traditions. Such a task is urgent in the Asian context.(3)

Like the women in the Punjabi town or the women in the slums of Bangalore or the Mothers for Peace in Sri Lanka and the Women in Black in the former Yugoslavia, many other women around the world live out this dialogue by confronting the violence, often risking their own lives calling on their communities to live in harmony with each other.

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Notes

1. M.M. Thomas Risking Christ for Christ's Sake: Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Pluralism (Geneva 1987)
2. Gabriele Dietrich Women's Movement in India: Conceptual and Religious Reflections (Bangalore 1988)
3. From a Statement of the Asian Regional Consultation on Violence Against Women, organised at the mid-point of the Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women.

(This article is an edited version of a paper first delivered to a Mennonite Church Interfaith Colloquium in Pennsylvania, USA, in June 1994)

SOME WOMEN IN PUNE AND IN SMETHWICK

We sat on the verandah in the early evening, the elderly Brahmin widow, Saraswatibai, our 'Aji' ('Granny') and I. Sympathetic to Christians, for she had attended a Mission School, worked for a Roman Catholic College, and now lived in our ecumenical Christian Ashram in Pune, India, she practised her ancestral faith, loving to tell its stories. She told me how the evil powers tried to destroy creation by pouring poison into the ocean; how the god Shiva, in his compassion for humankind, drank the poison himself, thus making his neck blue, forever a mark of this act of salvation. Her awe and devotion, her tears, were such that I too, was deeply moved, and cried out, "But, Saraswatibai, this is what we say Jesus did on the cross for us. He received the poison of the world's hatred into his own body, and he still bears the marks!" We were silent together, pondering the implications of the Lord's love. Rising, we went to the evening Arati (Offering of light), adoring Christ, the Light of the World, and receiving his light into our minds. My ministry? Friendship, listening, but also 'making the connection' between her faith and mine. I heard with joy, that she died with the Name of Jesus on her lips.

Radha, another Hindu lady, does not often speak explicitly of God. Attractive, dynamic, radical, she taught alongside me in a large, multifaith school in Pune, helping us all to question and re-assess our opinions and values. Her loving, generous nature bore the marks of pain from the tragic death of her husband when their only child was tiny, and after entrusting me with her 'story', she is still able to ask my prayer and blessing on her and her family. Once, on a rare holiday abroad, she made a wide detour in order to show her daughter our Convent in England, the home of 'her' Sisters, for I think she recognises that we, a Community of celibate women, vowed to God, and bound together in our life of prayer and service, have something to share with other women.

Since I have been in Smethwick, on the edge of Birmingham, the Diocesan Missioner for Other Faiths has introduced me (and my Sisters) to Asians living here: Sikh, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist. I have made friends with a Muslim family where Aminah struggles to look after three younger children, helped by two older daughters - father

has left. She speaks little English but we meet on a deep level because she is a woman of faith, and it is good just to be with her as she sits with her rosary while the latest noisy Indian film is on. Once I asked her if she had many friends. "You are my friend," she replied.

Her eldest daughter, Yasmin, bears much of the strain of running the family-life while continuing her education, always at a 'disadvantage' by her comparatively poor written English, and the hostility of some students to a Muslim in traditional dress. Intelligent, articulate, highly aware of the Muslim 'under class' in Britain, she is sometimes crushed by the poverty and isolation of her environment and prospects. We have talked and prayed together, for she feels I have some understanding of their culture. Her faith challenges me; when the family moved from a house under demolition order to a new home, she could not rest until she, her mother, and sister had recited the Koran as a blessing for their new dwelling: Ramadan for her is a time of joy, for as she keeps the strict fast she discerns the will of Allah more clearly in her life. I share her joy and sorrow.

Another Smethwick friend is Sarla, a Hindu also struggling on her own to care for her family, where two out of her three children are physically handicapped, while her husband, who lost all in the Gulf War, works abroad. We talk deeply about life and its suffering. "Why does suffering come? How can we respond to God in our suffering? Why do women have to bear so much? And, sitting cross-legged on bed or sofa, we too have prayed and meditated together, as two women, seeking the One and Only God who has brought us together.

Sister Valeria, Community of St. Mary the Virgin

THE 'HAGARS' OF TODAY

In Bangladesh a new women's theology has started to develop since 1988 through an ecumenical group. This theology arises from the fact of suffering caused by oppression, and is done by and for people who suffer, and who are aware that the oppression they endure is a global reality. Women form the majority of the suffering people of the world. It is women, especially those of the two-thirds' world (1), to whom human dignity has been denied. Though this new way of looking at humanity, religion and God, primarily centres around women, eventually it encompasses all who are denied full human dignity.

Another point from which this theology originated is the total disillusionment of the innocent sufferers concerning oppressive power structures. Suffering people believe that they have waited long enough, in vain, for the powerful to improve the condition of the powerless, as the powerful benefit from their sufferings. In their task of identifying the forces which empower the powerful, these women have found religion to be the most forceful element working against them. Women have recognised that over the years the powerful have taken control of all the main religions. Consequently, people of faith have either misused their religions to strengthen the power structure of each society to sanctify oppression or have remained indifferent to innocent suffering. Bangladeshi women also acknowledge that from the beginning of civilisation, religion and society have regulated the lives of people and as the head of both religion and society, it is men who have ruled.(2) All the main religions stand guilty of supporting patriarchal social structures.

The theology emerging in Bangladesh contains a critique of the western Christian theology that the churches in Bangladesh have inherited. It finds that a theology which originated in the context of power, imperialism, colonialism and male domination has no relevance for the powerless women whose country itself was colonised by the authors of this theology. The women of faith know that the exploitation of women is a part of the whole history of oppression in which the Christian world continues to play a role. The theology that was used by the oppressors is declared unusable for the liberation of the powerless. The new theology, for the first time in the history of Bangladesh, is struggling to disentangle biblical theology from western theology in the attempt to view the Christian faith directly with the help of the Bible. Instead of giving up the Bible as patriarchal there is a new enthusiasm developing to delve deep into the Bible to find liberation for the victims of exploitation. Christian women doing theology are surprised to see how central the issue of justice is in their scripture. In a context of poverty and exploitation, the theology of the poor and the exploited is beginning to emerge, and the heart of the gospel of liberation to be heard.

Another characteristic of this theology is that it is a theology from the underside. It is the theology of the dispossessed. The dispossessed women in their search for a just God and a just society are striving not just for theological theories but for theological praxis. Theory is totally bound up with practice. Thus it is an active theology. In Christianity, so far, orthodoxy, that is correct thinking or doctrine, has taken primacy over orthopraxis, correct acting which comes from reflection. The new theology in Bangladesh is not orthodoxy but orthopraxis. The process through which this theology is created is a hermeneutical circle. It is done by groups of women who have always known innocent suffering. Women are encouraged to voice this suffering. In the next stage, the suffering is reflected on theologically. This reflection causes women to articulate their questions and suspicion about the

structure that causes the suffering. At this stage reinterpreting the Bible from the perspective of women takes shape. This generates the will to change this pitiful human condition. Often some actual change takes place. After the action, there is more reflection, but by this time, women have already risen to a higher level of understanding. Their self-esteem is higher too. This circle does not stop, but women continue to invest all three essential human elements - feeling, thinking and willing - in a circular manner to make their condition better. This reflection, action, reflection and action form the hermeneutical circle and the theological praxis.

Although a Christian theological praxis, this does not set itself up in opposition to other religious understandings and world views, as the whole process has taken account of, and drawn upon, the religious and culturally pluralistic environment in Bangladesh. Women involved in this process have a twofold task of first raising questions pertinent to their own faith and faith community and then having dialogue mainly with Muslim women who are involved in the same task in their own arena. Nothing in one's own faith is taken for granted any more, as this new way of seeing makes all religions stand guilty of befriending the powerful at the expense of the least and the lost. The task of women of faith is to befriend the powerless. In doing so, they inevitably incur the wrath of all whose power is threatened, among whom are religious leaders. The visible sign of this wrath is being expressed in the rise of religious fanaticism and fundamentalism in religions all over the world, not least in Bangladesh. It is very striking that it is women who are most often the victims of fundamentalist repression. The power of patriarchy seems to be threatened by the unleashing of the feminine power, shakti.

Looking into the Jewish scriptures, a Bangladeshi woman is seen as Hagar of the Bible. Her Euro-American sister Sarah is also under the constriction of patriarchy but she is not dispossessed in every sense. A Bangladeshi woman is the gentile (dispossessed because of her ethnicity), slave (economically and politically dispossessed), woman (dispossessed because of her gender, her physical identity). Nationally and internationally she is the exploited one. The main difference between the Euro-American and the Bangladeshi women's liberation struggle is that the latter struggle is one that is against exploitation in all areas of life. This movement in Bangladesh, in many ways, is one against even her Euro-American feminist sisters until racial, economical and political divisions become as clear as that of gender in their theology. In her identification with Hagar, there is hope for a Bangladeshi woman within the biblical tradition. God honours the totally destitute Hagar with a vision of darshan. God sees her and she sees God (3). The Creator who created all appears to the Gentiles no less than to the Jews. This truth is not just the truth of the Bible but is visibly true in the lives of many destitute people in Bangladesh.

Some people claim that St. Paul's declaration that 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 (4) is a reversal of the Jewish men's daily prayer I thank you God that you did not make me a slave, a Gentile or a woman' (5) or, in a word, Hagar. From a different perspective the above mentioned vision of Paul in Galatians seems like a development of the Jewish men's prayer rather than a reversal of it. The prayer did not teach the Jews to denigrate the people in those categories, but helped men to see their position in their own social context. Men had no cause for pride as their status was God-given. They knew that as God demanded justice, men had been placed in a position not of privilege but of responsibility. The proof of this argument is hidden in the story of Hagar. The authors of the Hebrew scripture knew that they had to be merciful and holy as their God was holy. This is why in the theological history of the Jews 'her-story' was listened to and written down as this story gave a glimpse of the nature of God the Judeo-Christian scriptural tradition upholds. This is why the Jews were obliged to give space to this gentile, slave woman in their life and history. This understanding taught them not just charity, in the modern Christian sense, but a strong sense of justice that sees this destitute gentile woman as an equal, in her identity as a child of God. Hagar and her son were not sent to the wilderness to be forgotten for ever but to be remembered from generation to generation.

The Bible consistently depicts a God who is deeply concerned about those who, like Hagar, are dispossessed because of race, gender and economical status. The "people of God" are instructed to love the dispossessed as their neighbour.

... the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of Lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the Lord your God.(6)

Rabindranath Tagore portrays Jesus who is claimed to have manifested the nature of God, as the 'Son of Man, seeking the least and the lost'. Ma-hatma Gandhi said, 'Consider the poorest person you know and ask whether the next step you take will be any use to them'. For this ecumenical women's group in Bangladesh both Christian theology and inter-faith dialogue are futile unless they take account of the well-being of the least and the lost, the Hagar of today.

Mukti Barton

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Notes

1. The third-world countries consist of approximately two-thirds of the world population. This why here the phrase 'the two-thirds world' is used to replace the old derogatory term 'third-world'.
2. Taslima Nasrin, *Nirbachito Colom* (Calcutta 1992)
3. Genesis 16:13
4. Galatians 3: 28
5. Talmud, Menachoth 43b
6. Deuteronomy 10:17-20

COMMON GROUND FOR WOMEN OF DIFFERENT FAITHS

The Revd Jemima Prasadam is a priest in the English Diocese of St Alban's where she exercises a particular ministry with women in a multi-racial and multi-faith community. Here she reflects in conversation with her Christian friend Dalice on some of those things women hold in common...

Well, first of all, Dalice, we are human. It is common humanity that brings us together. We live in the same neighbourhood, so we can share our potentials and problems. More or less regardless of faith or race, women have the same concerns: whether we are mothers, wives or single, we come together as a united family concerned for the health and future of all.

We can also have common aims. For instance, you, Dalice, and Nicole are Christian. You've been meeting together for the teaching and learning of English with Shell! and Nasima who are Muslim, and Uryashi and Bhavana who are Hindu. Your aim here is to give these young women a much better grasp of English so that they can communicate better with their English-speaking neighbours and improve their earning capabilities. But the bonus side-effect for you and Nicole has been what you have learned about the lives of these young women, both in this country and in the Indian sub-continent. But your teaching also includes inculturation. In this way, Easter Eggs, Hot Cross Buns, Christmas and so on can be explained naturally without direct evangelisation...

We know that Asian women in Britain often suffer economic oppression because of their lack of job opportunities. A local firm, for example, can get away with paying only £1 an hour for ironing (so-called "casual labour" - no social security, national insurance, etc.) Because they want some kind of independence -and to improve the lot of their families - the women are glad to accept. Even a poorly paid job (hemming, unpicking, sewing on buttons and other repetitive work) at least improves ones self-image...

A prime concern for all women is, of course, healthcare. If a mother's health fails, all too often does that of her family. This is not abstract but practical: healthy children = healthy family = healthy nation. Often, due to their extremely low wages, they get depressed. Think of Zoraha as an example: at a comparatively young age she suffers from high blood pressure.

Another health problem can be dealt with by talking together and explaining the need for wearing clothing suitable to the (normal) climate. (Editor's note: This was written during the hottest British summer for many years!) It is important that wearing Western clothing is not seen as an acceptance of Western - or Christian -ideals. Also, in our neighbourhood of All Saints, Luton, there are no parks or leisure facilities apart from a very basic recreation ground. So I recommend body movement - gentle exercise - to keep muscles and joints supple. Yet another problem we come across related to the lack of English is the misuse of prescribed medication, particularly of antibiotics. The story is endless...

Leading on from health comes a concern for the environment This is common to women of all faiths, the practical result being to bring up children to have a social conscience. Shewley and Sawina have on various occasions used their talents as dancers to train other youngsters and put on shows. They have raised funds for various good causes, such as flood relief in Pakistan, the care of children in Rwanda and the ministry of the (Anglican) Children's Society in Britain.

Hence justice comes high on the agenda. We try to apply this to our family life, don't we? Naturally we long to see it in the wider world. During One World Week at the end of October each year, women of all faiths come together baking and preparing food for the International Evening. One particular concern is for justice in the "Rag Trade" (Clothing manufacture with much of the work done in private homes). Last year's campaign "Stop the Stitch-Up" was well supported because so many women are the particular sufferers from the iniquities of the system. This was a demonstration of unity.

All women from the various faiths have the same concerns for their families, their children, their community... Coming together, trusting one another, getting to know one another...

This opens up the possibility of sharing and questioning. While we lived in our own water-tight compartments we lived in fear of the unknown. So a Muslim woman can come to acknowledge: "Dalice is a Christian, but she is a woman with the same concerns as me..."

Finally, there is the question of rights. This is a wide area where we can help one another. I have been able to help Kauser when her doctor said that her child would get over bed-wetting problems by the time he was aged twelve. She asked for referral to a consultant, who unearthed the background problems giving rise to the bed-wetting. Another young woman was given a corset to wear after a caesarian operation. When she came to me in tears, I suggested that she needed specific exercises to tone up her muscles again. And so on...

We all have the same hopes for our families and for our town. For me - as a Christian - that is what praying "your Kingdom come" means: a situation where everybody can enjoy justice and rights and all these things. "Your will be done" must mean everybody can be healthy.

Basically, as we come across people of different faiths, I have to ask: Is religion a hindrance or an opportunity? Is religion a big obstacle for us or can we make the wonderful discovery that it is not?