

My Question

“In my opinion it is only possible to bring women into the centre of an incarnational Christology if the traditional categories are gender reversible. In other words, we may speak of the Divine incarnated in a female body, truly God and truly female” (Hopkin 1995, P.85)

The historical male figure of Christ has been problematic for some women. It becomes most problematic when looking at the doctrine of incarnation, Jesus as man and God. “Church doctrine and practice has used the formula to legitimise male supremacy in authority and even in nature.” (Hopkins 1995, P.83). or as Mary Daly writes, “If God is male then the male is God and salvation comes through the male.” (Hopkins 1995, P.85). It is true that, “Women have been excluded from imaging the divine.” (Grey 2001 P21) and “to use this new language of the female as divine can be a breakthrough to a new revelation.” (Grey 2001 P21). Because of this I intended to use the language of the female as the divine in a very visual way. By literally making Jesus female.

It became apparent as I engaged with the feminist perspectives course, that hearing women’s stories was crucial to understanding feminist theology. As a man, I felt handicapped in this respect as I couldn’t offer a personal story from a woman’s perspective. I was moved by some of the accounts I heard in the seminars and I found the concept of Midrash (Like in Rosemary Radford Ruether’s “Sexism and God-Talk 1983”) particularly poignant. As a musician and composer, I knew what could be done with theatrical medium’s. I felt able in this respect to create stories, which although not my own, felt genuine and personal. I also felt that theatrical mediums allow stories to slowly immerge. A finished script is never finished. Directors cut and change bits as they go along. By using movement and expressions stories take on more meaning than was expressed in the script and finally good actors bring their own interpretations and certainly in terms of method acting, bring much of their own story as well. Having done Biblical theatre before, I found that often a cast and crew would find themselves engaging in exegesis (Is that what it’s really meant to say?) and hermeneutics (What can this say about the world we live in?) whether they knew it or not. I also knew from experience that in a theatrical, non-church setting people are more willing to ask theological questions. After performances of shows, Christians would affirm or berate the theological stance they thought was expressed and non-Christians would ask questions about Biblical passages they had previously had no interest in.

In dramatic productions, it’s possible to do Midrash in a grand way, but whenever texts viewed as sacred, “Internalised as sacred law” (Tamez 1994), are adapted, there is someone who is offended, disgusted and enraged “To openly question the teaching of the Churches concerning Jesus Christ is in many congregations regarded as tantamount to heresy.” (Hopkins 1995, P.16) as well as someone who is intrigued, excited and inspired. It is a sensitive issue and in this respect it’s most certainly a pastoral venture. I decided therefore to create a musical, as a Midrash, but specifically one, which told a woman’s story with a feminist perspective.

At first I was going to make all the gospel characters women, but this lacked male to female dialogue, which as a man, I am interested in. I then thought about focussing on the stories in the Gospels, which involved women, but believed that the whole Gospel should be important to women. (and indeed, I believe it is). Then I thought of Edwina Sandys's "Christa" and the impact that had on my seminar group and felt that I could replicate "Christa" as a musical. The power of "Christa" for me was that nothing else was different. From a distance the cross and pose was the same as any crucifix I had ever seen. It was this similarity, which I believe led me into a sense of familiarity and comfort, that made the impact of the woman on the cross particularly acute and powerful. So similar and yet so different. This juxtaposition is what made "Christa" send a metaphorical jolt through my mind. Much like the statue of the ape in place of Abraham Lincoln at the end of "Planet of the Apes", it is the familiar with a twist, which is disturbing, provoking questions of "what if?" and "Why do I feel uncomfortable or empowered". It makes us question what we take for granted. This seems to me, a key facet of feminist theology and it is this impact that I wanted to achieve on the stage. My "Messiah" should therefore like "Christa" be, "A significant sign of the Jesus who suffered on behalf of all, including women." (Bennet Moore 2002, P81)

Julie Hopkins'(1995) research done in Holland discovered that of thirty women interviewed who were all Church goers, only five believed that Jesus was divine, the son of God or our redeemer. It seems there is certainly a problem with at least the way a male Christ has been portrayed in Christian dogma. "One is still confronted as a woman believer with the fundamental problem of identification with a male messianic prophet." (Hopkins 1995, P24). For Schussler Fiorenza there is a big question of whether a historical male figure can be a role model for contemporary women. As a person who believes that the connection between Jesus and God is crucial, I am really interested to discover whether changing the gender of Christ, might allow such women to regain confidence in such doctrine.

I intended to use the concept of Midrash and a "Hermenutic of Suspicion" (Schussler Fiorenza, 1983, P.13 introduction) to "Provide new lenses" (Schussler Fiorenza, 1983, P.14 introduction) for experiencing the gospel narrative. I wanted to examine how dramatised Midrash can serve as a pastoral tool in exploring the patriarchal nature of Christianity and stimulate a response. I hoped also that this piece would allow women and men to explore the way in which gender plays a part in their faith and how this might change if they were to visualise female attributes in Christ and God. I therefore intended to use what Bridget Gilfillan Upton calls "Acts of imagination and subversion." (2002) in order to do this.

The Agenda

"Why is it so often considered permissible to suspend historical particularity in respect of everything about Jesus except his sex?" (Bennet Moore 2002, P81)

I started with Mark's Gospel because of its dramatic impact as the joy of Jesus' ministry turns sharply into the reality of a Messiah who will be crucified. There were several issues to address besides just changing the gender of the Jesus figure. Although I wanted to keep everything else familiar to give the full impact of a feminist perspective on an historical patriarchal society, I felt I couldn't write a musical with a feminist perspective without addressing:

- Patriarchal language. “critique of Patriarchy” (Parsons 2002, P99)
- Lack of name and voice given to female characters “Trying to draw attention to female characters in the text” (Parsons 2002, P103)
- The meaning of salvation in this context “rereading” (Parsons 2002, P99)
- The male names given to God
- The patriarchal genealogies associated with Jesus
- Female authority, particularly over men
- Group mentality
- Sexism and stereotyping in scripture

I wanted to have two overriding missions. Firstly “Gaining distance and coming closer” (King 1994, P196), meaning I wished to distance myself from traditional interpretation and dogma in order to get closer to another truth that speaks of the joys and trials of daily life. Secondly I wanted, “To discover new women-liberating aspects or even elements in the text that other perspectives would not bring to light.” (King 1994, P199).

I started with the agenda of only using inclusive language, but this became a problem as it detracted from the fact that I wanted my female Messiah to be in a patriarchal society. I decided that rather than just make patriarchal language inclusive, it would be better to have the subject tackled within the narrative. This therefore could serve as a strand in the theme of the Messiah bringing about salvation. I also found that I could use Patriarchal language against itself, so if the word “men” could be used to describe people in a positive context, it could also be used to describe simply “men” in a negative context.

I gave names to the women in the narrative and allowed their voice to be heard following the thoughts of Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza on recovering women in history by restoring their place in it. In this way I believe I am using a “Subversive memory” (Schussler Fiorenza, 1983, P.31) to not only keep alive the struggles of women in the past but also to create a solidarity and sisterhood between women in all ages which were and are confronted by patriarchy. Again, I found that the re-giving of a name and voice by the Messiah figure was also symbolic of salvation from a silencing patriarchy. In this respect it became part of a liberation theology.

This theme of the “Missiah” bringing salvation from patriarchy became an overriding theme. It felt necessary, as in the Gospels, to allow some in the narrative to take up the call freely and easily and others not to. So disciples were those who for the most part were ready to hear a feminist perspective and therefore to obtain salvation, whereas Judas and the Pharisees, were not able to break away from their culture and tradition as, “In the Hebraic framework the Messiah can only be imagined as male.”(Ruether 1983, P.119). Although for Judas we wanted to make it clear that his proximity to the “Missiah” had meant that his continued oppression of women became harder to the point where he had to decide whether difference in opinion should ever go as far as physical or mental abuse. Much like some say racism is prejudice with power, so too we wanted to convey a sense that a sexist may be able to realise that they are sexist and do no harm. Peter’s denial equally could be used as a tool to examine the lengths to which one must go to end oppression, particularly of women. I wanted the women in the narrative to find salvation through the “Missiah” but also to find salvation for themselves, therefore empowering the women. By expressing salvation as liberation this “allows women to insert themselves into the classical biblical Christian narrative both as recipients of liberation and as agents of liberation” (Bennett Moore 2002, P84). I intended to use exorcisms as analogies of

salvation. The demons being patriarchy and those possessed as the victims of a patriarchal culture.

“The translator must ask whether the biblical text insists on the natural masculine gender of God or whether such a genderisation and sexualisation of God is against the intension of the biblical texts and its theological contexts” (Schussler Fiorenza 1983, P44).

I decided to use both “Mother” and “Father names for God, “Obviously any symbol of God/ess as parent should include mother as well as father” (Ruether 1983, P.69). However I also wanted to use the difference in name to serve as analogy of redemption or salvation for those who used them so I decided that the “Missiah” would call God “mother”, and the people who had received salvation would also sometimes call God “mother”. The rest of the people would call God “father”. My aim was to allow names of God to have both genders to see what the effect would be, but unlike Ruether’s “God/ess” (1983) my point was to highlight the discrepancy not attempt to resolve it.. Also the fact that Jesus was a man and called God “father” suggests a particularly close and empathic relationship. I wanted to explore a similarly close and empathic (i.e. female to female) relationship between the female Christ and God. For this reason I also use the “Logos” in female terms.

Biblical genealogies include only men. So I decided to have the debate within the narrative of why genealogies are as they are. I wanted to suggest that genealogies are another way that patriarchy maintains control and also explore the question of to whom genealogies are important? Ruether (1983) talks of genealogies as being used to demonstrate the importance of Christ. In this way the genealogy gives Jesus a right to kingship. However Jesus, “does not evoke the hope for a Davidic Messiah” (Ruether 1983, P.119) and therefore distances himself from genealogies. In the same way, my aim was to portray the “Missiah” as uninterested in the genealogies. My reasoning here is that the “Missiah” I want to portray is about liberation and salvation not about kingship or rule. I therefore planned to juxtapose the genealogy debate in the script alongside talk of Messiah as warlord.

Female authority, particularly over men, is a problem in the present, with some men finding it hard to take authority from women. This problem could be made very evident with the introduction of a female Christ. So I aimed to use the Pharisees and Sadducees as analogies for those who struggle with female authority. I also wanted to demonstrate some of the reactions, which men have to female authority. I intended to explore dismissive and derisive reactions and group mentality and peer pressure.

I wanted to demonstrate the way stereotyping is used to oppress women and the way in which scripture is used to support such stereotypes. Scripture as sacred text holds a particular power and authority for many people. I wanted to demonstrate that this is the very reason that scripture can become the most dangerous tool of oppression when it is used to support certain arguments.

I needed a narrator and it seemed only right that the story was seen through a woman’s eyes, “To read the Bible from a woman’s perspective, we must read it with women’s eyes, that is to say, conscious of the existence of individuals who are cast aside because of their sex.” (King 1994, P198). Mary Magdalene seemed to be the best candidate as she was very close to Jesus. Also by the fact that the audience follows the story as she follows the “Missiah”, she is by default firmly placed in the position of disciple. Indeed I saw this as a turning around of the patriarchal myths

which take such a serious role away from her by making a myth around her as a purely sexual being and it is this. "...long series of ideologizing (or mythologizing) readings...that are more harmful to women than the actual texts are." (King 1994, P194)

Finally there was a problem with the crucifixion of the "Missiah". It isn't certain that the Romans crucified women at the time of Jesus, although female martyrs were killed by this means later. The second problem was that the authorities would have to view the "Missiah" as a threat to the authorities for this to happen and I was not convinced that it would be believable that the patriarchal society I wanted to portray would have taken this view, as one of the things I wanted to show was the way in which patriarchal society plays down women in authority, ignores them or edits them out of history all together. Therefore another way had to be found.

In Retrospect

The musical (appendix) may appear finished but I consider all compositions "work in progress" and constantly revisit them as I develop spiritually, theologically and in terms of experience. Also I intend to change things as I examine reactions to it. Two weeks after rendering this copy I already want to develop some themes. For the most part I believe that I have done what I aimed to. However there are themes I believe could be developed and likewise there is much which has come out of it which I didn't expect. I will now re-evaluate the aims I set out above.

I made patriarchal language inclusive, used it as it is found in scripture in different contexts so that it had a another meaning, I removed it where I felt necessary but also attempted to reclaim patriarchal words in an attempt to un-gender them. I allowed the disciples to call the "Missiah" lord. Personally this works, but for others it may not. Part of the purpose of writing such a piece is that it creates discussion and this may be an example of a subject around which a debate may arise. The fact that some inclusive language is used, makes it obvious when the language is patriarchal and though the "Missiah" is imaginary, the iconic power of a Christ figure, is such for me that in seeing she is inclusive, sub-consciously the listener starts to feel that the authority of God is against patriarchal language.

I think the giving of names to Biblical women works particularly well. Not only does it make their stories more memorable but it also raises their status literally to principles in the narrative.

The child's resurrection story became more about empathy, since God had given her only daughter to die and to rise again. God could empathise strongly with Jairus and the female Christ was in fact instigating what she hoped her mother would do for her. The child and the female Christ therefore were to have an experience in common and dialogue is between two daughters. This makes the story very powerful. However, despite what I see as success in this part, I wish now that I could have given the other women a greater account. Unfortunately there just wasn't room for everything. I hope that in balance I did not give too much of the story to the men. Although, I hope to make room for men in this production when it is staged as I want to create a situation where both genders can discuss their roles in the story and hopefully in the patriarchal society of today. However I do believe that I should have included the woman who washes Jesus' feet as, "such a feminist critical hermeneutics must recover all those elements within biblical texts and traditions that articulate the liberating experiences and visions of the people of God" (Schussler Fiorenza 1983,

P.33). This story has much to offer in terms of liberation for women and I hope I can include it in a later draft.

The salvation themes work symbolically as “holistic-physical wholeness, social justice. ...as well as the renewal of religion and morality” (Hopkins 1995, P.29). For it is by physical healing and justice that those who come to the “Missiah” are saved. Equally salvation occurs when the barriers of patriarchal religion are brought down. For the disciples salvation is found by breaking away from patriarchal structures in society. “They rejected the current patriarchal social structures and eschewed external religious and familial obligations and formed a new sort of extended family based upon the belief that they were brothers and sisters, a discipleship of equals.” (Hopkins 1995, P34). It is therefore clear that the “Missiah” is working against oppression and oppression is not therefore the will of God. In the case of Peter’s mother in law I made the “Missiah” almost make her swear not to serve men in the way she had been doing, before she could be saved. But the “Missiah” also says, “Now you are free to serve people like me”. By this I wanted to give a flavour of the transformation into what Reuther (1983) calls the “good slave”. This means a person who does not unquestioningly subject themselves to the existing social order of bondage. And I used the word, “serve” in such a way that it implied discipleship which is how Deborah Klause (2001) says it should be used. Also, in this instance, “within the words on the page, the narrative, they find an affirmation of their experience” (Levine & Blickenstaff 2001) as the “Missiah” names the trials of Peter’s mother in law but also of the woman with haemorrhaging. For Peter’s mother in law servitude is transformed from domestic work to discipleship. Another aspect of salvation was the concept of the last being first in the kingdom of God. I used the story of the widow’s offering to allow the “Missiah” a parable of salvation for the most oppressed members of society of which the widow is an example of as a woman, a poor woman, and a woman without the social protection offered by marriage in the ancient world. For Hampson (1990) salvation must be seen from a woman’s perspective “As a healing of the self; as a person coming to be all that she may be in a network of relationships” (Hampson 1990, P127). I believe that this is the door that my “Missiah” opens.

It could be said that naming God “Mother” evokes respect for motherhood but also offers a role model for mothers. The negative being that this role model may seem so unachievable that actually it is counter productive by forcing women into a role of motherhood, which is unsustainable. I also felt that it seemed quite natural at times to call God un-gendered names like “The one”. What is certain is that when naming God, “Female metaphors carry other resonances and convey a different sense of God or of the divine.” (Hampson 1990, P.156), but the job of the musical is to make the audience sense those, not tell them what they are. What felt important when covering such topics was to make emotional connections. I couldn’t, within a musical theologically reflect on everything that occurs in the life of Jesus with a feminist perspective, but what I did, was highlight where the problems were, and how seriously they affected people. A musical is about evoking an emotional response so leaving the audience or actor with an emotion so strong that it transforms them would be an ultimate goal.

The introduction of female authority on a Messianic scale did allow me to demonstrate the varied responses of men to female authority and certain features which I hadn’t consciously planned added to the impact of this. Firstly, as God is referred to as “mother”, there can be no feeling of the “Missiah”, having got her authority through male intervention. She argues intelligently both emotionally and

theologically with those she meets, which dispels any feeling that she may have obtained her authority by good looks or flirtation. Likewise she is calm and composed. However she is also portrayed as someone who can have righteous anger and therefore I believe she is separated from stereotypes of a “gentle Jesus”(Hopkins 1995, P.17) which as Hopkins argues damage both women and Christianity, “gender and Christological stereotypes reinforce each other” (Hopkins 1995 P.18). In all, I hope she is a compelling symbol of female leadership for women and men. However, her compelling authority gave me an opportunity to demonstrate the male response of “Couldn’t have done it without a man”. The Pharisees, in the musical, are convinced she is simply a cover for a man who is really masterminding the whole thing. Of course, in the story, they are shown to be quite wrong. The Pharisees also view a female in a position of leadership as a damaging thing, “If they attempt to exercise leadership they bring suffering upon themselves and their families” (Hopkins 1995, P.19). I found that the Sadducees and the Pharisees demonstrated group mentality, particularly involving men working together to oppress women but this happened by accident and this theme is worth developing at a later date.

I used sexist and stereotypical language throughout the musical to resonate with what women still have to deal with today. I focussed on the use of scripture for creating stereotypes. However the “Missiah” was a powerful tool for dispelling such language, as what was being played out within the script was a clear contradiction of such stereotypes. Although I think I highlighted many stereotypes quite effectively, there was the problem of whether in questioning stereotypes of the age, we were in fact questioning Jewish principles i.e. oppressing one set of people in the process of liberating another. I therefore decided that some kind of postscript or explanation of our intentions should be added to the script and the program when it is staged. This would hopefully explain that what is being attempted is an examination of patriarchal issues in Christianity today and that references to the culture of Jesus’ time are only being used as analogy for this issue, therefore no statement is being made about other world religions. What was interesting was the way in which giving biblical women a voice and showing their salvation, actually removed stereotypes. In the case of the Syro-Phoenician woman her strength to speak out lead to her salvation therefore destroying stereotypes like, “The ideal woman was expected to be found at home, surrounded by her family, shy, modest and quiet.” (Cotter 2001, P58) and therefore the woman’s outburst could not be seen in terms of stereotypes of ill behaviour, hysteria or aggression but in terms of faith.

Finally, I eventually decided to not crucify the “Missiah”, but instead have Judas kiss the nearest man in the Garden of Gethsemane, thus demonstrating the betrayal of Women by men even unto the cross. This denial of the “Missiah’s” destiny is analogous for the way the Jesus narrative has become a stumbling block for many women because of the barriers created by patriarchy, which deny women’s role in the narrative. It also speaks of the refusal to ordain women and also the continuing question of “glass ceilings” in the Church, barriers created by society, which prevent women from following Jesus right to the end. However at the very end, while the last number brings the issues raised by the musical into the present, the cross with the man on it will revolve, revealing the “Missiah” on the back. The purpose being to offer the impact of “Christa” and the discussion, which I hope will ensue. I hope it will be shocking and thought provoking. Although I really want people to come to their own conclusions, I know what it means to me. It means that the Christian narrative is for men and women. It means that Jesus, though physically a man, embodied both genders and was therefore an incarnation, first and foremost, as a human. It also

speaks of the hiddenness of the female aspects of the Jesus Narrative. The fact that the female, crucified Jesus is revealed from the back of the cross, speaks of what I believe are the aspects of the narrative and indeed feminine characteristics of God which must be revealed for all people to see and feel the full impact of the Jesus narrative. It is also crucial that Mary Magdalene, who sings as this happens is the one who first sees the truth of the crucifixion, much like finding the tomb empty and the truth that she sees is that the Messiah is on the metaphorical cross anyway, having been brutally assaulted by patriarchal society, having born on her shoulders the burdens of oppression in the world (in this case oppression of women) and has taken upon herself the very worst this society can throw at her (which is to mock her as an authority, to hide her legacy and attempt to remove all memory of her). I cannot evaluate the success of this until it is physically performed however I believe it will be the make or break of the whole piece.

Conclusions

Writing “Messiah” has at times felt very transgressive. I hope that it will feel transgressive to be in and indeed to watch as I believe transgression has to occur to navigate the patriarchal barriers within scripture, dogma and exegesis. Personally it has had an impact on the way I understand God. I can now visualise a female God, or a female Christ. I have found this to have a rewarding effect on prayer life. For me, this is probably a psychological issue, in that I find male authority quite threatening and often converse better with women. Because of this I often find prayer now to be easier, more conversational and reassuring.

The writing of this musical has made me much more aware of patriarchal language, having spent such a long time editing and rhyming it. It has also made me quite angry with those who say that inclusive language ruins poetic hymns and scripture and creates problems for meter and rhyme. I now know it can be difficult but certainly not impossible.

Finally I turn to the key feature of the female Christ. Julie Hopkins (1995) argues that a universal dogmatic Christology is not possible as different people relate to the figure of Jesus in very different ways. It therefore, does not seem to me that by adopting a certain Christological position or provoking one, that I have done anything different to what already occurs. Although many Christians would find my musical insulting, this is probably due to their understanding of Authority as given by the Church tradition. I share the view of Julie Hopkins who says, “The need for religious authority to legitimise our beliefs and actions can be viewed as a lack of faith in ourselves and our God.” (Hopkins 1995, P13). I believe that God is able to speak to me in many ways and I take seriously the notion of God being within us as well as outside of us. With this in mind I believe that there are certain truths, which can be revealed to me about the nature of God, which may at times be contradictory to truths being asserted by religion. For me the Bible, even if God’s word, is written through secretaries who are sinful and more important for this essay, patriarchal. Therefore we must “search for clues and allusions that indicate the reality about which it speaks” (Schussler Fiorenza 1983, P.41). The important word for me here is search. This implies that we may not always find. I therefore agree with Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza that this kind of Biblical interpretation can only happen if biblical revelation doesn’t understand the New Testament as “archetype but a prototype”

(Schussler Fiorenza 1983, P.33). I hope that “Missiah” is like a prototype and stimulates the beginnings of a renewed journey through the gospel narrative.

Hopkins (1995) talks of faith in Christ as not about a historical figure but about a Christ who transcends time and space and as Zoe Bennet Moore says, “particular identification as a male human being” (Bennett Moore 2002, P86). For me this is what “Christa” and now “Missiah” is all about. My aim, put simply was to respond to Hampson’s call to “Renew and reshape the ancient story of Jesus in lively and liberating ways.” (Hampson 1996,P44). Now an audience must decide whether I have achieved this.

Bibliography

Bennet Moore, Zoe. “Introducing Feminist Perspectives on Pastoral Theology” (London, Sheffield Academic Press, 2002)

Cotter, Wendy. “Aimon Peter’s Mother-in-law-Disciple or Domestic Servant? Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics and the Interpretation of Mark 1.29-31” in Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (ed) . “A Feminist Companion to Mark” (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 2001)

Gillfillan Upton, Bridget. “Feminist Theology as Biblical Hermeneutics” in Susan Frank Parsons (ed). “The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology” (Cambridge, CUP, 2002)

Grey, Mary. “Introducing Feminist Images of God” (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 2001)

Hopkins, Julie. “Towards a Feminist Christology” (Great Britain; SPCK, 1995)

Krause, Deborah. “Mark’s Hero of the Twelfth-Year Miracles: The Healing of the Woman with the Hemorrhage and the Raising of Jairus’ Daughter (Mark 5.21-43)” in Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (ed) . “A Feminist Companion to Mark” (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 2001)

Radford Ruether, Rosemary. “Sexism and God-Talk” (London; SCM Press Ltd, 1983)

Schussler Fiorenza, Elizabeth. “In Memory of Her” (New York; SCM Press Ltd, 1983)

Slee, Nicola. “The Power to Re-member” in Daphne Hampson (ed.) “Swallowing a Fishbone?” (Great Britain; SPCK, 1996)

Tamez, Elsa. “Women’s Rereading the Bible” In Ursula King (ed.) “Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader” (London: SPCK, 1994)