WHATEVER HAPPENED TO *FEMINISM?*

NOTES toward a Theology Group discussion of #3197, a review of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's JESUS....

1 Before we could say YES to the building of our Cape Cod (Craigville) home, we had to say NO to the woods: 24 years ago, the site had to be cleared. No new faith without no-saying to (repentance from) the old faith. No transformation without rejection of the old formation. No new birth without abandoning the ways of the old birth. No new culture/community without **alienation** from the old culture/community.

2 In a book my CHRISTIAN CENTURY review praised for its competence & creativity, viz. THE BOOK OF REVELATION: JUSTICE AND JUDGMENT (Fortress/85), ESF (the author mentioned above) rightly asserts that the Bible's last book aims to **alienate.** But isn't the gospel about overcoming alienations, i.e about reconcilation? Yes, but the culture-accommodated are the comfortable the gospel aims to afflict. Thoreau, rejecting the culture of Concord, aimed to reconcile himself to nature--& was unmoved when a dying aunt called upon him to be reconciled to God: "I was not aware," said he, "that we had quarreled."

Now see how ESF (p.197) sees Jn. the Revelator working away at this necessary negative: "In constructing a symbolic universe John attempts to maintain the superiority of his prophetic view of reality and of God as well as to help individual Christians face the terror of death." The Christians couldn't compete at the cultic-symbolic level--having "no cult, no temples, no priests, no sacrifices"--the Patmos author fantasizes a symbolic world in order to teach rejection of "all pagan cultic activity as idolatry...and **alienate** [my boldface] his audience from the magnificent symbols and cultic drama of the emperor cult."

3 That book was the main fruit of ESF's doctoral dissertation & is not, as so much of her literary work, feminist propaganda (such as BREAD NOT STONE: she denounced my CHRISTIAN CENTURY review of that!). Yet it seems to me not accidental that so much of her writing is open to the criticism she aims to **alienate** her readers/hearers from all forms of heavenly & earthly patriarchy/"kyriarchy"/hierarchy/androcentrism. I've known a number of German women who lived under the Nazis, & none were free of at least a tinge of misandry (the antonym of misogyny)--the American parallel being womanism (i.e., African-American feminism). Add to this dismal sisterhood some man-hating ex-nuns in the Eng.-speaking world (esp. Mary Daly).

"Whatever happened to feminism?" One thing is the increasing strength of a healthy backlash of (shall I say?) man-loving feminist scholars, such as Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen & Kathryn Greene-McCreight.

4 Consider some stances face-to-face with persecution/oppression/injustice:

(1) THEY are sinners, we are victims. Hebrew slaves in Egypt. African slaves (& pre-1964 second-class-citizens) in America. Saul Alinsky's ploy.

(2) WE are sinners. Divine revelation brings awareness of our condition (Ro.7). The most frequent question Mel Gibson has faced since "The Passion of the Christ" hit the fan has been, "Who (really) killed Christ?" His everywhere reply has been & is: "WE did." "Were you there when *I* crucified my Lord?"

(3) WE and THEY are sinners, & we victimize one another.

(4) THEY are sinners, we are victims (of Rome) & victors (with Christ). Here is the Bible's last book, & also all victims who take their share of responsibility for ("We Shall Overcome") overcoming their disadvantages. So here's another thing that's happened to feminism: as women have become more free to participate in society, feminism's rancorous antipatriarchalism has abated. (In the older liberationist movement in America, African-Americans are beginning to reject the victim mentality as an immobilizing poison [which the Palestinians, also, have found it to be].)

(5) WE are sinners, they are victims. "We" means any power-group I & you readers are in. A third thing that's happened to feminism is that increasing numbers of women have become, from gaining in power, "we" sinners; & awareness of this matriarchalism (e.g., in women business execs) has softened the old attacks on earthly patriarchy. (Is there a parallel decrease in umbrage against the biblical heavenly patriarchy? Not that I've noticed, except that the Bible's pronouns for God are making a slow comeback into mainline Protestantism.)

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5 Gabriel Fackre is among the theologians who have presented challenges to ESF. In his THE CHRISTIAN STORY: A Pastoral Systematics (vol.2, Eerd/87), pp.116-24, he presents her with some questions (after acknowledging [p.114] that she "opts to work within the Christian ethos"). The title of this second vol. in Fackre's systematic theology is "Authority: Scripture in the Church for the World": to preface his questions to her, he honors her by calling her (p.116) an "important partner in the conversation on authority"--for uncovering "the presence and leadership of women in the early Christian communities," for exposing "male bias in a traditional exegesis and theology that has obscured this presence of leadership," for making "a good case for the role that patriarchal premises have played in the formation of Scripture itself," for "stress[ing] the importance of Jesus' [egalitarian] attitude in dealing with women," for making "a modest use of a Christological reference point in developing her own theses," and for finding "a place for the church in her authority structure, and calls rightful attention to those who have been oppressed as an epistemologically significant constituency within that church." Fackre's questions have to do with the ahistoricity & Manicheanish illusion of an original Christianity pure of patriarchal distortion (I'll call it, gender utopianism); whether patriarchy so twisted canon-formation as to challenge canon; whether "oppression and liberation" are "adequate [criteria] to the range of other concerns that constitute the life of women"; whether feminine liberationism can "do justice to the universal problem of sin and alienation from God"; whether "women-church" can "avoid the errors learned in the history of sectarian Christianity"; whether feminist Christianity can answer the question "who will keep alive the memories in the Body of Christ of the other dimensions of the gospel"; whether her proposals can avoid drifting into "Mary Daly's marginal communities" "out of the mainstream Christian community," "out of the church itself"; "whether the definitive community of authority is really women-church."

6 Mary Steward Van Leeuwin, who lead a one-day CCMass. discussion on "How the Church Can Help Boys Become Men," is a new-style feminist (neo-feminist?) with no anti-male animus. In her MY BROTHER'S KEEPER: What the Social Sciences Do (and Don't) Tell Us About Masculinity (IVP/02), she presents a challenge to the Christian community (with its egalitarian resources) to articulate a vision of true masculinity beyond the macho of driven wealth/power/consumption, a masculinity of strength in service in the pursuit of charity & justice within the faithful, covenantal love of God. Tough in a consumption culture manipulating males to be non-erectile-dysfunction promiscuous machos--harmful, depressive images of males (parallel with the harmful, depressive images of females). Her research confirms that when a marriage relationship is marked by mutuality at all levels, life at all levels goes better for husband/wife/children/society. Christianity favors a win/win male/female relationship of control-surrender (hard for men) & self-sacrifice (hard for feminists). In personal conversation with her, I was mainly pleased with her theology of marriage, but somewhat unsatisfied with what seemed to me a too facile handling--or actually bypass--of hormonol differences. Specifically, how are the leadership hormones (the androgens in men & women) to be honored within the basic partnership-paradigm?

7 Kathryn Greene-McCreight's primary burden in FEMINIST RECONSTRUCTIONS OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE: Narrative Analysis and Appraisal (Ox/00) is the rebuke & correction of radical feminist Bible-abuse. Self-described as (p.135) "a narrational feminist," an orthodox trinitarian, KGM throws down this challenge to feminist hermeneuts/theologians (pp.127-9): "Those who object to the name Father, Son, and Holy Spirit must [meaning "should"] examine whether they, in fact, want to name a god other than the Holy Trinity." Indeed, can teaching "so decisively rejecting" "classical teaching on primary doctrines" be properly called "Christian feminist"? A feminist "non-narrative reading of Bible" & Trinity is "non-contextual and a-relational," "a new narrative setting for" Jesus with "a reconstructed doctrine of the Trinity," an "abstract from the particularity of the Christian story"--a disfiguring, for "reconfiguring" of the gospel story. (I add: Tom Wright said the gnostic Christian literature, e.g. the Gospel of Thomas, died not because it was suppressed [as Elaine Pagels thinks] but because it forsook the Story; so [says KGM, p.130] much feminist exegesis/theology "dismantles...the meta-narrative of the Christian canon.") "If we do not respect the holistic narrational depiction of the biblical God, there is no compelling reason for us to claim as true...any of the...details...in that depiction."