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Emerging from Women's Studies: A New World View and a

New Goal For Educators

THE JOURNAL OF CURRICULUM THEORIZING 4.2 (SUMMER 1982):187-92.Nancy Topping Bazin
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A feminist is someone who believes in change—a change in the status of women. Feminists differ, however, concerning the amount and kind of change. Therefore, among feminists there exists the whole political spectrum from conservative to radical. The need for change is clear when one examines the facts. On the national level, 51% of the population is female; yet only 1% of women hold top jobs; and 60% of all working women are clerks, saleswomen, waitresses, and hairdressers. A secretary with 13 years of education earns 38% less than a truck driver with 9 years of education; and a nurse with 14 years of education earns 5.8% less than a delivery man. For every salesman's dollar earned, a saleswoman earns \$.40. On the international level, 23-33% of all households in the world are female-headed, and these female-headed families have 50% less income than male-headed families. Two-thirds of the world's illiterate people are female; 80% of the women in Asia and Africa cannot read or write. Furthermore, more than half of the women in all developing countries are anemic.

Such facts are raising women's consciousness. The existence of women's studies and the women's movement has raised many questions that are forcing more and more women to analyze and understand power—such questions as: why are there so few women in the government although 53% of the voters are female; Why, though women are known for their expertise in sewing and cooking, are the top chefs and fashion designers male? Why is it that the gap between men's and women's wages nearly doubled in the last 20 years? Why does a woman earn \$.59 for every \$1.00 a man earns?

To explain how this unequal situation came about (where we have 51% of the population subordinated to the other 49%), several theories have been proposed. Some speculate that it was simply due to biology, to woman's particular role in reproduction and her smaller size. Without birth control, the female was extremely confined by almost constant pregnancy. Less constrained, men could be hunters and hence in control of protein, which was highly valued. They were also warriors and therefore responsible for community protection, which was of prime importance. Generally larger and stronger, the men could control the women physically—with violence, if necessary. Women today are still socialized to choose as a mate a person superior in size, education, and earning power. This sets up a situation in which the male has greater power in the relationship. In *Against Our Will* Susan Brownmiller suggests that men and women are unequal by "anatomical fist." Because women could be raped, they needed male protectors. Hence, women gave up power in exchange for protection. Philosopher Azizah al-Hibri explains the origins of inequality in yet another way. She points out that women had a visible connection with the future and hence immortality, because they had the power to create life and produce food out of their own bodies. But men saw themselves as having no visible connection with immortality. The male's only possible connection seemed to be through the development of culture and technology. Hence, men were motivated by "womb envy" to achieve. They felt compelled to control, master, and conquer nature. Still others propose the psychological theory that misogyny is created by the male's need at puberty to separate his male identity from his mother's female identity; to deny her power over him, he must see women as inferior. All of these theories aim to explore the origins of the patriarchal power system.

There have been few cultures, if any, that have not been patriarchies. Therefore, the women's movement seeks to change patterns of behavior and attitudes that have existed for thousands of years. The first major women's movement in the United States took place between 1848 and 1920. It was started by

women involved in the anti-slavery movement who had discovered that they were not allowed to speak in public and that while the black males could vote, no female, white or black, had that right. The more recent women's movement was begun about 1968, supported largely by women involved in civil rights and new left politics. These women discovered that they were expected to type for and sleep with the men; but, in general, they were expected to keep quiet and not assume leadership. When challenged, black civil rights leader Stokeley Carmichael said: "The only position for women in SNCC is prone." But why has the women's movement sprung up at this particular time in history? It is not very well organized; it is just happening spontaneously everywhere.

It is occurring because the reality of our lives has changed. There is much lower infant mortality; hence, women can produce fewer children to have a reasonable number survive. Rapid population growth combined with diminishing resources has led to the ideal of zero population growth. The availability of contraceptives backed by abortion has provided women with the right to choose how many children they want. The right to a college education, gained by women just over a hundred years ago, has led to higher expectations: women want to do more than spend their lives reproducing. Better medical care has led to fewer deaths in childbirth and longer lives for women. Therefore, a smaller percentage of a woman's lifetime is spent raising children. She is free to turn to other activities. Likewise, inflation has convinced couples of the need for two incomes. Finally, changing mores find divorce preferable to suffering, battering, lack of sex, or incompatibility.

The women's movement is not the cause of all these changes; it is merely the adjustment mechanism. It encourages us to alter our attitudes so that we can adjust to this new reality. But it is bringing with it much more than concepts of equal pay and equal job opportunities. It is bringing a new system of ethics, a new philosophical framework, and a revolution in epistemology. And through all of this, the women's movement has brought into being a new world view.

The development of approximately three hundred and fifty women's studies programs across the United States is an integral part of, not just a response to, the women's movement. Women's studies programs are the contribution of academic women to the national feminist goal of improving the status of women, not only in the United States but also throughout the world. There are an infinite number of ways that a woman may choose to contribute to the goal of improving the lives of women; and education, as a medium, is an obvious choice for those who have decided to devote their lives to teaching. Many academic women have found themselves motivated not only to teach but to do research about women. The ultimate aim of women's studies teaching and research is the transformation of the college or university curriculum. The existence of women's studies has encouraged faculty to include materials about women and to re-evaluate traditional content from a feminist perspective. For example, the reading of Shakespeare's *Othello* changes when the tragedy of Desdemona becomes more apparent. This new perspective has also led faculty to question basic assumptions in their disciplines. In psychology, for instance, should how "normal" one is be judged by the extent to which one conforms to sex roles? In sociology, should problems in the black community really be attributed to the fact that many black males are raised in female-headed households?

Historically, universities and their courses of study were created and developed by and for men. Naturally, these academic men taught and did research from a male perspective. This perspective, like any other perspective, influenced the assumptions made, the methodologies used, and the conclusions reached. From this intellectual work emerged a set of values and a world view rooted in the male experience. Within the male academic perspective, there were variations based upon culture, religion, and other factors, but most of these men were of the same elite class. The point of view of the poor man and certainly that of the woman, the minority, or the colonized individual were omitted from the curriculum simply because representatives from these groups were not on the university faculties or among the administrators.

Out of subsequent liberation movements came an awareness of the perspectives and materials omitted from the university and college curriculums; and with the research that developed out of black studies, Hispanic studies, women's studies, and third world studies, faculty began to see how these new perspectives modified fundamental assumptions, procedures, and beliefs within the disciplines. The need not just to add to but to modify the entire curriculum became apparent. As knowledge increases or is seen differently, truth is often other than what it was thought to be. As the "truth" evolves so too do value systems and the world views based upon them.

Probably the most radical changes in the curriculum will occur because of women's studies. The introduction of feminist perspectives into the curriculum ideally brings with it the perspectives of all women—including those who are lower class, minority, gay, handicapped, or third world. It even brings with it the perspective of the men's liberation movement. Hence, the perspectives, values, and interests of all the other liberation movements are interwoven with those of the women's movement. Out of such a multi-cultural feminist perspective could emerge a curriculum that would actually encourage students to work towards the realization of equality. Mission statements might be written in such a way as to commit universities and colleges to the philosophical principle of equality. Faculty with expertise in such relevant areas as black, feminist, and third world studies could be sought for regular departmental appointments; and faculty development programs in these areas could be encouraged. What should be realized is that women's studies has set off an epistemological revolution that requires an adjustment in educational goals and in classroom and research activities within every discipline. Even more important is the recognition that the theories evolving from women's studies are merging into a new philosophical framework, a new world view.

In *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*, Carol P. Christ explains briefly why a feminist perspective challenges and transforms the traditional world view:

As women begin to name the world for themselves not only will they create new life possibilities for women, they will upset the world order that has been taken for granted for centuries. ...The subordination of women not only has been taken for granted...but the assumption of women's secondary status also has influenced philosophers' and poets' perceptions of the nature of authority and hierarchy, and of the relation of spirit and flesh, humanity and nature, body and soul: All of these subtle and not so subtle relationships will be challenged and... transformed as women begin to write out of their own experience.¹

The new world view articulated by feminist philosopher-theologians such as Mary Daly, Rosemary Ruether, Elizabeth Dodson Gray, Marjorie Suchocki, and Carol Christ is wholistic. It challenges, in Christ's words, "the adequacy of dualistic, hierarchical, and oppositional ways of viewing the world." To clarify, Christ tells us that traditional philosophers have viewed the "dualisms as oppositions in which the inferior continually threatens to overwhelm the superior. Hence, the name 'war' is given to the relations between spirit and flesh, culture and nature, man and woman, reason and emotion, and 'man' is warned to remain perpetually ready to do 'battle' with flesh, nature, woman, and the emotional realm." When feminist women question their own subordination, they also question this dualistic, hierarchical, oppositional way of thinking. For, "if women are different from but not inferior to men, then perhaps nature is different from but not inferior to spirit. Indeed, what has been called irrational—emotion, intuition, and sometimes even poetry—may not be inferior to the modes of thinking that have been called rational" (pp. 25-26).

The dualistic, hierarchical, oppositional mode of thought is replaced, in feminist thinking, by a more flexible and wholistic model. For example, the rigid categories of male versus female, masculine versus feminine, and heterosexual versus homosexual have been shown by scientists and psychoanalysts to be simplistic and frequently oppressive to individuals. If "the extent of variation within each sex identified as 'female' or 'male' is as great as any differences that exist between them,"² then a spectrum of female to

male may be a more appropriate image than the sharply dualistic one. Similarly, to say that those personality and behavior characteristics labeled "masculine" must belong only to males and those labeled "feminine" only to females is to deny every individual the whole spectrum of choices. This denial not only separates the sexes but also sets them in opposition to one another. Likewise, to deny the possibility of shifting sexual preference or the likelihood of bisexuality by rigidly labeling individuals heterosexual or homosexual denies the reality discovered even by such pioneers as Freud and Kinsey and endorsed more recently by Bruno Bettelheim and Jungian psychoanalyst June Singer. In her book *Androgyny: Toward a New Theory of Sexuality* (1976), Singer points out how such a rigid heterosexual-homosexual labeling system created unnecessary fears in her patients.³ The practice of polarizing male and female physiology, processes of masculine and feminine socialization, and same-sex versus "opposite" sex eroticism are made worse by the assumption that male, masculine, and "heterosexual" seems to endorse the domination of women, the denigration of the feminine, and the repression of those labeled homosexual.

The domination of women has led to today's situation in which women make up 1/3 of the world's labor force, put in 2/3's of the work hours, and get only 1/10 of the world's income. The denigration of the feminine has led to a lopsidedly masculine and, therefore, macho-like value system. Homophobia and the repression of homosexuality have encouraged a rigid and crippling adherence to sex roles. Hence, more flexible definitions of female and male, gender, and human sexuality and the consequent elimination of dualistic, hierarchical, and oppositional approaches to these fundamental aspects of reality are essential if we are to move towards a more wholistic and egalitarian world view.

Similarly, when women seek equality and their right to choose the kind of education they want, they are re-defining the "nature" of the female and attacking the concept of the "opposite" sex. In 1880, when Barnard College for women was being proposed and there was talk of admitting women to classes, Mr. Morgan Dix, a trustee of Columbia University, made clear how a re-definition of the female threatened the world order:

An enlarged mind is a deformity in the feminine organization, and ideas are as superfluous in a woman as they would be in a bottle of Lubin's extract. They are more than superfluous, they render the possessor uncomfortable to men as lords of creation. They nip the bud of man's egotism, they cut the flower of his self-love, they damage the stalk of his conceit. They cause, moreover, the preacher says, cold shivers to run down his magnanimous back. Now the chief object of the Almighty in the creation of women being to please men—particularly those who are a little narrow in the upper story—it follows that this petition for opening Columbia College lectures, and indeed the whole movement for what is called the higher education of women, but which is really higher disagreeableness, is a wrong, a monstrous wrong, a high-heeled rebellion against the order of the universe.⁴

The women's movement creates a change in "the order of the universe," a change in the traditional world view as radical as when Copernicus announced that the sun, not the earth, was the center of the universe. The discoveries of both Copernicus and the feminists suggest that the universe was not created for man, as is suggested in the Bible. The feminist declaration that Eve was not created primarily for Adam's pleasure threatens to change the mythology that has served as a model for many male-female relationships. Certainly, feminists today are proposing to change the definition of woman, the mythology that goes with that definition⁵ and, in turn, the world view that follows from the definition.

But how does the individual woman move from a sense of her own psychological and political malaise to a new world view? In *New Woman New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation*, Rosemary Ruether suggests that the expansion from self to universe may be described as a four-stage process. The first stage is purely "subjective and psychoanalytical." The focus is upon the self; the consciousness is

gradually raised and "debasement self-images" exorcised.⁶ This awakening can resemble a spiritual quest with the woman asking such questions as, "Who am I? Why am I here? What is my place in the universe?"⁷

The second stage in the process of moving towards a new world view begins with the recognition that "purely individualistic concepts of consciousness are insufficient." The individual consciousness is a product of socialization shared by females as a group. Therefore, women have problems in common like "dependency, secondary existence, domestic labor, sexual exploitation, and the structuring of their role in procreation into a total definition of their existence." To alter the way in which females as a group are defined and socialized, the woman begins to envision "a radically reconstructed society where work and home stand in a different relationship allowing men and women to participate equally in both spheres."⁸

In the third stage, the woman becomes conscious that although all women share common problems, they "are also divided against each other by their integration into oppressor and oppressed classes and races." Ruether rightly points out that white middle-class and upper-class women will fail to connect with women in oppressed groups if they ignore "their own class and race privileges." In this stage, the special problems of lower-class, minority, and third world women become clearer.⁹

In the fourth stage in the movement towards a new world view, feminist women acknowledge that a vision of a just society "must reckon with the ecological crisis." As Rosemary Ruether states in *New Woman New Earth*:

If women and oppressed classes and races are not to be cheated of their future in a world of dwindling resources, hoarded by the present power holders, we must seek the fundamental reconstruction of the way resources are allocated within the world community. This implies a fundamental reconstruction of our basic model of interrelationships between persons, social groups and, finally, between humans and nature. Our model of relationships must cease to be hierarchical and become mutually supportive, a cooperative model of fellowship of life systems. (p. 31)

The new world view, created out of feminist theory, practice, creative writing, and scholarship, embodies, therefore, a new—egalitarian rather than hierarchical—model of relationships. Rosemary Ruether concludes that "there can be no liberation for women and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination." It is necessary to transform the "world-view which underlies domination" and replace "it with an alternative value system."¹⁰ Man will have to learn to respect both women and nature and cease to regard them as having been created for his "use." What theologians refer to as the hierarchical ladder is what in the Renaissance was called the Great Chain of Being—God at the top, then men, and, still lower, women, then children, animals, plants, and minerals. This hierarchical system must be replaced by one that can be represented, not by a ladder, but by an egalitarian circle. No longer should everything be seen in terms of "up or down, dominant or subordinate, superior or inferior, better or worse."¹¹

Concerned about ecology, women are also questioning the macho-like attitudes of scientists that stress mastery and conquest of nature at any price. Women are questioning the ideal of infinite progress if it requires infinite exploitation of resources; and they question scientists' right to do research (for example, nuclear or DNA) no matter what the political or biological dangers. Feminists are suggesting that in scientific as in economic, social, and political planning, justice and a concern for the future will require changes in our values and priorities.

A respect for women and a respect for nature should be accompanied by a general respect for life as it is expressed in the philosophy of nonviolence. The survival of life on this planet may well depend upon our

ability to bring into being not only social justice, conservation efforts, and pollution controls but also disarmament and a general acceptance of the principle of nonviolence. What is called the feminization of society—the promotion in the public world of positive feminine values—should include strategies for making aggressive and violent behavior an unacceptable way of settling differences. There are many ways by which attitudes towards violence could be modified through what and how we teach.

In short, this new world view that has emerged from the women's movement and from women's studies research emphasizes the interdependence of all people, the interdependence of people and nature, and the sacredness of all life. Its vision is organic, wholistic, and non-hierarchical. Its focus is upon the quality of our institutions and relationships. Increasingly, feminist theoreticians and writers are stressing that our very survival depends upon our shifting away from the world view of dualism and domination and upon our conscious movement towards the androgynous vision. We would teach almost every course differently if our goal as educators was actually to teach for change and help bring about greater social, economic, and political equality and a greater respect for life. The feminist world view that has emerged from women's studies could provide the philosophical framework necessary for transforming the curriculum.

FOOTNOTES

1. Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980), p. 24. Subsequent references to this book will appear in the text.
2. From a manuscript for an introduction to women's studies textbook (p. B-7) written by women's studies faculty at Hunter College with the help of a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.
3. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor/Doubleday, 1976. See Chapter 20.
4. Annie Nathan Meyer, *Barnard Beginnings* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1935), p. 35.
5. See, for example, Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1973.
6. Rosemary Ruether, *New Woman New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 29.
7. Women's spiritual quest seeks answers to these questions according to Carol Christ in her book *Diving Deep and Surfacing* (p. 8).
8. Ruether, pp. 29-30.
9. Ruether, p. 30.
10. Ruether, p. 204.
11. Elizabeth Dodson Gray, *Why the Green Nigger: Re-Mything Genesis* (Wellesley, MA: Roundtable Press, 1979), p. 19. A more recent edition of this book has been printed under the title *Green Paradise Lost*.

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