

FEMINIST THEOLOGY IN THE UUA  
(REFORMATION BY RESOLUTION)

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I have chosen three tasks for our attention while we are together here this morning but my statement will cover only the first task, namely to explore how we in the Unitarian Universalist Association have tried to reform the sexist nature of the denomination through the resolution process. I shall not go into the content of the resolutions for I want to leave time for your response to what I have said before we turn our group attention to some of the obstacles we face as we push for our own empowerment and fulfillment within this, the faith of our fathers; and I also want us to search for ways, beyond the resolutions process, whereby we can more effectively move our patriarchal monolith toward a feminist consciousness.

In my statement I shall begin by examining the nature of the UUA and our place in it as women. Then I shall point to the three very early resolutions, practically ignored at the time and now seldom referred to, that were directed toward correcting the sexism in our institutions. Then I'll talk about the more recent resolutions that have had a very different purpose, that is, the eradication of sexism inherent in the patriarchal assumptions underlying liberal religion. The different thrusts of these two groups of resolutions need clarification, and I hope it will be helpful to name the two versions of feminism at work in the denomination, both of them endeavoring to bring new perceptions and new understanding to our religious community.

I want to say, before I begin talking about the UUA as I now perceive its history, that I have found this exercise both revelatory and unsettling, so if you feel some discomfort as I proceed do not think that you are alone.

To talk about the UUA and how it got there I begin with a quote from Charles L. Wilson, who was interim minister at First Parish in Lexington, Massachusetts, last year.

"Church history," he said, "has been the history of controversy. The controversy has typically been between highly educated men at the level of tract and pamphlet, sermon and speeches. The people in the pews have historically reacted to crises of opinion about doctrines by listening to the great articulators and making choices."

Controversy within Liberalism as it has developed in the Unitarian and Universalist denominations has had the same history. The articulators proclaimed from the pulpits and the podiums, and the people in the pews listened. In this year, when we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the birth of one of our great patriarchs, William Ellery Channing, we are reminded especially of the power of the credentialled male in the pulpit in calling us to new perceptions, to new understandings.

Channing's Baltimore sermon opened orthodox theology, and specifically the Bible, to analysis and criticism. By challenging the doctrine of the Trinity, he set the stage for Liberalism and Humanism that was to be developed further by those great articulators who followed. Along the way other highly educated men have written the script and played the parts, and we in the pews have listened, not hearing, and watched, not seeing. The assumption was, and we all believed it, that the male perspective was the only perspective, and if it didn't jibe with our woman's understanding, it was our perception that was wrong.

As the play titled "Liberalism" developed over the years, God, the Lord and Father, the legitimating symbol of the male-dominated hierarchy sanctioned by Judeo-Christian theology, was pushed aside and the human male moved up from the top step of the divinely ordered ladder to the platform beside God and succeeded in pushing the Great Father aside and enthroning himself.

The accompanying music score was "Let us now praise famous men." No longer were we praising the divine male or his son. We were praising their associate, the human male. "Manism," masquerading under the guise of "Humanism," proclaimed that, "the proper study of man is man" and proceeded to adulate the human male in obscene ways. In song and in text, in examples and in language, man, the human male, became central to our beliefs.

This secular theology had as its underlying assumptions the understanding that:

Man, the male, is the human being.

Man's perception is total (and his perspective is, of course, the perspective of women as well.)

Man rightly speaks for all. (It is appropriate for man to subsume women into his perspective.)

These three assumptions, so basic to the theory of liberal religion, undergirded our national perspective as well. The United States, although women have been considered inferior, has been called "the great experiment in democracy." But what has been more devastating and more personal to each of us is that these assumptions sanctioned male dominance in our families.

Throughout all of this time during which male adulation was flourishing, women, our being and our experience ignored, were socialized to believe that we were somehow among the counted, that we were insiders in Liberalism as women were not in other faiths, that we were "men, " too, although a subspecies not doubt.

The effective propaganda in this socialization process within Liberalism, where the myth held that women were equal to men, has been the illusion that the universals, the ambiguous tent words such as "men," "human," "person," and the patriarchal "isms" including "Universalism" and "Unitarianism" covered that which was not covered--half of the membership of our two denominations, namely, women.

Those universal terms covered over and obscured the fact that women were not included and they, the universals, continue to play the same role in our lives today. We need to get clear about the deception of such terms. In our situation the deception is deeper. We must see that, like women of more traditional faiths, we remain outside. The power that shapes our nation and our religion has been and still is the driving desires of men--males--as they have reached for their own fulfillment. No amount of universal terms should be allowed to hide that fact.

Sisters, ours is a secular theology--a theology where man is the deity and we who think of ourselves as feminists in the denomination must do our work in the patriarchal fields of "manism," called "humanism" for the accuracy of a term such as "manism" would be too revealing. Others, the Dalys, the Reuthers, Christs, Goldenbergs and all the millions of women in the pews elsewhere have their own special territory, but we who are liberals must do our critical analysis in the area where our experience has been.

In recent years, even before merger, some women and men have noticed that we, in the liberal faith, do not affirm, defend and promote the supreme worth and dignity of women as we affirm men. It has been noticed that we practice sexism, that we do not use the democratic method in relationships between women and men as we do between men and men. The most obvious evidence of this fact in the denomination stood glaringly before us in the form of credentialled males in the pulpits and the administration. They stood before us, too, as the average male who dominated roles in the churches; but most importantly they stood before us daily in our own homes, but they were too close to see. We did begin to see, however, that in the UUA we practiced discrimination while claiming that we were democratic.

Those who noticed faced a problem. How could change be brought into the UUA when the great articulators were silent? And why wouldn't they be quiet when it was for a place at the podium and the pulpit and the administration that women were reaching?

This problem brought us to the resolution route as the feeble means available to those of us who were outside the select, to those of us who were tired of being overlooked. If we were tired of being outsiders we could "have a go at it" with a resolution. Make no mistake about it, resolutions are mighty frail tools. Trying to effect change in this manner is like trying to pry a boulder up an incline with a toothpick.

But women tried not just once but three times over a period of nearly a decade to bring about what was called, in the secular society, "affirmative action." Each of you have a copy of the resolutions about which we are here concerned, and the first three--those on the first page--represent those early efforts to bring women into the patriarchal institution.

Of those three resolutions:

Resolution #8 in 1964--the Unitarian Universalist Ministry

Resolution #6 in 1970--Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women

Resolution #15 in 1973--Equal Opportunity in UUA Employment

The fourth resolve of the 1970 resolution summarized the thrust of all of them. It says:

"Be it resolved: that the 1970 General Assembly requests that a special effort be made in the Unitarian Universalist Association, its churches and fellowships, to place greater numbers of qualified young and mature women in policy-making positions, and to secure equal opportunities and pay for women in the ministry, religious education, and administration."

The feminist theory underlying these three resolutions is that all we have to do to bring equality and self-fulfillment for women and improve the society is to add women to the on-going patriarchy. Add women and stir. For a long time most of us have seen, and many of us still see, adding women to ongoing patriarchal institutions as the prime goal of feminism.

The changes sought by these three resolutions represent the changes that moderate or mainstream feminists are seeking in the secular society. This version of feminism is at work in so many areas that it appears to be the only feminist approach to bringing change in our culture and in our denomination.

These resolutions could only directly effect the lives of a limited number of women in the denomination, for there aren't that many professional roles to fill. Yet it was there that modelling could be done for all to see. Women, the backers of these resolutions believe, if given a chance, could play important roles within the patriarchy and could then be instrumental in bringing about change.

But denominational response to the three resolutions was minimal except for one appointment in the administration and a few women called to pulpits. Affirmative action in the UUA was inching along at a snail's pace.

By the mid-seventies it was obvious that if women in the pews were to wait until women in the pulpits became the great articulators in our behalf, the century would be gone and so would we.

Moreover, some of us had become aware of a more pervasive and deeper expression of sexism. We saw our outsidersness in a larger dimension: We were not merely shut out of participation in institutional roles, we were defined out of existence by the basic assumptions that undergirded patriarchal thought. It became evident that we must seek the roots of sexism in the male-biased preconceptions that prevailed in our culture and were sanctioned by all religions, including ours.

Individual women scholars in other denominations were leading the way, but there were no voices articulating this perspective from UUA pulpits. So women in the pews turned to the resolution process again and again and again.

You have copies of those resolutions:

1977--Women and Religion

1979--Battered Women

1980--Implementation of Women and Religion Resolution

These resolutions were directed toward the spirituality of all women in our denomination--toward our empowerment and fulfillment. By centering the 1977 resolution, Women and Religion, on the religiously sanctioned male dominance in patriarchally defined families, we touched the lives of all men as well as all women, in our childhood, of course, and generally in our adult relationships.

The first resolve was central. It pointed to the main vehicle for carrying forward patriarchal assumptions--that is, hierarchy as practiced in religiously sanctioned male adulated and male dominated families.

Through the second resolve the denomination, its affiliates and the theological schools were requested to help in changing the assumption that a hierarchy in human relationships rightly exists in our homes, our churches and our society, by putting patriarchy behind us ("put sexist language and sexist assumptions in perspective") and by reaching for a new and inclusive understanding of reality, a new Genesis, a new Creation ("avoid sexist assumptions and sexist language in the future.")

The Women and Religion Resolution and the two reinforcing resolutions that followed, the Battered Woman Resolution and the Resolution on Implementation of the Women and Religion Resolution, have spoken to a more radical form of feminism than the former resolutions:

The last three resolutions do not seek to find places within the patriarchal institutions for women, do not seek equality with men within our current understanding of reality. Instead they are based on the perception that patriarchal understanding is false because it is partial and because it is biased. Those resolutions hold that, to benefit women as full and equal human beings, efforts must be directed toward eradicating the assumption that a hierarchy rightly exists in relationships between men and women in the home, the denomination, the nation and the world.

Just as our forefathers opened traditional religion to critical analysis, UU women are critiquing liberal religion and finding that it fails to serve our spiritual needs. We are pointing the way beyond liberalism to new perceptions and to new understandings.

By adopting the resolution "Women and Religion" the denomination has moved again to the cutting edge of society's concerns and it should be shouting that message to the world:

"UUA focuses on hierarchy as practiced in patriarchal families."

"UUA embraces all women's becoming."

"UUA seeks a new Genesis."

Will we, as a denomination, have the courage to see?

Will we care enough?

Will we dare to act?

Will we make the resolution process, the outsider's instrument for reform, work for all of us?

We, particularly women, must ask those questions and more.

Lucile Schuck  
"Outsider by Intention"  
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