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11-13-2007

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Feminist Metanoia and Soul-Making

Rosemary Radford Ruether

In this essay I explore feminist metanoia and soul-making; that is, the journey of conversion and transformation toward self-realization, in relation to gender socialization. The word feminist, in this context, means not simply a political analysis and social change of patriarchal systems, although it is surely that, but how feminism calls both women and men into personal and social conversion and transformation. I begin by saying something about how I understand patriarchy and other systems of domination as sin, creating alienation and oppression in different ways for women and for men.

Classical Christianity has seen 'sin' as a condition of alienation from God, rooted in a primordial 'fall', which we inherit biologically. The possibility of being rescued from this alienation from God has been laid through the sacrifice of Christ, but we have to include ourselves or be included in that saving event through baptism and personal experience of conversion. We can then grow in grace through being incorporated into this new life in Christ. This is the traditional Christian prescription for 'soul- making'.

My view of sin and conversion differs from this classical view. I view human capacities as ambivalent rather than "totally depraved" or in a condition of alienation which humans cannot change by themselves. I prefer the traditional Jewish concept of the "two tendencies", the tendency to good and the tendency to evil, and believe that we retain the capacity to choose between them. I also see the good tendency as that which connects us to our authentic existence, our true 'nature', our 'imago dei'. But I also agree with the view, found in Judaism, and Christianity, that our tendency to evil has been biased by historical systems of evil.

The world into which we are born is not neutral, but has been deeply distorted on the side of alienation and violence. We are socialized from infancy to conform to those systems, as if they were normal, natural and the will of God. Thus in order to find the right path to spiritual health, we not only have to confront our own sadistic and masochistic tendencies, but also have to unmask the claims of the dominant culture that misleads us about the nature of good and

evil. This can mean struggling against persons and institutions, such as family, school, church, and country, that are close to us, that call for our allegiance and will be somewhere between disappointed and hostile to us if we choose a dissenting path.

My understanding of what sin is does not begin with the concept of alienation from God, a concept which strikes me as either meaningless or highly misleading to most people today. I think we need to start with alienation from one another. We can then go on to understand how alienation from one another expresses itself in personal relations and social relations of negation of others, as well as self-negation, that are sick-making and violent.

We can then look at the larger systems of social power and culture that re-enforce these patterns. Today we have to understand such patterns of destructivity, not only in terms of society, but also in relation to the sustaining environment of nature. Patterns of injustice not only destroy society, they also devastate the earth. It is in this expanded understanding of alienation that we might begin to grasp anew what alienation from God might mean; that is to say, alienation from the very source and sustaining matrix of life itself.

Christians have for too long mixed up the concept of evil as sin with problems of finitude and mortality. Natural limitations should be seen as sources of tragedy, but not the result of sin. What is appropriately called sin belongs to that sphere of human freedom where we have the possibility of enhancing life or stifling it. When this freedom is misused, patterns and organizational systems of relationship are generated where competitive hatred builds up. This violence is sustained both by the egoistic refusal of mutuality, but also by passive acquiescence to victimization of others or of ourselves.

The central issue of sin as distinct from finitude, as I see it, is the misuse of freedom to exploit humans and other earth-creatures and thus to violate the basic relations that sustain life; physically, psychically and spiritually. Life is sustained by a biotic relationality in which the whole attains well-being through mutually affirming interdependency. This is a fancy way of saying that life is sustained by love. When one part of any relationship exalts itself at the expense of other parts, life is diminished for these others. Ultimately the exploiters also diminish the

quality of their own life as well, although material profit may abound for them. An expanding cycle of violence is generated.

Sin as distorted relationship has three dimensions: there is a personal-interpersonal dimension, a social-historical dimension and an ideological-cultural dimension. It is imperative to give due recognition to all three dimensions, and not only to focus on the personal-interpersonal aspect, as our confessional and therapeutic traditions have generally done.

On the interpersonal level, sin is the distortion of relationship by which some persons absolutize their rights to life and potency at the expense of others with whom they are interdependent. Thus, for example, in male-female relations men were exalted as those persons in the family system with the superior right to be valued, to receive education in preparation for gainful economic roles and political participation in society. Women were accordingly disvalued. They were denied these advantages of self-development in order to function as auxiliaries to male development.

Christianity was not entirely wrong in seeing the heart of sin as pride, an egoistic selfishness that reduces all others to objectified instrumentality. But it has defined this wrong relationship primarily vis-a-vis God, and thus failed to develop the implications of this teaching for relations to other people. Although pride is certainly an element in distorted relationship, I suggest that this is an unhelpful beginning point, particularly for women and for those men who have primarily been on the underside of systems of privilege. But even for those men who appear fairly advantaged, issues of insecurity and fear of vulnerability need to be recognized.

What is called pride, not to be confused with healthy self- esteem, is generally a cover-up for deep-seated dis-ease with oneself. Moreover, the prideful claims of superiority and privilege of some persons and groups over others can only be maintained by some combination of coercive repression and co-optation of these others. In one way or another one must force the victims to acquiesce to and even become collaborators in their own victimization. Aggressive pride can abound only when fed by passive acquiescence of others, and the ability to isolate enemies who can be violently coerced into subjugation. One has to see all these elements of the pathological

relationship.

Some of the earlier ventures of feminist ethics suggested that women's sins are primarily the sins of passivity, of failure to develop an autonomous self, leaving in place the assumption that men sin primarily through pride. Naming passivity as well as pride as components of sin was a significant advance in ethical understanding of the pathological distortion of relationship, but dividing it neatly by gender is too simple.

Although women have been directed to accept passivity, acquiescence and auxiliary existence to men as 'feminine virtue', they also exist within class and race hierarchies where they can exercise exploitative hauteur toward those under their power. Women, as well as men, in 'advisory' relations, also learn to cultivate passive aggressive or manipulative use of power to control those whom they cannot dominate directly.

Patriarchal masculinity has directed men to develop a self-confident, in-charge relationship to women and others under their power, but such confidence does not come easily. The appearance of confident control covers over insecurity. The deeper this insecurity the more it generates a cycle of violence. The male growing to manhood in patriarchal society was parented as a child largely by women. His masculinity is rooted in the over-throw the mother who was once the all-powerful presence in his early life.

Thus, I suggest, underneath every assertion of male hegemony over women is the fear of women as the 'great mother'. The more insecure his 'manhood', the more aggressively he needs to put down his wife in order to secure his emancipation from his mother. The need for totally secure, dominating power characteristic of egoistic aggression feeds on an unsatisfied void of an insecure, ungrounded self, with its unresolved fears of vulnerability and dependency.

Although the roots of domination in the insecure self is most obvious in gender relations, it lies at the heart of every dominating and exploitative relationship. White racists need continually to repress blacks and punish them for the first signs of 'uppitiness'. Settlers in North America needed to eliminate Indians or herd them into reservations, repressing any expression of their priority in claiming the lands of the continent. The militarist needs enemies who justify his

demands for ever larger and more total systems of military might.

This cycle of violence is fed by the belief that, if more and more power is gained over the subjugated other, the possibility that they might threaten one's own power will finally be crushed. The other as other will be eliminated altogether, or reshaped as a totally docile instrument of benefit to oneself. But this can never be accomplished, both because the dominating relationship eventually prompts rebellion from the dominated, but also because the dominator himself can only be a dominator through the existence of enemies to be vanquished. This became evident at the end of the cold war, where we saw the scramble of the U.S. government military-industrial complex to identify new enemies to justify their arsenals. Now we have a new open-ended "enemy" that we ourselves generate, the "terrorist," justifying eternal war.

But the patterns of domination are not created de novo in the movement of privileged males from the nursery to the playing fields to the killing fields. Rather these familial patterns are themselves kept in place and re-enforced by the larger historical, social structures in which the family is embedded as a dependent part. We are born into this system of patriarchal relations. We are socialized to accept our roles within it, as males or females, as members of more or less privileged class and racial groups, as if it were normal, natural and the will of God.

This is the inherited, collective, historical dimension of sin, which Christianity called 'original sin', mistakenly seeing its inheritability as the fruit of sexual reproduction, rather than the historical reproduction of social relations. This is also where sin is experienced as unfreedom, as a power that defines and controls us and which we feel powerless to change, even when we become aware of it as wrong.

We are born into sexist, racist, classist, militarist systems of society. This has shaped who we are from birth, and even before birth, for privilege and unprivilege mean that children may be well or badly nurtured even in the womb due to the availability or lack thereof of good food and medical care for their mothers. Distorted, exploitative relationships are embedded in legal, economic and political systems that define the world around us. This is what the Biblical

tradition calls 'the powers and principalities'.

Exploitative social systems are also maintained and reproduced through ideologies which make themselves the hegemonic culture. It is the purpose of this hegemonic culture to make such unjust relationships appear good, natural, inevitable, and even divinely mandated. To question or rebel against such relationships is to rebel against nature and nature's God. Family, school, church, media are all enlisted to socialize both the privileged and the disprivileged to accept their place and role in this system of evil, to interiorize its mandates as their identity and duty.

Yet we are not left without a trace of our 'imago dei', of our capacity for healthy and life-giving relationality, intimations of which persist in our intuitive sensibilities despite this ideological and social misshaping. Nor are we left without exemplars of good and life-giving relationships in family, friends, mentors in education, religion, work and even sometimes in politics. We inherit critical counter-cultures and communities, the fruit of past transforming movements in society, that hold forth alternative visions.

Culture and society, then, also express the struggle between the 'two tendencies', the tendency to just and loving relations and the tendency to hostile negation and exploitation of others and of ourselves. How then do we understand growth in the 'good tendency', or 'soul-making'? We might describe this as the process of enhancing our capacities, both personally and socially, for sustaining just and loving relationality, of curbing and curing fear of and contempt for others and for ourselves.

Soul-making does not lie in splitting our minds from our bodies, our reason from our passions, as though our good tendency lay in our rationality and our bad tendency in our bodies and passions. Nor can we just turn the dualism upside down, trusting impulse and rejecting thought. We need to look at this process wholistically. Soul-making happens through transformative metanoia, which is both sudden insight and also slow maturation of a grounded self in relationship or community, able to be both self-affirming and other-affirming in life-enhancing mutuality. It is both a gift and a task, grace and work.

Such transformative metanoia is both personal and social. It cannot be fulfilled simply as

an individual journey, although some individuals seem to accomplish a remarkable depth of soul; of inward tranquility and kindness to others in the midst of hostile relationships. As sin is not a 'something', a bad 'part of ourselves, but distorted relationship, so metanoia or soul-making is essentially a journey of transformed relationship, relationship to oneself, to one's immediate community, of society and of culture, finally, a transformation of our relationship to all creation, to animals and plants, air, soil and water. Reconciliation with God is within this whole process of transformation and reconciliation with others. It is what the Biblical tradition calls the 'reign of God'.

Our journeys of metanoia and soul-making will differ both because of the differences of individual histories and because of differences of social context, as males or females, as white, Black, Asian, or other ethnic cultures, as more or less privileged economically. Women within the same general class and culture differ in the extent to which they have been socialized to accept patriarchal mores and abused by its violence. Similarly patriarchal self-identity has 'taken' with some men more deeply than with others. Family patterns, social environment, as well as differences in 'temperament' that cannot easily be explained by socialization, all play a role in these differences.

To the extent to which these patriarchal patterns have been held lightly, with positive role models of mutuality available, the journey may seem easy or obvious, while the abused woman who has internalized patriarchal sanctions may experience its discrediting as deeply traumatic. She may be precipitated out of its securities only through profound outer crisis in which remaking her inner world becomes necessary for her own personal survival. Some kind of alternative community that provides an alternative culture and world view also is essential for her to embark on this journey.

A woman who experiences dissenting thoughts alone, without any network of communication to support her, can hardly bring such dissent to consciousness. She is cowed into submission by the authorities of family, school, church, etc. that surround her and judge that such dissent is the sign of either sin or craziness or both. Thus only when there is a feminist movement

that has been able to establish some foothold, creating an alternative vision of being a woman, developing networks of communication and community, can critical and transformative feminist self-perception come to consciousness and be acted upon in a woman's life. The consciousness-raising groups of l960's feminism were examples of such communities.

Openness to feminist consciousness demands that the ideology and socialization into 'feminine virtue' be thrown into question. All the ways that women have been taught to be 'pleasing' and 'acceptable' to men are critically reviewed as possible tools of false consciousness and seduction, preventing women from asking who they are as persons. Although feminist parents may try to raise daughters and sons to be egalitarian, it is not easy for individual families to compete with the larger culture. Teen-age and young adult years are a time of strong needs to conform to the peer group and its social references. Thus the deeper journey out of patriarchal consciousness often is one that belongs more to the mature stage of life.

Yet if women comply with traditional female roles well into their adult years, and receive some status and secondary power through this compliance, it also becomes difficult to make this journey. Such women have lost a large part of their lives. They have missed the educational opportunities to develop skills for a more self-defined life. It is painful to face up to their own self-betrayal, as well as betrayal by those with whom they have identified themselves. Such women become ready candidates for anti-feminist crusades.

For Christian women from conservative traditions one of the most difficult barriers to feminist consciousness is the Christian identification of sin with pride and anger and virtue with humility and self-abnegation. They have been told they must always put others, their parents, husband, children, first. For women this view of sin and virtue functions as a powerful re-enforcement of female subjugation and lack of self-esteem. Such women feel that rebellious thoughts and self- affirmation are the roots of that sin of Eve for which they must atone by redoubled self-negation, even accepting abuse as the means of salvation. Women are to become 'Christ-like' by having no self of their own. They will save themselves and their abusers by accepting exploitation and becoming 'suffering servants.'

In the context of such socialization, the claiming of one's own quest for selfhood seems forbidden territory. Yet the conditions that precipitate such a choice for one's own personhood may be experienced, not only as traumatic, but also as exhilarating. In the classical Christian sense of conversion as an experience of transforming grace from beyond our present reality, conversion from sexism is like a gift of power and expanded possibilities.

Part of this breakthrough experience also involves getting in touch with one's own anger and hurt, bringing to consciousness one's experiences of betrayal and abuse and recognizing one's own complicity with this diminishment. This anger also has an energizing element, like a new inner power that allows one to break the chains that have bound you to the culture and systems of sexism.

Consciousness of this personal history also leads to recognition of the collective history of patriarchy and its stratagems of enforcing female subjugation. One begins to read, and perhaps write, this collective history in all of its ramifications. One's anger deepens as the fuller collective history comes into view. One should not short-circuit this work of anger, but also one must recognize its dangers, the danger of being stuck in soul-destroying resentment. Thus the unleashing of consciousness of all that has been lost and destroyed needs to become deeply rooted in love, self-love and compassion for others. One needs to move through anger to a deep enough self-esteem to forgive oneself and one's victimizers. To forgive, however, is not to forget, or to capitulate once again into victimization. It is only from a context of a certain confident autonomy, one that also allows some critical distance on one's own capacities to oppress others, that one can rebuild relations with others and with oneself, moving into increased capacity for mutuality.

Such a journey cannot remain only on the personal/interpersonal level nor can it develop simply as consciousness without praxis. It needs to be actualized in action. A woman may decide to seek additional education in preparation for new arenas of life. In so doing relations with significant others will be transformed, or perhaps broken. In the process new awareness of the workings of the structures and ideology of patriarchy comes to be recognized.

But the journey of feminist soul-making must also break out beyond the boundaries of the personal journey and become a journey in solidarity with others, others of one's own group and also others across class and race. This recognition that one's own liberation is an integral part of the liberation of a community, a people, comes much more readily to women of oppressed races and groups. The ideological and cultural encapsulation of middle class white people, women as well as men, make it much more difficult to see beyond the personal/inter-personal arena.

Yet, as women seeking liberation enter into this larger struggle for liberation, they also recognize more fully who they are. When a woman is a person of some class and race privilege, she must also take account of her own capacity to victimize others or simply to be the unconscious recipient of benefits based on their exploitation. One becomes more aware of the ways that the victim too learns to victimize others. This critical distance on one's own context, however, must also become a committed and compassionate praxis, a praxis of solidarity that seeks to ameliorate the systems of exploitation that perpetuate the cycle of violence.

Parallel to the female journey into liberation from patriarchy there also needs to be a male journey. I do not attempt to chart its process in detail here. But I do want to insist that, since sexism is a two-sided relationship, it can only change when both women and men seek liberation from patriarchy, A movement of men's liberation from patriarchy can only arise among men who have been willing to listen to women's story long enough to care deeply about what has happened to women under patriarchy, to have become compassionate enough to support women's journey into an autonomy that can allow genuine peer relations between men and women, and also courageous enough to risk ridicule and censure from other men when one breaks with patriarchal sanctions. Men must recognize how they too have had their humanity distorted by patriarchy. Such a movement must move beyond the personal-interpersonal context to transform the larger structures of gender injustice.

The journey of 'soul-making' is incomplete without a transformation of the whole. To adapt Augustine's language, our hearts are restless until we rest in this whole. Unlike Augustine, however, we cannot split reconciliation with God from reconciliation with all the others with

whom we are interdependent. Indeed our hearts must remain restless, and stir up restlessness anew, as long as women are raped, children beaten, men sent to war, animals are tortured to test our cosmetic. To remain in compassionate relation to all others who suffer is not simply a gracious choice of the saint, but a necessity of our reality. To 'bliss-out' by oneself in the midst of a suffering world is denial of one's own reality, one's interdependency and complicity with this suffering.

Yet, since total transformation and reconciliation will never be fully accomplished within history, since the fullness of the reign of God is an eschatological norm, not a historical possibility, since both tragedy and sin will continue, hopefully partially alleviated by our struggles for personal and social metanoia, we also have to learn to sustain our soul-making in our personal and social relationships in the midst of defeat. We have to taste wholeness in the midst of the insufficiencies and tragedies of natural life, of the child born brain-damaged, the young man inexplicably stricken down by disease in the prime of life. We also have to sustain our faith, hope and capacity for love in the midst of cruel reversals of our best efforts, victories betrayed and the martyrdom of prophets.

Soul-making takes place in and through the cross, yet in spite of the cross. The cross is not our goal. Christians must cure themselves of a masochistic spirituality that glories in suffering, usually prescribing it as a way of perfection to be endured by those already victimized. Natural suffering, or tragedy, and unnatural suffering, or unjust violence, are neither the goal nor the way of soul-making, but they are often the context in which we must endure and keep the faith in healing love, despite the presence of its contradictions.

The journey of soul-making in community is a never completed or perfected process. There will be no millennium where it is established 'once-for-all' in static perfection. Rather we must take up the task in each day, in each relationship, in each generation, in specific social and historical contexts; the struggle to enhance loving, truthful and just relationships and to curb and cure hate, fear and violence. It is in this way that we also both receive and manifest the redemptive work of the Holy One.