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WOMEN AT THE END OF THE WORLD: CHRISTIAN FUNDAMENTALIST MILLENARIANISM AS AN ENGENDERING MACHINE

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In feminist literature, a shift from concern with “woman” to a concern with gender started in the 1980’s. This shift was, in part, a response to the theoretical analysis of Michel Foucault regarding the interplay of power, knowledge and sexuality. “Truth,” Foucault argued, is produced within domains of social and rhetoric power. Included in that production is the generation of subjectivities which sustain the domain. The key insight feminist theorists garnered from Foucault’s investigations was the extent to which existing systems of meanings could serve to foreclose feminist objectives.

To circumvent this foreclosure, feminist theorists made a strategic move. They began defining gender as a socially constructed category that encompassed sex rather than accepting sex as a biological condition with gender its bi-product. This expanded definition of gender enabled feminists to launch a novel domain of power, knowledge and sexuality that, it was hoped, would be compatible with feminist goals. It also opened up new and important areas of analysis for feminist thought, allowing feminists to critique “the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established...[and] the discursive/cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or ‘a natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive’ prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts” (Butler, 7). In the process, feminists were finally able to avoid incorporating into their analysis ‘woman’ as an entrapping essentialism that often functioned to sustain conditions of oppression under the guise of their deconstruction.

Yet serious quandaries resulted from this tactic. Most notable was the ensuing difficulty that arose when feminists needed to address the situation of women. The epistemological shift that eliminated the unwarranted and over-determined “woman” made it troublesome to bring issues effecting women into discussion. The resultant loss of subject threatened to push beyond the vanishing point the overriding socio-political goal of feminist sensibility: the liberation of women. There was, it seemed, a discursive incompatibility between dismissing “woman” as an arbitrary, unnecessary outgrowth of antiquated habits of human gendering and raising meaningful arguments in support of the liberation of women. Confronted with this apparent impasse, feminists were compelled to rejoin the issue of woman. The dilemma was well articulated by Linda Alcoff.

The concept and category of woman is the necessary point of departure for any feminist theory and feminist politics, predicated as these are on the transformation of women’s

lived experience in contemporary culture and the reevaluation of social theory and practice from women's point of view. As a concept it is radically problematic precisely for feminists because it is crowded with the over-determinations of male supremacy, invoking in every formulation the limit, contrasting Other, or mediated self-reflection of a culture built on the control of females....Thus, the dilemma facing feminist theorists today is that our very self-definition is grounded in a concept that we must deconstruct and de-essentialize in all of its aspects. (Alcoff, 330)

The resolutions proposed to alleviate the dilemma have been diverse. Two that exemplify the current variances are cultural feminists and post-structuralism feminists. Cultural feminists reject the Foucauldian path to advocate maintaining the concept of "woman," but argue that feminists should have the sole authority to define its contents. Post-structuralism feminists have opted to abandon the concept of "woman" and committed themselves to deconstructing it wherever it appears.

A leading advocate of the post-structuralism strategy, Judith Butler argues feminists need to dismantle the misleading analogy that gender is written on the body as a means to achieve identity. Instead, she suggests a more apt metaphor is to imagine gendering as a social practice akin to Kafka's perfect torture instrument in "The Penal Colony." Liberation for women will come not from trying to understand why the machine inscribes what it does, but from employing the expanded definition of gender to ask "...what cultural apparatus arranges this meeting between instrument and body, what interventions into this ritualistic repetition are possible?" (Butler 146) In other words, what compels people to achieve their identities via gendering customs and how can these rituals of engendering be disrupted? Where are the fissures and cracks in putatively natural gendering processes that possess subversive potential?

Hence, from a post-structuralism feminist perspective, the challenging of engaging in a sustained feminist critique of millennialism at the turn of the millennium is not simply to ask how women fair under millennialism or within millennial groups, or within the millennial story. It is to engender the millennium, to call attention to the social constructions of gender associated with millennialism and to the gendering ingredients of millennialism's appeal. To understand the way millennialism is engendered, it is further necessary that this work be done in the particular, examining millennialism as it has arisen in specific settings, in particular historical periods, and among particular peoples rather than treating millennialism ahistorically or essentially thereby avoiding the pitfall of falling into the same error with millennialism that post-structuralism feminists wish to avoid with regard to woman. In sum, engendering millennialism from a feminist post-structuralism perspective requires that those analyzing millennial case studies determine how and why bodies and millennialism are brought together to create a cybernetic engendering apocalyptic.

To accomplish this, at least four tasks are necessary:

- deconstructing the discourse of the millennial narrative to disclose its gendering components including the possibly assumed construction of gender that underlie them;
- analyzing gender as a factor in the social situatedness of the millennial narrative especially in terms of the gendering implications of authorship, access, education, pronouncement, interpretation, and revision;

- analyzing the gendering implications of millennialism's effect on human lives, especially those whom societies categorize as women even while acknowledging that the content of "woman" is, like race, arbitrary, varied, and continually contested; and,
- situating the case study against a backdrop of related and contrasting engendering cultures and subcultures, thus engendering millennialism in comparative perspective and facilitating an assessment of the extent to which the gendered components should be deemed an aspect of millennialism as opposed to a manifestation of prevailing gender currents at wash in the wider culture that are manifesting themselves in the millennial movement but in countless other social locations as well.

Providing a complete case study modeling this approach is beyond the scope of this paper; however, a brief sketch illustrating some of the more salient questions that would need to be answered to engender millennialism for a particular case may be helpful. Consider the manifestation of millennialism in contemporary American evangelical Christianity known as millenarianism. For American evangelicals, beliefs about cosmogony (God's creation of the earth) as well as beliefs about eschatology (God's end of the earth) are normative aspects of faith, with millenarianism (a millennial eschatology that centers upon Jesus' return to earth) the omega to the creation story's alpha. For conservative evangelical Christians or fundamentalists, millenarian eschatology is an especially valued theological idea. Consequently, a central site for learning about the millennial story in American culture is within its evangelical subculture, and within that subculture, among its more conservative elements.

Looking more closely at the appeal of late twentieth century fundamentalist sub-culture to determine why people might be attracted to it and through an involvement with it receive an intense exposure to the millenarian tradition, the role of gendering factors becomes obvious. Early rhetoric and practice reveals the presence of ambiguous and contradictory gendering impulses from the start. Historian Betty DeBerg has shown how condemnation of early 20th century liberalizing gender practices were a dominant rhetorical trope of fundamentalist preachers. From pulpits and in inexpensive tracts, fundamentalist preachers used ribald caricatures of flappers and other 'loose women' as a social sanctioning device to prod people into becoming fundamentalists. Yet, Peggy Bendroth's study of fundamentalist parachurch organizations from this same period revealed how in fundamentalism's early years, its institutions offered women more opportunities than they could find in the wider society. But by the mid 20th century, most of this ambiguity had eroded. Christian fundamentalist parachurch organizations ceased to be a source of unusual employment opportunities or women. This was partly because the wider society had liberalized in terms of the jobs it was willing to make available to women; however, it was also because fundamentalist parachurch organization had become more restrictive. They no longer extended to women many of the opportunities they had in their early years.

By the late 20th century, a widespread movement was underway in American society to understand gendering as a verb, as a complex, habit of existence that was amenable to change. In an advanced capitalist nation such as the USA, this habit of identity was questioned so severely it began eroding as a source of meaning. Restrictions that formerly had allocated differing tasks and opportunities to women and men were eased or eliminated. Education, work, law, sports, and family life became sites of egalitarian exploration and change. Against this societal backdrop, fundamentalists took up the overt construction and maintenance of an emphatically gendering religious tradition, positioning itself within American Christianity as a religious movement

whose adherents present a stark contrast to the rest of the world epistemologically, axiologically, and ontologically when it came to gender. Thus, the first step in engendering the millennialism of contemporary Christian fundamentalists is to ascertain why people are attracted to fundamentalism in light of this context. Recent empirical studies suggest that intertwined economic and theological motives generate fundamentalism's appeal, but further study remains to be done (Brasher, 170-175).

The main site of fundamentalist life is the congregation, which had grown in importance within the fundamentalist movement. In an attempt to set themselves off from society at large, those associated with fundamentalist congregations work diligently to construct a sacred canopy of fundamentalist beliefs and practice. Under that sacred canopy, they also constructed a sacred gender wall that bifurcated congregational life, and provided substantially different religious experiences to those on either side of it (Brasher, 12). Hence, the second step necessary to engendering millennialism for American Christian fundamentalists is to determine whether and how millennialism as a theological concept penetrates that gender wall. Given the content of the millenarian story, this would seem a facile accomplishment; therefore, let us explore it further.

Through its claim that Jesus will return to Earth and judge all of humanity, the millenarian story includes the claim that human history will be overtaken and is really guided by sacred history. Relativizing all of human history, it makes a tyrannical claim: what is really important is the sacred story. Through its insistence that divine actors and motives are paramount, millenarianism provides a basis by which gender as a human practice can be undermined, neglected or ignored. This is why in the history of Christian traditions, it is not unusual for women to be in positions of leadership in millenarian movements even when they have not been deemed capable of leadership elsewhere in the society. Yet because it insists that the religious story is paramount, the millenarian story also provides no basis for a systematic critique of gender. Subsuming human history within the millenarian plot, it provides no means by which misogynistic structures and patterns of behavior can be brought into view, criticized and addressed. Since it leaves these structures intact, millenarianism provides no basis for long term gender reform or transfiguration.

Feminist process requires shared bitterness. Its goal is to mobilize people toward concerted efforts of structural political change after people whose stories are not told are told and the political and structural implications of those silenced stories are grasped. But in millenarianism's tyrannical story as Christian fundamentalists tell it, the only bitterness that can be expressed is the bitterness of an anthropomorphic god. Millenarianism precludes the consciousness raising of individuals telling their stories by silencing all stories, all tales of otherness but one: a divine story that claims to represent real, ultimate truth and meaning. When all social problems, including those linked to gender, are erased under the press of sacred ends, political, issues of hegemony and power must be ignored. But the articulation of gender issues requires associating concern over gender inequities with particular peoples and groups to legitimize strategic solutions that attempt to alleviate these inequities.

Engendering 20th century American Christian millenarianism reveals it to be decidedly antifeminist. It makes it impossible for people to liberate themselves from gendered stereotypes because it provides no basis by which to name stereotypes. By insisting upon the hierarchical import of one story, the stories of individual people's experiences are marginalized, and trivialized—a classic move of patriarchal social structures. This is made graphically evident in the film "The Rapture," where the anti-individual, anti-political aspect of contemporary Christian millenarianism are starkly portrayed. When Sharon, played by Mimi Rogers, begins to be

raptured or bodily assumed into heaven at the end of time, she refuses to let go of her own story which involves the fact that she shot and killed her daughter in obedience to events that she had been taught to believe were signals of divine command. At the film's conclusion Sharon is left standing forever outside of Heaven. There is no place in the millenarian story from which a human being can raise the question of theodicy, can challenge the ethics of the divine being by whom they are to be judged. Like all good patriarchal stories, Christian millenarianism is non-dialogical, non-participatory, and claims triumphalist value and meaning exclusively for the divine.

But engendering the millenarianism of Christian fundamentalists also involves locating the fissures, the cracks between and within both its appeal and its system of meaning that could lead to openings of liberatory potential. Again the disruptive potential of millenarian appeal is beyond the scope of this paper to address in any length; however, as a story communicating the paramount importance of divine intentions, Christian millenarianism is not devoid of liberatory potential. In *Apocalipsis: Reconstruccion de la Esperanza*, Pablo Richard discloses how the millenarian promise of ultimate judgment can inspire and energize poor, peasant peoples of Latin America prone to despair over whether those who oppress them will ever come to judgment in this world or any other. In *Prophesy Deliverance! an Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, Cornel West reveals how the black church's use of apocalyptic rhetoric assured the members of an oppressed subculture that its suffering was not in vain. Under the aegis of millenarianism, women in Christian traditions have legitimized a right to engage in non-traditional behaviors because of the story's overarching, tyrannical claim. Thus, in the history of Christian traditions, women have claimed that violated restrictive gender expectations to take on roles of leadership, and engage in public speaking and teaching not because they possessed an intrinsic right to do so; but, because being subservient to the millenarian dynamic they were bound to comply with its paramount demands.

In the history of American Christianity, Phoebe Palmer is an excellent example of millenarianism's subversive potential. A leader in holiness movement (1807-74), Palmer's book *Promise of the Father*, first published in 1859, argues the case for women preachers from the biblical promise that in the last days an outpouring of the spirit was to be upon all; yet, Palmer did not advocate women's rights, or support the women's issues of her day such as women's suffrage. To Palmer, an apocalyptic urgency justified her violation of reigning gender norms; but, the freedom that came with that violation could only be put to the service of divine, not earthly, causes.

Empirical research in the impact of the millenarian story on those involved with Christian fundamentalism supports this conclusion. Millenarianism does not penetrate the sacred gender wall. For men, it is a primary religious idea that justifies social conservatism. For women, it is a much more marginal belief, drawn upon in one of two ways. On rare occasion it is used to justify individual practices that transgress sex category norms; however, not in a manner that facilitates sustained change. Most commonly, fundamentalist women draw upon the millenarian teachings they are exposed to as a means of rationalizing their acceptance of the explicit or implicit gender injustice of their existing situations (Brasher, 29).

Engendering the millenarian impulse of American Christian fundamentalists reveals it to be a very narrow gate of liberation for women. As such, it is non-feminist. For while the millenarian story can empower individual fundamentalist women, it is not conducive to consciousness-raising, and the political engagement that might inspire social movements which could benefit women as a whole.

This does not mean that millenarianism has not or cannot generate social changes beneficial to women. The millenarian belief that whatever the present state of society is, it is always penultimate to the kingdom of God, may make it more possible for people to adopt novel social arrangements such as liberalized gendering norms. However, it does suggest the hermeneutic of millenarianism adopted by contemporary Christian fundamentalists is significantly antifeminist. Through its claim not to be about the social, the political, the human, but the transcendent, Christian fundamentalist millenarianism functions as an ideology that elides gender from human discourse. Engendering the millennium reveals the power embedded in this ideological move. It also discloses how—much like a magician who claims to have nothing up either sleeve and thereby calls attention to the means of an illusion while denying it—the millenarianism of late 20th century Christian fundamentalists, although generally conveyed with the disclaimer that it has nothing to do with gender, is contrary to this disavowal a significantly engendered and engendering machine.

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