

## Women and mission: reflections and research findings

Nicola Slee

Nicola Slee is a poet and theologian based at the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, Birmingham. She teaches in the fields of spirituality and feminist theology, and has a particular interest in women's contemporary poetry that addresses issues of faith and spirituality. As well as writing poetry herself, she regularly runs workshops on women's poetry and on creative writing.

### 1. *Missio Dei* in the lives and experience of women

Mission is the work of God in and to God's world, in which the Church is invited to share. This has become axiomatic in contemporary mission studies. We speak of *missio dei* – the mission of God – as the primary theological foundation for all mission studies and missionary activity. This implies that God is already at work – of course! – in God's world and in and with all of God's people, in and through the energising, encouraging and convicting, justice-inspiring work of the Holy Spirit. Thus another imperative of mission studies is to listen to and learn from the people with whom one seeks to share the good news of the Gospel, as the primary site where *missio dei* is to be located. The incarnational God is above all at work in the lives and sufferings of the people formed in the divine image (although not exclusively there, as ecotheologians remind us – the earth, too, and the other creatures, are caught up in God's care, God's mission). The fundamental affirmation of human lives and cultures as the site of mission is enshrined in what Bevans<sup>1</sup> names the anthropological model of contextual theology, which has a high view of human culture, believing that God is always and already at work in every human context, and that the seeds of the gospel are already present in each and every human encounter.

What might this mean for mission to and with and alongside women? It means taking seriously the presence and stirring of God's Spirit in the lives of women throughout the world, not only as individuals, but in the huge collective movement of women over the past four or five decades towards self-affirmation and actualization, towards liberation, towards claiming our God-given vocation as those made in God's image and sharing in God's work of redeeming and remaking God's world. We have seen during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the rising up of many previously marginalised and disenfranchised peoples into a new claiming of voice, collective identity and dignity. Movements of and on behalf of women, the poor, black people, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people, children, those differently abled and the elderly can all be seen as energetic and beautiful expressions of the work of the Spirit kindling the longing for recognition and a true sharing in the life of the world amongst the marginalised, the poorest of the poor, those who live on the 'underside of history'. All of these are expressions of the *missio dei*. The Church has so often tended to regard such movements with suspicion and defensiveness, as manifestations of the spirit of the times which are seen to be secular, anti-religious, acquisitive, individualistic and opportunist; rather than regarding such liberation movements as signs of the new work God is doing in world history in our times, disrupting ancient and entrenched structures of injustice and bringing to birth new patterns of relating, community and care. Not that we need be naïve

about the cost and the messiness of such wholesale shifting of ancient patterns and ways of relating. God's work in the world is a costly one, reflecting and working out the passion of Christ in the lives of women and men today; and this is so at the macro as well as the micro-level – transformation of structures is no less painful and costly than transformation of individual lives, and institutions as well as individuals may and do resist change, especially where that change demands the loss of power and the sharing with many of what has been the possession of a few. The work of liberation always costs, and the angry, justice-inspired, disruptive work of the Spirit is not a force for either safety or self-protection. And the God who works in and through human lives and becoming is a God who takes the risk of immersing in the muddled, messy, confused and complex forces of history (or her-story), in which it is not always possible to distinguish between what is of God and what is merely or perversely human (particularly when we are living the experience – hindsight may bring a greater clarity).

If we may believe that God is at work, however obscurely and messily, in the liberation movements which we have witnessed and are witnessing in the world, we must also pay special attention to the voices and lives of those who are in vanguard of such movements. Liberation theologies of all kinds teach us to expect to hear in a very particular way the voice of God speaking in the voices of the poor, the marginalised, the oppressed – whether this be the voices of the elderly, the disabled, children, women or the earth itself. And so the Church needs to listen with particular care and respect to the voices of women which, having been silent for so many centuries, are beginning to rise up with new urgency, power and authority.

In what follows below, I want to share some of the findings of a research study I conducted into the spiritual searchings and sufferings of a group of 30 women<sup>2</sup>, as a way of considering more specifically how the Spirit of God might be at work in the lives of women in the world today, as a way of listening to the voices of women, and as a way of identifying some particular challenges to the mission of the Church to and with and alongside women. I do so strongly aware of the limitations and particularities of this small piece of work, and not seeking to claim more generalisability for it than it warrants. I am also aware, in writing of the spiritual hungers and searching of contemporary women, of a parallel and not unrelated movement amongst a growing number of men who might wish to speak of the need for new patterns of masculinity and of an emotional and spiritual crisis amongst men (in the west, at least). I take this new quest of men seriously and do not want to either ignore or belittle it: this too is the site of the *missio dei*. But my own focus is and has been on the experience, needs and struggles of women for identity, voice and authentic spirituality – and I believe that such work need not detract from men's search for new forms of identity and voice but can enhance and encourage it.

## **2. Women's faith development: patterns and processes**

In the mid-1990s I conducted a research study into the patterns and processes of women's faith lives based on interviews with thirty women in and on the edges of Christian tradition. The women ranged in age between 30 and 67 and were drawn from a variety of

cultural backgrounds, with approximately one third from contexts other than British – thus although there is a weighting towards white, western women, the study did include other voices. The study drew widely upon Fowler’s faith development theory and methodology<sup>3</sup>, but also utilized the work of feminist psychologists and theologians both to critique and widen the base of Fowler’s approach to faith. The intention of the study was to produce a qualitatively rich account of women’s faith lives, which would be self-authenticating in its own terms, which would allow theoretical constructs to be developed from the ‘ground’ upwards, and which would suggest avenues for further exploration and study. The aim was to listen to women’s stories as valid in their own right, and to ‘map’ women’s meanings in as much detail as possible, as a way of providing an alternative and a corrective to dominant accounts of faith development which have been shaped within an androcentric culture.

I can do more than highlight some of the main trends here, and suggest ways in which they might be significant for pastoral, evangelistic and developmental work with women. The findings identified both a number of distinct *processes* by which women articulated and made sense of their spiritual lives, and a number of broader *patterns* which seemed to recur, albeit in very different ways and configurations, across the research group. Here I am going to concentrate on the three broad patterns of faith development – I do not describe them as stages, because they do not necessarily appear in a straightforward linear pattern nor function like classic developmental stages. The three themes can be summarised as alienation, awakenings and relationality, which, in their various manifestations, seem to represent key developmental challenges, crises and opportunities for the women. Alienation, in its many forms, signifies the crises which women face in a patriarchal culture in coming to an ownership of their lives as meaningful, spirit-inspired and intentional. Awakenings describe the moments and longer struggles in which women come to some resolution, however temporary, of paralysis. Through such awakenings women enter into deeper levels of meaning, transparency to truth and ability to act significantly in the world. Relationality, the third theme, seems to represent not so much a specific developmental phase or crisis, as the underlying sense of connectedness to God, self and other which endures across time. Although this sense of connection is threatened in the experience of alienation, it survives and guarantees meaning even during the most apparently bleak and hopeless times.

### 3. Alienation in women’s spirituality

A dominant strand in the women’s accounts was an experience going by many names and articulated in different ways, but in broad terms constellating around notions of paralysis, powerlessness and loss of a sense of self, God and other. This experience can last for a relatively short period or over many years. Some women expressed this alienation negatively or indirectly by an inability to name and by a pervasive silence throughout the interview. Many women, however, used powerful images to describe the experience. They used landscape images of wilderness and desert, confinement and enclosure to convey the physicality of the experience. They employed metaphors of deadness, loss of feeling and reality, speaking of not knowing the self or God. They called on images of disconnection, fragmentation, alienation and breakdown to convey the sense of a split, divided self and

faith. They spoke of being stuck in the place of paralysis or impasse, or feeling compelled to repeat destructive patterns or return to the same place from which they were trying to escape. They used quest imagery to speak of a search for what is unknown or out of reach. Images of abdication, absorption or reckless giving up of the self to the [male] other expressed ways in which they felt themselves to be complicit in this powerlessness. More fearful yet, there were images of domination, oppression, violent attack or rape testifying to the ways in which they felt themselves to be robbed of selfhood and faith, violated at some fundamental level. At the personal and psychological level, women's experience of impasse represents a major developmental challenge. I suggest that the experience of impasse is potentially creative, if it can be actively appropriated and integrated within the woman's psyche and spirituality. Yet until the experience is more widely recognised, authenticated and named in language and symbols which resonate with women's experiences, the creative potentiality of impasse is likely to remain severely restricted.

For all those working with and alongside women in the church or in wider society, it is imperative to recognise how wide-ranging these varied experiences of alienation from God, church and from their very selves can be. This can be masked because the church itself is, of course, a strongly feminised sphere, at least in many cultural contexts, which may lead some to speak more of men's alienation than of women's and to assume that women are comfortable in the religious realm. Without for a moment wanting to detract from the spiritual crisis facing men in our day, my research suggests that women, too, experience profound spiritual alienation both within and outside the church, and that this needs to be recognised by pastors, evangelists, educators and others who seek to enable and empower women. Many women, certainly in the west, have left churches because of their profound experiences of alienation, oppression and infantilisation; yet they still express a deep spiritual hunger and yearn for communities and rituals which will enable them to name and explore their own spiritual needs. As a number of feminist theologians have suggested, preaching good news to women has to mean engaging with the forces that threaten to undermine women's selves, both internal and external, and naming the experiences of alienation that prevent women from engaging meaningfully with faith.

#### **4. Awakenings in women's spirituality**

The women in my study also spoke of those experiences through which they had moved through alienation and into some form of awakened or revived faith and selfhood. Analysis revealed a broad range of significant marker events which had acted as the trigger or gateway to such awakening. Some of these have already been identified by previous research, but some were new, and the women's accounts added new depth to accounts already available in the literature.

Women spoke of the significance of various exodus journeys, separations or home-leavings, in which they had been able to make the break from what had been death-dealing and stultifying. For some, travel to another country, place, people or experience of world was the catalyst to self-knowledge and insight, enabling them to see themselves and their situation more clearly and freeing them to act decisively upon their situation. For many, being in loving relationship was the core experience which enabled them to come to knowledge of

themselves as valuable and cherished, to discover healing of the divided self and to be empowered through the energy of love. Whilst for many this occurred through a one-to-one relationship to a lover, partner, mentor or friend, for others it was associated with a home-coming or coming to rest within a wider group or community. For a number of women, the experience of motherhood had been a decisive one, in which the bonding with her child and the bodily intimacy with the vulnerable newborn had served as the gateway to a profound encounter with God as Mother to her own self. Other women spoke in similar fashion of their relationships to a variety of vulnerable, marginal or suffering others. The contact with suffering persons somehow gifted the woman with a deeper awareness of her own vulnerability yet, at the same time, the power of compassion was a motivating force to action which overcame the isolation of the paralysed self. Other stories centred around the discovery of the woman's creative voice or her own particular work, vocation or sphere, as the significant catalyst to deeper awakening. In contrast to such narratives, other women pointed to experiences of illness, suffering, death or other limit situations as the context within which they worked through paralysis and powerlessness and came to greater healing and wholeness.

While there is a great deal of variety in the women's descriptions of their experiences of awakening or breakthrough, a number of common features were noted. First, there was a strong emphasis on the priority of intuition, bodily knowing and instinct over rational thinking, the dictates of conscience or authority. This suggests that for many women, the process of awakening is bound up with the movement from what Belenky and her colleagues<sup>4</sup> describe as the movement from 'silence' or 'received knowledge' to 'subjective knowledge', marked by 'a new conception of truth as personal, private, and subjectively known or intuited'. Second, there was often, although not always, evidence of what Rosemary Haughton<sup>5</sup> describes as the period of 'preparation' leading to the critical moment of awakening or breakthrough itself. Third, the experience of awakening is marked by a sense of the coming together or coherence of different parts of the self – inner and outer, 'secular' and 'religious', emotion and thought – acting in a unity. This stands in stark contrast to the experience of the 'split self' which marked the experience of alienation. Fourth, as a result of this coming together of the self into a cohesive unity, there is a new sense of power, vitality and energy, and an explosion of feeling in the experience of awakening. The energies which were previously dispersed and employed in maintaining the harmful dichotomies are now released, often with a rush of psychic force which gives rise to metaphors of release, transformation and rebirth. Finally, the awakening to new consciousness demands a 'new naming' of self, of reality and of God or one's core values. Things are no longer what they previously seemed; there is a sense of having crossed a threshold into new awareness. This new awareness requires new language, new terms, new images for its expression. There is a developmental challenge of reconstructing not only old understandings of selfhood but also 'received' models of religion and spirituality. For some women, the former patterns of religion are so deeply embedded in passivity, powerlessness and paralysis that they seem incapable of being reworked and are rejected along with the former self-identity. For other women, there is a movement from religion experienced as an external, authoritarian system of rules, beliefs and behaviours, to spirituality experienced as a personally appropriated path which empowers and sustains the new self.

At one level, the narratives of women's awakenings are a heartening affirmation of *missio dei*: that God the Spirit is already at work in the lives of women stirring new life and birth, although from my findings it is clear that this work may happen in a wide variety of contexts and is as likely to be located outside the church as inside it. There is a strong sense of the broad, generous, creative work of God who lives and moves and has being in every human person and whose sustaining, saving work can never be confined to the church or controlled by church authorities and spokespersons. Putting this another way, it is striking that many of the women's narratives of awakening centred on ordinary, mundane, 'non-religious' experience as the vehicle of change, and this is something for Church leaders and workers to take with fundamental seriousness. Mission needs to be fully world-focused and world-centred, working in and through the realities of women's lives where they exist – in the home, in places of work, in networks and social groups, in places of learning, and so on – rather than narrowly church-focused.

## 5. **Relationality in women's spirituality**

The third dominant theme to emerge from the interviews was the theme of relationality or connectedness. This theme found expression in a wide variety of ways, and encompassed not only human relationships and the divine-human relation, but also a sense of connectedness to the earth and a more profound sense of connectedness being at the very heart of reality. My research thus supports the contention, at least in large measure, that women's faith is constructed in predominantly relational terms, in line with the descriptions offered by Gilligan<sup>6</sup> and others of women's contextual and connected ways of thinking.

The majority of women conceived of faith in personal relational terms, as being in relation with God and/or the Other and/or Self. They imaged this relationship in a wide variety of human relational metaphors. Some named God in hierarchical terms as parent, sovereign or lord; more often, relationships of mutuality were drawn upon to speak of God as lover, partner or friend. In some of the accounts, male imagery was dominant; in others, female. Despite the variety of relational imagery, what were crucial for the women was the constancy, faithfulness and dependability of divine presence in their lives. A number of women spoke of this enduring divine presence in terms of 'core' imagery, whilst others expressed it in terms of an ongoing dialogue with God, characterised by trust, intimacy and openness, as well as conflict, struggle and challenge. Where the women did not use personal relational images to speak of faith, they used other relational metaphors to speak of faith as connectedness, pattern, bridge-building, weaving and touching into the depths or deeper dimensions of things. Many narratives emphasised the connectedness of suffering through which empathy with the other is achieved and the presence of the divine transcendent made known. Another common theme was the sacredness of the ordinary as the locus of the encounter with the divine, and a strongly incarnational, embodied spirituality. Most pervasive of all was the notion of integration of experience, which women talked about both as a present reality and a longed-for yet rarely glimpsed ideal. Whether integration remained an ideal towards which they moved or a reality which they were beginning to live out, there was a common commitment to relationship with God and with others as the arena within which to draw together the disparate and apparently contradictory elements within their own lives.

In contrast to the phenomena of alienation and awakenings within women's spirituality, relationality appears to represent not so much a moment or phase within a developmental sequence of faith as a more fundamental epistemology which underpins the whole of a woman's spiritual journey. The conviction of the connection to God (or whatever she names the source of being) carries her through the threat of non-being and paralysis into an awakened faith. In alienation, the reality of relationality and connectedness seem to be most at threat, contradicted by the woman's sense of dividedness and impasse. Yet even here there is an underlying sense that the self is held in place by a deeper reality of love and grace, even if she can no longer feel or name that reality. The various moments of awakening are often experienced as a renewed awareness of the relatedness of the self to its own powers of being, to the powers of nature, to others, and to the source of all connectedness, however that source may be named. Increasingly, the sense of connectedness with others extends to include not only those with whom one has obvious affinity but also those who are alien, different and strange yet are known in new ways to be affiliated to the self.

I do not want to suggest trite 'applications' of these findings to mission<sup>7</sup>. However, a broad and obvious implication is that the 'how' of mission is at least as important as the 'what'. The nature of the human relationships, both inter-personal and more broadly communal, in and through which women encounter the gospel, is of paramount importance. If God is communicated and experienced by women in a peculiarly relational way, in and through the fabric of human relationships as well as in some epistemological sense of interconnectedness, then it is imperative that there is congruence between the church's message and its living out of that message in its own communities of care. Carol Lakey Hess has written insightfully of some of the features that such communities of care need to exhibit if women and girls are to know themselves loved, valued and cared for by God in the household of faith<sup>8</sup>. These include genuine listening to women and girls' stories in a climate of respect; affirmation of women's and girls' gifts, skills and contribution; the teaching of a right self-care as well as concern for others – and many other features.

## **Conclusions**

This brief sketch of some perhaps significant patterns in women's spirituality is neither conclusive nor universal; and one important test of my own findings will be to discern how comparable the experience of women in different cultural settings might be (research by Eun Sim Joung on Korean women's faith attachments suggests both some commonalities and some differences, for example<sup>9</sup>). If my findings have some kind of validity, however limited, their educational, pastoral and missiological implications will nevertheless not be obvious or straightforward; and the contextual nature of all mission requires their interpretation and application with subtlety and care in different settings. I would be most interested in readers' reactions and responses to the findings, and particularly interested to hear from a range of cultural and educational settings. How might things look differently in different settings? What would some of the key aspects of women's spiritual search look like in other settings, and how could and should the missionary work of the church respond?

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> For a full account, see Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004)

<sup>3</sup> James Fowler's classic account can be found in his *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (London: Harper & Row, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> Mary Field Belenky, B. M. Clinchy, N.R. Goldberger & J. M. Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Rosemary Haughton, *The Passionate God* (London: DLT, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

<sup>7</sup> For a fuller discussion of the implications of my findings, see *Women's Faith Development*, chapter 8.

<sup>8</sup> Carol Lakey Hess, *Caretakers of Our Common House: Women's Development in Communities of Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Eun Sim Jung, 'Attachment and women's faith development', *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 27, 2, pp. 145-155 (2007).