



Manifesto of the Second Reformation

A Review Essay by Anne Eggebroten

Sunday School Manifesto: In the Image of Her? by Elizabeth Dodson Gray. Wellesley, MA: Roundtable Press, 1994.

I felt a tightening in my body's center as I read the opening words of this book. Their truth, importance, and danger leapt out at me; and the sudden tension created that fear reaction.

"Male-reflective Christian theology is curiously unrepentant for the blatant way Christianity has been constructed 'in the image of him.' . . . What I am calling for is another Reformation of Christendom, freeing us this time not from the power of pope and priest but from the power of patriarchal males whatever their position."

This book is indeed a manifesto, a list of sins nailed to the door of the church today with a call for specific changes. Its appearance in the same year as the Re-Imagining controversy is no coincidence. The Re-Imagining conference in Minneapolis in late 1993 and the explosive reactions in 1994 are landmarks of the Second Reformation of the church.

In its slim size and its bright blue-and-white cover with the Picasso drawing of flowers held by two hands, this book does not look as radical as it is. In fact, the words *Sunday school* in the title might cause most readers to ignore the book. Who wants to read a book about how to revise the Sunday school curriculum?

But this white-haired prophet is not talking about polite and superficial changes. Step one, she says, is to "totally strip the male language/image/metaphor from our references to deity in worship and in church life" (p. 53). Would the governing body in your local church vote for that one?

Step two: "Deconstruct the male-identified biblical text"—that is, the sexist passages—presenting them with "prayers of repentance for the sin of idolatry of the male." My pastor would have a little

trouble with that one.

Step three is high visibility for women in every church service and curriculum (at least half of all humans visible in leading worship, or mentioned as examples, or quoted from the Bible, and so on, should be women). This could include celebrating women missionaries, honoring birth as sacred, honoring women's bodies (all parts—need I name them?).

Step four is actively countering the centuries-old misogyny of Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas—pointing out that fetal life is neutral and will become female unless triggered into male. These old boys taught that feuses were naturally male unless unfortunate circumstances caused femaleness-as-missing-the-penis to occur. The misogyny centered on Eve must also be uprooted.

Dodson Gray's final and most radical step is to move beyond our focus on Jesus' death and the violence of the cross.

That's where she loses me—but not completely. I can learn that we focus on that death too much—that the idea of God-as-father-asking-son-to-be-obedient-unto-death feeds the child abuse that has been epidemic in Western culture for centuries. But I'm not ready to leave the central significance of that death. With the disparados of Argentina just now being revealed as having been drugged and dropped out of planes at night in the mid-70s to mid-80s, the suffering deaths of the righteous are still precious to me, as they are to God. I can worship a God who dies innocently for truth; this God speaks to me against the male gods in my culture who kill. I want to continue to believe that this God's death encompasses my sins as well as those of all humanity. As far as Augustine's ideas about original sin and concupiscence—we feminists have to continue struggling with our male-inherited theology and find out how to cleanse it

without losing the gold.

At any rate, I recommend reading this book. The first two chapters are a concise and passionate review of the contempt for women in Greco-Judeo-Christian tradition and history. The third presents Jesus as radically challenging that tradition (this was news to us in 1972—but still refreshing to review now). In chapter four, she points out the dangers of an obsession with Jesus on the cross—particularly when the messages of obedience and forgiveness are forced on women surrounded by a culture of unrepentant, abusive males. To obey the father who is sexually abusive, or the husband who is violent, and even be expected to forgive ongoing abuse certainly contributes to patriarchal control of women.

There was a surprise for me in Dodson-Gray's chapter on changing the church and the world. In calling for movement away from masculine imagery, she does not want to move to female-based language for God, arguing that two errors added together don't make a whole picture of God. I feel very comfortable with and comforted by female language for God, as in Marty Rienstra's *Swallow's Nest: A Feminine Reading of the Psalms* and as in the Sophia/Wisdom imagery. These are things we and our daughters and daughters' daughters will have to work out.

How will the next generation understand Jesus? Will Sophia be central in their worship? I admit that I am having trouble in communicating my "Jesus died on the cross for you and me" theory of atonement to my three daughters. The oldest, now 13 years old, enjoys opposing me when I push her toward faith. The younger two are more tractable so far, but getting all three to Sunday school each week is a battle. Is their opposition developmental? Or sinful? Or an instinctive reaction to male/female and parent/child power relations in church and



society? Would they attend the “men’s church” better if I attended every week? (I go to Women-Church on alternate Sundays, and there is no provision for children there.)

To reflect on these questions, read this book—whether or not you agree with all of it. I hope Elizabeth Dodson Gray’s own story will be her next book. Starting out as a Southern Baptist in Baltimore, she went to Smith and then in 1954 completed a B.Div. (yesterday’s M.Div.) at Yale Divinity School, one of the first women to do so, at a time when the mainline denominations were just beginning to permit women’s ordination. What a story that must be! She married a fellow student and pastored together with him (but without the credit or the salary, until recently), raising two children. As an Episcopalian today, her theological journey has been similar to that of many of us in EEWC.

But she is not going to fade away into decent feminine old age. In her 70s she is a noisy prophet, putting her money into mailings to everyone on the EEWC, *Daughters of Sarah*, and other lists so that women will find this book and her five others. Could the same woman write *Children of Joy: Raising Your Own Home-Grown Christians* in 1975 and *Patriarchy as a Conceptual Trap* in 1982? Yes. To meet her, order one of her books from Roundtable Press, Four Linden Square, Wellesley, MA 02181. ❖

California-based Anne Eggebroten is a founding member of EEWC and editor of *Abortion—My Choice, God’s Grace: Christian Women Tell Their Stories (New Paradigm Books, 1994)*.

A Challenge to Update Readers

How can EEWC respond to the questions raised in Elizabeth Dodson Gray’s *Sunday School Manifesto*?

How do you handle these issues in your home?

How can we teach children about God, the Scriptures, and Christianity in ways that are gender inclusive and that affirm the experiences of girls and women?

What printed materials do you recommend? What changes are needed in the Sunday School curriculum? Write to **UPDATE** and share your ideas with other readers.

Just as I Am: Journal-Keeping for Spiritual Growth by Virginia Hearn. Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1994. 141 pages..

—Reviewed by Kathryn Pigg

In this recently published book, Virginia Hearn has given the reader an engaging and practical guide to journal-keeping. The style is clear and concise—sometimes not true of books on journaling. Examples from the author’s longstanding interest in the genre, her many years of leading workshops in this area, and her depth of reading combine to make the book an excellent resource for both the novice and the seasoned keeper of journals.

The journal is *not a diary*, Hearn reminds the reader more than once. It is more than a daily record of events in our lives; it is a way to discover where God is leading us, a way to grow in spiritual discernment, and a way to put down our concerns and issues for the purpose of clarification. Hearn uses a metaphor which she paraphrases from an early Pendle Hill pamphlet on journaling:

Journal-keeping is like having a cardigan sweater with two pockets. The left-hand one is full of a tangle of strings. In the right-hand one is a small ball of neatly wound string. When you have time, you take out the tangle and wind a piece of it onto the tidy ball. And slowly, slowly, the tangle gets smaller and the ball gets larger.

Acknowledging her debt to the work of psychotherapist Ira Progoff, who has been called “the father of contemporary American journal-keeping,” Hearn recommends a basic journal pattern that bears similarity to the Progoff journal method in its use of notebook dividers for various sections.

These divisions in Hearn’s suggested journal correspond to chapters 2 through 10 of her book. Chapter 2, for example, is titled “*Nothing Never Happens*,” and

its four writing exercises fall under the notebook divider titled, “Who Am I?”

Each chapter contains exercises for warming up to the task of writing, as well as stories and examples from the author’s journal-keeping workshops which add clarity and encouragement. Hearn’s suggested dividers for other categories in a personal journal have such titles as “My Days,” “Turning Points,” “Present Tense,” “Free-Flow Writing,” “Affirmations,” “Unsent Letters,” “Conversations,” and “Conversations with God.”

The author’s skill as a writer makes this book a pleasure to read. In addition to her communication skills, the use of quotes from such diverse writers as T.S. Eliot, Elizabeth O’Connor, Harvey Cox, Luci Shaw, Alice Miller, Morton Kelsey, Thomas Merton, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Carlos Fuentes, and Flannery O’Connor, among others, added to my personal enjoyment of the book.

Many additional sources are noted in the extensive bibliography, which is divided into sections listing (1) books on journaling from an explicitly Christian perspective; (2) books on journaling from other perspectives; (3) books on related topics—such as teaching poetry-writing in a nursing home, and dreams as a way to listen to God; and (4) magazine and newspaper articles on journal-keeping.

Just As I Am is a book that is both basic and enriching. It will be a useful and valued addition to my library. ❖

Reviewer Kathryn Pigg is the pastor of the Broad Street United Methodist church in Portsmouth, VA. A new member of EEWC, she writes poetry and paints under the name Kathryn Cramer Brown.

Ed. note: Virginia Hearn, author of the book *Just as I Am*, is a longtime member of EEWC. She reports that her initial interest in journal-writing was sparked by a workshop she attended at an EEWC conference.