VISIONS FOR POWER-IN-RELATION
A Bibliographic Survey
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The utter, unqualified reciprocity of neighbor love and love of God/ess must always be a hallmark of a feminist Christian ethic. Our knowledge of God is in and through each other. Our knowledge of each other is in and through God. We act together and find our good in each other and in God, and our power grows together, or we deny our relation and reproduce a violent world where no one experiences holy power.

— Beverly Harrison, Making the Connections

Beverly Harrison is well known for her conviction that when women come together in struggles for our common well-being, we join One who is our co-creator and co-redeemer in the dance of redemption that is the created, material world. From this theological perspective, Harrison celebrates faith as the power to live one’s life fully, genuinely engaged in receiving and communicating a sense of life’s joy and possibility. Hence to live by faith and develop an ethic in conjunction with this acceptance of one’s own power means to engage with others in a tender shaping of the processes of nature/history for genuine human and cosmic fulfillment.¹

The religious praxis of a feminist liberationist ethic lives towards the horizon of Justice/Love; we seek to relate human persons to the web of life. I preface this bibliographic review by locating several hermeneutical resources Harrison insists are crucial to keep feminist ethics accountable to questions of power and oppression existing in specific historical contexts. In addition to sex/gender organization, other crucial power differentials feminist ethicists analyze include class relations and their mystification, racial/ethnic traditions and current dynamics, and sexuality and social order.

The binding theoretical term in feminist liberationist ethics is social relations, necessary both as a vehicle for social analysis and for the evaluation

¹Beverly Harrison, Our Right to Choose Toward a New Ethic of Abortion (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 93.
of conflicting moral claims. Hence, I try to be aware that being a white and middle-class, heterosexual and educationally privileged, Christian and Canadian woman mediates all my relating. The affirmation of our “power in relation” includes recognition that this power is always partial and finite, and underscores that we are morally accountable for our world under concrete limitations set by social location, our relatedness to others and to our environment. Mutuality, or shared communal expression of power, is another name for the feminist norm of justice. The task of feminist ethics, then, is to envision and shape an understanding of moral life and community in light of women’s experience of struggle against all concrete structures of oppression. As a means to empowering women’s moral agency, understood as taking responsibility for our lives in community, we aim not to develop a set of moral guidelines that will be binding for all persons (or all feminists) in all circumstances, but to employ a social ethical framework towards a collective praxis of liberation.

Happily, many women now carry forward the work Harrison has established. Both religious and nonreligious resources help to refocus feminist ethics and practice to privilege the lived-world experience of women, the poor, the racially and culturally marginalized, and all those outside the circle of significance defined by white, heterosexist, patriarchal capitalism. To practice the art of feminist ethics, Harrison critically appropriates three streams of theory: theological theories of historical communities of faith; moral theories; and various social theories, both social-scientific and philosophical. Most crucial for the trajectories she elaborates is attention to social theory:

Our methodological coherence depends on the consistency and convergence of presumptions obtaining in our theo-anthropological, moral, and social perspectives. The most serious threat of incoherence in religious ethics lies in the refusal to be self-conscious about

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3 Ruth Smith argues cogently that becoming a moral subject involves understanding morality as a structure of sociohistorical relations. See “Feminism and the Moral Subject,” in Women’s Consciousness, Women’s Conscience, ed. Barbara Andolsen, Christine E. Gudorf, and Mary D. Pellauer (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985).


Because of this injunction, and to encourage the construction of feminist religious ethics whose task is to engender a “justice imaginable,” I will focus on significant resources in recent philosophical, social, and cultural theory that stand in continuity with Harrison’s approach.

Three authors who grapple with the problems and possibilities of the connections between feminist social theory and political strategies are Patricia Hill Collins, Caroline Ramazanoglu, and Elizabeth Spelman. Professor Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, demonstrates how “African-American women’s position in the economic, political, and ideological terrain bounding intellectual discourse has fostered a distinctive Black feminist intellectual tradition.” Through an assessment of its thematic content and its epistemological approach she establishes the significance of her tradition and how these twin components have been shaped by Black women’s outsider-within stance as well as by their embeddedness in traditional African-American culture.

Sociologist Caroline Ramazanoglu, in *Feminism and the Contradictions of Oppression*, attends to identifying and clarifying the differences between women, in experience as well as feminist explanations of women’s oppression, in the hope of contributing to effective strategies for liberation. Assuming that liberation is not a uniform or noncontradictory process, she reassesses possible connections between feminist theory and feminist political practice based on the actual contradictions of women’s lives.

Philosopher Elizabeth Spelman in *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*, addresses the paradox at the heart of feminism this way: “Any attempt to talk about all women in terms of something we have in common undermines attempts to talk about differences among us, and vice versa. Is it possible to give the things women have in common their full significance without thereby implying that the differences among us are less important?” Writing from British and American academic settings, each directs attention to social location, the historical roots of injustice, and the different faces of empowerment and solidarity. Taken together they create a conversation around issues of privilege and oppression; ideologies, culture

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6 Harrison, “The Role of Social Theory in Religious Social Ethics,” in *Making the Connections*, 57.
and sexuality; and the revolutionary implications of specifying the interconnections of race, gender, sexual politics, and social class among women struggling for liberation. Multidimensional theories emerge to shape and give credence to suppressed voices, account for women's relational particularities, and challenge us into deeper moral agency and communal dialogue.

As a Canadian working in feminist liberation ethics and theology, I have also been indebted to the intellectual tradition of socialist feminism in Canada for making more explicit the ways in which power and ideology, as rooted in material conditions, differently thwart women's empowerment. This stream of social theory is manifest in the "Women and Philosophy" issue of Resources for Feminist Research/Documentation sur la Recherche Feministe. In it, for example, Mary O'Brien invokes a feminist love of wisdom, as it is grounded in both productive and reproductive activity; Kathleen Martindale discusses the ethics of "voice" in feminist literary criticism; and Lynda Lange deals with feminism and political choice—reproductive labor and the tension between collectivism, cultural nationalism, and individualism. Elsewhere, Kathryn Pauly Morgan, in "Women and Moral Madness," examines how women's moral voices and sense of moral integrity are distorted under patriarchal ideology and lived experience. Focusing on how women are denied full moral agency, Morgan cites four maneuvers, typical of traditional ethical theory and moral practice that accomplish women's moral disempowerment—via concepts of human nature, exclusion of women from the public domain, the generation of insanity through double-binds and moral contortions, and the maintenance of the invisibility of women's moral domains.

If we are to take the specifics of women's lives seriously, and most particularly those of the marginalized, we will employ not only social theory but also alternate cultural resources. Karen Lebacqz, for example, calls for dialogue with silenced voices:

If justice begins with the correction of injustices, then the most important tools for understanding will be the stories of injustice as experienced by the oppressed and the tools of social and historical

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11 See the "Women and Philosophy" issue of RFR/DRF 16, no. 3 (September 1987).

To discover how the relationality of our lives yields both suffering and hope, feminist liberation ethics must attend not only to social analysis but also to different kinds of resources within the cultural domain.

Because our religious lives and discourses are inextricably shaped by culture, and because culture can also function to resist alienation and dehumanization, feminist ethicists seek to identify, create, and sustain traditions, values, and ways of life that enhance women’s well-being. Katie Cannon and Delores Williams have in unique and different ways long struggled with a normative engagement of the cultural milieu of black women’s everyday lives, while Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz has done the same for a mujerista ethos. Each warns against neglect of cultural resources in the critical and ongoing creation of what Williams calls “lifeline politics.”

In Standing Again at Sinai Judith Plaskow argues for attention to religious difference and specificity in the development of accountable theology and ethics where she presents, for example, the concept of *tikkun*—in rabbinc thought, attending to material needs with God in mind—as a gift of Judaism for the repair of the world. Mary Hunt’s *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship* appropriates lesbian existence and spirituality to offer a multidimensional account of how justice must include befriending the self within communities of accountability where change takes place.

Less familiar may be other important cultural resources such as Janet Silman’s compilation of Native Canadian women’s struggles for self-determination, *Enough is Enough: Aboriginal Women Speak Out;* and the *Telling It Book Collective’s Telling It: Women and Language Across Cultures,* about a gathering of native, lesbian and Asian Canadian women where racism and

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17 *Enough is Enough: Aboriginal Women Speak Out,* as told to Janet Silman (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1987).
homophobia were publicly addressed by feminist writers in Canada. In a different setting, similar issues emerge in a fascinating and unique project called *Unsettling Relations: The University as a Site of Feminist Struggles*. This book consists of the sociobiographies of five academic women who write out of a common commitment to social change but who have different communities of accountability and unequal relations to power.

In combination, these resources challenge women of faith who seek justice to undertake the constant task of naming our social location in the interstices of race and ethnicity, class and gender, religion and sexual politics as honestly as possible. We must question exactly where our privilege, oppression, and practices fit within current social relations. We make the way as we go, trusting that wherever women experience ourselves as participants in building community, authorizing our own lives, and celebrating this struggle, we will be blessed with Holy Presence.

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