

The Anglican Church and Feminism: Challenging 'the Patriarchy of Our Faith'

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Abstract

Gender-based violence is a problem in most Southern African countries and yet it has generally received little attention from governments and civil society—including Christian churches. In recent years, some churches have been responding by making public pronouncements when, for example, gender-based violence resulted in acts of brutal murder. This was the case in February 2013, when the seventeen-year-old Anene Booysen was gang-raped and left for dead. For example, the Anglican Church issued public statements and called on its members to act against gender-based violence. Arguments made in this essay are underpinned by the view that gender-based violence has its roots in patriarchy and, that patriarchal privilege (embedded in male headship) gives men power over women. The essay describes how prominent leaders of the Anglican Church make public statements when and where it matters. The call “to repent of the historic patriarchy of our faith” was one such statement made by the then archbishop during the church’s synod in 2005. Other Anglican archbishops have also made public that feminist insights have raised awareness about the injustices of sexism maintained by culture and the church. Thus, based on the observation that Christianity and feminism share certain concerns for just relationships, the argument made here is that the (Anglican) church could be more intentional about employing feminist insights in challenging “the historic patriarchy of our faith.” The essay identifies the reasons usually given for dismissing feminist insights and suggests that such reasons could serve as entry-points in the church’s response to gender power-relations in general and gender-based violence in particular.

Introduction

In South Africa, the recent spate of reported cases of violence against women and, particularly the brutal gang-rape and murder of Anene Booysen, of Bredasdorp, once again brought gender-based violence on to the agenda of the government and civil society organisations—including the church.² The Anglican Church (amongst others) has also

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² For a timeline of events concerning Anene Booysen’s rape and responses from various civil society organisations and the South African government, see: News24.com, “Articles Relating to Anene Booysen,” <http://www.news24.com/Tags/People/anene_booysen/> [Accessed 29 January 2014]. On 02 February 2013, it was reported that Anene Booysen was found at about 4 pm with parts of her intestines next to her in the dirt at a construction company. She died six hours later. Heidi Swart, “Will Anene Booysen’s Brutal Rape and

noted the brutality ‘with sadness.’ Responses from the Anglican Church included a media statement entitled: *A Call to South Africans to Recover our Humanity* in which Bishop Rubin Phillip states that “Leaders in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa (ACSA) have called on all members of the Church to use the season of Lent to recognise that every time we fail to act against gender based violence, we are complicit in its perpetration.”³ This appeal was followed by pastoral letters from some bishops of the Anglican Church. For example, in his pastoral letter, sent to Anglican parishes in the Diocese of Saldanha Bay, Western Cape, Bishop Raphael Hess states that the recent spate of rapes of women in Atlantis, Kraaifontein and Bredasdorp reflects a violent society and that there is a need to speak out against gender-based violence.⁴

The premise of this essay is that speaking out against gender-based violence is a necessary response but, this scourge requires more than just speaking out at times when the rape of women is made public or when sexual violence results in murder. There is a plethora of feminist research that identifies patriarchy as the catalyst for gender-based violence including sexual violence.⁵ Thus, I agree with Bishop Margaret

Murder Shake the Nation into Action?” *Mail & Guardian*, 15 February 2013. <<http://mg.co.za/article/2013-02-15-00-will-anene-booysens-brutal-rape-and-murder-shake-the-nation-into-action/>> [Accessed 29 January 2014].

³ Bishop Rubin Phillip, the present Bishop of Natal, in his capacity as Dean of the Anglican Church made this media statement on 08 February 2013, during which time Archbishop Thabo Makgoba was away on retreat.

⁴ South Africa’s reputation for the world’s worst sexual violence rates is based on reported cases. Official South African Police Services statistics indicate an average of 48,060 cases per year—or one rape every eleven minutes. See Ivo Vegter, “South Africa: Rape—The South African Scourge.” <<http://allafrica.com/stories/201308021370.html/>> [Accessed 29 January 2014].

⁵ Gender inequality is reported to be one of the reasons why rape is such a scourge in South Africa. See, Vegter “South Africa: Rape—The South African Scourge.” <<http://allafrica.com/stories/201308021370.html/>> [Accessed 29 January 2014]. Much has also been said about skewed gender power-relations rendering women vulnerable to contracting the HI-Virus. See for example: Denise M. Ackermann, *After the Locusts: Letters from a Landscape of Faith*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003); Denise M. Ackermann “Engaging Stigma: An Embodied Theological Response to HIV and AIDS,” *Scriptura* 89, (2005), 385-395; Denise M. Ackermann “From Mere Existence to Tenacious Endurance: Stigma HIV and AIDS and a Feminist Theology of Praxis,” in *Ragbag Theologies: Essays in Honour of Denise Ackermann: A Theologian of Praxis*, eds., Miranda N. Pillay, Sarojini Nadar and Clint Le Bruyns, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 221-242; Miranda N. Pillay, “Church Discourse on HIV/AIDS: A Responsible Response?” *Scriptura* 82, (2003): 108-121; Miranda N. Pillay, “See this Woman? Toward a Theology of Gender Equality in the Context of HIV and AIDS.” *Scriptura* 89, (2005), 441-455; Miranda N. Pillay “Christian in Public: Aims, Methodologies and Issues in Public Theology,” in *Re-reading New Testament Texts: A Public-Theological Resource for Addressing Gender Inequality in the Context of HIV/AIDS in South Africa*, ed., Len D. Hansen, (Stellenbosch: African SUN Media, 2007), 209-226;

Vertue who says, that “Anene is a victim of social ills.”⁶ However, I want to argue that patriarchy is a social ill and that the church has to name and address it as such. Many women and children suffer in cultures where patriarchy is condoned as God-ordained and defended as the natural order of things. This fact had been recognised by Njongonkulu Ndungane when he, as the (then) Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town in his (2005) charge to synod could state that, “We must repent of the historic patriarchy of our faith which so often colludes with the discriminatory attitudes of our cultures.”⁷

Despite the fact that many prominent (Anglican) church leaders have publicly acknowledged that “the historic patriarchy of our faith” is wrong and that feminists “have forced us to confront the patriarchal orientation of much of the biblical texts”⁸ feminist insights are not taken seriously and are often dismissed as being inappropriate and irrelevant. In this essay, I suggest that because feminist theology is a useful hermeneutical tool to describe, understand and expose patriarchy as a lived-reality in church and society, it is time that the (Anglican) church is more intentional about engaging feminist insights. This argument is sustained by the view that both feminism and Christianity are committed to striving towards human dignity and equality, justice among people and sustainable relationships with the earth.⁹

Patriarchal Hierarchy and a Woman’s Place

The historical nature of gender-based violence confirms that it is entrenched in culture and religion and reinforced, powered and maintained by patriarchy.¹⁰ Patriarchy, which in broad terms refers to

⁶ In “Pastoral Response to the Rape and Death of Anene Booysen” dated 08 February 2013 from Bishop Margaret Vertue to congregations in the Diocese of False Bay, Western Cape.

⁷ “It is said women are more sinful than men.” Irene Kuppan, *Daily News*, (07 July 2005), 2; cf. Miranda N. Pillay “Church and Environment: On Being Down to Earth in a Consumerist Era.” *Scriptura* 107, (2011), 187-188. See also: Ndungane’s subsequent pastoral letters in which he calls for action from priests and laity at the local parish level. Njongonkulu Ndungane, “God, Gender and the Christian Life,” in *Faith in Action*, ed., Sarah Rowland Jones, (Cape Town: Lux Verbi, 2008), 301-310.

⁸ Desmond Mpilo Tutu, “Foreword.” In *The Earth Story in the New Testament*, vol. 5, eds., Norman C. Habel and Vicky Balabanski, (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 7.

⁹ Pillay “Church and Environment...” 185-188.

¹⁰ See for example: Karen L. Bloomquist “Sexual Violence: Patriarchy’s Offence and Defence,” in *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse*, eds., Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, (New York, NY: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 6; Carol J. Adams, *Woman Battering*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 1994), 18; Corinne Kumar-D’Souza, “The Universality of Human Rights Discourse,” in *Women, Violence and Nonviolent Change*, eds., Aruna

male rule, male headship and androcentrism (i.e., a male-centred perspective on relationships and lived-reality) is entrenched in the structures of society and the church as well as in the inner consciousness of both women and men.¹¹ This explains why many women remain in abusive and violent relationships and why some women and men defend the system of patriarchy.¹² It is not my intention within this essay to discuss gender-based violence (i.e., as brute force of sexual violence, battering or murder) but instead I will focus on the fact that this scourge is condoned, perpetuated and sustained by patriarchal hierarchy¹³ and continues to be defended as God ordained in both

Gnanadason, Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro and Lucia Ann McSpadden, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), 5.

¹¹ Generally speaking, patriarchy is a complex social structure built on the simple premise of male headship. As a social system, patriarchy is maintained and reinforced by the view that the male is the normative human being through whose perspective the world functions. This androcentric reality is constructed and sustained by (often) subtle means through symbols and sexist language—a reality experienced in many Christian churches. A more structural form of patriarchal rule is for example, the exclusion of women from leadership roles during worship services—as is the case in an Anglican Church in Salt River, Cape Town. However, in some cases where women occupy leadership positions, dominant male perspectives (i.e., androcentrism) are perpetuated. Melanie Judge reminds us that, “We must distinguish between being in locations of power and having power... especially the exercise of a kind of power that challenge patriarchal hierarchies of gender privilege.” Melanie Judge, “In the Garden of ‘Good and Evil’: Lesbian and (in)visible Sexualities in Patriarchy,” in *The Evil of Patriarchy in Church, Society and Politics Consultation*, hosted by Inclusive and Affirming Ministries, University of the Western Cape and the Centre for Christian Spirituality, (Mont Fleur, Stellenbosch: Inclusive and Affirming Ministries, 2009), 15; cf. Miranda N. Pillay “Challenging Patriarchal Masculinity in ‘Act like a Lady. Think like a Man: A Feminist Theo-ethical Perspective,” in *Sacred Selves: Essays on Gender, Religion and Popular Culture*, eds., Juliana Claassens and Stella Viljoen, (Cape Town: Griffel Publishing, 2012) 94; Louise Kretzschmar, “Gender, Women and Ethics,” in *Questions about Life and Morality*, eds., Louise Kretzschmar and Leonard Hulley, (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 1998), 172.

¹² Nadar explains that patriarchal hierarchy is maintained and perpetuated through positional power and discursive power—which justifies a “palatable patriarchy.” Sarojini Nadar, “Who is Afraid of the Mighty Men’s Conference? Palatable Patriarchy and Violence against Women in S.A.” in *The Evil of Patriarchy in Church, Society and Politics Consultation*, hosted by Inclusive and Affirming Ministries, University of the Western Cape and the Centre for Christian Spirituality, (Mont Fleur, Stellenbosch: Inclusive and Affirming Ministries, 2009), 23.

¹³ Daniël Louw notes that this hierarchy is underpinned by four interlocking justifications, viz., biological (that male physical strength is part of intended natural law); cultural (that families and societies are naturally based on aggression, domination, procreation and spouse and child protection); economic (that property, production and distribution of goods are the natural domain of men); religious (that male superiority, dominance and privilege are part of received religious revelation). Daniël Louw, “From Phenomenology to Ontology in the Gender Debate: ‘Feminine’ without ‘Femininity’ beyond ‘Feminism’?” in *Ragbag Theologies: Essays in Honour of Denise Ackermann: A Theologian of Praxis*, eds., Miranda N. Pillay, Sarojini Nadar and Clint Le Bruyns, (Stellenbosch: SUN Media, 2009), 99.

church and society.¹⁴ For example, the date, 25 November, usually marks the start of “The 16 Days of Activism for No Violence against Women and children” campaign in South Africa.¹⁵ At the beginning of this campaign (in 2010) I tuned into a local Cape Town radio station where listeners were invited to respond to the question, “Why is there an increase in incidences of violence against women—despite the fact that, in our new democracy, there has been an emphasis on education to raise awareness against domestic violence?” A woman caller offered the following explanation:

*The reason for the increase in violence against women is because nowadays women don't know their place. They [women] want to be 'over the men' and the bible says clearly that the man is the head.*¹⁶

This hierarchical view of men over women continues to reflect the unobtrusive sexism operative in patriarchy as socially normative, sustained by religious precepts based on the bible.¹⁷

More than two decades ago Kathleen Weiler¹⁸—referring to the seminal work of Louis Althusser—pointed out that social reproduction theory was a helpful conceptual framework for understanding how institutions function in order to reproduce hierarchical relationships. According to

¹⁴ An example is the current retrieval of patriarchal hierarchy by the fundamentalist Christian evangelist and preacher, Angus Buchan who teaches at his Mighty Men conferences that a family man must stake claim to his God-given calling to be a prophet, priest and king to his family. Shalom Ministries, <<http://www.mighty menconference.co.za/>> [Accessed 29 January 2014]. This claim is challenged by (amongst others) Jesse Powell, The Thinking Housewife, “White Patriarchy in South Africa,” <<http://www.thinkinghousewife.com/wp/2010/06/white-patriarchy-in-south-africa/>> [Accessed 29 January 2014]; Nadar, “Who is Afraid of the Mighty Men Conference?; Pillay “Challenging Patriarchal Masculinity.”

¹⁵ While this is an important advocacy against patriarchal violence, I do not agree that women’s issues should be (naturally) likened with those of children. It reminds me of a time when I, as an adult married woman was regarded as a minor who had to obtain her husband’s permission to perform any financial transactions.

¹⁶ Young identifies this kind of unconscious assumptions and reactions of people in the ordinary interaction, media and cultural stereotypes as structural oppression. Structural oppression involves relations amongst groups that do not always fit the paradigm of conscious and intentional oppression of one group by another. In this kind of oppressive relationship, power (i.e., having mastery over) is exercised as being humane and for the good and benefit of the oppressed. Iris Madden Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 41.

¹⁷ Browning discusses the so-called biblical mandate for wives to submit to their husbands. Don S. Browning, “The Problem of Man,” in *Does Christianity Teach Male Headship? The Equal-regard Marriage and Its Critics*, eds., David Blankenhorn, Don S. Browning and Mary Stewart van Leeuwen, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 4.

¹⁸ Kathleen Weiler, *Women Teaching for Change: Gender Class and Power*, (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc., 1988), 7.

social reproduction theorists, these relationships promote the acceptance of hierarchical structures as being not only inevitable, but unchangeable. I do not wish to elaborate on reproduction theory, but of interest here (particularly to the issue relating to ‘women not knowing their place’) is its particular reference to ideology.¹⁹ Ideology, according to reproduction theorists, is based on two theses. First, ideology presents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence; and secondly, ideology has a material existence:

Ideology thus seems to be the cultural world that people inherit; it is imposed upon them through material practice. Their ideological views of the world, their ‘imaginary relationship’ to their real conditions of existence, is a reflection of their actions (practices) which are governed by the structure of institutions, through ritual, custom, lines of authority, and so forth.²⁰

Mike Cormack notes that it is Althusser’s emphasis on the material existence of ideology that situate the embodiment of ideology in the structures and institutions of society. This emphasis is a significant departure from the traditional view of ideology as beliefs and ideas.²¹ Ackermann concurs when she states that “ideology is an action-oriented set of beliefs.”²² Thus, she concludes, Christianity itself is an ideology. Considering this argument, it is obvious that the church as an institution, is as much a manifestation of ideology as are the beliefs which people have about it.

In the light of this argument and given what Young says about structural oppression²³ one can understand why women and men attribute (the increase in) domestic violence to women who “don’t know their place.” And since “women’s place” appears to be one of subordination and obedience governed by the authority of the Christian bible, one cannot

¹⁹ According to Cormack, ideology is an “essentially contested concept” particularly regarding its precise meaning and use, says Cormack (Mike Cormack, *Ideology*, (London: Batsford, 1992), 9. The concept meaning “a science of ideas” first appeared in post-revolutionary France at the end of the eighteenth century, although Cormack notes that a connection has been made with earlier concepts—particularly in the work of Niccolò Machiavelli, Francis Baker and Thomas Hobbes. It was Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the nineteenth century who removed the concept of ideology from its French philosophical origins of a ‘mental science’ by arguing that “the way we think is a result of the material situation in which we find ourselves.” In the twentieth century, it was the French structural Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser, who emphasised the material existence of ideology and its embodiment in the structures and institutions of society. Cormack, *Ideology*, 9-10.

²⁰ Weiler, *Women Teaching for Change*, 7.

²¹ Cormack, *Ideology*, 10.

²² Ackermann, *After the Locusts*, 53.

²³ See footnote #13.

ignore questions about the institution's (church's) complicity and culpability in domestic violence/gender-based violence/patriarchal-based violence in South African society. What particularly comes to mind here are customary attitudes and practices as well as liturgical rituals that reflect male headship embedded in androcentric language. Thus, in the language of social reproduction theorists, the most important source of material and ideological practices about women's subordinate place, is the church. It is through instruction and social relationships in the church that women and men learn to uphold, defend and justify hierarchical patriarchy as a social reality that defines a "woman's place."

Needless to say that the church's call (by the erstwhile Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town in 2005) to "repent of the historic patriarchy" of its faith is a prophetic vision which challenges the patriarchal *status quo* in the church—in all its manifestation of being church.²⁴ For such a prophetic vision to be embodied, it calls for a radical re-thinking of the perceived hierarchical place of men over women in the family and the church. Feminist insights provide the hermeneutical tools for such re-thinking.

Feminism and the Christian Church

Feminism, like Christianity is an ideology.²⁵ Feminism, like Christianity is not a monolithic entity.²⁶ From the earliest communities of believers in the first century CE, Christianity has been a multi-vocal, diverse and complicated religious and social entity—and different types of Christianity continue to flourish in the twenty-first century.²⁷ So, too, different types of feminism continue to exist—and feminism and its goals have been defined differently by different individuals and groups.²⁸

²⁴ Not only statements by the Bishops as the heads of the church and in synod records, but "the historic patriarchy of our faith" should also be challenged by being mindful of liturgical language, in women and men's organisations, Parish Councils, confirmation classes, marriage preparation/counselling, etc.

²⁵ According to Ackermann, feminism is a comprehensive ideology that it is "rooted in women's experiences of sexist oppression and discrimination, is critical of patriarchy, and embraces an alternative vision for humankind and the earth." Ackermann, *After the Locusts*, 32.

²⁶ Caryn D. Riswold, *Feminism and Christianity: Questions and Answers in the Third Wave*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 3.

²⁷ Miranda N. Pillay, *Re-Thinking Stigma: A Socio-Rhetorical Reading of Luke 10:25-37 in the Context of HIV/AIDS in South Africa*, Unpublished PhD. Thesis, (Bellville: University of the Western Cape, 2008), 92.

²⁸ Some feminist see Christianity as irredeemably patriarchal and regard biblical texts as irretrievably ideological in nature and therefore unable to facilitate the freedom and wholeness of humanity in general and of women in particular while other feminists are hopeful and revisit the "life-giving and life-sustaining intention and authority of scripture for

Women's experiences of being women in different places and times are diverse.²⁹ Riswold points out that both feminism and Christianity are "traditions in the original sense of the Latin root word *trado*" which literally means "handing over of something."³⁰ The essence of traditions is that they grow and change and shift as they are handed over throughout time and across generations—while retaining insight from the past. Thus, both, Christianity and feminism are traditions that continue to change while it is firmly rooted in certain core beliefs. First-, second-, and third-wave feminism are broad generational movements distinguished on the basis of historical situations, goals, and strategies. Throughout the historical shifts recorded from the nineteenth century onwards, one core belief of feminism is the idea of human equality. Based on the multi-dimensional nature of women's experiences regarding race, class, age, ability, sexuality, etc., as raised within third-wave feminism, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians calls for recognition of the full humanity of women and men. This is a central feature of Christian feminism: that it is committed "not just to the liberation of women, but to the liberation of men also" says Elaine Storkey.³¹ She explains further:

What is more, this liberation is not only from class oppression, from work alienation, but from the very slavery that sin-ridden, male dominated culture has produced. For, cultural stereotypes have prevented men too from knowing real freedom.³²

For this reason, "African women's theologies include men in the vision and struggle for African liberation from all forms of oppression," says Isabel Phiri.³³ The approach of African women theologians have the distinctive characteristic of inclusiveness, calling for the recognition of the full humanity of both women and men. In the words of Denise Ackermann:

No man can be liberated as long as women are not. Just as some whites joined the struggle for liberation from racist oppression, men must join women in the struggle against discrimination, abuse and

all creation in terms of God's dynamic, re-creative presence in ever-changing times and circumstances." Elna Moulton, "Human Dignity as Expressions of God Images? Perspectives from in 1 Corinthians 24 and Ephesians 5," *Neotestamentica* 45, no. 2, (2011), 276.

²⁹ Ackermann, *After the Locusts*, 31.

³⁰ Riswold, *Feminism and Christianity*, 4.

³¹ Elaine Storkey, *What's Right with Feminism*, (London: SPCK, 1985), 163.

³² Storkey, *What's Right with Feminism*, 163.

³³ Isabel Apawo Phiri, "African Women's Theologies in the New Millennium," *Agenda* 61, (2004), 16-24.

violation. It is about their humanity as much as it is about ours. Solidarity is what we ask for.³⁴

However, the struggle continues. Tinyiko Maluleke reminds us of this when he observes that African male theologians, who have been dealing with issues of oppression and exclusion are slow in recognising issues of dehumanising, oppression and exclusion operative in patriarchy.³⁵ “African theology,” says Tinyiko Maluleke “has remained largely beholden to the supremacist ideas when it comes to gender relations” and “patriarchy speaks to the supremacy of the male.”³⁶

As a Christian, Coloured, South African woman, my views on gender justice have been shaped by the model of inclusivity as espoused by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. I also speak and write from my experiences within an Anglican tradition as a lay woman. The worldwide Anglican Communion itself is diverse—and so are the different Dioceses within the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. The principle that holds Anglicans in community and communion is the dynamic freedom to change as a new situation requires, while maintaining continuity with the essential beliefs and practices of the tradition it has received.³⁷ As the Archbishop of Cape Town, puts it:

[T]he human condition is such that there is always need, urgent need, to do better and to rise to the changing challenges of life; and so we must constantly have our eyes opened to what is awry, and to where we are required to go forward into a fuller expression of the glorious freedom of salvation and redemption that is God’s purpose for us.³⁸

The above statement by the Archbishop of Cape Town, Rt. Revd. Dr Thabo Cecil Makgoba, appears in the “Foreword” to *Ragbag Theologies: Essays in Honour of Denise Ackermann, a Feminist theologian of Praxis*.

³⁴ Cited in Sarojini Nadar, “Circles of Abundant Life: A Tribute to Denise Ackermann,” in *Ragbag Theologies: Essays in Honour of Denise Ackermann: A Theologian of Praxis*, edited by Miranda N. Pillay, Sarojini Nadar and Clint Le Bruyns, (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2009), 154.

³⁵ Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, “An African Perspective on Patriarchy,” in *The Evil of Patriarchy in Church, Society and Politics Consultation*, hosted by Inclusive and Affirming Ministries, University of the Western Cape and the Centre for Christian Spirituality, (Mont Fleur, Stellenbosch: Inclusive and Affirming Ministries, 2009), 31.

³⁶ Maluleke, “An African Perspective on Patriarchy,” 33; cf. Pillay, “Challenging Patriarchal Masculinity...”

³⁷ James E. Griffiss, *The Anglican Vision*, (Cambridge: Cowley Publications 1997), 35.

³⁸ Thabo Makgoba, “Foreword,” in *Ragbag Theologies: Essays in Honour of Denise M. Ackermann - a Theologian of Praxis*, eds. Miranda Pillay, Sarojini Nadar and Clint Le Bruyns, (Stellenbosch: SUN Press 2009), 1; Njongonkulu Ndungane, “The Heartlands of Anglicanism,” in *Faith in Action*, ed. Sarah Rowland Jones, (Cape Town: Lux Verbi, 2008), 125-137.

Given the context of the statement, one may see it as an invitation for renewed conversations between feminism and Christianity. This view of ‘invitation for conversation’ is further illuminated by the following three observations. First, in his “Foreword” to *The Earth Story in the New Testament*, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu says, “Feminists have forced us to confront the patriarchal orientation of much of the biblical texts.”³⁹ Second, as mentioned above, the then Archbishop of Cape Town, Njongonkulu Ndungane, in his 2005 charge to synod said:

We must repent of the historic patriarchy of our faith which so often colludes with discriminatory attitudes in our cultures. We must expose and oppose gender violence and all forms of inequality in our midst. We must build girls’ and women’s self-esteem, assertiveness and interpersonal and leadership skills. We must declare and demonstrate the dignity, respect and honour of all, regardless of gender.⁴⁰

Third, according to Makgoba:

We still need to move further away from past tendencies to privilege the cognitive over the affective side of faith, to privilege men over women (to say nothing of rich over poor, powerful over weak, forthright over voiceless, and in every way favour insiders over outsiders), and to privilege theory over the realities of our lives in the world and within the body of Christ. We are, I believe, heading in the right direction, though we must go further, both in overcoming old habits of partiality, and in looking with fresh eyes at the new realities of the twenty-first century, to see who are now being marginalised, excluded, diminished or rendered voiceless....Gender questions, particularly violence against women and children, is of considerable concern, though I hope that with the appointment of a gender action coordinator and liaison bishop for the Province, and an increasing number of gender desks within our Dioceses, the Anglican Church of Southern Africa is becoming more practically engaged in ways that can make a tangible difference.⁴¹

³⁹ Tutu, “Foreword,” 7.

⁴⁰ *Daily News*, (07 July 2005), 2.

⁴¹ Revd. Cheryl Bird is the first appointed gender action co-ordinator and Bishop Raphael Hess is the first appointed liaison bishop for gender in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa—formally known as the Church of the Province of Southern Africa. It is my opinion that making appointments of this nature is a good structural initiative on the Provincial level, but that the church (on all levels) has to be intentional about challenging androcentrism and patriarchy which is so inherent in its practices of being church. Another point of intentionality is that the business of the gender desk (or rather, as I prefer, gender ministry) is as urgent enough matter to warrant the attention of a coordinator/facilitator on a fulltime basis and that the agenda for such a ministry should not be dictated by the existing hierarchy of the church—lest it is set up to die a natural death. Thabo Cecil Makgoba, “Foreword,” in *Ragbag Theologies: Essays in Honour of Denise Ackermann: A Theologian of Praxis*, eds., Miranda N. Pillay, Sarojini Nadar and Clint Le Bruyns, (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2009), 3.

Considering these statements and concerns raised by the leadership of the Anglican Church, I sense a sincere recognition of the seriousness and urgency from the church (as institution) that gender questions and violence against women (and children) have to be understood within the historic context of patriarchy.

However, how beliefs and practices that perpetuate and defend patriarchy are to be challenged in, and by the church remains a question of concern. I want to suggest that while it is obvious, from the above-quoted statements made by leaders—that Christian feminism offers the necessary hermeneutical and education tools to address “the historic patriarchy of our faith”—there is generally still great resistance towards a feminist consciousness.⁴²

On Dismissing Feminist Insights

Riswold notes that feminism brings with it a “new way of conceiving power relations between women and men, between people of different races and ethnicities and between humans and the earth.”⁴³ In South Africa, feminist insights and women’s movement contributed to the greater liberation movement and the subsequent dismantling of apartheid.⁴⁴ Feminism has also provided a prophetic discourse that contributes to a hermeneutic of interruption to oppressive Christian theologies. Despite these contributions, feminist insights continue to be ignored or dismissed.

Nearly forty years ago, Mary Daly identified four tactics that to this day continue to be used to dismiss feminism.⁴⁵ Daly points out that, critics of feminism trivialise, particularise, spiritualise, or universalise problems

⁴² For example, at a Diocesan assemble where representatives were nominated to attend a meeting on Provincial level, the Bishop (who happens to also be the liaison Bishop for Gender) requested that the assembly be more conscious of the fact that representation ought to be gender inclusive. A senior male cleric’s response was, “We started this meeting in prayer and invoked the presence of the Holy Spirit. If it was the will of God that we elect women representatives, we would have done so. Besides, why did the women present not nominate women to represent the Diocese?”

⁴³ Riswold, *Feminism and Christianity*, 87.

⁴⁴ Here the work of the Black Sash comes to mind and the 09 August 1956 march on the Union Buildings by South African women of all races in protest of the proposed ‘pass law’ amendments to the Urban Areas Act by the apartheid regime. See, Karin Chubb, “Hope in Times of Despair: Denise Ackermann and the Black Sash,” in *Ragbag Theologies: Essays in Honour of Denise Ackermann: A Theologian of Praxis*, eds., Miranda N. Pillay, Sarojini Nadar and Clint Le Bruyns, (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2009), 19.

⁴⁵ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1973), 4-6.

raised. These tactics continue to function in the church and broader society to mock feminism. For example, to trivialise a problem is to argue that feminists are silly and selfish to raise such trivial issues as the use of gender inequality when there are so many more important issues, like poverty and AIDS orphans the church has to attend to.

Second, to particularise the problem is to say that the problem of women's oppression is really just a problem of a particular group—those women who “don't know their place”; those “man-hating” women; or women in polygamous marriages; or women who are in “unequally yoked” marriages; or women who fail to be a helpmate to their husbands to claim their place of responsibility of prophet, priest and king in the family.

Third, to spiritualise the problem is to say that our reward awaits us in heaven—so a little suffering in this earthly life will not matter in the long run! This means that a battered woman must bear her cross with patience and forbearance in exchange for the crown of eternal life. Besides, as some would argue, it is spiritual equality that matters according to Galatians 3:28c (NRSV): “...*there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Jesus Christ.*” Fourth, to universalise the problem is to argue that women have nothing to complain about because they are not the only ones who suffer. Everyone suffers in this world—men also suffer. This universalising of suffering is, in my view, the tactic used to retrieve patriarchal masculinity—especially the view that men suffer an ‘identity crisis’ of what it means to be a man. These four reasons provide convincing arguments that serve to maintain and justify patriarchal attitudes and practices.

Feminism recognises patriarchy as a system of oppressive power that through its institutionalisation masquerades as being beneficial to the oppressed. It's a system that has throughout the ages been posited as a God-ordained holy hierarchy—sanctified by certain bible passages. One way of challenging this system that is deeply rooted in the psyche of Christians today—and repent of “the historic patriarchy of our faith”—is to respond systematically to these four attempts that serve to undercut feminist criticism of patriarchal institutions such as religion, education and the family. Moreover, these four criticisms against feminism could serve as entry points for conversations among men and women in the church when engaging gender matters on theological, liturgical, pastoral or educational levels.

Common Ground between Feminism and Christianity

Disregard for feminist consciousness and feminist criticism reveals how important and necessary systematic analysis is to understanding patriarchal privilege. In this regard, I add my voice to that of Caryn Riswold (amongst others) who sees some congruence between Christianity and feminism. I hold this view while being mindful of the antithesis between the arguments of some Christians that, on the one hand, feminism is part of what is wrong with an increasingly secular world; while on the other, Christianity is nothing more than the handmaiden of patriarchy. However, as mentioned above, neither feminism, nor Christianity has a univocal voice. For, if it were the case, “it would in fact be impossible to be both feminist and Christian,” a view I share with Riswold. However, there are specific topics that have been raised by both Christians and feminists that provide common ground between feminism and Christianity. This is what makes it possible to be both Christian and feminist. While certain divergence have been noted between feminists and Christians on the same three topics identified by Riswold,⁴⁶ I want to highlight some common ground between feminism and Christianity on these three topics.

First, Christian feminists affirm the human dignity and equality of every individual person—often using the language in Genesis (1:27) to state the theological claim that there is “something about God in every individual person.” The implication of this is that because each person is of equal value, it anticipates a future that “guarantees human dignity and equality for all people—men and women. Of importance to feminist thought here, is that if each person is treated as equally human, then each one ought to be given “same access and privileges regardless of gender, race or class.”⁴⁷ However, the fact that women have access to leadership positions in the church does not imply repenting of “the historic patriarchy of our faith”—particularly not if church communities continue to refer to clerics in masculine terms only, and especially not if men and women continue to use liturgical language that is embedded in, reflect and perpetuate the androcentrism of “the historic patriarchy of our faith.”

A second broad commitment shared by Christians and feminists is advocating for and sustaining a just human community. Feminist Christians have a passionate focus on justice especially in the area of gender equality and particularly as it relates to race, class and sexuality.

⁴⁶ Riswold, *Feminism and Christianity*, 93-98.

⁴⁷ Riswold, *Feminism and Christianity*, 94.

Christian communities see the ideal human community as one where fellow participants love one another and are freed to serve their neighbour and praise God. Because feminist theology has its roots in liberation theology, feminism contributed significantly to a prophetic and liberative theology that challenged apartheid theology and promoted a theology of reconciliation and inclusion in South Africa. Today, conversation between feminism and Christianity can make a meaningful contribution in the long on-going (and often threatening) debates on human sexuality.

Third, in the twenty-first century, feminism and Christianity share an emerging commitment to a just and sustainable relationship between humans and the earth. Since Rachel Carson's (1962) book: *Silent Spring*, feminists have been working toward incorporating an eco-justice element into their work. Similarly, Rosemary Radford Ruether in her (1992) book: *Inside Gaia and God: An Eco-feminist Theology of Earth Healing*, showed how control of the earth and control of women are based on the same patriarchal assumptions.⁴⁸ Wangari Maathai, who founded the Green Belt Movement in Kenya won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for expanding environmental activism primarily through networks of women.⁴⁹ Christian churches are also taking the environmental crisis seriously. For example, in a prayer request for Earth Day in 2011, Colin Moodaley, environmental co-ordinator of the Diocese of Saldanha Bay,⁵⁰ asked "fellow clergy and people of God" to "dedicate 5-10 minutes to honour Earth Day on Good Friday."⁵¹

Conclusion

I have argued that statements made by prominent church leaders in times of crises are a necessary response. However, to move beyond paying mere lip or (dare I say) essay service—which merely puts on record that the church is doing something, there has to be some follow through and follow up. I want to suggest that one such tangible follow up is to take seriously feminist insights that challenge the inherent "historic

⁴⁸ Cf. Pillay, "Church and Environment..."

⁴⁹ Susan Rakoczy, "Eco-feminist Spirituality: Of and for Life," in *Ragbag Theologies: Essays in Honour of Denise Ackermann: A Theologian of Praxis*, eds., Miranda N. Pillay, Sarojini Nadar and Clint Le Bruyns, (Stellenbosch: SUN Media, 2009), 118.

⁵⁰ Colin Moodaley is an ordained minister in the Diocese of Saldanha Bay, (one of three Dioceses of The Anglican Church of Southern Africa in the Western Cape) and also a lecturer at the University of the Western Cape.

⁵¹ The request was sent via e-mail to parishes in the Diocese and included a prayer from the National Council of Churches Web of Creation Ecology Resources: Transforming Faith and Society. "Earth Day." <<http://www.webofcreation.org/Worship/liturgy/prayers.Htm#earthday/>> [Accessed 29 January 2014]; Pillay, *Church and Environment*, 195.

patriarchy of our faith.” First, I make this observation on the basis of the commitment to justice for humanity and the earth inherent in both, feminism and Christianity. And second, that the four tactics often used by the Christian church to dismiss feminism could serve as entry-points for conversations about “the historic patriarchy of our faith.” A practical example would be to explore the impact of sexist language in perpetuating “the historic patriarchy of our faith” and how patriarchal privilege contributes to gender-based violence.

There are numerous examples of how sexist language is infused not only in the liturgy of the church, but also in everyday relationships. For example, earlier this year the Anglican Church celebrated twenty years of the ordination of women to the priesthood.⁵² Yet, male priests continue to be addressed as ‘father.’ The title ‘Reverend’ is deemed appropriate when addressing women priests but the same title is thought to be (grammatically) incorrect as an alternative to ‘father’ in respect of male clergy. Furthermore, it is absurd when male priests address one another as ‘father.’ I find the fact that some male clergy address woman priests as ‘mother’ to be equally absurd particularly since the headship of ‘father’—in the home and the church—had not been adequately addressed by the church. The uncritical adoption of the title ‘mother’ for women clergy would be to uphold the perceived superiority of males in the family, church and wider society. This superiority is sustained by patriarchal hierarchy that, not only links men to “God, the Father” in heaven and women to mother earth but also justifies wife-battering, rape and incest—which in the words of Bishop Rubin Phillip makes the church “complicit in its perpetration.” Thus, if the church is serious about challenging gender-based violence it has to seek ways of transforming itself as church—in all its manifestations of being church. It is through instruction and social relationships in the church that women and men learn to uphold, defend and justify hierarchical patriarchy as a social reality that defines a “woman’s place.”

Given the social and theological challenges presented by gender-based violence, the contributions of women and men with a critical feminist hermeneutic is a relevant resource for the renewal of community and for transformation in the church—lest feminist insights be regarded as yet another irritant to be dismissed as a fad that will fade in due time.

⁵² I am not introducing a new argument here, but merely wish to identify practical examples of how feminist insights could be helpful in addressing “the historic patriarchy of our faith.”

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