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Joyce Q. Erickson

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The Contributions of Women's Studies to a Christian World View

Joyce Q. Erickson
St. Joseph College
West Hartford, Connecticut



Dr. Joyce Erickson has been Undergraduate Dean at Saint Joseph College in West Hartford, Connecticut since July 1987. She has been teaching English as a faculty member and administrator since she received her Ph.D. at the University of Washington. Her publications include articles on literature as well as women's studies.

Those of us who have spent a large part of our lives in Christian colleges, as students and/or teachers, realize that the Christian college mission has been and is a special one. Especially in the past decade, we have become keenly aware that we have something important to contribute to the definition of academic life and to higher education in our country. Most frequently we have defined that special quality as a deliberate and self-conscious attempt to bring to bear on all of our communal life—intellectual, emotional, spiritual—a Christian understanding. Some of us may have even become tired of some of the slogans which we have adopted as a special kind of shorthand

for articulating our mission. I'm thinking of the old faithful, "the integration of faith and learning." It's a useful phrase because it can mean so many things to so many people; yet even though the phrase is getting a bit worn, the aim it expresses is a worthy one. It is the aim of the Staley Foundation that supports these lectures and to the extent that we as individuals or as institutions can achieve some kind of integration, we can congratulate ourselves with a suitably humble pride.

Another phrase we have used with perhaps more success to describe the special mission of the Christian college is that we intend "to formulate a Christian world view." I needn't repeat what you students have undoubtedly

heard more than once in your classes and what your professors have probably explained more eloquently and at greater length than I will here; to simplify, what we mean by this phrase is that no thought or discipline or action is without its implicit or explicit assumptions. Therefore, it behooves us to articulate our assumptions and to test them against biblical and historically Christian assumptions. In that process of testing, we come to know ourselves and what we are studying more thoroughly and more deeply. And we also affirm, at least in the Reformed tradition, that in this process we are carrying out a divine mandate to care for creation.

With a confidence born out of this conviction that as scholars (by scholars I will from henceforth mean both beginning scholars we call students and the more experienced scholars we call teachers) we are obeying God's command, we explore the vastness of the universe and the invisible world of the quark, the tragedy of the human condition expressed in literature and art, the complexities of human individuals and society, the joys of music and worship. Though some of our Christian brothers and sisters in the church or in fundamentalist institutions of higher learning may fear the effects of such bold exploration of the created world and its creatures, we respond that our boldness comes from our confidence that "all truth is God's truth." Whatever is true comes from God.

But there's a catch. How to discern truth from error? The risk that we might mistake error for truth is what makes our exploration courageous. And it is also why our courage must be tempered with humility and trust in God's ultimate control of creation, of history, and of our lives. As a matter of fact, as we look back over the history of Christianity at those great minds who have struggled to discern truth from error, we may be both warned and heartened. Some aspects of the normative Christian world view that we would all affirm without question have not always been so easy to affirm. What we take for granted as truth has been forged out of conflict and doubt and challenge. Think of the various intellectual and

social movements whose premises or effects have seemed to contemporaries to threaten the possibility of belief in the biblical and historic faith: first century hellenism, the Constantinian compromise, Renaissance humanism, Baconian science, Enlightenment skepticism, the industrial revolution, and that trio of "isms" that have shaped contemporary thought—Darwinism, Marxism, Freudianism. In all of these examples and many more that might be cited, we find those who have struggled with the challenge and lost their faith and those who have won—for themselves and for us who are their intellectual and spiritual heirs—a new synthesis, a new understanding of the faith once delivered, a synthesis that makes sense out of the world we have been given and of the faith we have been graced with.

When we tell the stories of these heroic figures, with whom do we identify? Most of us put ourselves on the side of Galileo or Copernicus rather than the church councils, of the abolitionists rather than the slaveholders. We may be a little more ambivalent about whether we would be on the side of William Jennings Bryon or Clarence Darrow, because the challenge of evolutionary theory is still troubling to some. The synthesis by which some Christian biologists hold both the creation story and evolutionary theories is not yet firmly established for all Christians. Yet in this ambivalence we find a reminder that we find it much easier to distinguish the white hats from the black hats when we have the lens of history to see through.

All of this is a long introduction to my topic today, but setting the context is necessary for the fullest appreciation of my thesis: that the challenge of women's studies is of a magnitude close to some of the historic challenges I have already mentioned. Whether you're hostile or sympathetic or neutral with regard to this challenge, you must pay attention to it if you are serious about bringing the Christian faith to bear on all aspects of our world and lives. What I will speak of to you today is not the grand synthesis that I hope may be someday achieved. Nor will I focus on the possible errors that lurk among the thickets of opinion and theory

and practice. I'm not even suggesting that you had better get on the side of the white hats by agreeing with me! I am suggesting that you carefully and prayerfully consider the challenge as an opportunity to think deeply about your task as Christian scholars who are committed to developing a Christian world view that is as complete as is humanly possible.

Having provided this context, I focus your attention on three related but separate topics: a brief review of issues integral to women's studies, a justification for women's studies as a Christian project, and a sketch of what including women's studies implies for teaching and learning.

When we talk of women's studies we sometimes substitute this fairly neutral term for a more emotionally charged phrase: feminist thought. Perhaps future historians of ideas may include feminism as the fourth of the celebrated "isms" that have shaken prevailing norms in the past 150 years. In some settings, to call oneself a feminist is to invite ridicule or sanction, though the word doesn't inevitably mean all the media-hyped connotations that some associate with it—bra-burning or rejection of men. One would be naive to assert that feminism is always reformist rather than radical, but the spectrum of political, religious, and social opinion among self-proclaimed feminists is nearly as wide as among other groups. What all feminists do agree upon at least is the standard dictionary definition of a feminist: one who believes that women are entitled to the same opportunities, rights, and privileges that men are entitled to. As you can see, this definition does not exclude men as potential feminists, and there are many of them (perhaps even some in this room!). Women's studies is an outgrowth of a political and social movement that was reborn with other movements of liberation in the mid-1960s. And although the practice of women's studies today as a scholarly discipline exhibits all of the characteristics associated with many other interdisciplinary areas of study, its connection with the personal experiences of women who felt themselves oppressed, repressed, and discriminated against is important to understanding its strength.

Once women began to look at their lives and at their culture in the light of their own experiences, they felt compelled to test the assumptions that were given: assumptions that the difference between women and men justified the social practices and explanations of women's inferiority (or sometimes their superiority). They were compelled to ask whether this difference was attributable to more than the obvious biological differences. What are the reasons for the ubiquitous discrimination against women in the great majority of human cultures? What are the relationships between male and female (a biological fact) and masculine and feminine traits (a cultural artifact that varies from society to society). The point is they did not assume that women's historical and social position is necessarily a given of the way things are—or as we Christians would say, a given of God's intention for creation, even though the prescribed position for women has prevailed for centuries, though not always uncontested. Some feminists did and do assume that the difference is indeed a fact of nature, but they took a cue from the men who had discussed the issue over hundreds of years. These feminists still claim that so-called feminine characteristics are those that will "save" humankind from the destruction of the earth and of human lives that the masculine enterprise of western civilization has brought us to.

Some of these feminists also agree with the most fundamentalistic interpreters of the Scriptures, claiming that the Bible itself justifies the inferior status of women. Their response, of course, is to reject the Bible and the Christian faith.

Though one might disagree with both the radical feminist and the biblical literalist, it is hard to ignore the evidence of women's exclusion from what we have labeled the mainstream of western history and culture (or non-western culture for that matter). So it is not surprising that much of the early work in women's studies concentrated on women as victims. For Christian feminists it became an important project to point out the ways in which bias against women had affected the interpretation—even

the translation—of Scripture. But pointing out and highlighting the sad and sinful effects of such bias was not sufficient for Christian feminists, whose scholarship led them to uncover what they believe to be implicit in Scripture and in the Christian tradition most faithful to Scriptures—that women are the equals of men in God's eyes and that women have been not only victims but heroes of faith as told in the Bible and in history.

Similarly, scholars discovered women writers and artists and scientists who had been obscured in history but who had been there in influential and significant ways. They pointed out the contributions women as a group had made to the economy in agrarian and industrial societies, and they began to celebrate those aspects of women's lives and work which had been denigrated or ignored, from quilting and diary-writing as art forms to the significant ways women as wives and mothers or as dedicated single women had made possible the "civilization" we formerly prized as the sole creation of men. In addition, they began to realize that women had a history and culture as interesting and worthy of study as the public, largely male history and culture that we studied in school as the only normative human culture.

As Sandra Harding puts it, this aspect of women's studies scholarship sees women as objects of knowledge. Useful as this phase of scholarship is, however, the tacit assumption that may underlie it is that women are somehow aberrant human beings rather than normative. One doesn't see chapters in literature or history books on men in the Renaissance or on male writers of the 18th century. Because it is men who have been at the forefront of the public world that has been defined as the whole of human culture, it seems to be an obvious conclusion that it is men who characterize the quintessentially human. Male human beings become the human norm and, quite reasonably it seems, females are the *other*—what Dorothy Sayers called the "not quite human." This "obvious conclusion" is one that women have accepted as well as men, so that women who have for whatever reason been active in the public realms of politics or

the arts or academe do not necessarily focus on their femaleness. Rather, like men, they assume they are acting in their public capacity as human beings, not as females, just as men would and have assumed they are acting as human beings, not as males.

The point I am making here is that if women's studies focus on women more only as objects of knowledge, it is hardly challenging to our present paradigms. Such a focus may lead as easily to condescension as to genuine understanding, to the kind of attitude aptly satirized by Dorothy Sayers in the phrase, "the ladies, God bless 'em; the women, God help us." (By the way, who is the *us* in this phrase? Well, human beings, of course.)

When women are only objects of knowledge, the tendency to characterize them as other than normatively human may override the gains in knowledge about women, useful as those gains are in illuminating the whole history of humankind or in helping individual women to recognize themselves as responsible and responsive creatures.

However, this kind of additional knowledge about women is not necessarily a challenge to our Christian world view that requires the kind of intellectual struggle I described earlier, though it is more than challenging enough to our psychological attitudes and social practices. Without the increasing information about women that scholars have been amassing in the last decade, those attitudes and practices will change more slowly and, perhaps, with more difficulty.

It is when women become *agents* rather than *objects* of knowledge that our present paradigms are challenged. When we focus on women reading a literary classic from the conscious perspective of their experience as women, we discover all sorts of new things in that text. (One might say the same about reading the Bible with this consciousness.) When an anthropologist goes into a village to understand the tribe's religious rituals as women understand them, we see different rituals than we saw when we understood them as the men saw them. Perhaps most startling of all, when we ask how a woman doing science

changes that enterprise, we discover that the sacred canons of objectivity which we've all honored as the *sine qua non* of the scientific method have sometimes masked a biased subjectivity. And we find that the scientific enterprise which has contributed so much to our understanding of God's created universe and which is certainly a gift from God—we find that this enterprise can be expanded and improved when we recognize that our gender influences what we see and how we know. We find that including the perspectives of women in all disciplines challenges the so-called universality of received knowledge and expands that knowledge.

I'm certain that the generalizations I have just made are not convincing merely because I have asserted them to be so. In fact, I am hardly doing more than alluding to a great deal of scholarship that requires deliberate and reasoned consideration, as well as scrutiny from a critical perspective. What I am hoping to do in this "allusion" is to point you in a direction that may be new for you. I am suggesting that all of our theories and the practical implications of those theories are "standpoint dependent." This is not news to people who have thought deeply about the distinctives of a Christian college. We have always claimed that knowledge is not value-free, arguing against a spurious objectivity and for knowledge consciously imbued with a Christian perspective. There is no innocent and objective observer of reality.

Those of you who have studied the philosophy of science or the sociology of knowledge will not find that last statement startling or debatable. And you will recognize too that scholarship in women's studies that focuses on women as knowers and as agents of knowledge is part of a much larger intellectual movement that has been challenging our paradigms since Einstein and other physicists have demonstrated how the subject and the object of study are inextricably related. Thus, women's studies can also be placed in the intellectual landscape with that group of thinkers who argue that our knowledge is socially constructed, thinkers who include Kuhn, Polanyi, Vygotsky, Rorty, McIntyre, and Berger.

The significant contribution scholars in women's studies have made to the discourse about the social construction of knowledge is this: gender is itself a social construction and gender is an inextricable category in our knowing as human beings. Let me take a moment to define gender. Most of you probably first encountered the word when you learned a foreign language; in some languages nouns are masculine or feminine and it doesn't necessarily have to do with a biological characteristic of the thing being named. It's a convention, something speakers of the language tacitly agree upon. Only those of us whose native language is not gender-marked even notice the gender markings as odd in some way.

Human gender characteristics bear similarities to grammatical gender markings in that they too are conventional, i.e., tacitly agreed upon by members of a society. This conventionality is disguised to us because of the more important dissimilarity between grammatical gender and human gender: that is, human gender is tied to the biological differences of female and male. We know human gender is a convention, not a given of nature, because different societies assume gender characteristics that are not universal in all societies; in fact, some of them are markedly opposite. So all that it means to be masculine or feminine in any society is related to but not necessarily caused by the biological fact of maleness or femaleness.

Having said this, however, I must also say that gender is as inescapable as the biological fact of femaleness and maleness. Even though individual differences among persons of the same sex may be greater than differences between persons of the opposite sex (Jane may be more like John in many instances than she is like Sally), gender appears to be a salient feature of the human condition.

Now even the assertion that gender is a salient feature of the human condition may seem innocuous unless you assume that women are not one of two kinds of human creature but added on to *the* normative human creature which our language calls "man." In fact, the use of the word man to mean both human creature

and male human creature reveals the pervasiveness of the assumption that male is normative and female is added on—as other.

Here at the juncture where the conventional traditional assumption that males are the human norm and females the other—here where this assumption is challenged by the research and theory of scholars in women's studies, we also find the challenge to what the vast majority of Christians have assumed to be truth. This conventional assumption about what it means to be human is part of the "Christian world view." How do we deal with evidence that calls this view into question? In a Christian college, we do not shrink from exploring ideas that may be unsettling at the same time that we continue to affirm our faith in God's revelation.

There is much in God's revelation in Scripture that does *not* accept the conventional understanding about what is normatively human, and though I do not have time even to sketch the outlines of that challenge, I encourage you to study the resources for yourself. Such a challenge to one's basic assumptions is very likely going to be unsettling, but I think if you are really serious about integrating faith and learning, you must accept the challenge. Perhaps remembering that our faith has survived the challenges of Copernicus and Darwin may be a comfort. Remember that certain social practices of the Old and New Testament world which appeared to be givens of that world we now call sin. Slavery is the prime example. And the Old and the New Testament have survived and continue to teach us. From this we may take courage as we develop a healthy skepticism about some of our received assumptions about women and men but remain faithful in our confidence in God's continual sustaining relationship to God's creation and God's creatures. Through such exploration we are, to use the language of the King James version, subduing and replenishing creation.

The fact of creation reveals God's interest in and relationship with matter, more particularly, with flesh. If we agree with the affirmation in Genesis that God created human beings in two kinds—male and female (and I assume this

means that there is no "normative" human standard that does not include female and male, that neither male nor female alone can be a prototypical human), and if we agree with another affirmation of Genesis 1 that what God created is *good*, perhaps we can even go so far as to welcome the insights and knowledge of women's studies scholarship as an additional dimension that provides a fuller, more complete and inclusive understanding of ourselves and of the many worlds of discourse that shape the real world we inhabit.

But God's primary revelation is Jesus—Emmanuel: God with us. In that revelation God re-affirmed humanness and, most importantly, re-affirmed embodiment. The Incarnation as a fact of God's interaction with the creation underscores the interdependence of human creatures and creation, an interdependence evident not only in our use of creation to survive and flourish, but in an even more important way. It is evident in the way we *know* the creation. Surely this also "blesses" the fact of "standpoint dependence" as a condition of human knowledge. And the necessary interdependence of creation requires a variety of "standpoints," of experiences, for the fullest knowledge.

What are the practical implications for teaching and learning in all this? Many of them are implicit in what I've already said. Since scholarship in women's studies necessarily draws upon diverse methods and disciplines—biology, psychology, the arts, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and on and on—its practitioners are forced to become interdisciplinary, or perhaps better yet as a descriptor, transdisciplinary. Women's studies provides one means for getting ourselves out of the constricting boxes of our narrow disciplinary specialties, specialties that have their uses but are least useful in undergraduate education and potentially harmful to the individual and communal integration of knowledge necessary for significant advances that benefit and improve the lot of humankind.

A most important implication for us as Christians, though, is the enhancement of community that is part of the product and process

of serious efforts to include women as agents of knowledge in our exploration of reality and to understand gender as a category that both screens, sharpens, and shapes our view of reality. This is true for at least three reasons:

1) We are much more aware that all knowledge has a personal dimension, that it is not disembodied. Perhaps this awareness may help to heal the hurtful dualisms that have characterized both human knowledge and human society, the split between mind/body, reason/emotion, head/heart, public/private. We all carry each of these dichotomies within us and hence also have the capacity to project them as wholes rather than as opposites. This is so both because a recognition of the subjective dimension of the most putatively objective knowledge might heighten our awareness of the connected nature of knowledge and because we may be less prone to attribute one side of these opposites to a particular gender, e.g., questioning the clichés that men are rational and women are emotional. We are each rational *and* emotional, though our socialization may teach us to express these qualities in different ways.

2) If our way of knowing—our epistemology—is changed, our relationship to the knowledge may also change in ways that enhance human community. Parker Palmer is a most eloquent spokesperson for this insight. I quote at length from Palmer to make the point, beginning with this trenchant line: "...every mode of knowing contains its own moral trajectory." What follows are some passages from the book that develops that idea, a book I think every faculty member in Christian higher education should read (*To Know and To Be Known: A Spirituality of Education*, Harper & Row, 1983):

...images of the knower, the known, and their relationship are formative in the way an educated person not only thinks but acts. The shape of our knowledge becomes the relation of the living self to the larger world. And how could it be otherwise? We have not self apart from our knowledge of the self, no world apart from our

knowledge of the world. The way we interact with the world in knowing it becomes the way we interact with the world as we live in it. To put it in somewhat different terms, our epistemology is quietly transformed into our ethic. The images of self and world that are found at the heart of our knowledge will also be found in the values by which we live our lives (p. 21).

...In our quest to free knowledge from the tangles of subjectivity, we have broken the knower loose from the web of life itself. The modern divorce of the knower and the known has led to the collapse of community and accountability between the knowing self and the known world (p. 26).

Objectivism is institutionalized in our educational practices, in the way we teach and learn... But the teacher is a mediator between the knower and the known. A teacher, not some theory, is the living link in the epistemological chain.

If this is the case, then as a teacher I can no longer take the easy way out, insisting that I am responsible only for conveying the facts of sociology or theology or whatever the subject may be. Instead, I must take responsibility for my mediator role, for the way my mode of teaching exerts a slow but steady formulative pressure on my students' sense of self and world. I teach more than a body of knowledge or a set of skills. I teach a mode of relationship between the knower and the known, a way of being in the world. That way, reinforced in course after course, will remain with my students long after the facts have faded from their minds.

The message education should convey is not identified by words like "fact," "theory," "objective," and "reality" (though these words have their place). Instead, the message is

called "truth." That word, once central to any discussion of knowing, teaching, and learning, was omitted from my earlier lexicon simply because it is not much used these days, not crucial to our conversations about the knowledge we value. Though people may still yearn for truth, it is widely felt in our disillusioned times that the word points either to a romantic illusion or an unreachable goal. To our skeptical ears, truth has a dreamy, airy, fantastic sound.

But when we examine the image hidden at the root of "truth" it turns out to be more immediate, grounded, and human than the words we now use to describe the knowledge we prize. The English word "truth" comes from a Germanic root that also gives rise to our word "troth," as in the ancient vow "I pledge thee my troth." With this word one person enters a covenant with another, a pledge to engage in a mutually accountable and transforming relationship, a relationship forged of trust and faith in the face of unknowable risks.

To know something or someone in truth is to enter troth with the known, to rejoin with new knowing what our minds have put asunder. To know in truth is to become betrothed, to engage the known with one's whole self, an engagement one enters with attentiveness, care, and good will. To know in truth is to allow one's self to be known as well, to be vulnerable to the challenges and changes any true relationship brings. To know in truth is to enter into the life of that which we know and to allow it to enter into ours....

So truth has nothing to do with manufacturing a world, keeping it at a distance, manipulating it to suit our needs, or owning it as property. Nor does it mean projecting our psyches on the world's screen. Rather, truth in-

volves entering a relationship with someone or something genuinely other than us, but with whom we are intimately bound. Truth contains the image we are seeking—the image of community in which we were first created, the image of relatedness between knower and known that certain philosophies of science now affirm (pp. 30-31).

As these eloquent words of Palmer indicate, recognizing that our knowledge is personal and socially constructed does not necessarily lead to relativism but to holism, to inclusiveness.

3) And that path to inclusiveness strengthens the community. Including women as full members of our intellectual and faith communities makes our history and stories more complete, more reflective of divine intentions for human lives who reflect God's image in their desire for relationship and relatedness.

As we work out ways in which women and men share the center of communal life by moving women closer to the center of the public sphere and men closer to the center of the private/domestic sphere, perhaps we will also help to make the life of the mind and the life of the heart and spirit more whole.

Most importantly, perhaps those of us who have been on the margins will be more sharply aware of others who are marginalized and relegated to the category of "other" because of race, class, or age. If we do not, we are substituting one category of exclusion for another. Even as I, out of rhetorical necessity, have blurred the important differences among women in this talk, I may have misled by blunting the sharpness of oppression that plagues women of color in our society and in the "two-thirds world," a double oppression since these women are at the very bottom of a system that denies most of the men in their societies full humanity.

With our increased capacity for full human development comes increased responsibility to enlarge the possibilities for all members of the human community, who, like each of us, has been created to embody the divine image.