Feminism, Humanism: A Clash of Metaphors

by Lynda Hambourger
July 19, 2009
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Raleigh, NC

Good morning. I’m so glad to have the chance to make this presentation today.

I’ve been a feminist for a long time, as well as a humanist, and I’ve always been interested in religion, so the ideas I’m going to share have been rattling around in my brain for a while. But they have been clarified and brought into sharp focus by a book I’ve been reading recently, Becoming Divine: Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Religion, written in 1998 by Grace Jantzen. Jantzen was a British philosopher who unfortunately died of ovarian cancer in 2006. This was especially unfortunate because she clearly had many more ideas which she intended to explore that she never got around to writing about. This sermon is not a book report; but I’m very excited by Jantzen’s book and much indebted to her ideas and inspiration.

It is a well-known feminist perception that Western culture is heavily masculinist, patriarchal, phallocentric. This is clear in our language; our family, legal, political, and economic systems; and of course in our religions. Exhibit A is the three great monotheisms, Judaism, Islam and Christianity, which all worship a father God. Feminists have long been aware that patriarchal religious assumptions limit and even damage actual women, as well as men, and as well as our religious imaginations. In the Middle Ages, women mystics glorified God with language that reflected their own experiences, and today in Christian churches as well as in UUism it is not uncommon to hear God referred to as Mother or as Goddess. But while expanding religious language this way is valuable, it is not enough, if underlying patriarchal assumptions are not addressed as well. Such efforts have been described as putting God in a dress. And while it is healthy and disruptive to conceive of a cross-dressing God, should you peek under the dress, if what you see is the same old phallocentrism, then the masculinist assumptions have merely been dressed, not addressed.

I would like to suggest that some of these pernicious assumptions are a product of dualistic thinking. Dualism has a long history in the West, predating Christianity; it is present in the thought of Plato and Aristotle. And I have a suspicion: Could it be that dualism is a result of the very basic observation that many animals, including humans, come primarily in two sexes? Having noticed this binary, did people then proceed to dichotomize other concepts into two essentially different and opposing categories? We separate not only male and female, but also mind and body, thinking and feeling, spiritual and physical, heaven and earth, good and evil, white and black, etc. etc. as opposite and irreconcilable. Furthermore, having made two lists, one associated with maleness and the other with femaleness, we then assign a higher value to the male-associated list. Yet, as Leslie Takahashi-Morris’s reading points out, this is surely an oversimplification, and frankly doesn’t it seem like just lazy thinking? Reality is more complicated; it is not binary, but multifaceted.
So the God of monotheism, in addition to his maleness, exhibits such traits as omniscience, omnipotence, self-sufficiency, and immortality. He is spirit, not physical, not material. As the ultimate source of meaning, a God with such male-associated traits leads to the valuing of rationality, mastery, power, and autonomy, as well as a presumed afterlife following death, rather than earthly life.

This is all standard feminist analysis; obviously accurate, in my opinion, and very interesting to anyone living in Western culture. But Grace Jantzen makes another point which strikes me as fresh and important. It is this: Another essential feature of western theism is the centrality of belief statements. This is so much the case that it is easy to overlook it, for belief statements—creeds—are virtually synonymous with religion. Not so long ago, it was quite common for organizations to claim they did not discriminate on the basis of “race, color or creed.” This catch phrase has a slightly antique flavor, but it shows “creed” as essentially a synonym for religious faith.

It is the goal of feminist analysis to discover masculinist bias in our culture, the subtle and hidden as well as the obvious, and Jantzen persuades me that this emphasis on creed is yet another masculinist feature of monotheism. It can be seen in both a hyper-rationalism—an insistence on argument and reason, even when it is fruitless—as well as on domination, winning; and, moreover, it’s coupled with an apparent lack of concern for actual human consequences. Creeds are statements of faith; in other words, statements that adherents believe to be true, but, because they are about metaphysical matters, cannot be proved. Yet, with arrogant self-assurance, monotheistic faiths hold that accepting their creed is the requirement, the sole requirement, for salvation, while those who do not accept the creed are damned. This has led to some very unfortunate consequences: among them unending religious wars and persecutions. It has also led to centuries of rationalistic argumentation attempting to prove the unproveable. Since the evidence is subjective, the arguments go on forever.

But, what does this emphasis on creed have to do with UUism? We are, famously, a non-creedal faith.

Let’s examine our claim to be non-creedal. What do we mean? For one thing, we mean that there is not a specific statement of beliefs that all must adhere to. This is a very good thing, because it gives us leave to welcome people of differing beliefs into our fold. Sometimes people wonder if our seven principles are a creed. I would say they are not, because they do not involve unproveable metaphysical questions. Sometimes our non-creedal stance leads people to say that UUs can “believe anything they want to,” and it seems to me this is true, to the extent that we are certainly free to hold whatever metaphysical beliefs we want. But it misses the point, because it keeps the focus on belief. Rather, I think UUism should make more of the fact that our religion does not involve a reliance on belief statements at all. In other words, when we say we are non-creedal, we could understand this not only in the sense that we need not all agree on a creed, but also in a stronger sense: that our faith is based on something other than
metaphysical beliefs. It is not a problem to lack a unifying creed if our religious faith has another basis.

I know this has been a bit rough-going, and I see some people nodding off in the back, so let’s quickly review. My main points are these: Western culture is patriarchal. Attempts to introduce feminist imagery are laudable, but do not go far enough if they only mask patriarchal assumptions. Among the less obvious examples of phallocentrism in western monotheism is an insistence on the centrality of creed. And UUism is non-creedal, but could more actively differentiate religion from creed and clarify its non-creedal basis.

So how do we accomplish this task?

By a feminist transformation of humanism. If I wanted to be cute, I might call it humanism in a dress. And there is a point there, not just a lame joke, because one of the things about humanism that needs revision is its phallocentrism. But it still wouldn’t be accurate, because the transformation I have in mind is a pretty extreme makeover that will require more than a new outward covering.

According to the 2005 report by the UUA Commission on Appraisal, Engaging Our Theological Diversity, when asked about their theological beliefs, a plurality of UUs chooses humanism. I would be one of them. In its details, humanism is hard to pin down; it’s quite vague and amorphous. A strain of humanism clearly runs through Western thought, from the Greeks to the Renaissance to the Humanist Manifesto. At its most fundamental, humanism is a commitment to human dignity and human potential. The Humanist Manifesto of 1933 gets very specific, affirming 15 beliefs of humanism, and in the process producing, it has been argued, an imitation creedal faith. The 36 signers of the Manifesto—all male—put their names to a document that puts its faith in reason and science, human progress and autonomy, and (I quote) “reasonable and manly attitudes” in the face of life’s crises. Not all of this is bad, much of it is good, but it is masculinist, both in content and form. The signers’ confidence in science, in its ability to provide life with meaning and understanding, is reminiscent of the confidence that theists put in their creedal statements.

But in practice the Manifesto is not the defining document of humanism; many humanists probably don’t know it exists, let alone what it says. And while humanism going back to antiquity undoubtedly has a masculinist cast, if we take the fundamental meaning of humanism—commitment to human dignity and potential—and infuse it with a feminist spirit, we can produce a non-masculinist humanism that truly lives up to its name.

What would a feminist humanism look like? Well, obviously, it would not be creedal (or pseudo-creedal); it would not concern itself with unproveable metaphysical arguments nor make overconfident claims of truth or knowledge. It would acknowledge human limits, as well as human capabilities. While accepting reason and science as important ways of knowing, it would recognize other ways of knowing as well: imagination, intuition, sensitivity, attentiveness, appreciation. While recognizing the uniqueness and dignity of each human being, it would see us as members of communities, not as
autonomous individualists. It would value interpersonal love and caring as much as universal standards of truth and justice.

Perhaps most important for our religious faith, it would recognize the importance of metaphor.

[When I got here this morning and looked at the order of service, and remembered what the title of this talk is, I realized it’s really not accurate. I had to turn in the title a few weeks ago, before I wrote this talk. And I realize now that it’s not really so much a clash of metaphors, as extensive use of metaphor on the one hand and lack of metaphor on the other.]

Metaphor, or the use of an idea or image to stand for another concept, permeates religion. An appreciation for metaphor is one reason why we as UUs value a wide and rich diversity of religious expression, even when it comes from religions whose creeds we don’t accept. Humanism, however, particularly as expressed in the Humanist Manifesto, does not often employ metaphor, and in fact seems quite suspicious of it. Feminist religious expression, on the other hand, is full of metaphor: God as mother; the earth as God or as God’s body, the world as “pregnant with God,” as Angela of Foglino said. Jantzen suggests another feminist metaphor, which she calls natality, and which has much in common with humanism. Natality is a centering on birth as the chief miracle and defining moment of life. Like humanism, it conceives each human being as unique, irreplaceable, and precious. While recognizing the dignity of the individual, it also recognizes that we are products of other humans, born into families, into communities. It values embodiment, because we are born into bodies and without bodies we have no existence. In its focus on birth, it does not limit itself to humans, but celebrates all births, thus all life and the interdependent web of existence. And it recognizes our limits as born beings: our lives have their beginning and their end, the boundaries of our individual portions of infinity. Thus, a metaphor of natality focuses on this life, not on death and a supposed afterlife.

Going further, Jantzen points out that the word God is also in fact a metaphor, standing for an ideal of perfection. If we understand God or divinity in this way, then there can be many metaphors of the divine, many representations and conceptions of God. There is no reason to accept the patriarchal image of a Father God, the Guy in the Sky, as its only or real meaning. Furthermore, if God is a metaphor for an ideal of human perfection, then divinity even becomes compatible with humanism. I see some humanists squirming in their seats, getting ready to raise objections. But when humanists or atheists claim not to believe in God perhaps they are implicitly accepting the God of monotheism as the sole legitimate conception? In other words, which God is it that they don’t believe in? The title of Jantzen’s book is Becoming Divine. Building on the work of a diverse array of feminist thinkers, she asserts that God need not name an all-powerful super-being in a timeless realm, but can rather name the possibilities of awareness and transcendence that humans aspire to.
It is difficult to erase the image of God as the Guy in the Sky, difficult to wrap our minds around the idea of becoming divine. Yet I hope we will explore more deeply this matter of metaphor. People often ask: without a creed, what keeps UUs together in religious community? There are many answers: our seven principles, our common values, our covenants, our traditions. Yet, somehow these are not satisfying enough, not religious enough, so the question is asked again. Metaphor may be our religious answer. Maybe we are the metaphorical faith, drawn together by our desire for and acceptance of religious understanding that expresses itself artfully and indirectly. This sermon is a bare beginning, an introduction, at best. But religion is too central to our Western culture and too important to our human search for meaning and fulfillment. We need to develop our non-creedal faith. Adopting as our religion a richly metaphorical exploration of the possibilities and limitations of being born, of being alive, of being human, would be a step in that direction.