

Scotosis and Sight: Elizabeth Johnson, Feminist Theology and the Hope of Unity

Elizabeth Johnson, in her pivotal work *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, posits that by weaving feminist language into the understanding of God, there may be an “emancipatory praxis of women and men, to the benefit of all creation, both human beings and the earth.”¹ Feminist discourse related to the imagery of God was a nascent field at the time of the publication of *She Who Is*, requiring a willingness to be open to new ways to look at God. Johnson explains that those who oppose feminist discourse (and by extension its liberation) relegate “the theological question of God-talk in relation to women’s flourishing to the periphery of serious consideration in academy, church, and society,”² and drawing from Bernard Lonergan’s work, argues that they suffer from “scotosis”, coined from the Greek *skotos*, or “darkness”. This paper will briefly explore scotosis, and place Johnson into conversation with Henri J.M. Nouwen as they attempt to overcome the problems associated with scotosis.

Lonergan, expounding on the development of human common sense, explains scotosis thusly:

Besides the love of light, there can be a love of darkness. If prepossessions and prejudices notoriously vitiate theoretical investigations, much more easily can elementary passions bias understanding in practical and personal matters. To exclude and insight is also to exclude the further questions that would arise

1 Johnson, 8

2 Ibid, 14

from it and the complementary insights that would carry it towards a rounded and balanced viewpoint. To lack that fuller view results in behaviour that generates misunderstanding both in ourselves and in other. To suffer such incomprehension favours a withdrawal from the outer drama of human living into the inner drama of phantasy.³

Scotosis, then, is obscuring perspective in order to maintain an individual's prevailing insights: ignoring new ideas because the old ones have become comfortable. Lonergan further explains that scotosis "can remain fundamentally unconscious yet suffer the attacks and crises that generate in the mind a mist of obscurity and bewilderment, of suspicion and reassurance, of doubt and rationalization, of insecurity and disquiet."⁴ Scotosis is only the first step in a series of biases against new insights. As one lives into the darkness of scotosis, it reshapes the scaffolding of learning (which Lonagren called "repression") that leads to "aberrant censorship that is engaged in preventing insight."⁵ Progressively, an individual represses even the images of the insight he or she is avoiding, such that the entirety of an individual's conscious and subconscious thinking may be reshaped against a particular insight.

The consequences of scotosis can create incongruous arguments: "long and fierce discussions about justice and equality while we hate our teacher or ignore the needs of others around us... endless academic quarrels in a world filled with atrocities, and much talk about hunger from people

3 Lonergan, 191

4 Ibid, 192

5 Ibid, 193

suffering from overweight... [indulging] in comfortable discussions about the Kingdom of God while [individuals] should know that God is with the poor, the sick, the hungry, and the dying.”⁶ It can also mean, in Johnson’s case, that the patriarchal God is given unwarranted preference, leaving half of humanity without meaningful, self-referential imagery in order to find themselves in *imago Dei*.

Scotosis can have a significant effect on individuals, causing atrophy to critical thinking faculties that may lead to more nuanced understanding that is more life-giving. This is why Johnson rightfully points to scotosis as the major impediment to feminist God-talk. Inviting discourse of a God who is imaged both female and male, honoring the poetry of Sophia, Woman Wisdom, as holy, describes a God that is unconstrained by specific terms, acknowledging God as a God of freedom. Yet this kind of new talk about God requires reframing some of the most foundational understanding of one of the most intimate parts of the Christian worldview, which some are unwilling or unable to do.

This unwillingness is a problem Henri J.M. Nouwen acknowledges as he explores the issue of scotosis in learning. With great insight, Nouwen claims that the issue is

...resistance against a conversion that calls for a “kenotic” self-encounter. We can be creatively receptive and break out of the imprisoning of academic conformity only when we can squarely face our fundamental human condition and fully experience it as

⁶ Nouwen, 22

the foundation of all learning... the experience that teacher and student are both sharing the same reality – that is, they are both naked, powerless, destined to die, and in the final analysis, totally alone and unable to save each other or anyone else. It is the embarrassing discovery of solidarity in weakness and of a desperate need to be liberated from slavery. It is the confession that they both live in a world filled with unrealities and that they allow themselves to be driven by the most trivial desires and the most distasteful ambitions... for only in the depths of loneliness, when they have nothing to lose and are no longer clinging to life as inalienable property, can they become sensitive to what is really happening in the world and be able to approach it without fear.⁷

Scotosis is broken through when individuals focus on circumstances that are within darkness. By its very nature, scotosis invites isolation and loneliness away from new insight and individuals who claim them. It is extremely difficult, however, to ignore the realities of suffering, pain, and finality of death. Acknowledging shared pain, and recognizing its inescapability means that there is always a common ground – between teacher and student, parent and child, and woman and man.

Johnson asserts this reality powerfully as the last sentence of *She Who Is*. Speaking of the hope that feminine God-talk provides, she admits “it does so under the rule of darkness and broken words.”⁸ To have spent nearly 300 pages deftly explaining the value of feminine God-talk only to end on a capitulation of a broken world and words (in which the reader can imagine both written and spoken), Johnson is exposing her own nakedness and weakness, recognizing that even in the midst of all of the work she brought

7 Nouwen, 25

8 Johnson, 272

forth, there is no guarantee of redemption. More importantly, however, Johnson invites each and every reader to acknowledge the same, and consider what it means to live under the rule of darkness – of scotosis – even in the midst of what each views as beautiful and affirming.

It's in this space that Johnson's work on feminine God-talk's liberating power takes shape. She criticizes suffering as an inappropriate place to draw understanding about God. A Thomistic view of God as *actus purus*, completely pure, creates an image of God that is unmoving and apathetic. However, given the prevalent and overwhelming suffering in the world, "the idea of the impassible, omnipotent God appears riddled with inadequacies... a God who is simply a spectator at all of this suffering, who even 'permits' it, falls short of the modicum of decency expected even at the human level. Such a God is morally intolerable."⁹

Johnson then unfolds a series of metaphors that describe a feminine God that is not unmoved nor apathetic to pain. First, She is a God who knows the pain of childbirth; of bringing forth new creation from Her body. The God of Isaiah 42:14 evokes "a God who is in hard labor, sweating, pushing with all her might to bring forth justice."¹⁰ It is in the pain of justice that God because a God "in solidarity with those who suffer. In the midst of the isolation of suffering the presence of the divine compassion as companion to the pain transforms suffering, not mitigating its evil but

9 Johnson, 249

10 Ibid, 255

bringing an inexplicable consolation and comfort.”¹¹ God’s solidarity is one that knows and walks with those treated unjustly, grieving at the degradation of female bodies – bodies in *imago Dei*. For Johnson, God as woman is Mother, suffering in birth, and suffering in the pain of Her children, walking beside them in shared anguish.

Johnson’s Mother God is one that continuously performs a “kenotic self-encounter” and invites the broken in for healing not as victims, but as one “utterly committed to the *humanum*, whose glory is the human being and, specifically, women, fully alive.”¹² Other individuals stepping into the “depths of loneliness” described by Nouwen can find a feminine God waiting, loving them in the midst of their weakness. Those who may have rejected the insights offered by Johnson and others now have new schema to engage SHE WHO IS: She has met them in their darkness, beyond the scotosis, and into the deeper constructions that repress feminine insight to create new constructs and new meaning: true holy in-breaking and redemption from God Herself. For those whom move feminist God-talk to periphery, it is not *just* a “feminist” approach but a unifying *both/and*: God as Woman, for all.

Feminist theology, as with any discourse that seeks to reimagine God for the benefit of liberating the marginalized, individuals who are accustomed to the dominant discourse may struggle to make sense of new insights. While some may do the work to incorporate the insights into their

11 Ibid, 267

12 Ibid, 271

worldview, others will resist, creating a scotoma. However, it should not discourage those who seek to speak new insight into discourse, nor should it lead individuals to dismiss those who develop scotoma as lost. Instead, it requires a pedagogical approach that encourages “kenotic self-encounter” with the other where they, too, can see the need for liberation. Elizabeth Johnson, in *She Who Is*, provides a path for feminists as well as others giving voice to marginalized people that both honors the need to focus on the people at hand, but extending the invitation for everyone to be liberated.

Works Cited

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