

What Is Feminist Spirituality, and Why Should We Care?

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When I first became involved in the late 1960s, women's issues were both clearer and more obscure. On the one hand, sexism was blatant with no need for apology. When I finished my doctorate and began looking for an academic position, I was told "we don't want a woman" or "we already have a woman." On the other hand, feminist analysis was in its infancy and very unsophisticated. We focused mainly on what I would call the "effects" of patriarchy or sexism or male chauvinism. I would argue that even our analyses of race and class were still focused on effects. Through then ground-breaking studies like those of Sandra Bem, we traced the impact of attitudes towards women and how they were learned...but we never actually got to why those attitudes and assumptions had formed in the first place or what was keeping them firmly in place. And so paradoxes could abound, such as my young step-daughter flourishing as a self-confident six-year-old, the fastest runner in her class, and yet coming home from school saying in all seriousness "boys run faster than girls."

Over the years, a number of legal inequities have been addressed, and women now participate in a wider range of occupations and fields of study. There have also been significant global initiatives to address women's issues through, or supported by, the United Nations – e.g., the establishment of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in 1946, the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) now ratified by 185 countries (including Afghanistan!), the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and the 2000 UN Millennium Development Goals to be met by 2015 that include a goal (#3) on promoting gender equality and empowering women.

But what has really changed? As 51 percent of the world's population, women still earn less than two-thirds on average of men's salaries for the same work even though they are, on average, better educated (with 36 percent more women than men graduating from college). As women move into a particular occupation, the average wage for women tends to drop while men in the occupation continue to earn higher salaries than those women. While there are a few notable exceptions, women are still not well represented at the highest levels of power in business or in government (e.g., only 21 percent of Canada's members of parliament are women). Women still do on average twice as much of the unpaid domestic and community work (20-40 hours a week, compared with seven hours per week for men) and own less than one percent of the property. Women (especially Aboriginal women) are over six times as likely as men to be the victims of domestic violence, represent over 90 percent of rape victims, and are almost three times as likely to be victims of stalking. Girls comprise the majority of the vast number of children forced into prostitution in virtually every country (including Canada!) and sexually abused 10 to 40 times a day.

So why the disconnect? Why do we remain apparently unaware of gender inequities and talk about “post-feminism” as though all issues were resolved? I would postulate three reasons for this intentional or unconscious blindness. The first reason has to do with how we manage data. If we really look at the data (of which the earlier statements are just the tip of the iceberg), we would have to acknowledge that there continue to be major gender-related issues that need our attention. Instead we tend to personalize and particularize our experience, assuming that if we had just acted “appropriately” there would have been no problem (a typical pattern of abuse victims), and refusing to trace the commonalities amongst our various experiences. Or we blame other women for “asking for it” – though it is difficult to see how a six-year-old girl “asked for” the role of sex slave. Or we label the data as inaccurate or misinterpreted so that we do not need to deal with the ramifications.

The second reason stems from the fact that sexism is so pervasive that we don’t even recognize it. It is like the air we breathe. We cannot see that air...we simply take for granted that what we need in order to sustain us will be available. In fact, though, the air in this room could become lethal to us and, if it happened slowly enough, we might not even know that the relative amounts of oxygen and carbon dioxide and nitrogen and carbon monoxide were changing. So too with attitudes towards women...the negative attitudes are so ubiquitous that we often don’t even notice them. One of the reasons that all-women workshops or consciousness-raising sessions have been held over the years is to create an environment of contrast so that assumptions get challenged. After one has been immersed in a group process that is striving to be consensual and mutually respectful (not that women’s groups always meet that ideal!), suddenly the myriad of win-lose, belittling interactions we experience every day become noticeable and we have the possibility of making different choices.

The third reason has to do with our underlying belief structure regarding the nature of reality, our relationship to a larger cosmos or deity, and our purpose on this planet – all part of what we think of as our “spirituality.” These beliefs form a critical portion of our worldview and are communicated to us from birth, even before we are able to speak. As with our cultural assumptions, these spiritual beliefs typically go unquestioned until we experience persons with a completely different perspective – e.g., we travel to a foreign country, or we meet someone from a different spiritual practice – or we have a personal crisis where our belief system is challenged and we emerge with a different awareness.

It is this third reason that is the focus of my talk today. It is my contention that we will be unable to affect a lasting change until we identify and change the fundamental beliefs that hold sexism and misogyny in place ... and that those fundamental beliefs are embedded in our spirituality. I would argue that much of our joint work on advocacy, education, research, and even civil disobedience has been focused on the effects of the effects, so to speak – i.e., on the ways in which sexism and male chauvinism and paternalism and misogyny manifest themselves in our everyday lives. All this hard work has not really touched the root cause. Before we get to the matter of root cause, though, I want to address a couple of contextual issues.

First, I want to distinguish between spirituality and religion. By the term “religion,” I am referring to an institutionalized system of dogma and creeds with regard to the Transcendent that is expressed through shared rituals and liturgy. What I mean by “spirituality” is our personal

understanding of ourselves, our relationship with the Transcendent, and our purpose as humans in this vast cosmos. It is that non-tangible dimension of what we experience as “greater than ourselves” that encompasses a significant portion of our world view. It determines, for example, how we view ourselves and each other, what traits we value, how we define “success,” how we assume we learn, and how we view change. So two persons could belong to the same religion but have different spiritual beliefs and practices. And it is also possible for those two persons to have similar spiritual beliefs while belonging to different religions.

Second, for purposes of dialogue, I will state some of my own “world view” assumptions that I believe transcend different forms of spiritual practice. The cosmologists tell us that the cosmos is a sea of energies, billions of years old, that is continuing to grow in multiple directions. I assume that we are all part of this cosmic energetic field. While we are each unique, we are fundamentally all connected through this energy field, and what we do, say, or feel affects the whole energy field. Our belief that we are separate and that there is a “we” and “they” is an illusion that unfortunately allows and encourages us to objectify others. Because we are each part of the cosmic energetic field (which some deify), we share in its nature and so are already at some level “perfect.” We do not always exhibit this perfection, in part because we do not remember who we really are. But it is our essence. The purpose of the cosmos as we know it is to learn and grow. We learn by contrast and difference, and so the transcendent energy source that is the cosmos chose to differentiate itself in order to learn. Another example of this principle is that we learn about our own culture and cultural values primarily by interacting with persons from different cultures. The nature of learning requires that we try different options, some of which will work well and some of which won’t...Finally, the core energy of our universe is joy, though we have become mired in a tradition of guilt and suffering.

Third, I want to articulate an outcome we might wish to achieve through questioning our embedded spiritual assumptions so that we have a sense of what we are working towards. Since so often that outcome is framed negatively (e.g., “we want an end to sexism or the patriarchy or misogyny”), I want to substitute a positive outcome. I have chosen, for purposes of dialogue, the outcome of “goodwill,” by which I mean a disposition towards kindness, understanding, compassion, cooperation, and inclusion. An important aspect of this concept, to me, is that it is relational...that is, it does not occur in a vacuum or as something that one group does to another group. Rather, it is an attitude of relating to others, grounded in respect and focus on collective well-being.

Fourth, I’d like to underscore the challenge that we face with regard to dualistic thinking, especially as the construct of gender lends itself to dualism. The dynamics of sexism and misogyny (and all similar forms of violence and oppression) are grounded in the practice of labelling another group as “other” and then objectifying that “other.” The obvious solution is to eliminate dualism, and indeed practice in non-dualistic thinking is a part of the solution. But we learn many concepts and lessons through sharp contrast – in other words, through posing dualistic extremes, or the thesis and antithesis – so dualism plays an important role in arriving at new awarenesses and synthesis. Given our predisposition towards dualism, we have typically tried to replace one extreme with another when working for social change...for example, moving from patriarchal to matriarchal theist models that still assume an authority outside of ourselves. Albert Einstein reminds us that we need to shift our perspective and change our level of analysis

if we are to solve a problem. Ideally, feminist spirituality should enable us to find superordinate commonalities that result in a rich synthesis that is based on, and produces, goodwill...not simply a neutral zone between the two extremes. As we do that, we can undermine the foundations of sexism and misogyny and ultimately substitute for, transmute, and eradicate those constructs.

So what does feminism have to do with spirituality? I would argue that feminism, in its essence, is an analytical lens. Its purpose is to expose attitudes, beliefs, and practices that imprison us within gender role stereotypes and that result in sexism and misogyny. What I want to do today is to outline some of the dimensions of that feminist analytical lens and give illustrations of the social effects of spiritual beliefs that become revealed as dangerous to our collective wellbeing. I would caution that what we are concerned about here is how spiritual teachings are currently referenced and lived out, which may involve misinterpretations of their original intent. I have selected eleven questions to demonstrate this analytical process, ranging from the very obvious to the not so obvious. I will be using gender as the dimension of illustration, but one could use race or class or any other variable that elicits objectification.

First question: Are legal rights mandated in spiritual teachings as equitable among all adults? Such rights for women would include control of financial resources (including property and businesses), control of whether or not to marry (not simply veto power regarding a proposed spouse) or divorce, equal rights within a marriage and with regard to inheritance, control over one's own body, the right to vote and run for political office, and so forth. Usually, if women are legally second-class citizens, there is some religious text used as justification for keeping women legally dependent on men.

Second question: Is the language that is used in spiritual practice inclusive and respectful of all persons? By this I mean not only gender-neutral nouns and pronouns but also the use of parallel language (e.g., "women and men" rather than "girls and men") and of gender-neutral metaphors to teach or reinforce concepts. Typically the language used is male except in specific instances (e.g., motherhood). A good way to test this issue is to substitute female language for any male language and see if you have any different sense of the relevance or meaning.

Third question: Are the experiences of all groups (in this case, women and men) represented equitably in spiritual teachings? In other words, are an equal number of women authorities and role models provided, an equal number of women authors cited, on so forth? If the answer is "no," then the impact includes not only a lack of appropriate role models for women (the typically under-represented group) but also a lack of the perspective of that particular gender.

Fourth question: How are women viewed in spiritual teaching? I'd like to describe six options, all of which are problematic:

- a) The most extreme is the view of women as inherently evil, tempting men into sin (like Eve in the Christian story of the Fall) and causing them to lose control and act out of sexual lust. In addition, women are seen as the source and cause of all pain and suffering in the world (for example, the Pandora myth).

The social effects of this view are horrendous, including the ongoing practices of clitoral mutilation (still occurring in 40 countries to five women each minute) and the

stoning of women who are “immodest,” as well as the justification of domestic violence as males disciplining females “for their own good.”

- b) Another overtly negative view is of women as chattel, or possessions to be deployed to the benefit of males. A variation is the female as a passive womb for breeding male heirs.

The social effects of this view are similarly horrendous, including suttee, dowry murders and bride burnings (which still exceed 7,000 a year), child prostitution and child pornography, and also the pro-life position that denies women control over our own bodies.

- c) An apparently more benign negative view of women is that of being childlike (“the weaker sex”) and needing protection from a paternal figure – i.e., being unequal by ascription.

The social effects of this view are to create dependency and lowered self-esteem, as well as to exclude women from prestigious roles and relegate women to routine support roles that men do not wish to perform for themselves.

- d) A slightly more subtle negative view of women is as “Other,” with men equated to the norm or the ideal.

The social impact is that women exist and have an identity only as a wife and mother, with unmarried women described in derogatory terms as “spinsters” or “old maids.” Interestingly, “bachelor” does not have that same derogatory connotation; in fact, there is a sense in which marriage for men is viewed as losing freedom and privilege.

- e) More subtle still is the negative view of women as “separate but equal,” with each gender having its own sphere of responsibilities. This division of labour leaves women with primary responsibility for housework, child care, and community volunteer activities.

The problematic social impact here is that women are stereotyped based on a single trait – gender. For some women, these roles are an excellent fit with their interests and aptitudes; for others, they are not. In my family, for example, my brother was a happy househusband for 1.5 years and would have continued in that role had he and his wife not needed two incomes. I, on the other hand, have little interest in domestic chores and would love to have someone else take on those responsibilities.

- f) The most subtle of the negative views is that we are all human beings and that gender-based differences do not exist. True, this is ultimately reality and is our ideal...so what is the problem?

The problem is that, at the present time, this view is disrespectful in that it is dismissive of the actual inequities and discrimination that exist. How can we affect change if we deny that there is an issue that needs to be addressed?

Turning now to some of the less obvious questions...but first a brainstorm – what are the most highly valued traits in our society?

Fifth question: Which personality traits are valued in spiritual teachings? Depending on our cultural portrayal of the transcendent, those traits may range from being rational, impartial, and detached to being tolerant, forgiving, and unchanging. The more “feminine” traits of being intuitive, emotional, nurturing, or accommodation-focused tend to be devalued. And yet Jean Baker Miller, author of the foundational book, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, commented in a news interview that what is considered a female trait of caring about relationships is “the human characteristic most needed at this time . . . in this day of nuclear threat, even connected to the survival of us all.”

Sixth question: What is the ideal working relationship portrayed in spiritual teachings and reinforced in the imagery and metaphors used? The classic patriarchy model is one of dominance and submission, of victory (the omnipotent god), of control – in essence, a win-lose model. What this means is a devaluing of collaborative, win-win relationships that are based on an appreciation of differences and respect for all parties...often labelling them as “wimpish” when they actually take a lot of hard work.

Seventh question: Who is described in spiritual teachings as responsible for nurturance and emotional and domestic support? If we were to have shared responsibility as adults, then we would see no ascription of roles based on gender (including the role of planning for domestic needs) and instead would have a negotiation of roles based on preference and equity. Rather what we have is a scenario of “double burden” for women where women are really never “off duty,” where women are expected to (and expect themselves to) accommodate continuously to others’ needs and preferences, and where women fail to set the boundaries that would allow for their own self-care and sense of self.

And now to some even less obvious questions...

Eighth question: Are skills described or assumed in spiritual teachings to be gender-neutral or gender-linked? Following on the previous question, one of the rationales given for the traditional division of support responsibilities is that women (as a gender) are better at nurturance than men. Instead of expecting all adults to acquire basic caretaking skills and assuming that the less skilled will learn from the more skilled in areas where they wish to re-balance skill inequalities, we have a scenario where skill acquisition is restricted by gender and skill differences result in permanent inequality. Shifts like the increased emphasis on male parenting demonstrate that change is possible, provided traditional gender roles are not reinforced in religious teachings.

Ninth question: How is “creativity” defined in spiritual teachings? This is a fascinating topic as one might expect that women, with their biological ability to procreate, would be viewed as the creative leads. In actuality, many religious traditions ascribe the creative role to the “Father” or “spirit,” with the female role relegated to that of passive receptacle.

Tenth question: How are same sex relations viewed in spiritual teachings? To the extent that heterosexual intimacy is equated to procreation, there are likely to be religious strictures on sexual intimacy between persons of the same sex. But the roots of homophobia go deeper than this and are actually linked to a fear of gender role blurring (particularly the “effeminate” male),

coupled with a fear of women not being under the direct control of men. So homophobic teachings help us identify an attachment to a gender-based dualistic worldview that lays the foundation for objectification of one gender in favour of the other.

Eleventh question: What is assumed about the nature of the Transcendent? In patriarchal religions, the Transcendent (typically called “God”) is characterized as being omniscient, omnipotent, unchanging and self-sufficient. Such a figure needs nothing outside Itself. Why, then, create humans one might ask? Such a self-sufficient entity external to ourselves provides a model for we-them objectification and can reinforce fears of the “other.” Combating this assumption requires an openness to the possibility that the Transcendent is interested in learning from our experience, that learning and evolving rather than perfection might be the purpose of our existence, and that the ideal relationship is one of interdependence, rather than one of dominance and submission.

So now that we have examined selected areas of spiritual belief, what benefits can we see from this analytical approach – i.e., from feminist spirituality? Perhaps the most useful contribution of these types of analytical questions is that they help us make the implicit explicit so that we have the possibility of addressing and permanently changing the root causes of sexism and misogyny. As a result, we have the possibility of maturing into unique, effective adults rather than remaining as fearful children in a spiritual sense.

But intellectual analysis is not enough. We bring about change in core beliefs only through practicing alternatives for a minimum of one month. I’d like to illustrate this principle by listing examples of behaviour changes that could be practiced, linked to the particular questions asked:

- #1. Relate to your sense of the Transcendent directly, as a co-creating experimenter.
- #2. Substitute female nouns and pronouns for male ones to “break set.”
- #3. Select spiritual material written by women and/or with a majority of women references.
- #4. Question imagery and assumptions that women are other than complex adults with unique preferences.
- #5. Challenge yourself to provide a third alternative when two have been named.
- #6. In groups, focus on appreciating and respecting differences.
- #7. Negotiate an equitable division of non-paid tasks based on preference with your partner or a close friend.
- #8. Identify a “non-traditional” skill linked to your spiritual practice that you wish to learn, and arrange for a coach.
- #9. Substitute “we are all co-creators” for language and imagery that restricts creativity to one gender.
- #10. Affirm the importance of loving relationships regardless of gender.
- #11. Substitute “we are interdependent” for language and imagery that describes the Transcendent as omnipotent and self-sufficient.

I’d like to close with a quote from Margaret Mead as an encouragement to each of us to tackle the challenges identified by a feminist analysis of our spiritual beliefs:

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

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