

Sexism and Sin-Talk

*Feminist Conversations
on the Human Condition*

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Introduction

She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.

—*Proverbs 31:26 NIV*

This book explores the language of theology and the power it has over human lives. Specifically, it treats the classical rhetoric of the church on the sinfulness of humans, and how this classical rhetoric often becomes deadly to women. As such, it is a book about the rhetoric of feminist theologians, relative latecomers to the language game known as theology, who, after centuries of negative and often deadly rhetoric about women, are creating narratives of critique and reimagination with an eye toward life and the flourishing of women. Moreover, this book shows how feminist critiques of classical sin-talk speak with the grammar of classical sin-talk, but also create a new narrative with it.

Delwin Brown talks about theology as the creative reconstruction of inherited symbols, the construction of a tradition's future from the resources of its past.¹ This definition of theology expresses the fact that a living religious tradition is both continuous with the past and open to change in new times and contexts. The temptation might be to want to make a choice between these two aspects: either you are for tradition and resist change, or you embrace change to the extent that the tradition is seen as irrelevant or wholly harmful. However, the first option gives rise to dead (and often deadly) traditionalism, and the second forgets that traditions exist because they have given people life. The art of constructive theology is that of discarding that which is dead and death-dealing and finding that which is alive and life-giving.

1. Delwin Brown, *Boundaries of Our Habitations: Tradition and Theological Construction*, SUNY Series in Religious Studies, ed. Harold Coward (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1994), 148.

This perspective shapes my approach to feminist conversations on sin. I develop here a rhetorical approach to this conversation, which leads me to use the terminology of “sin-talk” rather than “doctrine of sin,” since the focus is on how we speak about sin, and what kind of praxis that speech encourages. Feminist theologians criticize those aspects of classical sin-talk that are death-dealing, especially for women. However, the very criticism of some classical forms of sin-talk is itself already a form of constructive sin-talk, as notable feminist theologians have remarked. This is, moreover, not new to the Christian tradition, which every now and then has engaged in sin-talk against its own sinful teachings—even against the sinfulness of some forms of sin-talk. Therefore, the thesis in this book is that the feminist rejection of some forms of classical sin-talk is not merely critical, but in fact itself already constitutes, and forms the foundation of, constructive sin-talk, and that this is in fact not entirely new, but is a classical Christian theological move, characterized by a prophetic rhetorical tone aimed at human flourishing, albeit now with a specific focus on women.

To be sure, the Christian concept of sin is one that is often seen as negative, moralistic, and increasingly irrelevant. One of my theological mentors once said to me that a theologian should not focus on the doctrine of sin too much, and should focus on God’s love instead. He had a point, of course. Christian theology is faith seeking understanding of the good news as presented by the Gospel writers, which makes the “bad news” of sin a secondary theological concern. In fact, as theologians from Augustine to Luther taught, an obsessive focus on sin can indeed be sinful!

Nevertheless, the Christian gospel does not bypass sin, and the Christian theologian therefore needs to take the concept of sin very seriously, even if we are not to dwell on it. After all, the good news of the gospel logically correlates with the perception of something-that-is-not-as-it-ought-to-be, that is, sin.² The English word “sin” corresponds to the Greek term *hamartia*, which carries the connotation of “missing the mark.”

Furthermore, there is an ethical responsibility to speak of sin, since sin is that which is harmful to human flourishing. We cannot reduce the gospel of grace to one of cheap grace, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer so famously remarked.³ What Bonhoeffer meant was that costly grace calls us to discipleship, implying that faith is not only a matter of believing, but also of doing, including responding to things-that-are-not-as-they-ought-to-be. Therefore, I would argue that the love command that is central to Christian ethics requires us to take the question of sin seriously, since sin is that which harms human life.

2. See especially Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 43–56.

British theologian Alistair McFadyen points out that the trivialization of the concept of sin in modern Western culture reflects the fact that “sin” has ceased to function as a way of talking about the pathological in human affairs. The aim of sin-talk, he says, is to speak of *concrete* pathologies in relation to God.⁴ Reflection on sin, when it transcends moralistic blame games, is reflection on the human condition, on human misery in all its concreteness. It is reflection on our alienation from our true selves, from each other, from the Source and Ground of Being and of our being. However, it is also reflection on the ills that are expressions of this alienation: violence, war, racism, oppression, sexism, heterosexism, greed, abuse, and much more. In short, although a sickly dwelling on sin has to be avoided, God-talk and grace-talk cannot bypass sin-talk, since God speaks the word of grace into the concrete pathologies we encounter in human existence and is heard from within those experiences. The theologian therefore cannot bypass reflection on the painful matters that go by the name of “sin.”

What feminist theologians have been saying, however, is that if we are to speak of sin, we need to be mindful of possible distortions in our rhetoric on sin that become harmful in the lives of human beings. Stephen Ray speaks of this phenomenon as the “sins of sin-talk.”⁵ This book seeks to trace the continuing conversation among feminist theologians on sin-talk, its sins, and its potential, and to show what the contributions of feminist theology as a field have been and can be with regard to the Christian conversation on sin. The book is premised upon the recognition that words have power, and perhaps more so when those words have doctrinal status, that is, speaking with the authority of religious tradition. In the words of Serene Jones, “doctrines function like loose but nonetheless definitive scripts that persons of faith perform; doctrines are the dramas in which we live out our lives.”⁶ The feminist conversation on sin-talk is therefore centered on the question, how does sin-talk create a script that people perform?

In short, the guiding question in this book is: what are the dynamics of feminist theological conversations on sin-talk, particularly in light of its rhetorical function? This is a deceptively simple question, and many a student who has sat through an introductory class in theology will raise their hand and mention something about the feminist critique of the classical focus on the sin of pride. The slightly more clever ones will add that feminist theologians

4. Alistair McFadyen, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust, and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3–5.

5. Stephen G. Ray Jr., *Do No Harm: Social Sin and Christian Responsibility* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 1–35.

6. Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*, *Guides to Theological Inquiry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 17.

are critical of the ways in which women have been associated with sin. The more critical ones will complain that feminist theologians want to do away with the doctrine of sin and replace it with fuzzy concepts that take out the sharp edges of Christian theology. While all of these hypothetical students would have a point, I contend that the answer to this simple question might include all these responses, and yet also is more complex than that, and that feminist theologians do not in fact want to do away with sin-talk. Indeed, I even contend that when some feminist theologians reject sin-talk they do so because they deem it to be too sinful, which paradoxically affirms the very concept of sin.

A few general notes about my approach. I do not pretend to include every feminist theologian who has said something about sin, but focus for the most part on some “classical” feminist voices. While the term “classical” might be stretched here a bit, it is worth remembering that Christian feminist conversations on sin and sin-talk have been going on for nearly sixty years at this point, and there are indeed “classical” voices and perspectives within that conversation. So the analytical part of this book aims to trace those voices and perspectives. Primary among these are Valerie Saiving, Judith Plaskow, and Susan Nelson Dunfee on the “pride critique,” and Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether on the theme of women-blaming. I also include the voices of female (and sometimes male) scholars who may or may not self-identify as feminist theologians, but who add important insights to this conversation. I furthermore try to keep in mind that feminism is not the domain of white North American women, and that it is also not the only kind of female voice in the theological conversation. I am aware of the very valid critiques lodged against classical feminist theology by womanist and *mujerista* scholars, and also of the multicultural expressions of feminism claimed by women around the globe. I do not pretend to be sufficiently aware of all voices and perspectives out there, and present this book as an invitation to further conversation, even as I trace the “classical” feminist conversation on sin while offering some constructive proposals of my own. In the constructive chapters at the end of the book I push toward two things: a deep retrieval of the tradition, on the one hand, and a global, intersectional feminism, on the other hand. These arise from two broad characteristics of my theological approach in general.

My approach to feminist theology is in part the result of the history of my native country of South Africa, and my opposition to apartheid, which I perceived to be incompatible with my Christian faith at the young age of thirteen (this was in the early 1980s, a time when South Africa was being torn apart by violence as a result of racial oppression). This religious-political awakening shaped my life decisions in multiple ways. Awareness of the reality and

pain of racism continues to shape my feminist perspective, prompting me to remember that even when feminist scholarship demands analysis of gender oppression, such scholarship should keep in mind that gender alone is not sufficient as an analytical focus. From my experience of how white women, while themselves subjugated within a patriarchal culture, also “bossed about” women (and men) of color as a result of racial hierarchy, I know all too well that women are not only victims but often perpetrators in the oppression of others. I therefore also know that sisterhood is complex and fragile as a result of the intersection of gender with race (as well as other factors).

My intersectional, global approach to feminist theology is furthermore shaped by the fact that, as a white South African woman now living in the United States, I occupy a hybrid social space: I do not quite share the world of white North American feminists, but of course would not presume to share the world of black African feminists and womanists either. Instead I find myself in a strange intersection of whiteness, Africanness, “immigrant-ness,” and Americanness. Postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha uses the phrase “interstitial perspective” to speak of this kind of complexity, while other postcolonial thinkers speak of hybridity or liminality, although, as Sang Hyun Lee notes, the latter also “includes the meaning of being located at the periphery or edge of society,” and given the reality that my whiteness largely precludes such liminality I don’t claim that term for myself. My experience is perhaps best expressed by Vietnamese American theologian Peter C. Phan, who speaks simply of being “betwixt and between,” that is, being “neither here nor there, to be neither this thing nor that.”⁷ In this book, the interstitial perspectives of African, Asian, and other global scholars shape my perspectives on the issue of gender violence, which is so central to this book, and continue to inform my perspective on theology.

My feminist theology was furthermore shaped by earlier work I did on the thought of American Catholic feminist theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson, whose theology combines serious critique with deep retrieval of the Christian tradition. Her approach can be seen, for example, in her brilliant retrieval of Thomas Aquinas’s insights on God in her book *She Who Is*. From her I learned that serious critique of the tradition does not preclude deep retrieval of the life-giving elements in it. In this book I primarily retrieve elements of the thought of John Calvin and Augustine of Hippo, albeit amid serious critique of the androcentrism in their thought.

7. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Sang Hyun Lee, *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), x; Peter C. Phan, “Betwixt and Between: Doing Theology with Memory and Imagination,” in *Journeys at the Margin: Toward an Autobiographical Theology in American-Asian Perspective*, ed. Peter Phan and Jung Young Lee (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 113.

Elizabeth Johnson is not the only feminist theologian whose work has influenced me. Serene Jones's work on the rhetoric of John Calvin, but especially her use of feminist theory as conversation partner for theology, both play a role in my analysis here. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's insights on how texts both reflect and shape praxis influenced the development of my rhetorical model for doing theology. María Pilar Aquino's liberationist-feminist emphasis on the human cry for life and the affirmation of God as the God of life shaped the final conclusions of this book. But I need to especially honor the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether, whose analysis of dualism has deeply shaped my work in general and this book in particular. It should also be noted that the title of my book was partly inspired by the title of Ruether's famous *Sexism and God-Talk*. My title, *Sexism and Sin-Talk*, also of course expresses the book's focus on sin, and my use of the term "talk" instead of "doctrine" reflects the book's rhetorical perspective.

In this book I utilize both classical and modern rhetorical concepts. The first chapter, "Rhetoric," develops my critical-constructive model for doing rhetorical theology, in conversation with both rhetorical theory and other rhetorical theologians. It also introduces the classical and feminist rhetorical tools that I use to trace the feminist conversation on sin. Chapter 2, titled "*Kairos*," covers the crisis context within which feminist conversations on sin occur, with specific recognition that there is a dialectical relationship between context and theological rhetoric. This second chapter also recognizes the term "feminism" as an intersectional concept, in recognition of womanist, *mujerista*, and global feminist perspectives. These two introductory chapters are followed by chapters titled "Mary" and "Eve," which analyze the two major criticisms lodged by feminist theologians against classical sin-talk. In chapter 3, I trace the development of the so-called feminist pride critique from a mode of naming difference to a mode of naming oppression, and I show how the classical emphasis on pride ties in with an oppressive ethic that is ultimately life-denying for women as it participates in encouraging women to emulate the example of Mary, understood primarily in terms of humility and self-sacrifice. In chapter 4, I examine the feminist critiques of the classical theme of blaming women for sin and the ways in which this blaming of women for sin forms a patriarchal rhetoric of death centered on the symbol of Eve, which contributes to various forms of violence against women. In chapters 5 and 6, "Grammar" and "Life," I start to move toward the more constructive work done by feminist theologians in their discussion of sin-talk, and make some constructive proposals of my own. I do so in chapter 5 by first pointing to ways in which feminist theologians, even amid serious criticism of classical sin-talk, are already (sometimes only implicitly) retrieving the concept of sin, in particular the inner logic or "grammar" of the doctrine of original sin. In the final chapter, I make use of

classical Aristotelian rhetorical elements, which are first introduced in chapter 1, to outline the contours of constructive feminist sin-talk: the prophetic *ethos* that drives it, the complex *pathos* (broadly understood as situation) of women, and the death-denouncing and life-affirming *logos* (arguments) at the heart of it. So, in short, the book consists of three parts and six chapters: two introductory chapters (“Rhetoric” and “*Kairos*”), two chapters focused on criticism of classical sin-talk (“Mary” and “Eve”), and two chapters focusing on constructive sin-talk (“Grammar” and “Life”).