

Book Launch 28 February 2013

A. Elvey, C. Hogan, K. Power and C. Renkin (eds.) *Reinterpreting the Eucharist: Explorations in Feminist Theology and Ethics* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013) 217 pp.

What a handsome book *Reinterpreting the Eucharist* is — with Miriam Rose Ungunmerr Baumann's painting adorning the cover inviting us into the treasures inside. I think the last time I was so excited by something on the Eucharist was back in 1983 (I think!) when at a Movement for the Ordination of Women Conference in Adelaide I heard Janet and John Gaden giving their different gendered perspectives on Eucharist in a conversational format. While reading this book the moment came back to me, when Janet described that when she baked bread, baking was killing the yeast, equating this with the death of Jesus on the cross. I've never felt the same about bread since — it is truly a paschal mystery.

This book gave me *such* a sense of excitement. I almost felt it had been written for *me*! There are so many delights and challenges in it — so many different perspectives, references to significant gender and ecological theologians and thinkers, new insights and thorough scholarship. Often when faced with an anthology such as this I tend to look for authors I know or chapter topics that appeal and start reading there. But with *Reinterpreting the Eucharist* I only wanted to start from the beginning and work through the book's logic. I would recommend this approach to anyone as, unlike other collections, this book does progress from Carol's more biographical chapter through to Anne's ecological concluding chapter. This book is a feast, a celebration, a thanksgiving — all elements of the Eucharist it reinterprets.

Opening with Auntie Betty Pike's rich foreword, we are reminded as she says that both our cultures use "fire, water, oil and smoke", so already "Aboriginal people had received an understanding of the great mystery of the Incarnation". (p. x). Then in Carol Hogan's "Eucharistic Metamorphosis: Changing Symbol, Changing Lives", the story behind the genesis of this collection, Carol's own Eucharistic journey is retold. Quoting one of the sisters in her Eucharistic Community she captures a recurring theme in the book:

"through the lens of the Eucharist, the whole creation is a holy seamless web that we are an integral part of it." (p. 25)

Carmel Pilcher opens her chapter "The Sunday Eucharist: Embodying Christ in a Prophetic Act" recalling the innovative presence of women on the altar during the concelebrated Eucharist for the beatification of St Mary McKillop presided over by Pope benedict XVI in 1995. Subsequent attempts to restore this in other Eucharistic liturgies were deemed unacceptable by the officiating clergy. Carmel contrasts this refusal with "Communion with Jesus at table required openness to wholeness and healing, exemplified in the women who anointed Jesus." (p. 36)

Lee Miena Skye's "How Australian Aboriginal Christian Womanist *Tiddas* (Sisters) Theologians Celebrate the Eucharist" gives an anthropological perspective on how

“genetic memory, cultural memory, and experiences that replicate themselves within the life-cycle of the individual” are operative in the indigenous experience of Eucharist. She expounds on: “When our women become inculturation theologians, Christ and Christianity become transformed ... the Eucharist becomes embodied and embedded in the Land.” (pp. 54-5).

In Chapter 5, Veronica Lawson and Elizabeth Dowling present a collaborative biblical analysis of how “the Markan Gospel finally presents a picture of women as actively and vitally involved in Eucharist.” (p. 89) In the Markan passages 6:30-44 and 8:1-10 the fascinating distinction is made between the women who follow (as disciples) and minister (as *diékonoun*) to Jesus and the *Twelve* or *Apostles* who as we are always told are male. Years ago I heard Veronica make this point with its gender implications and I’ve been waiting until now to be able to cite it in print. Then they explore the “house context” of more stories in Mark 7:24-30 and 14:3-9, 22-25. They conclude: “We suggest that the exclusion of women from leadership in this [Eucharistic] context also limits the power inherent in this great communal act of Christian worship.” (p. 80)

Kathleen Rushton’s “Rediscovering Forgotten Features: Scripture, Tradition and whose Feet may be Washed on Holy Thursday Night” delivers on its title. Demonstrating that the recently imposed prohibition in Roman Catholic liturgy on having the feet of women washed is actually an innovation stemming from the restoration of the rite under Pius XII in 1956, and therefore not reflective of the wider tradition of footwashing rituals in Christian liturgical and monastic history. This chapter is such a detailed biblical, historical and liturgical investigation that refutes this most recent exclusive gendering of what should be an inclusive rite, due to its origins and nature. Her final connection is that this rite has become associated with the “Renewal of Commitment to Priestly Service” as celebrated at the Chrism Mass in cathedrals (p. 109), hence the need to exclude women from the Holy Thursday ceremony much as they are excluded from priestly ministry in the Roman Catholic Church.

Frances Gray’s “Mystery Appropriated: Disembodied Eucharist and Meta-Theology” is a philosophical (and theological) exchange with the founder of the *Radical Orthodoxy* movement, the Cambridge scholar, Catherine Pickstock. Personally, I welcome this Australian acknowledgement of Pickstock’s significant work *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* which I believe has not received sufficient attention here unlike her male collaborator, John Milbank’s writings. As Gray argues, Pickstock’s preference for a literal, metaphysical reading of the Eucharist, especially recovering Transsubstantiation, tends to lose the ethical dimension of the Eucharist. Gray concludes that:

“On this reading, the Eucharist is divested of its underpinnings in egalitarianism, when an elite appropriate and dominate through over-exuberant theorizing of Jesus’ being, culminating in the intellectualizing of the Eucharist in the doctrine of Transsubstantiation.” (p.124)

The next two chapters are beautiful and critical explorations of the nexus between art and theology. Claire Renkin's "Real Presence: Seeing, Touching, Tasting: Visualizing the Eucharist in Late Medieval Art" demonstrates the thesis that "some images suggest that their viewers experienced 'real presence' outside formal liturgy". (p. 130) Recalling that most of the laity in the pre-Reformation period and after (in Roman Catholicism) received communion only once a year at Easter, the importance of visual images such as that of Veronica (true ikon) and Her veil-image of Christ, the anointing woman in the Pharisee's house and Mary Magdalene's post-Resurrection encounter with Christ, the *Noli me Tangere*, particularly connect the "spiritual experience to sight" (p. 134). Renkin's final image of the lactating Virgin and Child by van Cleeve, illustrates that

"In a culture where symbols pervaded bodies, both corporeal and textual, an image of the Virgin and Child was never 'just' a mother and child. Her figure inevitably embodied Eucharistic love." (p. 149)

Kim Power's "Embodying the Eucharist" tackles more contemporary art and the controversy surrounding various "Christa" images that depict the crucifixion with a female figure. I know of at least one woman theologian who was banned from a Catholic Archdiocese for using this image in a presentation she gave to teachers — such is the power of this inclusive image! Most of us would be familiar with Arthur Boyd's *Shoalhaven Crucifixion II* from Rosemary Crumlin's exhibition *Images of Religion in Australian Art* of 1989, but Power presents even more challenging images in these pages. They all illustrate that "Both women and Christ are willing to experience suffering in their bodies, shedding their blood that others may have life." (p. 156) She concludes that "the *Christas* challenge whatever in our current Christian worldview still confines them to a world devoid of spirit." (p. 178)

The final chapter by Anne Elvey suitably draws together the gender and ecological themes of the collection in "Living One for the Other: Eucharistic Hospitality as Ecological Hospitality". Those who know Anne's work will recognise this theme of "earth hospitality" from her book *An Ecological Feminist Reading of Luke's Gospel*. She presents how "Eucharist brings into focus the reality of Earth-being as interconnected and interdependent." (p. 186) So the "creational context" of Eucharist as "a sacrament of the Earth (and by extension cosmic) Community" calls for understanding the earth not as a subject of Eucharist but as its theological locus, where it is embedded. Developing the "hospitality" theme she concludes:

"The abundance of the Eucharist is inseparable from Jesus' self-giving, through which, by participating in Eucharist 'we become one with others and their fate'. (p. 203)

And these "others" are "more than human others". (p. 203)

So I commend this excellent volume to you. It shows thorough and insightful editing by Anne Elvey, Carol Hogan, Kim Power and Claire Renkin, who have produced such a competent and challenging book. May she be launched into posterity.

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