

# A Feminist Christian's Theology—Two Reviews

Colleagues,

Exactly one year ago ThTh #1, our first one, went out into cyberspace. Today's edition is #50. If you have been on the receiving end since the beginning, you did get 52 editions already, since we doubled up a couple of times in this first year, sending out two week's worth on one Thursday. For our first birthday anniversary we're sending you a twinset, two reviews of the same book, one from each of us. We think the book's important enough for a doubleheader. But we didn't do our work together. Neither of us saw the other's review until we'd written our own. Then first we talked about what we'd done. You get them both at the same time.

Peace & Joy!

Robin Morgan &

Ed Schroeder

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**Gail Ramshaw**

**UNDER THE TREE OF LIFE.**

**THE RELIGION OF A FEMINIST CHRISTIAN.**

**New York: Continuum Publ. Co. 1998.**

**vi, 149 pp. paper. \$16.95.**

Review by Edward Schroeder

In only one book that I know of do I get mentioned by name in the text. It's the autobiography of my Doktorvater, Helmut Thielicke, as he describes his visit to Seminex in the 1970s.

Gail Ramshaw's UNDER THE TREE OF LIFE, a life-story retrospective of her own, may be the second. May be. She speaks of a miscreant professor (blessedly unidentified) at Valparaiso University, who "advised me upon college graduation that I had no future in the field of liturgical language since I was a woman." I wasn't the only theology prof Gail encountered at VU, and I don't remember such an utterance. Since encounters with Gail Ramshaw, even then, were unforgettable, I think I'd remember. But maybe not. "Senior moments" occur more regularly in my own biography these days.

Whoever that false prophet was—*mea culpa*, if it's me—he (sic!) couldn't have been more wrong. Gail is upper upper echelon liturgical scholar of our time. She's an American—and even a Lutheran, not just in her ecclesial affiliation, but in her theology. Well, in much of her theology. But more on that below.

One reason we crossed at VU was the common Missouri Synod roots we both had. Nurturing roots, she can still say, in many ways, and just as often strangling in the umpteen put-downs by patriarchy—she prefers the term "androcentrism"—that oppressed her as her own wings unfolded. This is at least her 15th book and she just turned fifty. That half-century mark she celebrates with this gift to us. And gift it is. Even if her theology were all heresy, as she's heard more than once, especially when "I have riled lots of the old boys," reading her prose is sheer delight. She's such a word-crafter, a maven of metaphor. And as one generation her senior I'm clearly one of those old boys, yet on page after page I got riled into smiles, sometimes even audible old boy laughter.

"We [Christians] aim for symbols that are shared," she says at the end. And that's the simplest reason why androcentric symbols have to go. In her "search for shared symbols," she has not only riled the old boys, but "also disappointed some of the women,

for we women do not yet agree on the name of God, the meaning of Christ, the life of the church.”

Her own core symbol is the book’s title term, the tree of life. That tree is found throughout the world of religion. In Christian faith and worship too it’s a fundamental image from Genesis via Calvary to Revelation and on through the two millennia up to our own day. Her table of contents itself looks like a tree. Four chunks of trunk, 30 branches, the theme and parts. I can do no better than to replicate it for you.

**RELIGION IS A COMMUNAL WORLDVIEW . . .**

*I, now fifty years old,  
a feminist, minimizer style,  
repelled by the horrors of religion,  
drawn by the symbols of religion,  
especially the ubiquitous tree of life—  
with the serpent goddess out on a limb—  
am reading a Bible written by men.  
Symbols can smother  
or manifest the mystery.*

**ABOUT ULTIMATE REALITY . . .**

*The mystery of One-in-Three,  
our Clothing,  
our Sovereign Love,  
our Waiter, Winter, Weapon, whatever—  
yes and no to each—  
is God for us.  
Even feminists are in need  
of what Christ might mean  
and the Spirit give.*

**WITH REQUISITE RITUALS . . .**

*Each Sunday morning,  
in the night of Easter,*

*and in the dead of winter,  
we savor the water, the bread, the wine,  
following saints unbalanced,  
attending to their remains,  
opening up in prayer.  
So we practice the faith.*

***AND ENSUING ETHICS . . .***

*Our goal is not heaven,  
but justice in the arena,  
care for the trees,  
and bedrooms that benefit the body.  
For we all are the body.*

*And then a coda: "Such is the religion of one feminist Christian."*

There's lots of stuff I'd like to rap with Ramshaw about, erstwhile student now my teacher. A trivial one for starters: Is the Ascension of Christ really impossible as a "symbol that can be shared?" For her it is one of the "symbols that smother." "Filled with male hierarchy," she says and then concludes, "so I skip Ascension Day, and I suggest to others that they do the same." Is my twitching here just proof that old boys get riled? Maybe.

I was genuinely jabbed at only one place where she closes a section predicting that "most Christian systematic theologians will dismiss me altogether." Well, maybe most of them that Gail has already encountered have done so. But there are systematicians and then there are systematicians. When did she ever engage any of us so designated in the Seminex/Crossings tradition? Yes, I know: if the magistra can't make it to the mountain, it's the mountain's job to get to the magistra.

Her way of “doing” the Trinity is grist enough for a term-long seminar on its own. Ditto for her 5 pages “of what Christ might mean.” Here she goes down the clothesline of the Jesus images of her 50 years, and then adds her own. “To this list—gentle Jesus by my side, the elusive historical Jesus, Jesus oppressed and suffering with me, a bleeding Christ suffering for me, a victorious Christ conquering death, magisterial Sophia herself—let me propose another: Jesus as the opening up of God.” Packaged in but three paragraphs, Gail’s Jesus has juices for another seminar. Here’s where I’d offer my most serious “Wait a minute, Gail,” alluded to above.

Granted it’s only three paragraphs, yet the God whom Jesus “opens up” looks to be a tad antinomian, I’d say. Antinomian means “soft on God’s law.” Says Gail: We used to think “we knew who and where God is, God is the law-giver way up above the mountain top.... But the more our ancestors reflected on Jesus, the more they came to believe that God is also a person among us.” Yes, but in leaving the mountain-top did the deity opened by Jesus also leave that law-stuff back there too? Almost sounds so in Gail’s Gospel. Although at one place (only one that I noticed) she speaks of God as judge, her condensed Christology doesn’t mention that judge.

So the Judge’s bench was effectively left back on the mountain-top too, as Jesus “opens up God for us” in the Ramshaw model. For when it comes to “Jesus saving me,” he does not save us from any divine critique. “If we are saved from anything, it is from ourselves. I am freed from a life kept small and constricted—not to say boring—by continuous rotation around myself.” That’s not untrue, of course, but with Gail’s soteriology, that’s all we get—at least, so far. She grants that her “proposal is partial and only in process” and she does “not pretend to have the problems of Christology solved or to have satisfied all feminist Christians.” But that partial Christology “does not keep me from

going to church.” That’s a good lab for Christian theologies in process.

Come to think of it, that’s where I’ve learned important stuff in my theology. One such liturgical learning came for me in whichever lectionary year it was that Romans 8:1ff appears. The words are hardly ambiguous: “There is therefore now no condemnation [the Greek is *katakrima*, “incrimination”] for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death.” Apart from the work of Christ God’s critique of sinners persists willy nilly. The “rule” of the Spirit [tree] of life in Christ Jesus supplants the rule of the law of criticism. And the criticism, if not abrogated, is finally deadly. God the critic needs more attention in Gail’s paragraphs here, and that not because some grumpy systematicians are such pessimists.

That she bypasses God the critic comes as a bit of a surprise in a volume that is so critical, rightly critical, on every page! And you don’t have to read between the lines to see that the author thinks the deity agrees with the critical judgments she makes. Thus Gail verifies criticism itself as a “shared” experience. Could criticism ever be hot enough to be called a shared experience of God? Many a Biblical person did—women included—e.g., Miriam, Deborah, Judith. Well, then, why not bring back the Judge’s bench and its “strange and dreadful” culmination in Christ’s cross—as “shared symbols” of women’s and men’s shared experience?

A Jesus who opens up a previously (mis-)packaged God, is a revelationist Jesus, to use another term of theological shop-talk. In revelationism Jesus pulls back the veil for us to see what God always was and still is. But nothing in the cosmos fundamentally changes because of Jesus. Such a Jesus was integral to my parochial Missouri Synod education. It may be a

piece that Gail too still needs to shed.

Revelationism leads us to believe that Jesus' life and work don't change things substantively between God and sinners. Instead it's our perception of God that changes. Reality "out there" does not. If that is so, then Roman's 8:1ff needs rewriting. But then you'd also have to rewrite a lot of Easter liturgy and hymnody. And hooked on Easter as Gail is (thank God!) I know she won't go for that. Her Christology section concludes: "Perhaps next Sunday I'll come to see it better than today. There are endless pages in the book. The tree keeps growing." Good. We can look for new branches in the days ahead.

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Review by Robin Morgan

My first attempt at reviewing Gail Ramshaw's new book *Under the Tree of Life: the Religion of a Feminist Christian* didn't go well. I said something nice and I said something critical as a good book review is supposed to do, but I knew that I was missing the heart of my reaction to what she had to say. Her personal reflections on life, liturgy and the Christian community touch on many issues I continue to struggle with myself: the Bible's male authorship, the power of symbols both to give life and to destroy, the names we use for God, how we pray, how we worship together, how women can claim their rightful place in the community. She quotes people I like to read: C.G. Jung, Virginia Woolf, Gerda Lerner, Annie Dillard.

Yet I was unsettled by her reflections and after further thought I realized that the core of what is at stake in her theology is the location of authority. Early on we're told that she grew up fundamentalist and toward the end of the book she says, "To keep doctrine graspable, God has to be relatively contained, the church controlled. So I am used to hearing people screech at

each other, 'What! You claim that you're Lutheran, after you said that about this?'"

So she ejects the absolutist authority of Scripture, rightly so, but what is put in its place? From my reading of her work, the authority now is located in an uneasy marriage between "the Cartesian I" and "the tribe". God moves within the community in the liturgy and then each individual makes decisions about the rightness or wrongness of the manifestation of that movement for themselves (Easter Vigil is good, Ascension Day is bad).

My concern is that as she is rejecting a fundamentalist reading of Scripture, the efficacy of the Word, the living Christ in our midst, gets shuffled off to the side. Somehow in de-emphasizing the Cross and heightening the importance of resurrection, she manages to strip the resurrection of even the possibility of historical reality. What seems to be left is its metaphorical shape (the wineskin) without the truth content (the wine), which generated it in the first place.

This kind of metaphor as truth is the theology of the privileged. People who are struggling to survive day to day don't have time for a metaphor without content. The community isn't enough when the whole community is being trampled from the outside. Metaphorical power just won't do. People struggling to survive need real power, the power of the Word.

Jesus Christ crucified and raised is the center of Christianity and is the locus of authority. "You have heard it said, but I say to you" was his refrain over and over again in Matthew. It was no longer Torah that had ultimate authority, but Jesus Christ himself. No wonder he was killed.

Neither Bibliolatry nor worship of the tradition and its corollary, the contemporary community, can be the central authority. Of course, the living Christ as the center of our



lives isn't going to lead to easy answers or hard and fast rules about ethics. He certainly isn't going to satisfy feminists like Mary Daly and Starhawk who want women's inner knowing to be the ground of being nor the fundamentalists who know the exact dates of creation as well as Armageddon. But for Christians the living Christ is the center outside of ourselves as well as within every fiber of our being. He is universal as well as local.

I respect Gail Ramshaw's quest for a Christianity that makes sense to a feminist. I just can't agree with her willingness to let go of the cross in the process.