

Feminist Sexual Ethics Project

Literature Review by Dawn Rose

Beverly Wildung Harrison. *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*. Ed. Carol S. Robb. Boston: Beacon, 1985.

Beverly Harrison served as Professor of Christian Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York until her retirement in 1997.

This collection of essays by Beverly Harrison was preceded by her book *Our Right to Choose: Toward a New Ethic of Abortion*, which established Harrison internationally as a foremost feminist Christian ethicist whose clarity of vision was only exceeded by her grasp of methodologies and meticulous research and reasoning.

Intelligently edited by Carol S. Robb of San Francisco Theology Seminary, *Making the Connections* is significant and groundbreaking in both content and method. Topics include sexism in language, the effects of global industrialization, energy, early feminists, and the clergy. The methods, clearly articulated in the essays and further underscored by Robb's section introductions, make the book an unusually fine tool for the classroom.

In the essay "Theological Reflections in the Struggle for Liberation: A Feminist Perspective," Harrison clearly explains the methodological stages of feminist liberationist social ethics. For Harrison, the first catalyzing step is conscientization – the coming to consciousness – in which a group clarifies its own "concrete historical experience of oppression" (p. 249). It is extremely important to note that she begins not in abstract theories of justice but in experience. Group experience is not subjective, but rather evidentiary and a concrete starting point. The next necessary phase (though this process is not always linear) is "historical socioethical analysis." As Harrison explains:

Emancipatory historiography enables us to see that the past has a human face, that human actions, patterned over time, are the source of social structures and institutional practices that have come to function as real, objective restraints on the lives of our forebears and on us (p. 249).

The historical analysis gives reason to the experience of oppression and points the way for the next steps. This is further illuminated by a "careful examination of the roots and ongoing dynamics of oppression or subjugation" (p. 250). It is imperative here to establish patterns of accountability. At the same time, Harrison recommends a "clarification of our solidarities and loyalties" (p. 251). Grounded in the concrete, material world, the next ethical step is the clarification of a "movement's options for action" (p. 251). These options are not to be merely and myopically "what works," but also what serves the communities of accountability in the long run. Moreover, "[w]e have an explicit responsibility to examine continuously strategic options in the light of the moral norms espoused in and intrinsic to the liberation process itself" (p. 252).

Harrison's delineation of stages in ethics methodology is grounded in praxis. The ethical dilemma rises out of experience of the material world, and is enhanced and informed by historical and critical thought. Responses are considered, tested, reviewed, and retested. Morality and efficacy are both important.

If she had gone no further, Harrison would still be a fine liberation ethicist. However, she extends this insistence upon physical and material grounding to questions of gender and the oppression of women. She posits that the seat of our knowledge is our bodies, and that it is through our bodies that we experience, relate, and respond. This position reaches its fullest articulation in what has become her most famous essay heading this volume, entitled, "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love: Christian Ethics for Women and Other Strangers." In it she states:

If we begin, as feminists must, with "our bodies, ourselves," we recognize that all our knowledge, including our moral knowledge, is body-mediated knowledge. All knowledge is rooted in our sensuality. We know and value the world, if we know and value it, through our ability to touch, to hear, to see. Perception is foundational to conception (p. 13).

Therefore, any feminist ethic needs to be "deeply and profoundly worldly." It must be, in fact, a "spirituality of sensuality" (p. 8). "Sensuality" here is multi-layered, and figures first as a statement of epistemology. We know the world through our senses. We also know each other through our senses, as received and shared through varying degrees of intimacy. Harrison takes this a step further, positing that our knowledge about God is directly based upon and grows out of our concrete, body-mediated relationships; thus, the "final and most important basepoint for a feminist moral theology is the centrality of relationship" (p. 15).

To speak of the primacy of relationship in feminist experience, and to speak of a theology of relation...is, above all, to insist on the deep sociality of all things. All things cohere with each other. Nothing living is self-contained (p. 16).

Precisely because no living thing is an island, ethics come out of our experience in relation and must relate to things and persons with whom we are in relation. Ethics must impact our relationships. Here her vision of right relation is strongly informed by an embodied and prophetic Christianity:

Like Jesus, we are called to a radical activity of love, to a way of being in the world that deepens relation, embodies and extends community, passes on the gift of life (p. 18).

Three primary tenets arise out of Harrison's life and work. The first is that the source of our moral power is our bodies. This pertains epistemologically and in agency—what we know and what we do. The second tenet concerns relationships, which are both the source of our experience/thought about the Divine, and the means by which we allow the Divine

to emerge. Finally, returning to concrete experience in a material world, justice is the shape of right relation and religious promise.

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