



STATEMENT DW050

Re-Imagining: Relishing Eve's Rebellion

"Sometimes when you ask God for help, God sends a heretic." These words, shared by presenter Delores Williams, may well have summarized the sentiments of many participants at a Re-imagining Revival conference held in St. Paul, Minnesota, April 16 – 19, 1998.

Williams, professor of theology and culture at New York's Union Theological Seminary, and other participants in this radical spiritual feminist movement assert they are seeking to salvage what they can from a corrupt, woman-oppressing, patriarchal Christian tradition. While not all would welcome the label "heretic," one could purchase a T-shirt on site that proclaimed its wearer a "heretic in good company" with others who have challenged predominant paradigms of faith, such as Jesus of Nazareth, Martin Luther, Meister Eckhart, and Matthew Fox.

The event was organized by the Re-Imagining Community, which emerged in 1993 with its first controversial conference, called to mark the midpoint in the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Decade: Churches in Solidarity with Women. The incorporated, nonprofit organization operates out of offices in Minneapolis, sponsors annual gatherings and "faith labs" for theological exploration, and periodically publishes a newsletter.

Organizers counted 850 women and 50 men present this year, with participants coming from 42 U.S. states, three Canadian provinces, Germany, Uruguay, South Korea, Switzerland, Sweden, Kenya, and South Africa. All mainline denominations were represented, as were the Church of the Brethren, the Church of Sweden, the Metropolitan Community Church, the Ugandan Episcopal Church, and the United Church of Canada. Also attending were Mennonites, Quakers, Unitarians, Moravians, Roman Catholics, and at least one Sufi. While all of these might argue for a stronger women's voice in the church, not all would embrace the more extreme elements of Re-Imagining, which extends to goddess worship.

The community begins with the assumption that the Bible is male-produced and permeated with patriarchal and dualistic understandings of God and God's relationship with creation. In order to speak to the reality of women's lives, promoters assert, the Bible and all of the foundational principles of Christianity must be "re-imagined" to reflect women's experiences.

As evidenced in this most recent event, one aspect of this re-imagining entails the deconstruction of Jesus Christ wherein His deity and sinlessness are denied. Lifted in His place is a panentheistic ("all is in God") oneness, as summarized by speaker Carter Heyward, professor of theology at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. "While nobody, not even Jesus is divine in and of him or herself," she said, "everybody like Jesus is able to god. And I use this [to god] as a verb. This is why we are here — to god...The good news is that everybody is in god. Nobody is left out." Heyward made it clear that "everybody" includes the earth and all its creatures.

It was not apparent what another speaker intended with her presentation. Mary Farrell professor of religious studies at United States Theological Seminary in New Brighton, Minnesota, identified five themes as common to women's theological writings across the world's religions. These commonalities, she said, give us "an idea of what a world view constructed by women might be like." The five themes are: (1) creative ambivalence of women toward their religious traditions; (2) the immanence or the indwelling of the divine to the world and in ourselves; (3) the sacredness of the ordinary and the ordinariness of the sacred; (4) the radical relational nature of reality — the interconnectedness — of all things; (5) an emphasis on healing as one of the most central tasks of any religion.

In a later conversation, Bednarowski denied she was suggesting that these five themes form the synthesis of a woman's world view capable of unifying across the world's religions; but there was nothing in her words to suggest

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otherwise. One cannot be faulted for questioning her intent, given that her words were spoken in the context of vendors marketing everything from goddess wares (figurines, books, T-shirts, bumper stickers) to Earth Mother retreats to Christian Science materials to Re-Imagining Community-produced “Bible study” denigrating the Bible and celebrating Gnosticism and the goddess of Egypt, Crete, Canaan, and Sumer.

Another presenter, Mari Castellanos, encouraged participants to embrace the Virgin of Guadalupe as a unifying “goddess of the Americas.” Castellanos, an interfaith minister from Miami, asserted that the Virgin Mary “is part of the composite of ancient, current, and future manifestations of the one who will not be suppressed...the ageless and universal sisterhood: Isis, Aphrodite, Brigid.” She also linked Mary with the Cosmic Mother and the mother goddess of the Aztecs.

Finally, the “revival preacher” Barbara Lundblad, associate professor of preaching at Union and minister on the radio program “The Protestant Hour,” laughed at the Bible with her audience and encouraged her listeners to rewrite the endings to the parables. Twisting the words of her text, John 20, she insisted that re-imaginings not hold on to Jesus — the Jesus of certain creeds and doctrines” — noting that some in the group had already heard altogether too much about Him.

Other themes and trends in evidence in plenary sessions, workshops, caucuses, and casual conversation were:

- Body affirming, immanent theology expressed, for example, in the milk and honey ritual that celebrates women’s bodily fluids.
- “Sophia” — the Greek translation of wisdom in Proverbs, the Apocrypha, and elsewhere — lifted as the feminine divine.
- The celebration of gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender (GLBT) relationships. This found expression in a GLBT caucus: in a plenary demonstration inviting participants to stand in solidarity; in a Shower of Stoles: a display of some 400 liturgical stoles (long embroidered scarves) from the GLBT community associated with the church; and in a demand (from Harvard’s Bunting Institute Director Rita Nakashima Brock) for the traditional church to own up to its “homophobia.”
- The re-imagining of hymns such as “It Is Well with My Soul” in order to remove references to the blood of Christ, the cross, and the Second Coming. According to the new lyrics, sins are handled instead by being “left in the wake” (i.e., left behind) to be “burdens no more” as people are nice to each other in community. One interesting omission: “There Is a Balm in Gilead” was left intact in the program, and thus re-imaginings ironically sang about the healing for the sin-sick soul available through Jesus.
- The Fall re-imagined so that First Woman, Eve, is celebrated for her act of resistance. All were encouraged to sing. “Taste and See how good is the fruit that falls from the tree. Taste and see how good is the fruit of the garden.” The Re-Imagining Conference concluded with an invitation for all to take a bite of the apple in solidarity with Eve.
- Speakers coming from positions of influence. In addition to those already mentioned, there was Brigalia Bam, general secretary to the South African Council of Churches; Beverly Harrison, professor of Christian Theology at Union Theological Seminary; Musimbi Kanyoro, YWCA world general secretary; Mary Ann Lundy, deputy general secretary of the World Council of Churches; and Anne Patrick, McDeever Chair of moral theology at St. John’s University.
- One (perhaps unexpected) story that came out of the conference was the interaction between re-imaginings and evangelicals. There were many remarks from the podium about the “religious right,” ranging from complaints about evangelical press coverage to Carter Heyward’s quips about a book she is writing entitled. *Saving Jesus from Those Who Are Right*. There was, in addition, a group of evangelicals present at the conference working to call these disaffected church women to salvation in Jesus Christ and to a renewed understanding of the Bible.

— Donna F. G. Hailson