

Introduction

A central assumption of this thesis, one which I will establish in chapter 3, is that *caring* is a defining feature of the Christian life and of ministry, particularly in the South African context. However, women's roles as carers have very often been subsumed into a patriarchal agenda in the church with negative effects for women. The thesis explores this as an ethical problem that confronts women, but also for those who are training women for the ministry. It proposes that feminist pedagogy provides important insights, tools and analyses which, when incorporated into women's formation, can help to counter these negative tendencies. This research aims to investigate the complex nature of caring in relation to women in ministry, in particular when caring becomes oppressive for women.

Conversations with those in ministry are frequently threaded with concerns about their own and others' exhaustion and burnout. Questions of who cares for the carer often produce shrugged shoulders and rather helpless gestures, suggesting that such issues are not given sufficient attention, particularly in communities where there are so many needs. When we attach a feminist lens to the discussion, other issues emerge which reveal women's socialization as carers. Those caring roles which have usually been expressed within the home, and the caring professions of nursing and teaching, also attach themselves to women as they enter the ordained ministry. It is this combination of women and caring in ministry that I wanted to investigate.

During the period 2000-2003 I was employed as a lecturer at the Theological Education by Extension College (TEEC) and, amongst other responsibilities, had the opportunity to develop a Women's Studies course and to serve as the course co-ordinator and assignment marker.¹ The experience of accompanying women (and men) through the course as they were exposed to a critique of patriarchy in society and the church, sharpened my questions about the impact of patriarchal oppression on women's perceptions of themselves and of their role in ministry. As the design of the course required that learners reflect on their personal experiences as well as those of other women, some of their own pain and struggles became apparent. Their reflections raised

¹ Chapter 6 provides more detailed information about TEEC and the Women's Studies course.

further questions about whether the training of women for ministry was adequate if it did not also acknowledge women's wounding as a result of patriarchy, provide opportunities for healing, and for developing the analytical skills and coping strategies they would require when they entered the terrain of the church. These issues seemed to me to be about more than the effectiveness of an educational programme; they were deeper questions about the ethical responsibility of educators and institutions towards their students.

It was these ethical concerns, specifically towards women students, that have led me into this formal research project which includes an investigation of the following dimensions: what is ministry and when can it be harmful to women; aspects of a critical feminist pedagogy that can be helpful in alerting women to the oppressive aspects in their ministry and strengthening their responses and resistance; and how these insights can be incorporated within theological programmes for women. At the core of this research is an appraisal of the way that patriarchal power operates and manifests itself, within the church and theological education, and how women have themselves internalised attitudes and behaviour that are detrimental to them.

This research is a three-way conversation which begins with my questions and ongoing reflection; extends to the questions and concerns of particular women who were willing to engage with me in this project; and the reflections and theorizing by others in the fields of ethics, feminist pedagogy and feminist theology. The purpose is partly to tell the stories of women's experiences in ministry and their struggles in their encounter with a patriarchal church in its various manifestations. It also tries to take the conversation into the space where we can look at overall patterns, ask some questions about the nature of their struggles and what enriches their lives; and explore different ways to support women's work of caring through education. All these themes will be examined in the light of an effective training paradigm for women in ministry.

Women will continue to care, and to those women who seek training for their caring work within informal projects or theological institutions, I raise the question of accountability as an educator and ask: 'How can the training we provide be more nurturing of you, more empowering, more supportive of your struggles, and more real

and useful within your contexts, so that you can do your caring work better and grow to greater fullness as intended by God?'

KEY TERMS

Some explanation of the way the following key terms are used within this work is important.

Christian ministry: This term is used in this work to refer to the work in ministry that ordained women undertake – in the diaconate, and the priesthood or pastorate. It includes a number of functions, viz. preaching, teaching, liturgical functions like assisting or presiding at the Eucharist, officiating at baptisms, marriages, funerals, and pastoral care and counselling. There are also administrative and financial functions including meetings, planning, organising, budgeting and evaluating.

An ethic of care: This term has a specific meaning derived from the work of Carol Gilligan and her work is fully acknowledged in the text (see chapter 3). However, the term has come to refer more generally to a women's ethical orientation and more specifically to the ethical framework within healing work, e.g. social work, HIV and AIDS care, nursing etc. In this thesis I extend its application to refer to the work of women in ministry.

Feminist pedagogy: This term refers to the challenge from a feminist perspective to traditional understandings and structures of knowledge and power and their transmission, which have been dominated by white men. It creates spaces for women's voices and experiences to be included in educational contexts, and includes the body and emotions in notions of rationality and knowledge. It scrutinizes the content, learning processes and relationships within the learning environment (see chapter 5).

Community of practice: This is a term proposed and used by two social anthropologists, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in their study of the way learning takes place within intentional communities (see chapter 6). I use it to explore the environment of the church, which constitutes women's primary site of practice, and raise the

importance of critical communities of practice to sustain women's critical and ongoing formation. Here I describe an example of such a community of practice in my case study of the Grail Christian Women's Movement.

Other terms used in the thesis are explained in the contexts in which they emerge.

ORGANISATION OF THE THESIS

The chapters of the thesis have been organised in the following way:

Chapter 1 sets out the two-fold purpose of this research, *firstly* to investigate whether it is possible to reinstate 'caring' as a transformative category for women in the church; and *secondly*, to define the elements of an appropriate training model in theological education that can help to promote a critical ethic of care among women in training for ministry. I explain the theoretical frame and methodology underpinning this study and describe the empirical research, some of the difficulties encountered, as well as its successes. I also describe my own motivation and positionality in relation to this work.

Chapter 2 locates the study within the fields of theological ethics and feminist theology. As will be explained, this dual theoretical approach is consistent with the interdisciplinary nature of theological ethics. It begins by surveying the literature pertaining to the field of theological ethics, and in particular to the construct of caring. It focuses on the relationship between a Christian vision of God's caring and the moral formation of the caring moral agent who has the responsibility to care. As this study aims to offer a critique of care/caring and how it is often destructive of women, this chapter also surveys the literature in the field of feminist theology. In particular it points to the critique of patriarchy and the different strands in feminist theology as they scrutinize the impact of patriarchy in different locations.

In *Chapter 3* I argue that caring, understood as love, empathy, compassion and justice is a key theological construct which permeates the Christian vision and our understanding of God, how God relates to us and the whole of creation, and how we are called to be in relation to God and our neighbour. I also demonstrate how caring is a key dimension within Christian ministry which achieves expression in different ministries in the church. But, as I illustrate in my discussion on servant leadership and power

(chapter 3), these concepts have to be analysed in relation to their embeddedness in the systems and institutions that oppress others, and reconfigured in ways that can be liberating, in our case, for women in ministry.

Drawing on the work of Carol Gilligan and a number of feminist theorists and theologians, I demonstrate that key theological categories need to be revised in order to support a liberating ethical vision and framework for women to care both for themselves and for others. I draw together some of the insights about an ethic of care as it has been investigated in other fields of caring, and explore some of the weaknesses through its incorporation into a patriarchal agenda. I show that an ethic of care, without the moderating values of justice and self-care, and women's agency, can serve to reinforce patriarchal expectations, is not liberating, and can even be harmful to women.

Chapter 4 focuses on women in ministry as the agents of caring and the context within which they perform their caring work. It points to the overwhelming need for care in our society and discusses, by way of examples from the research data, how women respond to these needs. It also draws on the analysis of caring from the previous chapter and uses research data to illustrate some of the destructive aspects of caring for women when caring is co-opted into a patriarchal agenda. I show how, despite their own need for caring, women are generally not cared for by the church.

I point out that women express various degrees of consciousness about the effects of patriarchy in their lives and in the church, and they adopt different responses in challenging it and asserting their agency. The chapter concludes that training programmes for women need to integrate a critique of patriarchy and raise women's consciousness about the potentially harmful nature of their work in ministry.

Chapter 5 shifts the discussion to education and a critical feminist pedagogy. It examines a number of approaches that challenge the structures of knowledge and power that exclude and marginalise women, as well as mechanisms for the self-care, and empowerment of women as moral agents. It explores the themes of power and knowledge; women's voices and subjectivity; supportive ways of teaching and learning; and reflexive and healing learning environments and their importance in the formation of women as critical carers in the church. Drawing on the empirical research, the chapter proposes a set of criteria for evaluating feminist theological pedagogies. It

makes suggestions about the content of the theological curriculum and also addresses the ethical nature of the relationship between teacher and learner. It proposes methodologies that support connected forms of teaching and learning, and strategies that can apply to the multilingual South African classroom.

Chapter 6 links the discussion of education directly to the theological formation of women and the experiences of a sample of women who have been exposed to a feminist pedagogy in two institutions – the College of Transfiguration and the Theological Education by Extension College. The chapter also discusses the educative function of the church and raises the problem of its often negative socialising impact on women. The chapter presents the problem of how to extend support to women once they leave theological institutions, so that they are able to sustain their critical consciousness. Drawing on the case study of the Grail Women’s Movement, I develop the notion of communities of practice which can become supportive bases for women in ministry.

I suggest that women’s isolation can only be overcome if they actively seek support, but that the theological institutions also have an ethical responsibility to prepare women to cope in situations which perpetuate a patriarchal mindset. I argue for a more synergistic connection between academic institutions and women in the churches.

Chapter 7 concludes with a summary of the chapters and draws out the implications of this study and the contribution of a critical ethic of care to women as agents of critical caring, and to the training programmes for women in ministry. It stresses the importance of including women in an intentional way in theological formation and the implications this has for the structures, leadership and the culture of institutions. It raises the imperative for the revisioning of the theological knowledge that is taught, and ensuring that the teaching methods, relationships and learning environment are conducive to the healing, support and development of women.

The chapter concludes with my dream for establishing a community of support for women in the Catholic church who are engaged in caring work. It also suggests some of the areas for further research.