

COLUMNISTS

Women's lives should alter approach to theology

Every once in a while I teach students who are particularly challenging to their teacher. I currently teach some students who are like this. They simply will not accept answers I have "gotten away with" in the past.

This week, my class kept pressing me about the significance of the fact that for so many centuries, theology has been conducted primarily by men. They make a good point, since it is only in the last 40 years or so that Catholic women even had the opportunity to obtain graduate degrees in theology. Prior to the 1950s, Catholic degree-granting institutions wouldn't even admit women theology students. Only priests studied theology.

My students want to talk about the consequences of this cultural phenomenon for theology and our understanding of faith. Thus I reread a remarkable article published in a 1960 *Journal of Religion* and written by Valerie Saiving, a professor whose teaching career was spent at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva. Professor Saiving points out that for most of Christian history, we have all understood sin and grace according to concepts developed primarily by men and holding true particularly for men's experience, not women's.



the
moral
life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

Thus we have accepted a doctrine of sin that identifies sin with pride and the human "will to power." Both men and women have been encouraged to examine our consciences against times when we were self-assertive, not self-denying.

This has become our dominant understanding of sin and grace. We should try to overcome the egotism that isolates us and causes us to dominate our neighbor. We can do this through denying ourselves and taking on the self-forgetfulness that serves others' needs ahead of our own. Most of us accepted this as the way sin and grace operates in a human life.

But Saiving's article disputes this very presumption. She asserts that the conception of sin as egotism and the "will to power" primarily reflects masculine ex-

perience. She claims that western culture is characterized especially by capitalism, the industrial revolution, imperialism, science and technology, and that these have been conducted primarily by men. Thus, our culture has been a "masculine age par excellence." We have identified the root of sin in these terms because our cultural patterns have emphasized competitiveness, pride and the use of power to secure one's advantage and reduce one's opponents.

According to Saiving, women's experience has been separated from these cultural tendencies. Thus women's "sins" have been just the opposite of pride and the will to power. Women have been led to examine their consciences according to a framework that actually denied their true experience. Saiving thinks that women have thereby actually denied their own particular form of sinfulness. Thus they have been prevented from taking advantage of a theology of grace that could actually help them address their true limitations.

In one of the best passages ever written on this topic, Saiving asserts that the sins of women are "better suggested by such items as triviality, distractibility and diffuseness; lack of an organizing center

or focus; dependence on others for one's own self-definition; tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence; inability to respect the boundaries of privacy; sentimentality, gossipy sociability, and mistrust of reason — in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self."

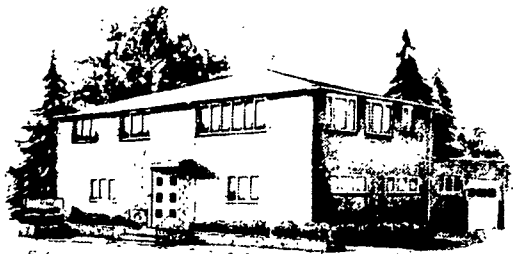
Instead of continually trying to uncover signs of pride, women should probably be questioning themselves about negating themselves and failing to attend to their own development. Instead of denouncing pride and the use of power, women should probably be questioning their lack of self-focus and failure to develop a sense of self-worth.

Saiving's article alerts us to the need for all believers to be involved in the task of theology. There is no single set of experiences that can summarize the human situation in any area of theology. Women's sins are simply not identical to men's, because women's experience have not been identical to men's. For the sake of faith rightly understood, women must be involved in doing theology. Let's give a thumbs-up to students who push their teachers toward better truths!

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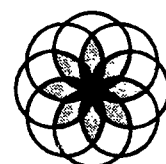
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