

Making sense of our lives

by [Felicity Brock Kelcourse](#) in the [May 3, 2000](#) issue

*Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology*, edited by Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Brita Gill-Austern

Feminists and womanists both consider "the experiences of women and girls and recognize the authority of female encounters with power, difference, and oppression." But while feminists often represent middle-class European Americans, "womanists" attend to the lives of women of color. According to Jacqueline Grant, "A womanist is one who has developed survival strategies in spite of the oppression of her race and sex in order to save her family and her people."

"Pastoral theology" is harder to define. Beginning with Anton Boisen, whose struggle with mental illness caused him to found clinical pastoral education, and Seward Hiltner, who emphasized systemic attention to "shepherding," pastoral theology once focused on the (usually Protestant male) minister's practice of pastoral care and counseling.

Pastoral theology has had a significant role in describing how relationships that embody justice and love actually look and feel. Its applied, interdisciplinary approach to ministry draws from the wisdom of psychology, theology, sociology, anthropology, psychiatry and ethics, among other disciplines, to promote healing transformation. While individual suffering remains an important "text," pastoral theology is now more aware of community contexts as these serve either to liberate or to oppress.

*Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology* chronicles the substantial contributions of women as they have moved from the margins to positions of authority. Most contributors to this volume, like its editors, are seminary professors. The culture of mutuality these educators envision remains a distant goal. The opportunities for women's leadership in the church are still limited and the rationale for inclusive language is not obvious to all congregations. Feminist concerns continue to be discounted in academic and congregational settings and womanist voices are only now gaining the attention of the majority culture. Nevertheless, I feel encouraged by these essays in my own vocation as a seminary educator. They provide abundant nourishment for the further journey into mutuality.

These essays move back and forth between the theoretical and the particular. Readers are introduced to the "essentialist" vs. "constructivist" debate in feminist hermeneutics that is roughly comparable to the "nature vs. nurture" debate in human development. In answer to the question "What does it mean to be a woman?" some theorists celebrate women's particular gifts while others discount the idea of any intrinsic differences between genders.

Whether one sees woman as "essence" or as cultural crossroad, it is clear to these authors that all persons, especially women, are called to invest their God-given talents. To give only two examples, communities struggling to embrace diversity can learn about building bridges from Marsha Foster Boyd and Carolyn Stahl Bohler's essay on womanist-feminist alliances. Teachers who believe in the value of experiential learning will be emboldened by Brita Gill-Austern's reflections on feminist pedagogy. These steadfast voices encourage us not to hide our gifts through fear.

I was inspired by Pamela Couture's visions of "Pastoral Theology as Art." Drawing on Frank Burch Brown's understanding of art as including aesthetics, practice and opportunities for revelatory transformation, Couture imagines a pastoral theology less wed to proving itself in the realm of social science, one that instead attends to

"the body's self-disclosure" as theological anthropology. For pastoral theology to prove its value to people in all ministerial contexts--including the subjective but essential ministry of making sense of our own lives--it must continue to be both pragmatic and prophetic, grounded equally in the present particularities of life and the timeless essentials of faith.

Meanwhile, it must be careful not to turn distinctions into dichotomies by ignoring all that has been learned from its therapeutic origins. In pastoral theology's current community emphasis I sometimes miss the "essentialism" of soul and religious experience at the heart of theology's enduring values. The breadth and variety of this collection will make it a valuable resource for seminary courses, church study groups and continuing pastoral education.