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# Parameters of a Progressive Faith

by Patricia L. Wismer

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**M**artin Marty's day began ordinarily enough. The prominent church historian and lively editor of *The Christian Century* boarded a 7 a.m. plane at O'Hare Airport, headed for his next speaking engagement. After takeoff, he and his seatmate, another professional person, simultaneously reached for their briefcases. The other man smiled at Marty and inquired about his line of work. Marty said simply, "I'm a theologian."

His questioner, noticeably unimpressed, responded, "Bah! Why do you bother with all that stuff? All you need to know about religion is 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.'"

Marty didn't reply, so the other man, counting himself the victor in the exchange, settled into his own paperwork. They worked silently side by side until breakfast appeared. As they were clearing their trays, Marty cheerfully reopened the conversation with, "And what do you do?"

"I'm an astronomer," the other boasted.

Without skipping a beat, Marty replied, "Why do you bother with all that stuff? After all, all you really need to know is 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star.'"

With due apologies to Robert Fulghum,<sup>1</sup> I submit that there is much we need to know in life that goes beyond what was dreamt of in our kindergarten curriculum. This is as true of faith as of scientific knowledge. Our secular culture, like Marty's astronomer, readily accepts this as true of science, but is unwilling to extend the favor

to religious faith. And, having restricted the scope of faith to a five-year-old's level, our culture then either romanticizes the beauty of a "childlike faith," or summarily rejects that faith as being too juvenile. In either case, faith can be ignored as a serious conversation partner in any discussion of important issues.

Unfortunately, our secular culture is not the only force blocking the development of an adult faith. Too often, it finds a ready accomplice in religion itself. For entirely different motives (some laudable, if misguided, others more self-serving), our churches encourage their members to accept unquestioningly the beliefs they were taught as children. At least half the students in my college classrooms (and I have taught in both Catholic and Protestant institutions) enter my courses with the assumption that questioning and doubt are antithetical to the life of faith. Some of this group continue to hold onto their faith, being willing to sacrifice part of their brain for the love of God and the hope of heaven. Others have already given up their faith because they can't give up their intellect. My message to both sub-groups is the same: "Back up a minute. There's another way. It's called progressive faith."

My assignment is not to describe or argue for a progressive faith (though I have been known to speak passionately on both topics). Rather, I see my task as that of a line-painter on a highway, delineating where the safety of the paved road ends and the dangerous soft shoulder begins. A clear, bright white line can make the pilgrimage of progressive believers not only less anxious but also much more meaningful. Since they don't need to worry every minute about falling into some Slough of Despond, our progressive pil-

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grims are freed to engage more deeply in theological conversation as they travel. My intention in this discussion is to suggest some guidelines for the pilgrimage, and a process for following them on the journey.

## *Guidelines Marking Off the Road*

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One fruitful topic of conversation for our pilgrims would be to ponder together the meaning of the phrase “faithful dissent.” In his book of the same name, Fr. Charles Curran, a well-respected Roman Catholic ethicist from the United States, tells the story of his seven-year investigation by the Vatican.<sup>2</sup> The “verdict” of the Vatican was that Curran could no longer be considered a Roman Catholic theologian, because he disagreed with some noninfallible official church teachings. Apparently, Rome has decided that “faithful dissent” is an oxymoron. Curran thinks otherwise, and so do I.

Although not constituting an oxymoron, the two parts of the phrase exist in a healthy, dynamic tension. The phrase itself gives no set formula for determining just how much tension is necessary to avoid stasis and just how much goes past the breaking point, sundering the two parts of the phrase. It encourages us to engage in honest soul-searching and in critical dialogue with each other as we travel together in pilgrimage.

But Curran does not leave us stranded, awash in this healthy tension. Instead, he proceeds to set forth four guidelines for faithful dissent. (The first three guidelines he suggests were originally put forward by the U.S. bishops in their 1968 pastoral letter, “Human Life in Our Day.”) In exploring these guidelines, I will restate and develop them in ways appropriate to any progressive faith.

*GUIDELINE No. 1: The reasons to move beyond an established belief or custom must be serious and well-founded.* Change simply for its own sake is more dangerous than holding onto the past. Past practices usually had a validity when they were introduced—they fit into their cultural con-

text and met people’s spiritual needs—which is why they were adopted in the first place. Often these practices have become deeply rooted in people’s spiritual psyches. Even after they have outlived their apparent meaningfulness, believers find ways of making them “work,” since they have to do them anyway. The example that comes to mind from my own tradition is the Latin Mass.

Believers, even though they couldn’t understand the words the priest was saying, found a sense of mystery in the ritual, which drew them closer to God. Many of them wanted to hang onto that experience, not realizing that one could have mystery as well as meaningful participation in the liturgy. In the long run, most Catholics have come to appreciate the liturgical revisions that simplified the ritual and brought it into their own language, but initially the change was very difficult for many. A believer’s faith life lies at the center of his or her identity, so every change is of great moment and must be initiated with care.

With this caution in mind, we still need to consider what constitutes a serious and well-founded reason. Studying the history of one’s own tradition provides an important clue. What was the origin of the beliefs and practices that are now part of the faith life? They didn’t just drop down from heaven. As I said earlier, they fit in the context of their culture. (“Fit” doesn’t mean they were carbon copies of what the larger culture was doing. Often they were in opposition to aspects of that culture. However, that very opposition was appropriate, for it met people’s needs for a fully human—and therefore fully spiritual—life.) The clue, then, is this. Our faith life should make sense in light of our culture. Cultures change and develop. Therefore, our faith life must change and develop as well. In order to convey the same or similar meaning in a different culture, it is often necessary to change the words.

Let me summarize what I am saying about this first guideline. A reason for change is serious and well-founded if it is in continuity with the basic teachings and values of a particular faith tradition and is required by changes in contemporary experience and culture. Both dimensions must be fulfilled to legitimate the change.

*GUIDELINE No. 2: The manner of dissent from*

*the status quo must not question or impugn the teaching authority of the church.* In Catholicism this “teaching authority” has a very specific meaning, which need not concern us here. In a more general sense, applicable to any progressive believer in a not-so-progressive denomination, it is necessary to give due respect to the leadership of one’s church. Respect does not always entail agreement, but it never allows mudslinging.

One makes one’s case, bringing forth serious and well-founded reasons (some of which are based firmly inside the tradition). As more and more believers become convinced of the validity of the progressive option, the leadership might finally begin to listen. This won’t happen tomorrow, or next week, or perhaps even next year. If this fails to happen over a period of years, the progressive believer can still take comfort in the fact that eventually those leaders will be called to their heavenly reward. Then new leaders will arise and with them the hope for institutionalizing a more progressive faith.

Working for change in a church structure is never speedy or easy. But Christ has promised that the Spirit will be present with us, so we have reason for hope. We must approach our task of working for a progressive faith somewhat like the builders of the great medieval cathedrals. The architects and those who dug the foundation realized that they would never live to see the spire completed or the stained glass windows in place. However, they knew that they were part of a much larger enterprise and that their labor would bear fruit long after they were gone. We progressive believers have one advantage over the cathedral builders; we can begin to live our progressive faith, even as we wait and hope for the larger community of believers to join with us.

*GUIDELINE No. 3: The change must not cause scandal.* This term deserves some comment. First we must differentiate between “good” and “bad” scandal. “Good” scandal, “Christian” scandal, is what St. Paul holds up to the Corinthian church: “Christ crucified,” he said, “is a scandal to the Jews and a folly to the Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23). Christians *should* cause this type of scandal, simply by being Christians. This is that aspect of necessary opposition to the larger cul-

ture I mentioned before. This guideline cannot be warning against “good” scandal.

Paul may be giving us a hint about the “bad” scandal in discussing when Christians could eat meat that had been sacrificed to the Roman gods. Paul’s major point here is that Christians should not hurt their brothers or sisters because of their food, for then they are no longer walking according to love (Romans 14:15). Our actions should not give scandal to those who are “weak in faith” (vs. 1, RSV). If we have followed the first two guidelines, this should not be too difficult. For

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then our reasons would be public, our intent to be faithful to our tradition would be understood, and our respect for our leaders would be obvious.

In his own reflection on this third guideline, Curran brings up an additional wrinkle on the notion of scandal, by pointing out that dissent is sometimes necessary precisely in order not to give scandal.<sup>3</sup> As more and more believers become better educated, they notice contradictions between certain traditional beliefs and truth as defined by the secular disciplines.

This kind of scandal is not merely an intellectual matter, but may be a matter of justice as well. Many strong-minded Catholics (both men and women) who have come to affirm the equality of women in all other areas of life are scandalized when Rome continues to refuse even to discuss the ordination of women. This intractability seems to them inconsistent with the Jesus who associated with many whom religion and polite society considered to be pariahs. In particular it is inconsistent with the Jesus who had women friends and disciples. This scandal guideline not only helps us determine where the “outer limits”

lie, but also urges us forward in our pilgrimage.

*GUIDELINE No. 4: The issues being challenged should not be “core and central.”* This is connected to what we said above about keeping continuity with the tradition in advocating change. However, this guideline makes an important additional point. If the issue one wishes to change lies at the very heart of the tradition, constituting its very identity, then perhaps one should leave that particular faith tradition and join (or create) another, rather than trying to make it into something it is not. Applying this guideline in the concrete is not always easy. What is central to one

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believer can appear rather peripheral to another.

Some examples might help us proceed. One is the origin of Christianity itself. Initially, the earliest “Christians” were good Jews who wanted to convince the rest of their brothers and sisters that Jesus, as the Messiah, was the fulfillment of Judaism. Some were convinced, but the majority resisted. This majority could not agree that their prophecies about the Messiah pointed toward someone who died on a cross. God would not let that happen to the one chosen to redeem God’s people. Something core and central about Judaism was being changed by the followers of Christ. As a result, a new religion was born.

Another example is a more contemporary one. It picks up a thread I have dangled before you once or twice and will be further weaving into the fabric of my discussion. It concerns the experience of many women in Christianity, an experience that gave birth to a new form of theology (feminist theology) and indeed to a new kind of progressive faith (a faith that begins with the premise that women’s faith experience is as valuable as men’s).

Two main branches of feminist theology illustrate the issues involved in our fourth criterion.<sup>4</sup> The first group of feminists, often referred to as the reformist feminists, believe that Christianity is not intrinsically and inextricably patriarchal. While they do not minimize the extent to which sexism and patriarchy plague the Christian tradition, they believe that the “heart” of Christianity asserts God’s equal love for all persons—male or female. Jesus’ life and death, they argue, manifests God’s will that all persons be liberated from whatever form of oppression they are experiencing. Therefore, they conclude, their project as Christians should be to work from within to call the church to a feminist conversion.

The second group, often described as revolutionary feminists, disagree with this analysis. In their view, the “heart” of Christianity is as irredeemably patriarchal as much of its exterior. Nothing can be salvaged; there is no place for women within Christianity. Therefore, these feminists have left the church, many turning to Goddess worship as their central form of religious experience.

The point of introducing these two groups here is not to debate the merits of either position. Rather, it illustrates our fourth criterion. The revolutionary feminists reject something that is core and central to Christianity: its understanding of God and Jesus. Therefore, they rightly view their position not as a “progressive” form of Christian faith, but rather as a non-Christian faith. The reformists, however, retain the “heart” of Christianity—recognizing the God of love and the salvific work of Jesus. Although their critique of traditional Christianity and the church’s status quo is often quite radical, reformist feminists always call on some “true Christian principle” to establish the legitimacy of their position. In this way they seek to fulfill our fourth guideline, and to be counted a legitimate form of progressive Christian faith. So far we have examined four guidelines for determining the outer limits of progressive faith: serious reasons, respect for church leadership, no “bad” scandal, and no core and central disagreements. Together these guidelines distinguish between the paved road and the soft shoulders stretching before our pilgrims.

However, our pilgrims still do not know which direction to travel on the road stretching before them or exactly how to proceed. What I would like to suggest now is a process, a series of steps, that might be used while journeying toward a progressive faith.

## *A Process for the Journey*

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This sequence of steps is, in fact, the basic method worked out by the reformist feminist theologians. Although not all progressive pilgrims need feel comfortable with their particular agenda, the process these feminist theologians propose can fit a variety of perspectives. In discussing each step of their process, I will highlight a few examples of the feminist journey. Remember, however, that these steps have a much wider applicability as well.

*FIRST STEP: CRITIQUE.* The process begins with a thoroughgoing critique of the patriarchy and androcentrism (male-centeredness) within the traditional position. This is necessary because women have so internalized the prevailing view of themselves that they often fail to notice their own oppression, exclusion, and second-class status. (This situation is not specific to women. Every oppressed group has its own examples, especially in the early stages of its move toward liberation: Latin American peasants who think their oppression is God's will for them; some African Americans who still see their poverty as a result of laziness and inferiority; abused children and women who think they deserve the abuse they receive, because this is "easier" than believing that the source of their security—parent, spouse—is cruel and abusive.)

One example from my own experience of this internalization might prove helpful. Ten years ago, at my first college job interview, one student asked me if I felt excluded when prayers employed only male images of God. At the time I gave her the reasons some feminists give for this reaction, but indicated that I did not feel personally excluded by this language. About a year later, the feeling hit me—and hit me hard. Then I really saw and felt the effects of this male monopoly on

God-language. God is like men, but not like me. Nothing of my specific femaleness is affirmed in the divine sphere. I am, at an ultimate level, excluded. Now, I have become a confirmed word-changer and image-transformer in public prayer and hymn-singing.

The thoroughgoing critique, then, is necessary because we don't always immediately see the extent of the problem facing us in the established faith tradition. And, as psychology attests, what we don't know *can* hurt us—often more than the problems we do recognize. So, while naming the problem is not the full solution, it is a necessary beginning. This critique can be internal (challenging one element of the tradition with another) or external (challenging the faith tradition from the perspective of contemporary experience or culture). Perhaps more frequently, it involves both.

*SECOND STEP: RECOVERY.* New insight into liberating dimensions of the tradition follows this critique. For feminists, this step brought a powerful upsurge of hope. They discovered, for example, that there was some feminine imagery for

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God in the Bible—not a majority to be sure, but a surprising amount given the patriarchal culture in which it originated. In fact, the Hebrew word for *compassion*—a central characteristic of God—comes from the same root as the word "womb." One biblical scholar argues that the term could better be translated as "womb-tenderness." Feminist theologians also discovered at this second step that the problem with some of the problematic biblical passages was not the passages themselves but rather scholars' patriarchal interpretations of them. In addition, a careful reading of the New Testament reveals some prominent women disciples, such as Mary Magdalene (who,

by the way, is never described anywhere in the Gospels as a prostitute), some significant stories about Jesus' encounters with women during his ministry, as well as some important women leaders in the early church.<sup>5</sup> This second step uncovers resources in the tradition that provide invaluable material for the final stage of the journey.

*THIRD STEP: RE-CREATION (OR REINTERPRETATION).* Here feminists put together what they have learned in the earlier stages and produce a statement of their progressive faith. One example, having to do with God-language, will suffice.<sup>6</sup> God should be imaged, they argue, in a variety of metaphors: Mother as well as Father, Liberator, Friend or Beloved, River of Life, et cetera. What this symphony of images achieves cannot be accomplished in any other way. Each individual image prevents the other from being taken literally, from being made into an idol.

If only male images are used for God, then God is perceived, even if only unconsciously, as male. More than half my students are convinced that God, according to traditional Christian doctrine, is male. No important Christian theologian has ever made such a claim; the official Christian teaching is that God transcends sexuality. Our images and pronouns, however, speak more powerfully than our concepts.

Further, if God is only Parent, whether Father or Mother, then we as believers are condemned to remain in some sense children. Thus, the need for images coming from adult-adult relationships, like Liberator, Friend, Beloved. If only personal images are used, then God is ultimately perceived as a person. Thus, the need for natural images—used quite exquisitely in both biblical and mystical literature. The end result of this feminist pilgrimage is, I would argue, a much fuller, richer, and ultimately more theologically adequate interpretation of God than the traditional one.

Our main concern here, however, is not with the specifics of the feminist pilgrimage—which I

have been able to paint only with a very broad brush, leaving out most of the nuances necessary to such a complex issue. Rather, our concern is with the sequence of critique, recovery, and re-creation. Let me now quickly summarize the wider applicability of this threefold process to any kind of progressive pilgrim. The critique is necessary to determine the problem, the exact point or points where the “progress” is needed in one's faith tradition. At this stage, one must be open to finding unsuspected and unwelcome aspects of the problem, aspects that we have previously glossed over, because they are, after all, part of our tradition.

The recovery step is necessary to highlight unexpected riches that are also present in the tradition, but have previously gone unnoticed because we weren't looking for them or hadn't yet developed the tools to unearth them. This step is crucial in arguing that the proposed progress is actually in continuity with the tradition, even if this is not obvious at first glance. Re-creation is the culmination of the journey, the point where the developed progressive faith becomes visible in its fullness. It is at this stage that one can best apply the two guidelines already discussed. It is at this stage that one can rest from one's long journey. But only temporarily.

For if all Christians are called to be forever pilgrims while on this earth, then this is even more true for Christians of a progressive faith. We who would be progressive pilgrims can never be too sure of ourselves. Each formulation of our progressive faith will have its own weaknesses. We must always challenge one another and ourselves to a purer faith. We must always listen carefully and caringly to the objections of our less-progressive sister and brother pilgrims, lest we discard something vital in our faith tradition. And last, but certainly not least, we must always place our trust, not in ourselves or in our progressive faith, but in God.

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**NOTES AND REFERENCES**

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1. Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten: Uncommon Thoughts on Common Things* (New York: Random House, 1988).
2. Charles E. Curran, *Faithful Dissent* (Kansas City, Missouri: Sheed and Ward, 1989).
3. Curran himself does not use this specific terminology, but the idea is present; see pp. 64, 65.
4. See, for example, the now-classic discussion in Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 1-11.
5. The best examples of feminist biblical "recovery" are Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) for the Hebrew Bible; and Elisabeth Shüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) for the New Testament. Two very useful anthologies of feminist approaches to biblical interpretation are Letty Russell, ed., *The Liberation Word: A Guide to Nonsexist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976); and Letty Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985).
6. See, for example, the discussions by Sallie McFague in *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), especially chapters 1 and 5; and her more recent *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).