

Engendered Theological Education: A Case of Women Theological Educators in the Baptist Convention of Malawi: A Personal Reflection

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Introduction

The paper seeks to illustrate the challenges that women pursuing theological studies in general, and women theological educators in particular, encounter with regard to patriarchal attitudes which are legitimized by socio-cultural and theological discourses. The purpose of the paper is to determine the socio-theological factors that contribute to the construction of patriarchal attitudes that undermine the role and position of women. It also seeks liberative and transformative theologies for theological education in the Baptist Convention of Malawi. Using gender as a tool of analysis, I will use my story to critically examine patriarchal attitudes that are culturally constructed and legitimized by Baptist doctrines.

Whilst the significance of theological education in Africa is acknowledged, feminist scholars have identified several challenges that women pursuing theological studies and theological educators encounter.¹ This paper is a reflection of my particular experience with patriarchal resistance by male students as a full lecturer at a Baptist theological institution in Malawi.

Story telling from a theological perspective is a legitimate methodology in feminist studies.² After my story in theological education, I will give a feminist analysis of my experience including women's response to patriarchy. Then I will suggest appropriate theologies that can

¹ Isabel Phiri identifies four challenges in theological education in Africa with regard to women's experience as follows: "1) redefining the identity of African women theologians; 2) promoting more women to study theology and be on permanent staff; 3) inclusion of African women's theology in the theological curriculum; and 4) collaboration with male theologians." See I. A. Phiri, "Major Challenges for African Women Theologians in Theological Education (1989-2008)," *International Review of Mission* 98, no. 388 (April, 2009): 105-119. In addition, Ezra Chitando, an African theologian, observes that women theological educators are denied promotions by their faculties or boards because the "male chauvinists" refuse to recognize gender issues and regard women's publications as "non-academic" and "gender nonsense." The same critics label Chitando as "a man who has been co-opted by these women who have been brainwashed by the West." E. Chitando, "Email note to I Phiri," (21 April, 2010).

² I. Phiri and S. Nadar, "What's in a Name? – Forging a Theoretical Framework for African Women's Theologies," *Journal of Constructive Theology* 12, no. 2 (2006): 7. See also R. Reuther, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. London: SCM, (1983), 12-46; P. Young, *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology: In Search of Method*. Minneapolis: Fortress, (1990), 56 S. Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*. Minneapolis: Fortress, (2000), 6. It is in recognition of the diversity of women's experience and social locations and how women experience patriarchy differently around the globe, that various forms of feminist theologies have emerged – womanist, *mujerista*, Asian feminist theologies, and African women theologies.

help the Baptist theological institution effectively engage with issues of gender discrimination and women.

My story: Theological education

I began to teach theology at the Baptist Theological Seminary in Malawi together with my husband in 1996. When I joined the seminary, it was missionary-controlled then, both administratively and financially and I was the only female lecturer. In order to appreciate the challenges of women in Baptist theological seminary in Malawi it becomes important to connect it to the aims of American Southern Baptist Missionaries in establishing theological education in Malawi.

In response to the need for trained local leadership the American Southern Baptist, through the Baptist Mission in Malawi, established their first Bible school in 1964 and then a seminary in 1994.³ Before 1994, those who were qualified above the Bible school level were sent for theological training outside the country.⁴ The seminary has made deliberate attempts to enrol female students although the response has been slow. Between 1996 and 2010 a total of twelve female students have been enrolled as students in their own right.⁵

Whilst other women have struggled with the challenge of either being accepted to study theology or to stay until they complete their studies, my particular challenge was to be accepted by the male students as a full lecturer at this theological institution. This challenge manifested itself through the students' evaluation forms of my courses. The following extracts are some of the comments that the male students wrote on the assessment form about me.

She is the only teacher who puts me to sleep in class. I don't see how she can improve. I suggest Mr ---- take the subject. I don't think there is any area she

³ For full discussion see H. H. Longwe, "Democratization of the Christian Faith: The Influence of the Doctrine of the 'Priesthood of Believers' on the History of the Baptist Convention of Malawi (BACOMA)," unpublished Thesis, University of Malawi, (July 2007) and H. H. Longwe, "Baptist Bible School System and the Baptist Theological Seminary of Malawi: A Paper Presented at the Southern African Baptist Theological Education Conference," in *Southern Baptist Theological Educator's Conference*, ed. L. Kretzschmar (Johannesburg: Baptist Convention College, 2003): 33-42. Longwe observes that the missionary strategy was aimed at training leaders at the grass-root level, thus being less educated, it took a long time to reach out to the educated Malawian elite. He also notes that the changing of the mission statement to read 'equipping God-called men and women for Christian ministry' was to refute the belief that the Bible school was training pastors. However, the inclusion of 'men and women' was just in theory than in practice because the Baptists had no women pastors. It was only the pastors' wives who were later given the opportunity to study for a very minimal period, a block of one week, three times per year.

⁴ Mostly, they were sent to Zimbabwe, Zambia, or Tanzania Baptist Theological Seminaries.

⁵ Out of this number five were still studying at the time of writing.

can improve because she is not gifted in teaching. She is not a teacher but a counsellor.

If it is possible please change the teacher for the betterness of this class.

The teacher should come to class to teach and not to discuss.

Feminist analysis of my experience

While I appreciate the necessity of evaluating a lecture for quality control purposes, a number of issues are apparent from the students' remarks, which reveal, as Nadar points out, "the role that the identity of the teacher plays in the power dynamics extant between the student and the teacher."⁶

First, the students used the course evaluation exercise to undermine my humanity as a female lecturer. The fact that the students wanted a male teacher and felt that a female one is good for office administration is indicative of both sexism and patriarchy. My suspicion that I was dealing with patriarchy and not issues of my incompetency in teaching was confirmed when later the students confessed that they did not want to be taught by a woman.⁷ Thus, the need for feminist theology that seeks to deconstruct the discriminatory patriarchal attitudes with a view to reconstructing theologies that are inclusive and life affirming.

Second, the students undermined my use of feminist pedagogy that promotes class discussions and relationships of equals. Their preference for the traditional methodology assumes that the teacher is the 'all-knowing, all-powerful subject of knowledge.'⁸ Feminists' critique of the "spoon-feeding" methodology in education is that it is authoritarian, hierarchical, patriarchal, and therefore dehumanizing. In contrast feminists identify the "democratic" type of education which engages the students in critical thinking through conversation as empowering and liberating for both the educator and the learner.⁹ Thus, as Nadar notes, the participatory democratic methodology "destabilises the hierarchy between

⁶ S. Nadar, "The Feminist Teacher: Pedagogy of the Oppressed Woman?" *Journal of Constructive Theology* 14, no. 2 & 15, no. 1 (2008/2009): 39.

⁷ It was at a farewell party when I was leaving for my studies in South Africa that one student spoke on behalf of the class to the whole seminary family that 'if there was anyone who did not want to be taught by a woman, it was our class'. Then the same class organized another farewell function for me; they said to thank me and to ask me to forgive them because of what they had said against me; they felt it was not good. I did not, however, ask them exactly why, since they had already disclosed that it was because I was a woman.

⁸ S. Nadar, "The Feminist Teacher," 46. Bel hooks also emphasizes the fact that 'teaching is a performative act', and to 'embrace the performative aspect of teaching we are compelled to engage "audiences," to consider issues of reciprocity', see b hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, (1994), 1-12.

⁹ B. hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. New York: Routledge, (2003), 41-49.

teacher and student and gives the student a voice.”¹⁰ Learning therefore becomes a mutually shared experience. What informs the students’ negative attitude towards women is discussed below.

Socio-cultural position of African women in Malawi

Malawian culture, like other African societies, is patriarchal. This is also true of the communities in Malawi, where many students come from. Patson observes that, “one does not have to go far to find oppression of women for injustice is in our own backyard, in our own homes.”¹¹ Although he makes this observation from a western perspective, it equally applies to Africa in general and Malawi in particular. This is due to the traditional socialisation processes that perpetuate beliefs, attitudes, and values which permit the subordination of women. The girl-child is taught to be submissive and polite, and is subjected to motherhood roles from an early age while boys are taught the ‘manly tasks of providing and protecting.’¹² The result is that women are systematically subordinated and discriminated against because they lack equal opportunities in spheres such as education, the legal system, the workplace, the medical system and worse still in marriage. Hany Longwe summarises well the plight of women in Malawi:

Their culture had kept women at home rather than sending them to school since parents saw no need because they would get married anyway. It was the men who needed to be educated in order to lead and provide for the families. Though Northern Malawi had more educated women, men did not allow them to exercise their gifts at the same level with men.¹³

In addition to cultural construction of who a woman or a man is, Western Christianity also influenced the position of women in African Malawi.

Western missionary heritage

¹⁰ S. Nadar, “The Feminist Teacher,” 46.

¹¹ S. Patson, *Pastoral Care and Liberation Theology*. London: SPCK, (1997), 241.

¹² See I. A. Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy: Religious Experience of Chewa Women in Central Malawi*. Blantyre: CLAIM, (1997); R. Nyagondwe Banda, *Women of Bible and Culture: Baptist Convention Women in Southern Malawi*. Zomba: Kachere Series, (2005); M. Longwe, *Growing Up: A Chewa Girls’ Initiation*. Zomba: Kachere Series, (2007); F. Mbanjo-Moyo, “A Quest for Women’s Sexual Empowerment through Education in an HIV and AIDS Context,” unpublished PhD Thesis, University of KwaZulu Natal, 2009; “Beyond Inequalities: Women in Malawi,” Southern Africa Research and Documentation Centre, (2005); “Cultural Practices and Their Impact on the Enjoyment of Human Rights: Particularly the Rights of Women and Children in Malawi,” Malawi Human Rights Commission, (undated).

¹³ Longwe, “Democratization of the Christian Faith,” p. 226.

Malawi Baptist Convention bears the heritage of the Southern Baptist Convention of the United States of America.¹⁴ Due to the growing awareness that women have been systematically oppressed in the church and in society, the goal of feminist theology is that every theological doctrine and concept be examined anew.¹⁵ For the purpose of this article I will examine and analyse Baptist doctrines: authority of scripture and the priesthood of all believers which seems contradictory with regard to the position of women.¹⁶

Authority of Scripture

Historically, Baptists share the fifteenth century Reformation tradition of *sola scriptura* (scriptures only). That is, they believe that the Bible is the only authoritative source for faith and practice. In other words, Baptists believe that according to 2 Timothy 3:16 every single part of scripture is God-breathed, or is the inspired word of God. Hobbs asserts that ‘the God of truth does not breathe error’.¹⁷ Thus, the Baptist use of scriptures does not take cognizance of the human agency involved in the writing and interpretation of these scriptures.

Priesthood of all believers

Baptists believe in the priesthood of all believers.¹⁸ This means that women and men are equally heirs to the salvation God has offered; they are all equally free to participate in all ministries according to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This position resonates with the egalitarian view that allows all priests (men and women) equal opportunity to all ministries. However, the priesthood of all believers contradicts with the Baptist view of women because women are barred from the ordained leadership positions. In other words, and according to the Southern Baptists’ understanding of the scriptures, the role of pastor-teacher is a special reserve for men as demonstrated below.

¹⁴ The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) is the world’s largest Baptist denomination and the largest Protestant body in the United States. For SBC work in Malawi, see Longwe, “Democratization of the Christian Faith” and Nyagondwe-Banda, *Women of Bible and Culture*.

¹⁵ Young, *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology*, 13.

¹⁶ For a full discussion of the Baptist doctrines see “Baptist Faith and Message, 2000 (1963),” www.sbc.net; and Hobbs, *What Baptists Believe*, The distinctive Baptist doctrines are authority of scripture; priesthood of all believers; religious liberty; autonomy of the local church; and soul competency

¹⁷ H. H. Hobbs, “The People Called Baptists: Whence, Who, What, Whither,” in *The Fibres of Faith: The Herschel H and Frances J Hobbs Lectureship in Baptist Faith and Heritage at Oklahoma Baptist University*, ed. D. A. Rader (Franklin, Tennessee: Providence House, (1995), 18.

¹⁸ H H Hobbs, ‘The people called Baptists’, Baptists’ in D A Rader (ed), *The fibres of our faith: The Herschel H and Frances J Hobbs lectureship in Baptist faith and heritage at Oklahoma Baptist University* (Tennessee: Providence House, 1995), p. 19.

With regard to the position of women Baptists follow the complementarian view which believes that men and women have different roles. That means, according to 1 Timothy 2:12, scripture forbids women from teaching and exercising authority over men. Women cannot therefore function as pastors, elders, or overseers. Thomas Coppenger asserts that according to second Timothy 3:16, God has designated men as the chief teachers, rebukers, correctors, and trainers.¹⁹ Baptists' failure to consider the socio-cultural and political context of the biblical writers such as Paul almost blinds them to the reality of patriarchy in their ranks.

Similarly, in marriage, Wayne Grudem argues that the creation of man as male and female shows God's image in their harmonious relationships; shows equality in personhood and importance; and difference in role and authority.²⁰ Thus, male headship and role differences and authority compares with the members of the Trinity who, he notes, are completely consistent with equal importance, personhood, and deity. Grudem fails to note that throughout the centuries, the same texts have been used to relegate women into support and subordinate roles, thereby providing marriage as ground for abuse, violence and silencing.

The Baptists' complementarian view is well articulated through theological education. The curricula of the Malawi Baptist theological seminary and one of the largest Southern Baptist seminaries, Southwestern, are geared to establishing women into the traditional roles as women, wives, and mothers; and equipping them for women to women ministry, asserting that these are God-assigned roles. From an African woman's perspective, instead of equipping, the women are being dis/ill-equipped. However, the situation at Malawi seminary is slowly changing, and with regard to teachers, I paved the way for other women teachers, including the women missionaries.²¹

On the authority of the Bible the women's argument is that the Bible itself is shaped by patriarchal values, and has been interpreted over the centuries exclusively by men, that is, from a male perspective, and taken as normative for all humanity. Thus, the Bible has been used to legitimise the marginalization and exclusion of women from various areas of church life, especially in leadership.

Patriarchy: A global problem and women's response

¹⁹ T. R. Schreiner, "Women in Ministry," in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, eds. J. R. And C. L. Blomberg (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001): 86, 177-183.

²⁰ W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity, (1994), 454.

²¹ H. H. Longwe, *Democratization of the Christian Faith*, 236.

Although I have focused my discussion with examples of Malawi and the Baptist church, patriarchy is an ecumenical problem. The establishment of women's departments and desks in world bodies such as the World Council of Churches, Council for World Missions or the Lutheran World Confederation illustrates a similar struggle. Similarly, my experience of patriarchy is not unique; it is an experience that women share universally. Emergence of various women's theologies testifies to this fact.²²

Women's Response to patriarchy: The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (The Circle)

Liberation from oppressive patriarchy involves deconstructing and critiquing the distorted male attitudes, and reconstructing and formulating new perspectives that are inclusive of both females and males.²³ The varieties of women's theologies that have emerged globally are a response to the various forms of women's experience. For example The Circle provides space where African "women's experiences, perspectives and reflections" are brought to light with the aim of bringing dignity, liberation and fullness of life especially to women.²⁴ That is, although women's experiences in Africa also vary,²⁵ their common desire and goal is to wipe out sexism and to establish a more just society of men and women that seek the well-being of the other, including the environment. Feminist cultural hermeneutics is an appropriate analytical tool to critique culture because of the ambivalent effects upon women.

With regard to theological education, The Circle advocates for theological curricula which include feminist theology and gender studies especially as separate disciplines. It also advocates for more female faculty members and women students to be prioritised in theological institutions.²⁶ In addition to these priority areas, Ezra Chitando suggests a serious "education process" directed towards many professors and doctors to recognise and appreciate that gender is a rigorous field.²⁷

²² For example, Asian feminist theologies deals with Asian women's multiple layers of oppression; *Womanism*, coined to deal with experiences of African American women or women of colour; and *Mujerista* is theologizing done by Hispanic women. See M. Longwe, "A Paradox in a Theology of Freedom and Equality: The Experiences of Pastors' Wives in the Baptist Convention of Malawi (BACOMA)." Doctoral Thesis in Progress, chapter two.

²³ Feminists have named this approach 're-constructionist' approach. See Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, 17.

²⁴ N. J. Njoroge, "Preface," in *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women*, eds. N. J. Njoroge and M. W. Dube (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), vii.

²⁵ M. A. Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*. Sheffield: Academic Press, (2001).

²⁶ Phiri and Nadar, "What's in a Name?" 10-21. See also Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, and Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, 21-22.

²⁷ E Chitando, "Email Note to I Phiri."

Liberative theologies for the Baptist churches in Malawi

True biblical manhood and womanhood in all their dignity can only be realized by deconstructing the Baptists complementarian, hierarchical view and practising genuine priesthood of all believers, a more democratic egalitarian view of ministry and marriage. Since theological education is the seedbed for theological formulations, I propose that the Baptist theological institution takes seriously and implements the feminists' goals. This will also help the church in Africa to 'get rid of literal interpretation of the Bible that lead to the oppression of women'.²⁸

Conclusion

This paper has shown that in Malawian culture, like in other African cultures, men are accorded a superior and dominating status over women, more evident in marriages. In addition, the Baptist doctrines endorse this cultural understanding by the use of scriptures, thereby denying women leadership and pastoral positions in the church. This contradicts the Baptist doctrine of the priesthood of all believers which gives freedom and equality for men and women both in privileges and responsibilities. Since these patriarchal attitudes are a global phenomenon, various women's theologies have emerged as a response to this challenge. The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians as a platform for African women theologies has theological education in Africa at her heart. They desire that both women and men receive a "relevant theological education that promotes female and male humanity as reflecting the image of God," as noted by Phiri.²⁹

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²⁸ M A Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African women and patriarchy* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 19.

²⁹ I A Phiri, 'The church as a healing community: Voices and visions from Chilobwe Healing Centre' in I A Phiri and S Nadar (eds), *On being church: African women's voices and visions* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), p. 34.

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