

28 Ιανουαρίου 2017

## **“Faith and Feminism” by Helen La Kelly Hunt**

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**A friend of mine met Helen La Kelly Hunt at a conference and was impressed with some of her ideas. He asked me to read and comment on her book, *Faith and Feminism: A Holy Alliance, Five Spirited and Spiritual Women Throughout History*. For what it is worth, here are my thoughts...**

faith  
and  
feminism

A HOLY ALLIANCE

Five Spirited and Spiritual Women Throughout History

"Universal and compelling."

—Betty Friedan

Helen LaKelly Hunt, Ph.D.  
with an Introduction by Gloria Steinem



As much as I appreciate what Helen is trying to do in *Faith and Feminism*, the book presents some serious problems for me. On the one hand, in a secular context, any acknowledgement of faith, no matter how vaguely presented, is a good thing. And I particularly found her examples of St. Teresa of Avila, Sojourner Truth and Dorothy Day inspiring. What Helen seems to miss, however, is that these women were inspired not by an ambiguous faith, but by a concrete faith in a specific God understood in a specific theological construct within a specific tradition. Given the audience Helen is trying to reach, she seems unable to extract the specifically Christian sources of inspiration for these women. Helen seems to be able to do nothing more than trade in the current coin of the realm: to place her 21st century, post-Christian, enlightenment/modern/postmodern categories on the women she highlights and explain what does not fit these categories as «faith.» (Indeed, what largely makes her postmodern is that she allows for such a category as faith-ambiguously defined.)

On the other hand, certainly both women and men have been and are oppressed by religious hierarchies, but the feminist insistence on «equality» as the correcting criterion is, in my opinion, sadly misguided and often hypocritical. Very well-educated, generally wealthy and white women in North America and Europe use their positions of power as ruthlessly as any man has. Anyone (male or female) who has worked for or studied under more than a few women in his or her life knows from experience, that just like men, women vary in their use and abuse of power.

Actually, it was a feminist professor (at Claremont School of Theology) who originally pointed this out to me. She realized that equality could never be the basis for a healthy society because human beings do not have equal access to power—children are not equal to their parents; teachers are not equal to their students; a person who is wealthy is not equal to one who is poor; a strong, healthy person is not equal to a weak, sick person. As a society we might generally agree to certain constructs that are more or less applied (such as, all human beings are equal under the law). However, the reality is that, to quote *Animal Farm*, «some animals are more equal than others.» The woman or man who can afford to hire the best lawyer is more equal than the woman or man who is stuck with an over-worked, under-paid and probably less-gifted court-appointed lawyer. The bright, well-educated, and highly-motivated sales person is more equal than the dull-witted sales person who suffers from migraine headaches. And on and on it goes.

Equality, while in many ways a much better social criterion than might equals right, can never produce a harmonious society. This is why the specifically Christian message is so important. Love and self-sacrifice is the only way human beings will

transform a sin-soaked, power-abusing culture. Sure, the Church—as all other institutions have and do—has functioned as an agent of oppression. But the Church has also produced saints—both men and women.

Unity, rather than equality, is, I think, the only effective Christian criterion for social transformation. Only as we act in humility as one body, one humanity, one *anthropos* will each member of the body find his or her place of fulfillment and service. Of course since Christians themselves do not «walk according to this commandment,» we have very little to offer those with whom we share this world except just another poetic ideal. And because so few in the Church actually strive to be holy, to be saints, it is probably a very good thing that Helen and others work within the popular categories of the day to create some space, some possible crack in the secularist wall, out of which a genuine Christ-rooted Tree of Justice can grow. If only some of us would let the acorn of our own individual rights die to grow into that tree.

*This article was posted at <http://holynativity.blogspot.com/> on January 3, 2012, and is posted here with permission.*