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Response

Kathleen McPhillips

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shape their activities.”² This reality came home to me more strongly in a conference on women and globalization in Germany held December 2–5, 2004. At one point the possibilities and impossibilities of globalizing women’s liberation movements preoccupied attendees’ imagination. One of the suggestions that came up was to articulate feminist theology and organize the movement from an intercultural perspective. Although most knew that it would be a formidable task, we agreed to focus not on the difficulty it would pose but on the promise it offered. The important thing, we concurred, was that the question had been asked and possibilities opened for us.

It is with this same attitude that I regard the challenge that Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza puts forward in her essay. It sure looks tricky, as I feel it means negotiating again the classic tension between particularity and universality,³ and at the same time daunting, as we are faced with two burning issues of the day that are fraught with complexity. But I am glad that she asked the question and presented us with an incisive discussion that explores all the possibilities that exist, even if it challenges the things we have come to know as basic to our being feminists. I am excited as well at the prospect that feminist theologians and feminist studies in religion will finally deal with and reflect on the problems spawned by nationalism and globalization.

RESPONSE

Kathleen McPhillips

Without doubt, religion and gender are deeply implicated in the machinations of nationalism and patriotism, as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza clearly indicates in the opening essay. I welcome a discussion that addresses the vexing question of why the discourse of nationalism has been largely silent in feminist religionist discourse. However, just as we can speak of multiple modernities, so we should also speak of multiple nationalisms. I believe feminist studies in religion needs to commit to the task of analyzing in particular the current pernicious forms of nationalisms that have arisen post–September 11. Feminist religionists must ask, What are our particular responsibilities in the face of such recent powerful expressions of patriotic nationalism and global capitalist imperialism? The response I wish to make to Schüssler Fiorenza’s concerns is to

² Deborah Stienstra, “Dancing Resistance from Rio to Beijing: Transnational Women’s Organizing and United Nations Conferences, 1992–6,” in *Gender and Global Restructuring: Sightings, Sites, and Resistances*, ed. Marianne H. Marchand and Anne Sisson Runyan, RIPE Series in Global Political Economy (London: Routledge, 2000), 212.

³ Douglas John Hall, “Globalism, Nationalism, and the Reign of God,” in *God and the Nations*, by Douglas John Hall and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 28.

offer some comments on the discourse of Australian nationalism, with particular attention to the symbolic and to the insidious position of women within this discourse.

In Australia nationalism has always been a highly problematic discourse.¹ In contrast to the United States, patriotism is viewed with suspicion and even cynicism by a large proportion of the population. There are some interrelated, complex reasons for this, the origins of which are located in the history of colonial Australia, but suffice it to say that the kinds of patriotic nationalism that are demonstrated in U.S. culture are extremely rare in Australia.² This does not, I believe, detract from the power of nationalism as an enculturating force. Rather, it points to the fact, as I have proposed, that nationalism has many forms and histories, is “an imagined community,” and cannot be reduced to a single expression.³ As a political formation of modernity, nationalism emerges from the politics of the Enlightenment, which from its beginnings construed a highly problematic subject location for bodies other than the dominant white male of Western liberalism.⁴ In a postmodern, globalizing, capitalist world, nationalism continues to be a most important political formation. As Benedict Anderson says, “[T]he reality is quite plain: the ‘end of the era of nationalism,’ so long prophesied, is not remotely in sight. Indeed, nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time.”⁵

Nationhood is almost always founded on violence and legitimated through the state. Indeed, the most significant expressions of nationalism in Australia are those involving war and the loss of life. Although the nation is imagined as a “fraternity of equals,” the political form of the nation continues to be legitimated through violence⁶—the war against Iraq being the latest example. Nationalism also continues to be a central site for forming hegemonic masculinities against other differences while simultaneously promoting equality and citizenship. This is a deep contradiction and contributes to an ongoing desta-

¹ There is a large literature here, but one recent essay relevant to the question of nationalism and religion is John O’Carroll, “Federation or Perdition: Australian Dreams of Nationhood,” *Eremos: Exploring Spirituality in Australia*, Essay Supplement no. 26 (May 2001).

² There are extreme right-wing nationalist groups that are very racist and peddle the White Australia discourse. They were given media attention in the mid-1990s when the One Nation political party was elected to federal and state parliaments. However, since 2001 the party has been in disarray, and there are now no elected One Nation parliamentarians.

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1990).

⁴ Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón, and Mino Moallem, “Between Woman and Nation,” introduction to *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State*, ed. Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón, and Mino Moallem (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 1.

⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*

bilization of the legitimating processes of nationhood and the fraught subject location of woman-as-citizen.⁷ It means that, as Australians, we continue to be deeply anxious about “belonging” to this land and to a nation that was born from destructive colonial violence.

The idea of the nation rests as much on the symbolic as on the material and political. Australian feminist historians such as Anne Summers, Miriam Dixon, Kay Schaffer, and Marilyn Lake have argued that, from the beginnings of Australian colonization and nation building, women have been positioned as symbolic boundary markers in a highly patriarchal frontier society. True “Australianness” equals the masculinized subject: the feminine was always deeply “other.” But that deep contradiction of nationhood in modernity means that “Australia has a local and international reputation for being both an effective socialist democracy and a deeply misogynistic society.”⁸ These two discourses of misogyny and equality sit side by side and continue to shape, construct, and inform public space and debate. They also make the position of women in Australian society deeply ambiguous and contradictory and the task of identity formation acutely fraught.

A commitment to equality and fairness sits alongside an ongoing, deeply embedded, unacknowledged misogynist tradition. This is played out in a variety of institutional and political responses but is nowhere as clear as in the Australian Christian churches, which continue to deny women full citizenship while simultaneously employing the rhetoric of equality. Since September 11, 2001, the position of women in the church has seriously deteriorated, there has been a backlash against feminism and other rights discourses, and there has been a reassertion of male clerical power, yet the rhetoric of equality from conservative male church leaders is stronger than ever.

It is important to understand just how deeply this contradictory nationalist ethic is embedded in Australian cultural life, and why resistance is so tricky. The work of Australian feminist critic Kay Schaffer is very helpful here. Schaffer proposes the argument that the symbolic discourse of Australian nationalism is constructed and communicated through a series of central myths; people come to identify or recognize others as Australian “by the myths of national identity which circulate both within and beyond the culture” (xiii). One of these central myths—possibly the most significant one—is the myth of the Australian bush. The bush was, first and foremost, the place of exile for nineteenth-century colonial outcasts. The development of Australian nationhood was founded on an imagined idea of the bush as

a threat to be mastered, an object to be possessed, an other to be in-

⁷ Kaplan, Alarcón, and Moallem, “Between Woman and Nation,” 1–3.

⁸ Kay Schaffer, *Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), xii; hereafter cited in text.

corporated into or appropriated by the self. . . . [The bush] threatened him [man] with assimilation, isolation and death. It represented a force which might reduce him to madness, melancholia, or despair. Man's identity, which might be secured heroically by his possession of the land as a primary object of desire, was called into doubt by the threat of the bush as a form of the monstrous feminine. (62)

Schaffer argues that in the early frontier society, the bush was designated as the iconic Australian experience: "the heart of the country, the Australian Australia" (52). In the colonial literary imagination the bush has a double function: "it both seduces and repulses, it offers the possibility of spiritual quest and vision as well as madness and death" (61). Accounts of trips to the interior—both fictional and real—are littered with references to the men who died in the inhospitable center of the land. The bush represented "a mysterious presence which calls to men for the purposes of exploration and discovery but is also a monstrous place in which men may either perish or be absorbed" (52). In this sense,

[t]he bush functions as a locus of male desire. Animated by man's desire, it takes on the seeming attributes of woman, whether described as a passive landscape or an alien force; a place of exile or belonging; a landscape of promise or of threat. This myth of the bush precedes actual seeing. And it is one constantly reproduced in the twentieth century through postcards, television, films, newspaper articles, picture books and ecological campaigns. (61)

The particular danger of "the bush" is absorption: that men will be sucked up into the interior and lose all sense of identity (52). This notion of the bush as monstrous Mother with the power to give or take life is a powerful fantasy and is present not in actual figures of women but in responses to the bush: "[T]he landscape provides a feminine 'other' against which the bushman as hero is constructed. . . . [T]he fantasy of the bush as an absorbing landscape, capable of sucking up its inhabitants, circulates through the narratives of history, fiction and film" (52).

The association of women with nature is a familiar trope in the Australian collective imagination. Such a representation continues to instruct personal and collective responses to the bush; it continues to be a very powerful imaginative force in Australian cultural life, and the feminine continues to mark out—both symbolically and corporeally—the boundaries of chaos and order. Tourists and visitors who disappear in the bush do so "without a trace," with media reports often making references to a harsh, unforgiving land. Individual women who survive traumatic experiences in the desert are often demonized. For example, Lindy Chamberlain, who lost her baby to a wild dingo in Central Australia nearly twenty years ago, is still viewed with suspicion. In another ex-

ample, the court case into the disappearance and possible murder of Peter Falconio in Central Australia in 2003 involved a seemingly irrelevant interrogation into the details of the sex life of his girlfriend, Joanna Lees.

The idea of the bush, especially the deep interior of the country, as monstrous was most recently played out in the cruel and inhumane detainment of Afghan and Iraqi asylum seekers in detention centers. These centers are often purposefully located in the desert—"in the middle of nowhere"—to prevent escape. It is both ironic and worrying that the current government reserves a special rage for distressed, homeless people who arrive on Australian shores in leaky boats, in a scene mirroring the arrival of British convicts more than two hundred years ago.⁹

This is, of course, a totally different bush than the sustaining, life-giving bush of Aboriginal Australia, where land is home, mother, the divine, the source of all knowledge and material resources. It is no small matter that the legal notion of *terra nullius* (empty land) was still valid until the 1980s, when the *Mabo v. Queensland* decision of the High Court finally recognized that Aboriginal people were the original inhabitants of the land and thus had a prior legal claim to land ownership. This led to the handing back of land to the original owners (where this could be claimed), but since the Liberal government has been in power (1996) these legislations have been seriously scaled back and the progress of reconciliation virtually halted.

It should be clear, then, that the dominant discourse of Australian nationalism is founded on a basic contradiction of violent misogyny and fairness and on mateship that excludes women from citizenship: this discourse remains silent and hidden yet shapes the collective imagination of its citizenry. It forms a collective cultural amnesia that both paralyzes and creates insecurity: it means that, as Australians, "we live in a culture traumatised by the circumstances of its inception, clinging to illusions like the bush myth because they are easier to live with than the acknowledgment of colonial violence."¹⁰

In negotiating such a discourse, women find no place for real and full subjectivity: "Women are excluded as subjects of representation. . . . Identity, autonomy, and authority are denied them in their own right."¹¹ This makes a response by religious feminists to current nationalist agendas very tricky, as the symbolic location of the feminine is also engaged in the fight for justice. Women are hampered by the lack of voice, particularly in religious discourse. Struggling from the margins might have certain political advantages, but it also means the center can easily dismiss the periphery as lacking authority and legitimacy. This is precisely what is happening to church feminists.

⁹ O'Carroll, "Federation or Perdition," 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21–22.

¹¹ Schaffer, *Women and the Bush*, 63.

Traditionally the margin has existed in modernity as a space where a politics of difference can be generated and articulated and the fight for social justice is organized and managed. Yet in the new post–September 11 age, the marginalized generate suspicion, terror, and intense levels of surveillance. Perhaps, then, because of white women's fraught subject location, religious feminists have had difficulty in understanding and hearing Aboriginal and Pacific indigenous women's experiences of faith and life, which in turn has reinforced forms of racism and exclusion.¹² Australian feminist theologies have often been trapped in the web of nationalism—caught in the contradiction—which has led unwittingly to a reinscription of the dominant discourse.

I believe there are two immediate responses that can be made to the dominant discourse. The first is that we white Australian religionists and feminists need to continue to understand the effects of nation-as-discourse on our own lives and in our communities at the symbolic, political, and material levels and to strategize political responses to injustice. The second is that we need to be careful not to universalize our experience of nationhood to others in the Pacific region but rather to recognize multiple views and histories.

Since the late 1990s one organization, Women Scholars of Religion and Theology (WSRT), has been attempting to promote community and analysis in a regional association, with members in Polynesia, Melanesia, Southeast Asia, New Zealand, and Australia. WSRT publishes an e-journal, *SeaChanges*;¹³ maintains a directory of members, which acts as a networking tool; and holds conferences every four years. As founding member Elaine Wainwright states,

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges to our association is the dialogue that recognises hybridity in relation to cultures that constitute this region, to diversities and differences in methodologies for the study of those cultures and their religious and theological traditions. *Seachanges* invite us into the borderland spaces which for us in this region may, in fact, be seascapes rather than landscapes or they may be foreshores.¹⁴

Such a shift—toward a seascape and toward a recognition that we share “the ocean within us,” as opposed to an enforced isolationism—may disrupt the powerful misogynist discourses of landscape (and bush), because it allows us to see that there are different ways of being women in much wider geophysical

¹² This is argued in Anne Pattel-Gray's book *The Great White Flood: Racism in Australia* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1998).

¹³ *SeaChanges: The Journal of Women Scholars of Religion and Theology* can be accessed at <http://www.wsrt.com.au/seachanges/index.shtml>.

¹⁴ Elaine Wainwright, “*SeaChanges* Land and Living and Loving: Women Scholars of Religion and Theology over 10 Years,” *SeaChanges* 4 (December 2004): 14, <http://www.wsrt.com.au/seachanges/volume4/doc/wainwright.doc>.

and symbolic spaces. Understanding our communities as a “sea of islands”¹⁵ connected by land and water provides a powerful metaphor against the misogynist traditions of the Australian bush, a way of reimagining our relationship to land, sea, and each other. Wainwright says,

Women are crossing the Pacific in many directions, sometimes to study theology or religion or to take up other academic pursuits, sometimes shifting permanently and crossing cultures. The diversity of cultures; women, men and children crossing cultures; and the ancient and more contemporary religious traditions associated with these crossings shape the contexts in which women are undertaking theology and studies in religion in this region. Discourses of the sacred are emerging in multiple languages and linguistic traditions in the region and are open to study by women and for women. In this, perhaps there is a challenge for those in the more dominant Western cultures, that we be attentive to the multiplicity of sacred narratives and traditions not only in their antiquity but also in their being re-invoked by women in the region today in multiple ways.¹⁶

In this post–September 11 age, a neonationalism is being reformed by the Western superpowers into a new conservatism based on a politics of fear and terror. The community is literally terrified into accepting a hardening of nationalist fervor against a devaluing of human rights and democratic rhetoric. Nationalism impinges upon the processes of democracy, because it seeks to limit personal and collective freedoms in the pursuit of security and border protection. It understands the discourse of human rights, which has traditionally challenged the excesses of nationalism, as hostile to the interests of the community, subsequently limiting freedom of speech, freedom of movement, and the recognition of cultural differences. Human rights have been “largely crushed since September 11th”: they have been pushed to the periphery in the race to ensure “national security,” which invokes “new laws that allow arbitrary arrest and indefinite detention, due process and a fair trial.”¹⁷

I’m not convinced that by itself a transnational articulation of feminist theologies will be effective in articulating the particular injustices of nationalist fervor and policy. It seems to me that there are as many dangers in transnational discourse as there are in national discourse. I’m also not advocating an uncritical approach to regionalism, but I do think that a critical stand on post-

¹⁵ Epeli Hau’ofa et al., *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*, ed. Eric Waddell, Vijay Naidu, and Epeli Hau’ofa (Suva, Fiji: School of Social and Economic Development, University of the South Pacific, 1993); and Epeli Hau’ofa, “The Ocean in Us,” *Contemporary Pacific: A Journal of Island Affairs* 10, no. 2 (Fall 1998).

¹⁶ Wainwright, “*SeaChanges*,” 4–5.

¹⁷ Moira Rayner, “Walking Away from Omelas: What Price a Just Society?” (Human Rights and Social Justice Lecture, University of Newcastle, New South Wales, September 2, 2004).

national discourse will suggest some important questions and articulate moments when nationalism unravels.

I believe that organizations such as WSRT will become more important in an alternate articulation of both imagined and real communities. Such an articulation should set human rights at the center of any political formation and public discourse and should accept nothing less than full citizenship and subjectivity for women everywhere.