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With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology

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Book Reviews

Seeds: Supporting Women's Work in the Third World

edited by Ann Leonard
The Feminist Press, 1989
239 pages, paper, \$13

The eight case studies in *Seeds* describe cooperative income-generating development projects designed and implemented by women's groups in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Additional chapters help to put the studies into historical and global context.

Originally published as a series of international economic development pamphlets, the stories told in the *Seeds* studies vividly illuminate the creativity and vitality of women in their involvement in economies around the world. Primary emphasis is placed on three main criteria for viable development projects for women: they must take a collective approach, professional services must be utilized at critical stages, and women's economic and decision-making roles must be emphasized.

From a weaving and dyeing cooperative in Mali to forest conservation in Nepal to waste recycling in Mexico, the case studies portray women's traditional roles in saving, production, and income generation in their "spare time." They then demonstrate ways in which women have built on these skills and activities to enhance their productivity and their income. They emphasize the need for women to have access to credit, even in small amounts, and the positive effect receipt of credit has on women's ability to develop new and effective project models.

Several of the case studies describe courageous strategies to move into "male" occupations—construction work in Jamaica or public transport in Kenya. A provocative chapter on handicrafts provides an in-depth treatment of the pitfalls of projects based on traditional stereotypes about women's "natural" or "proper" work.

Although lengthy and at times somewhat technical, each study is clearly

outlined and full of lively illustrative descriptions. A list of concise "lessons" at the end of each chapter helps to clarify the message and summarize the learnings.

Seeds will be most useful to those involved in international economics, development, anthropology, and women's studies. One chapter describes ways to use the book in classroom situations for students in these areas. Development planners and practitioners, as well as persons with international experience, will also find this a useful resource. Few will read it for pleasure, though it has potential to inspire many who are interested in the unfolding role of women in worldwide society.

Reviewed by SUZANNE LIND, who spent several years in Africa and now works with the North American service programs of the Mennonite Board of Missions, Elkhart, Indiana.



With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology

edited by Virginia Fabella, M.M.
and Mercy Amba Oduyoye
Orbis, 1989
192 pages, paper, \$13

This is a collection of 18 essays written by third world women from Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Each writer speaks from her own particular continent and country, dealing with an aspect of Christian theology, be it church-building, the Bible, Christology, or spirituality. To read this book with the passion and compassion referred to in the title is a way of holding hands with feminists around the world. It is a way of affirming solidarity with those who must often put their lives on the line for proclaiming Jesus' liberation. It may also expand and alter one's own Christian feminist theology.

In 1981 the Ecumenical Association of

Third World Theologians met for the first time in New Delhi, India. At that time a Women's Commission was formed, which planned future conferences for women of various Third World regions in the following years. The papers in this book have come from this process.

The strength of this book is in its global balance and variety of writers—Protestant and Catholic women from many different countries and cultures. Its weakness lies in a certain amount of repetition among the essays. I also would have preferred more emphasis on concrete storytelling and perhaps less on abstract theologizing. Nevertheless, I recommend this book for anyone interested in ecumenism and global justice.

Reviewed by RETA FINGER.



A Feminist Ethic of Risk

by Sharon D. Welch
Fortress Press, 1990
206 pages, paper, \$13

This important book for activists, ethicists, and tired liberals touches the heart, ignites the imagination, and supplies a solid critical foundation for a change in our paradigm of social ethics.

Welch begins with the question, "What does it mean to work for social transformation in the face of seemingly insurmountable suffering and evil? How can we sustain energy, hope, and commitment in the face of an unrelenting succession of social and political crises?" She describes our middle class paralysis in the face of evil as "cultured despair." If we see the problems clearly, what keeps us from responding?

Our problem stems from our accepted definition of morality as a responsibility to make things come out right. This definition, Welch argues, is based on our understanding of God as omnipotent. We valorize absolute power as a way to get things done. It leads us to an ethic of control and consequently to despair if we do not succeed immediately. Welch says,

"To the extent that we still cling to the ideal of omnipotence—of a sovereign god or an all-wise, all-successful father—we are trapped in our own role as oppressors, expecting a level of ease in action impossible in an interdependent world." For example, we think we must get rid of all nuclear weapons for all time and if we can't do that, we do nothing.

Welch proposes *immanence* (the "power-with" model advocated in women's religion) as an alternative to the worship of an absolutely powerful God with its attendant definition of moral action as the power to get the job done. Welch also advocates *communicative ethics*—welcoming everyone's story which can shed light on truth and provide a critique of each other's stories.

Like Susan Thistlethwaite in *God, Sex, Race*, Welch relies heavily on the writings of African American women novelists. Bringing in their stories, says Welch, is a way of receiving a critique of her social location and, thus, of her vision. The stories point to an alternative view—an emphasis on community, the knowledge that struggle goes on for generations, and that deep joy comes only with deep pain.

The goal of communicative ethics is a mutual critique leading to more adequate understanding of what is just and how particular forms of justice may be achieved. People of different persuasions and experiences cannot dialogue together, without paying attention to power configurations. Welch says, "A genuine conversation between those who are privileged by way of class, gender, or race and those who have experienced oppression or discrimination on the basis of those characteristics is possible when the privileged work to end the oppression or discrimination they denounce."

This kind of communication requires that we abandon the ethic of control and develop an ethic of risk. "Maturity," says Welch, "is the acceptance not that life is unfair, but that the creation of fairness is the task of generations, that work for justice is not incidental to one's life, but it is an essential aspect of affirming the delight and wonder of being alive." We do not know if our action will have the desired effect, but it may spark the creative imagination in our