NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Liberation theologian's Call to Action speech focuses on feminism, interreligious work

Sharon Abercrombie | Nov. 19, 2012 Eco Catholic
CTA 2012

At 40, Aimee Upjohn Light is a liberation theologian and eco-feminist, had Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley as her doctoral dissertation adviser at Yale in 2003, is editor of *The Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue*, and serves as an assistant professor of theology.

However, where she teaches theology might come as a surprise: Light serves on the faculty of conservative Duquesne University in Pittsburgh.

"Why here? Because I have a vocation to mediate between traditional theology and contemporary moral values, which have changed," she said during a recent phone interview. But Light holds her own. Although she and Bishop David Zubik are not on the same theological page, "he is very pastoral, a good leader."

Light said she drives some of her seminarian students crazy by insisting that the concept of God as Mother is solid Catholic orthodoxy, not just some rebellious feminist notion.

"I try to be very, very gentle and non-threatening," she said.

Some strong family threads illustrate how Light arrived in her part of the universe.

During the Vietnam War, Light's mother, Frances Mary, left the Mercy sisters when the community forbade her from marching on Washington, D.C., with other peace activists.

Young Light grew up in an extended family that included Asian Buddhists. Frances Mary's constant reminder -- "If you're looking for God, where else are you going to find her but here?" -- nourished and delighted the child's soul. By age 8, Light was accompanying her parents to the national Call to Action meeting in their hometown of Chicago or in Milwaukee each November.

"Matthew Fox was the first formal theologian I ever met," Light said. "He taught me that God's world is a world of joy, not one of fear. I fell in love with theology."

A few days after our conversation, Light flew to Louisville, Ky., for the 2012 Call to Action conference Nov. 9-11 to be one of the featured speakers. But this time, Light traveled alone. Frances Mary Light died two weeks before the conference.

In opening remarks, Light paid tribute to her mom.

"Call to Action is the church I grew up in, and my mother was my first feminist theologian. I grew up thinking that to be a Catholic was to be a feminist activist."

During her hourlong address, punctuated by witty ad-libs and asides, Light wove a historical tapestry describing how feminist theologies, environmental theology and interreligious work have roots in liberation theology. As a united group, they move away from the classical theism, which views an unchanging God who is "out there somewhere," into the concept of panentheism, God's imminence, "right here now" presence and relationality in the world.

God's right-here-ness among the poor and disenfranchised, a concept held by liberation theologians, solves many difficulties across the board in dealing with the differences among world religions, she said. During her address, Light referenced the works of St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, Farley, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Fr. Peter Phan, Paul Knitter, Nicholas of Cusa, Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius.

Some of her main points:

Christ as liberator is at the heart of the matter through each of these contemporary theologies. Because God is on the side of the marginalized, all marginalized persons, including women, non-Christians and the earth, are the privileged locus of God's self-revelation.

Regarding feminism, Light said: Without feminine language and imagery for God, we tend to fall prey to the sin of idolatry. "This is a strong claim, but an important and clear one, made by feminist theologians from Elizabeth Johnson to Rosemary Radford Reuther and Margaret Farley. ... Today our institutional church has taken our language and thinking about God to be literal, to the point that the fatherhood of God is insisted upon as the exclusive way we think about God. "

Light said using feminine language and imagery for God challenges "the sinful way in which we have come to think about men and women. Our culture's history of misogyny, devaluation and abuse of women is long ... and points to Elizabeth Johnson's maxim that 'when God becomes male, then the male becomes God.' To challenge this false, literal identification of the male with God and the wrong-headed thinking it engenders about women who in our humanity must also be considered fully *imago dei*, or the image of God, is an ethical imperative. And one which is well-served by the reintroduction of our biblical descriptors of God in feminine ways."

Light supplied scriptural references that speak of God as a mother who does not forget the child she nurses, the mother who births and protects Israel, as the mother bear who protects her cubs, and the woman seeking her lost coin. She said remaining faithful to scriptural ways of thinking about referring to God as feminine "is a demand of our God-talk. Without thinking and speaking about God in the feminine, we lose a dimension of our thinking about the divine which was throughout the origins which were ultimately included in the canon."

Regarding interreligious thought and liberation theology, Light drew upon the work of Phan of Georgetown University. In Asia, it is normal for people to blend two or more religions together. Meanwhile, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences has been quietly doing liberation theology with an explicit, uncompromising commitment to Jesus as liberator. Since the poor of Asia practice more than one religion simultaneously, Phan's Christology demands that he understand Jesus as on the side of the multiple religions.

Jesus is the crucified one who is on the side of the poor. "This seems to be the answer," Light said, because while the religions do differ internally on many points, by affirming goodness outside the boundaries of Christian religion using the tools of liberation theology, "we actually find that the non-Christian is not a problem to be dealt with, but the privileged locus of the revelation of God. Every religion is a different perspective on what is ultimately one and is just differently accessed in different cultures. God loves everyone equally, inside our religion and out. Talk about a world suffused with divine being."

During a question-and-answer session following her talk, one man asked how he could help infuse his 4-year-

old grandson with some of these new concepts.

Light responded: "There are simple things that I do. I insist to my four kids that they use inclusive language about God." The pronouns she uses -- "she," "mother" and "father" -- are all metaphors, of course, Light said. She said she tries to stress that ultimately, "God is bigger and funkier than we could ever imagine." She provides Peter, John, Eddie and Ottilie with children's storybooks about the world religions, referring to each of these books as a sacred scripture rather than as myth.

Just as her own parents took her to events like Call to Action when she was growing up, Light brings her kids to similar happenings. A few weeks ago, they accompanied her to a prayer service held in front of a local CTA-sponsored billboard in Pittsburgh calling for the ordination of women.

A final piece of advice: "It's important to listen to children." Light recalled an incident six years ago, when her son John was 3.

"He's our little mystic," she said. The two of them were out walking. John wasn't watching where he was going, ran full-tilt into a parking meter and fell down. But he just stayed on the ground where he was, gazing up at the trees. "Mommy, what do you think that God is trying to tell us?"

Mommy waited.

Observed little John: "I think she loves the color green."

But this endearing tot had something else to add.

"If God made the world, isn't God like a big mommy who hugs the world?"

So what is next for Light? Over the weekend, she was in Chicago, presenting an address at the American Academy of Religion conference on the Hindu goddess Sita's standing up against domestic violence. In February 2014, Light's book, *God at the Margins: Interreligious Thoughts and Feminist Theology*, is scheduled to be published.

For a complete CD of Light's talk, go to this website [1] to order.

Source URL (retrieved on *08/29/2014 - 12:43*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/eco-catholic/liberation-theologians-call-action-speech-focuses-feminism-interreligious-work

Links:
[1] https://www.dcporder.com/cta/?form_id=CTA10