

Is a Christian Feminist Theology Possible?

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The question explored in this paper is posed within the sisterhood of women who share the concerns of religious feminism. It is reflected in the sizable literature which represents the women's movement in the synagogue, the Christian Church, and the feminist spirituality movement, and which has already developed into a tradition which is ecumenical, pluralist, and academically serious. Religious feminists are united in the conviction that both feminism and religion are profoundly significant for the lives of women and for contemporary life generally. That shared concern includes the perspectives of Jews, Christians, and those who claim no bond with either tradition. It includes feminists who work for the reform of traditions - Jewish, Roman Catholic, mainline or evangelical Protestant - and those who declare Judaism and Christianity irredeemably biased against women and find religious homes in the new forms of feminist spirituality.

Feminist scholarship within the Christian context, for all its variety, is unified in its critical perception of sexism as a massive distortion in the historical and theological tradition which systematically denigrates women, overtly or covertly affirms women's inferiority and submission to men (patriarchy), and excludes women from full actualization and participation in the Church and society. It is unified in its aim of freeing women from restrictive ideologies and institutional structures which hinder self-actualization and self-transcendence. And it is unified in its attention to the interpreted experience of women as a source for religious and theological reflection, especially as those analyses, whether secular or religious, reflect the collective experience of women, in whatever groups of race, age, class, nationality. Thus it is an interdisciplinary and co-operative task.

The differences within feminist religious scholarship as it relates to Christian theology are accounted for by different perceptions of the depth and pervasiveness of sexism within Christianity. In a 1977 survey of feminist theology, Carol Christ argues that the essential challenge is posed by Mary Daly's claim that the gender and the intrinsic character and attributes of the Christian God are patriarchal.⁽¹⁾ Christ divides feminist scholarship into "reformist" and "revolutionary" approaches, and notes that few reformists working within the tradition have responded to this criticism of Christianity's core symbolism. Feminist revolutionaries, on the other hand, use the experience of women not only as a corrective but as a starting point and norm. Free of the authorities of Judaism or Christianity, they attempt to create new symbols and traditions on the basis of their own perceptions of ultimate reality. While it remains to be seen whether the writings of the revolutionaries - mainly concerned with symbols and spirituality - will develop

into traditional forms of theology, the reformists face the deeper challenge of a “radical feminist transformation of Christianity”:

A serious Christian response to Daly’s criticism of the core symbolism of Christianity either will have to show that the core symbolism of Father and Son does not have the effect of reinforcing and legitimating male power and female submission, or it will have to transform Christian imagery at its very core. (2)

Since 1977, a number of publications have advocated what Christ calls the revolutionary approach. Among them, Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology* is the most powerful and provocative exploration of feminist analysis and spiritual transformation.(3) Others deal with witchcraft, goddess worship, women’s spiritual experience in literature, in dream analysis, and in natural bodily processes.(4) The growth of goddess worship and witchcraft, or feminist Wicca, has elicited criticism from Rosemary Ruether, who points out that the cult of the Great Mother, claimed by feminist goddess devotees, emerged historically from a patriarchal culture and “has to do with putting kings on thrones of the world, not with liberating women or slaves.”(5) Similarly, witchcraft was never perceived in medieval times as involving a female deity nor were witches organized into cultic groups, as proponents of feminist Wicca claim. All historical religious traditions are biased, Ruether argues, and thus it is difficult to see how these “new” feminist religions are more radical than the transformations sought by Christian feminists who work with the critical or liberating traditions of the Bible. Ruether criticizes the revolutionary groups for separatism and reversal of domination, perpetuation of the nature/civilization split in female/male symbolism, assignment of goodness to females and evil to males, and failure to work toward synthesis and transformation. She adds that those who are alienated from Judaism and Christianity and the culture formed by them are nevertheless part of that culture. “If they try to negate that culture completely, they find themselves without a genuine tradition with which to work, and they neglect those basic guidelines which the culture itself has developed through long experience in order to avoid the pathological dead ends of human psychology.”(6) While sharply criticizing Judaism and Christianity, these religious feminists remain unself-critical: “instead of creating a more holistic alternative such feminist spiritualities succumb to the suppressed animus of patriarchal religious culture.”(7)

Nevertheless, as Ruether demonstrates, the alienation and the criticism of these women are profound and must be taken seriously. Daly’s critique of Christianity, as the radical example, centers on God understood as Father, the supreme patriarch in heaven who rules his people on earth and thus legitimates the male-dominated order of society. Eve as the originator of evil symbolizes, in fact, the original sin of patriarchy, a reification of sexual difference in which evil is projected on to woman as the original “other.” The figure of Christ represents idolatry of the male person of Jesus - “Christolatry” - and projects models of victim, scapegoat, and self-sacrifice especially presented to women in Christian history. The male symbols of God and Savior, or the “ultimate symbol” of “the all-male Trinity,” the “procession of a divine son from a divine father,” are not adequate symbols for women.(8)

In laying out the framework of her feminist critique of the major symbols of Christianity, Daly charges male theology with a cerebral “methodolatry” which renders the questions of women “nonquestions” and data about women “nondata.” In contrast, she makes such nonquestions and nondata central in rejecting Christian symbols for their devastating effects on women; she argues that feminist experience itself is the source of liberating spiritual experience for women in a world *without* models. She adopts a method which entails moments of “castration” and “exorcism” on its way to “liberation”, and employs a powerful counter-symbolics in her constructive efforts.(9)

Daly’s attack is on the broad symbolism of Christianity and the way it has legitimated the subordination of women and reinforced women’s internalized inferiority. Theologians have maintained that God transcends sexuality (although God is “he” for most) and that the humanity of Christ, not his maleness, is central in the Christian scheme (although, for many, maleness was and is essential for priesthood). But these theological distinctions have no impact on the ways the symbols actually function to support religious and cultural ideologies that are crippling to women. To check this claim, one need only review the explicit statements about women in Tertullian, Clement, Jerome, Augustine, Aquinas, Luthey, Calvin, Knox, Barth, Bonhoeffer, Reinhold Niebuhr, Teilhard de Chardin, modern and contemporary pronouncements of the Vatican, and, of course, the Bible. Daly warns against the most common evasion of the issue - trivialization - and her imaginative, sometimes eerie constructive efforts drive home the necessity of reformulation. A thorough revisioning of Christian theology is needed to redress so fundamental a distortion.

And yet, although some feminists leave Christianity behind as destructive and exclusionary, many thoughtful women remain in the churches. And Christian feminists who take the radical critique seriously continue to struggle with the symbols and their transformation. Both historically and in the present, the Christian symbols of God, Jesus, sin and salvation, the Church and the Holy Spirit have been life-giving and liberating for women.(10) Recognizing that we live in the religious and cultural context of traditions that have formed us and in part freed us, held by faith, Christian feminists attempt to cope with Christianity from within. The problem is not solved by adding mother or parent images to God as father (although to image God as female, to think of God as “she,” may be important); for parental images of God are problematic in relation to the experience of women and the problem of selfhood.(11) Rather, the task is to search for resources within the biblical, theological, and intellectual traditions that enable Christian feminist theology to be understood as an intrinsic theological task, unlike other partial theologies (of play, work, even so-called theologies of women), i.e., applications of Christian themes to contemporary issues; for the task implies not only a Christian critique of sexist or patriarchal culture but a feminist critique of Christianity.

Resources for Feminist theology

In the search for resources that enable Christian feminist theologians, male and female, to work fruitfully within the tradition and to take radical feminist criticism seriously, several critical requirements present themselves. The first is the need to ground the possibility of

understanding past theological tradition both critically and constructively, of seeing it anew from the perspective of contemporary questions. Ruether's observation about the loss of cultural guidelines in the attempt to work outside the tradition can be expanded. Women are in the cultural and religious traditions formed by Judaism and Christianity; they give us the very language with which we formulate our criticism and the symbols and countersymbols with which we imagine the new.

Recent discussion of hermeneutics and critical theory provides an important resource in this context. H. G. Gadamer's work (12) on the universality of the hermeneutic standpoint offers a foundation for Christian feminist theology as it attempts to understand the tradition adequately and to forge new interpretations. He has shown how all real understanding (truth as event) is in fact new understanding as it occurs in the dialogue with tradition. Thus tradition is conceived as a living address and responsive source for questioning and reinterpretation, and it is only within this conversation that tradition itself is understood. Gadamer argues further that all understanding intrinsically bears its own moment of "application" - the unity of cognitive, normative, and reproductive interpretation. The inherent connection of issues of practical action with all genuine interpretation of tradition thus overcomes any "merely cerebral" view of authentic theological work. A text must be related to the interpreter's situation if it is to be adequately understood. Finally, Gadamer describes effective historical consciousness, awareness of the history of the effects of texts, themes, or tradition, as it has been interpreted and reinterpreted, as the context in which the interpreter stands. It is this awareness that feminist theology attempts to achieve in discussion not only of biblical and historical texts but also of the ways these texts have been reinterpreted through centuries of preaching and theological formulation - their always continuing effects on practical life for women and for the self-understanding of women. Christian feminist theologians recognize, I believe, that it is impossible to work outside the effective history of tradition which offers us the subject matter, the very questions with which we struggle.

While accepting much of Gadamer's formulation, the critical social theorist J. Habermas has argued against certain conservative, elitist tendencies in Gadamer's reverence for the authority of past tradition and his insistence on its universal linguisticity. Besides language or texts,

Habermas maintains, there is also a history of work and of power (or force or domination). And language itself can be ideologically distorted. Thus hermeneutics must be joined to critical theory which analyzes the societal context and life-praxis in which all texts are embedded. Using psychoanalysis as a cognitive analogue on the individual level for critique of systematically distorted communication in the interest of transformation, Habermas points to the necessity of critical reflection on social structures of authority and domination, with an interest in emancipation. In addition to hermeneutical "translation" of traditions, critical theory provides "ethical and productive distance" from those very traditions in which we live. Habermas argues against the illusory selfunderstanding of value-free scholarship or the pursuit of "pure" knowledge - the illusion of objectivism - by showing the particular interests necessarily presupposed by the cognitive achievements of the empirical, the historical hermeneutic, and the critical social sciences.

Orientation toward technical control, toward mutual understanding in the conduct of life, and toward emancipation from seemingly “natural” constraint establishes the specific viewpoint from which we apprehend reality as such in any way whatsoever. By becoming aware of the impossibility of getting beyond these transcendental limits, a part of nature acquires, through us, autonomy in nature. (13)

Thus it is a matter of “coming to terms” with the interests that in fact underlie the pursuit of knowledge. The connection of knowledge and interests ultimately means that “the truth of statements is linked to the intention of the good and true life.”(14) The Christian feminist critique of ideology, developed in the study of the theological tradition in its historical, social, and ecclesiastical contexts, is not merely negation of the past. As theology, it explicitly claims to be rooted in an emancipatory interest in the future.

Paul Ricoeur joins the hermeneutical and critical perspectives by pointing to the necessity of both past and future orientations: “There are no other paths . . . for carrying out our interest in emancipation than by incarnating it within cultural acquisitions. Freedom only posits itself by transvaluating what has already been evaluated.” (15) The use of hermeneutical and critical theory in feminist theology clearly offers grounds for the double possibility of exposing the distortions of the past and of seeing something more, a future possibility beyond the distortion, in the light of new questions - questions raised by the feminist critique in both its cultural and religious dimensions.

A second requirement for a feminist theology which takes seriously both the radical critique and the authority of historical Christianity is a theory of religious symbols which grounds both negative and positive moments in its interpretive horizon. Tillich’s discussion is helpful in showing how symbols open dimensions of transcendent reality inaccessible to technical or instrumental reason.(16) He argues that symbols are born out of the collective unconscious, within particular situations. Symbols participate in the reality they signify, but participation in the depth dimension is not identity: the transcendent or unconditioned always transcends every symbol of the transcendent. Thus religious symbols remain under the “law of ambiguity,” reflecting the tendency of religion to substitute symbols for the divine itself, a tendency toward idolatry and the demonic. In every religious symbol there is tension between the unconditioned in which the symbol participates and the immanent, the appearance, the bearer of the Holy in a particular cultural situation. The truth of religious symbols is independent of empirical criticism; they die when the situation in which they were created has passed or on innersymbolic grounds, through a religious criticism of religion. “If Christianity claims to have a truth superior to any other truth in its symbolism, then it is the symbol of the cross” as a denial of the idolatrous tendency of all symbols.(17) Theology can neither affirm nor negate symbols; it can only interpret them. In criticizing the functions of the symbols of God and Christ, feminist theology exposes the idolatry which occurs when preliminary or conditional concerns are elevated to unconditional significance; something finite (maleness, sexuality) is lifted to the level of the infinite.

This law of the ambiguity of symbols is intensified by Ricoeur, who points out that symbols are profoundly double or multivalent in their meaning. Their richness is

constituted precisely by the “close alliance” of regressive and progressive elements.(18) The conjunction of “archeology” and “teleology,” disguise and revelation, means that interpretation includes two essential moments: an unmasking of regressive meanings or demystification, and a restoration of meaning. An adequate feminist interpretation is dialectical: it is suspicious as it unmasks the illusory or ideological aspects of symbols which denigrate the humanity of women, and it is restorative as it attempts to retrieve the genuinely transcendent meaning of symbols as affirming the authentic selfhood and self-transcendence of women. Ricoeur argues that the two moments are not extrinsic to one another; “they constitute the over-determination of symbols,” their “surplus of meaning,” and each requires the other.(19)

When the mixed texture or double intentionality of all religious symbols, the law of ambiguity, is taken seriously, the third requirement for feminist theology emerges. An adequate theological method must exhibit a double critique. On one side, the pluralism of feminist cultural and religious interpretations must be related to the Christian symbols in their overdetermined meaning, and their hidden, regressive, or ideological dimensions exposed. On the other, the restored or purified meaning of the symbols, in their transformative possibilities, must be brought to bear on the culture, and on religion itself.(20) This double critique takes serious account of the experience of women and at the same time holds itself bound to the progressive and anticipatory power of the gospel and its symbols for women and for contemporary life as a whole. The interpreted experience of women in society-economic, cultural, religious - is used to criticize those dimensions of the Christian tradition, the doctrine of God, Christology, ecclesiology, etc., which serve to legitimate the exclusion and subordination of women both in theology and in the practical life of the churches. And the newly interpreted understanding of the gospel and of Christian symbols as authentically liberating for women is used to criticize a sexist culture in which women are systematically exploited. Christian feminist theologians are convinced that the symbols both of the religious tradition and of the culture itself say “something more” than is apparent on the surface.(21)

Recent Developments

As feminist theology has developed, the critical correlation of the Christian tradition with the contemporary cultural situation has consistently broadened to include wider dimensions of women’s experience. In facing arguments that the women’s question is peripheral and middle class in relation to the global problems of war and peace, poverty and affluence, race, hunger, or violence, feminist analysis has demonstrated the interrelationship of sexism, racism, classism, and has shown, e.g., that “the majority of the poor are women, and children dependent on women”; that “internationally women’s occupations are characterized by low pay and low status”; that black women in the U.S. are under a double bind; that women are more likely to suffer physical and psychological violence; that “personal sin is intimately related to structural sin.”(22)

The major work of Christian feminist theologians thus far has been negation, unmasking cultural and religious ideology that denies women’s full humanity. While important studies of the forgotten history of women have indeed appeared, (23) the first task has

been analysis of the distorted traditions about women in the Bible, in the Church Fathers, in medieval, Reformation, and modern theology.(24) These criticisms are well known and need not be repeated. The result of these studies, however, together with secular feminist research, is that feminist theologians have at hand interdisciplinary analyses which describe several layers in the ideology of sexism and the complex of issues that must be taken into account.

Rosemary Ruether ably summarizes these.(25) From her historical studies she describes a first layer of ideology in which woman is the servant, object, or tool of male power, and shares inferiority with other reduced groups, lower classes, subjugated races. A second understands women as evil or fearful, representing bodiliness and carnality. A third layer is the romantic split or reversal in which women are idealized as more moral or spiritual than men, privatized, along with religion, art, and culture, and again used as mediators of a lost female side of the male, as havens in a materialistic, immoral, public, male world. The romantic idealization of women is frequently found in contemporary theological or ecclesiastical statements which, no longer overt about women's inferiority or dangerous sexuality, now speak of "complementarity," a romantic term which bears the suspicion of another rationalization for subordination. In addition, Ruether urges the need to work on several levels, lest the co-optation of feminism by racism, classism, and romanticism of the nineteenth century be repeated. There is individual and subjective consciousness-raising and exorcism of debased self-images; social analysis of structures and the envisioning of a reconstructed society; self-criticism about class and racial contexts lest women be divided against each other; ecological concern, in which nature and the earth are understood analogously in feminist or nonhierarchical, mutually supportive ways rather than in dominating or conquest models.

While feminists are rightly warned not to propose premature solutions to the radical criticism of Christian symbols,(26) there have been some efforts, especially in biblical scholarship, which have already shown the possibility of interpretations that are both Christian and feminist, that negate and affirm, unmask and restore. These studies demonstrate sophisticated appropriation of resources within the intellectual and theological tradition. The work of Phyllis Trible, for example, employs a complex hermeneutical method to show that "scripture in itself yields multiple interpretations of itself" in its continuing interaction with the world: the black experience, Marxism, psychology, ecology, and, in this case, feminism.(27)

As the Bible interprets itself to complement or to contradict, to confirm or to challenge, so likewise we construe these traditions for our time, recognizing an affinity between then and now. In other words, hermeneutics encompasses explication, understanding, and application from past to present.(28)

Trible reads the biblical texts from a feminist perspective, using rhetorical criticism as a clue to the fusion of aesthetic and religious visions. She takes the biblical metaphor of "the image of God male and female" (Gen 1:27) as a topical clue for her study of God and the rhetoric of sexuality to show how "this basic metaphor contrasts with the imbalance of... partial metaphors": God as father, husband, king, warrior, God as

pregnant woman, mother, midwife, mistress.(29) Acknowledging that “the Bible overwhelmingly favors male metaphors for deity,” she explores female imagery for God and uncovers traditions that, within the context of the goodness of creation, show the equality of female and male in creation and disobedience, in erotic joy, in mundane crisis. She concludes that female imagery “is not a minor theme” but “with persistence and power it saturates scripture”; some texts about male and female yield “the grace of sexuality, not the sin of sexism.” Recognizing the permanent patriarchal stamp of Scripture - accepting the radical feminist critique Tribble shows the Bible at the same time to be a “potential witness against all our interpretations.” Her work exposes the dominant interest of past exegesis and interpretation and uncovers neglected strands which “reveal countervoices in a patriarchal document”(30) that offer possibility for the future.

In New Testament studies, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza similarly demonstrates the possibility of scholarship which is both Christian and radically feminist. She joins historical-critical methods, hermeneutic theory, and feminist analysis in her discussion. Not only are there patriarchal texts and traditions in the Bible, and texts which centuries of exegesis, preaching, and theology have misinterpreted. In addition, she questions androcentric (malecentered) traditioning: “whether the original narrator or author in an androcentric way has told history that was not androcentric at all.”(31) She points out that the New Testament does not transmit a single androcentric statement or sexist story of Jesus, although he lived and preached in a patriarchal culture In the fellowship of Jesus, women apparently did not play a marginal role, even though only a few references to women disciples survived the androcentric tradition and redaction process of the gospels.(32)

Those references lead Fiorenza to uncover the importance of women as apostolic witnesses of Jesus’ ministry, his death, his burial, and his resurrection and the tendency of the New Testament authors to “play down the women’s role as witnesses and apostles of the Easter event.”(33) She analyzes traces of women’s history in the New Testament to demonstrate the presence of a vigorous female ministry and participation in early Christianity. When the evidence about women is presented, there is a mass of data to show that Gal 3:28 was not an abstract ideal but a political reality in the early Church.(34)

Fiorenza further questions the interpretive models used by scholars whose understanding of reality is androcentric. She goes beyond the thematic approach of “women and the Bible” or “female imagery for God” to argue for an interpretive model of early Christianity that accounts for the data about women disciples, apostles, prophets, teachers, missionaries, patrons, founders and leaders of congregations and the importance of women and the divine female principle in the Gnostic communities, the complaint, for example, of Tertullian in the second century that women dared “to teach, to debate, to exorcise, to promise cures, probably even to baptize.” She suggests that the early Christian writings are not objective, factual history but pastorally engaged writings that, despite the androcentric traditioning process, reveal another story.(35)

Fiorenza shows that the orthodoxy/heresy framework of interpretation has already given way to a theory of ecclesial patriarchalization occurring over centuries through the New Testament and patristic eras, understandable sociologically, but argued by historians as necessary for the Church's survival and thus used to legitimate the historical subordination of women. In contrast, she offers an egalitarian model of early Christianity as a conflict movement, based on the insight that Christianity was not originally patriarchal nor integrated into patriarchal society.(36) That the Jesus movement and the early Christian missionary movement were countercultural, radically egalitarian, and inclusive, accounts for the evidence about women (and marginal people) in the Jesus traditions and about women (and the abolition of social distinctions of race, religion, sex, and class) in the early missionary traditions.

Only an egalitarian model for the reconstruction of early Christian history can do justice to both the egalitarian traditions of women's leadership in the church as well as to the gradual process of adaptation and theological justification of the dominant patriarchal Greco-Roman culture and society.(37)

Fiorenza works from an interest in the past that attempts to free its emancipatory impulses and traditions for the future, and with an implicit notion of the ambiguity of religious symbols and texts, when she suggests that "a biblical interpretation which is concerned with the meaning of the Bible in a post-patriarchal culture" would have to hold that "biblical revelation and truth about women are found . . . in those texts which transcend and criticize their patriarchal culture," that "such texts should be used to evaluate and to judge the patriarchal texts of the Bible." (38)

From these examples of historical and biblical studies, one concludes to the profoundly ambiguous character of the Christian tradition and its symbolism when read from a contemporary feminist perspective. At the same time, the question raised by Mary Daly and Carol Christ - of the essentially patriarchal and so irreformable character of Christianity's core symbolism - is itself brought into question. Ruether's critique of the ideologies of sexism is itself based on basic Christian symbols of love: equality, mutuality, reciprocity, service in the context of the prophetic traditions of the Bible. Tribble and Fiorenza use the countervoices of the Bible as theoretical and practical witness against traditional sexist interpretations. Each finds in the tradition itself not merely "something more" to affirm but a more that bears within itself the moment of negation. These biblical and historical studies suggest that theology too, when interpreted from a feminist perspective, will yield a similar dialectic.

Theological Considerations

Feminist theology is just beginning to address central theological symbols of Christianity from a systematic perspective. The implications of feminism for the doctrines of the human person, sin and grace, and ministry have been the immediate issues.(39) The most important and difficult symbols, however, because of their centrality in the tradition and the issue of maleness, are the doctrines of God and of Christ. The work of Tribble, Fiorenza, and Ruether, however, undercuts the claim that these symbols are intrinsically

patriarchal, that they necessarily legitimate the subordination of women. In Tribble's study:

The repetition of the word *God* establishes similarity between God and the human creatures, while the addition of the word *the-image-of* connotes their differences. Here the lack of any formal similarity between the two components suggests a semantic disparity. Thus, this latter metaphor saves the former from idolatry by witnessing to the transcendent creator who is neither male nor female nor a combination of the two. Only in the context of this otherness can we truly perceive the image of God as male and female.(40)

Fiorenza writes:

The fatherhood of God radically prohibits any ecclesial patriarchal self-understanding. The lordship of Christ categorically rules out any relationship of dominance within the Christian community. According to the gospel tradition Jesus radically rejected all relationships of dependence and domination.(41)

And in a similar vein, Ruether:

Traditional theological images of God as father have been the sanctification of sexism and hierarchalism precisely by defining this relationship of God as father to humanity in a domination-subordination model and by allowing ruling-class males to identify themselves with this divine fatherhood in such a way as to establish themselves in the same kind of hierarchial relationship to women and lower classes. Jesus, however, refers to God as father in such a way as to overthrow this . . . relationship of the rulers over the ruled.(42)

Stressing themes of the otherness of God in the Bible, and iconoclasm egalitarianism, and service in the ministry and message of Jesus and in early Christianity, however important, does not suffice. These historical themes must be brought to explicit theological, ethical, and practical reflection. For as Daly and others point out, Jesus was a male; the dominant biblical images for God are male. And inherently male symbols are no help to alienated women because they have functioned so effectively in history to legitimate the subordination of women. This point may not be trivialized. Feminist reflection on the doctrine of God and Christology which shows that God is not male and that Jesus' maleness is a purely contingent fact must further attend to the effective history of these doctrines, their practical and political uses. Only if the effects of these symbols and doctrines are transformed now and in the future can it be claimed that the symbols are not intrinsically patriarchal, that they can be made available to women. A pragmatic criterion of the future emerges which holds that the truth of theological formulation lies in its effects.(43) Given the effects of the past, any adequate contemporary theology of the doctrine of God or of Christology must unmask past ideological uses of the symbols and attend to the transformative, ethical, and futural horizons of interpretation. The contemporary hermeneutic situation includes both past and future in its "applicative"

moment. And given the universality of the hermeneutic viewpoint, this applies to any responsible theology, not just “liberation” theology.

Theology reflects on the symbols of God and Christ given us by the Bible and centuries of tradition. Each symbol is partial, embedded in a cluster of symbols and a network of myths out of which its meaning arises. It is the symbol, in Ricoeur’s aphorism, which gives rise to thought and which bears within itself both regressive and anticipatory possibilities. Thus the symbols for God, whether mother or father, king or servant, warrior God or God of slaves, intrinsically demand their own negation. The fatherhood of God bears its own critique and transcendence of human fatherhood, especially in the Christian narrative perspective of Jesus’ radical relativization of all family ties and affirmation of God’s closeness.(44) All the symbols yield finally to awareness that none of the pictures depicts God; none of the symbols grasps the transcendent. They can only be interpreted anew, in succeeding historical situations, “constantly needing,” in Schleiermacher’s phrase, “to be refashioned for these present times.”

The interpretative framework of our time must include critique of the social effects and ideological uses of symbols and doctrines of God as well as ethical and transformative application to the present situation. While feminist theology points out the false uses of an idolatrous male god and its damaging effects on women, on other oppressed groups, and on nature, its further task is to search out a doctrine of God which is related to the intellectual, practical, and ethical concerns of the present situation of women and which suggests transformative or emancipative possibilities for the future. At present it may reassert the not-yet, eschatological dimension of the Bible, or the powerful tradition of negative theology, the ultimately hidden God, the mystery and final incomprehensibility of God. Beyond these negations, however, it continues to affirm God’s intimacy to persons and to the human community in its present experience. (45)

Contemporary interpretations of the doctrine of God have in fact developed concepts which, while maintaining the transcendence of God, affirm God as involved in the ordinary experience of women and men in this world. “There is a theological insistence, rooted in interpretations of the Bible and of contemporary experience, that the God of Christian faith, while remaining God, is intimate to the joy and the pain ... the struggle of human existence and comes to be known precisely there.”(46) Such discussions, beginning in the sixties, reveal common themes: the mystery of human experience and its transcendent source or horizon; temporality, the future, and the historical process; human autonomy, freedom, and responsibility; ultimate human dependence and limit, fundamental trust, the reasonableness of belief in God in one’s individual life. These themes are open to critical feminist appropriation insofar as they have moved beyond parent/child models of the divine/human relationship: conceptions of God as future, as the enabling source of human freedom and autonomy, as the ground of trust in the experience of the self and its possibilities of actualization and self-transcendence.(47) More recently, political and liberation theologies, with their criticism of a privatized, individualistic understanding of God and of human persons, and their attention to the history of the suffering of oppressed groups, have developed similar themes in relation to

the collective struggles of humankind for liberation in a social and political apprehension of God's reality and character in corporate human existence.(48)

It is precisely here, I believe, in the collective interests of human liberation, that Christian feminist theology is self-critical as well as critical of the tradition, is willing to relativize - not trivialize or negate - its claims in relation to other social and political issues and to fully human religious issues of finitude, suffering, death, hope, transformation - the question of God. For this feminism relates itself, as much separatist feminist thought does not, to wider concerns: other liberation movements, social reconstruction, distributive justice, ecology, and masculinity (not men) as a system of hierarchies and dominating, exploitative, manipulative powers.(49) It sees feminism itself - the woman - as the focal symbol, the original "other" in a culture and society which generates a series of oppressive relationships. It is a peculiarly powerful symbol, at once collective and closely personal. Transformation of the male/female relational system and the analogous series of exploitative relationships parallels new interpretation of the doctrine of God in relation to the self, human freedom, autonomy, the future, and to collective struggles for justice.(50)

In Christology, feminist criticism has attended to the uses of the maleness of Jesus as legitimating dominating systems in family, church, and society (e.g., headship) and to messages of self-sacrifice, sacrificial love and *imitatio Christi* that have been detrimental to the essential self-affirmation of women. It is clear why Christian feminism has focused on the ministry and message of Jesus in his acceptance of women and prophetic reversals of societal and familial orders. Jesus' maleness is understood theologically as purely contingent in the light of the patristic dictum about the Incarnation: "what was not assumed is not redeemed." In a profound sense, Jesus' sex does not make any difference for feminists, whose cause is, finally, to emancipate sexuality from its distorted societal and religious valorization, to overcome and transform traditional dualisms into a broader pluralism which accounts for the variety of human qualities, talents, choices, to move beyond anatomy as destiny in human valuation. But such an affirmation may not be made too soon; it is a projection of a future possibility if and when the maleness of Jesus ceases to be used theologically, ethically, and ecclesiastically. Jesus as the Christ is affirmed by feminist women only after a series of negations.

At the same time, recent developments in Christology offer possibility for critical feminist appropriation in their emphasis on the truly human Jesus and the story of his conflict with dominant powers as the revelation of God. A searching Christology (Rahner), the Logos as creative transformation (Cobb), human suffering, oppression, and liberation in the cross of Jesus (Moltmann), active discipleship of Jesus in the cause of justice (Sobrino), the rhetoric of inclusion of all human concerns (van Bieck), the prophetic iconoclastic Christ (Ruether) are Christological interpretations which transcend traditional biases toward women; images of lordly power, domination, and triumphalism have been left behind.(51) Emphasis on the future *humanum* as the liberating "wholeness that we seek" is especially clear in the hermeneutical Christology of Edward Schillebeeckx, who argues that it is necessary "to have a constant movement to and fro between the biblical interpretation of Jesus and the interpretation of our present-day

experiences,” that the story of Jesus is revelatory only if it effectively discloses that sought-for *humanum* in contemporary terms. (52)

What place has Jesus of Nazareth in this whole history of human suffering in quest of meaning, liberation and salvation? . . . Jesus’ universal significance cannot be affirmed unmediated or by some abstractly objectivizing argument, apart from the continuing, concrete effects of Jesus’ history.

What speaks to us in Jesus is his being human, and thereby opening up to us the deepest possibilities for our own life, and in this God is expressed. The divine revelation in Jesus directs us to the [human] mystery.(53)

The present-day experience of Christian women finds, in the New Testament and traditional doctrines of Christ, symbols of the human to negate and something more to affirm, both memory and anticipation. The negative critique of past and present uses of Christ to legitimate the subordination of women (and other groups in Christian history) emerges from the positive, new, even surprising contemporary and futural apprehension of the revelation of God in Jesus: his unconditional assurance that humanity’s cause is God’s cause, that the God of “pure positivity” wills human beings to live, that God gives a future to the hopeless in us. Feminists do not project an alien cause on the figure of Jesus. It is rather through a religious critique of symbols, “on inner symbolic grounds,” that feminism can identify with Christ and the world of possibility he projects.

Women’s religious protest and affirmation is a grace for our times. In its protest about the clear and real issue of women, it raises to view the scandal of the past and its confident, often idolatrous assertions about God and Christ and human persons. In its courageous iconoclasm and its symbolic association with the other “others” of history and the present, it exposes and denies the splits, dichotomies, manipulation, and exploitation - the sin of our times from a particular and practical perspective. In its new apprehension of God and of Christ, it affirms a vision of human wholeness, integrity, and community, a genuinely new Christian consciousness that extends inclusion, mutuality, reciprocity, and service beyond its own causes. In so doing, Christian feminism transcends itself and enables the tradition to transcend itself, to become the hope, the future, that is promised.

Footnotes

1. Carol P. Christ, “The New Feminist Theology: A Review of the Literature,” *Religious Studies Review* 3 (1977) 203-12; cf. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973).

2. Christ, “*New Feminist Theology*” 211, 205.

3. *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon, 1978).

4. Cf. Zsuzsanna Budapest, *The Feminist Book of Lights and Shadows* (Luna Publications, 1976); Starhawk (Miriam Simos), *The Spiral Dance: The Rebirth of the*

Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979); Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Rising: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon, 1980); Naomi Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions* (Boston: Beacon, 1979); Penelope Washburn, *Becoming Woman* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977); and the essays in Part 4 of *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979).

5. Rosemary Ruether, "A Religion for Women: Sources and Strategies," *Christianity and Crisis* 39, no. 19 (Dec. 10, 1979) 307-11, at 310.

6. Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Goddesses and Witches: Liberation and Countercultural Feminism," *Christian Century* 97, no. 28 (Sept. 10-17, 1980) 842-47, at 846.

7. *Ibid.* 847.

8. *Beyond God the Father* 13-43, 44-68, 69-97; *Gyn/Ecology* 37-38. Cf. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Random House, 1952) xix ff. for the concept of the "other."

9. *Beyond God the Father* 11-12, 69-97.

10. Cf. *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979).

11. See Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience in the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1980) 162-67.

12. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury, 1975), esp. section 2 of Part II, 235-344, and Supplement 11, 491-98; cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1976) 912, 39-95.

13. Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon, 1968) 301-17, at 311; Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge: MIT, 1981) 169-93. The phrase "ethical and productive distance" is Paul Ricoeur's, in "Ethics and Culture: Habermas and Gadamer in Dialogue," *Philosophy Today* 17 (1973) 164-65, cited in McCarthy, *Critical Theory* 192. The debate between Gadamer and Habermas is clarified in their respective articles in *Continuum* 8 (1970) 77-95, 123-33.

14. *Knowledge and Human Interests* 317. Mary Knutsen, whose forthcoming study *Shrieking Heaven: Resources in Critical Social Theory, Psychoanalysis, and Interpretation Theory for Feminist Theology* will provide a thorough discussion of these issues, provided helpful criticism in this context. For another use of critical theory in theology, see Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Critical Social Theory and Christology:

Toward an Understanding of Atonement and Redemption as Emancipatory Solidarity,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 30 (1975) 63-110.

15. Ricoeur, “Ethics and Culture,” *ibid.*

16. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University, 1964) 53-67, and *Systematic Theology* 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951) 238-41.

17. *Theology of Culture* 67.

18. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1970) 3-56, 494-551; *Interpretation Theory* 45-69.

19. *Freud and Philosophy* 459-551, 496; *Interpretation Theory* 45-46. The as yet unpublished work of Patricia Harrington on the symbol of the Virgin of Guadalupe was particularly important in suggesting the helpfulness of Tillich and Ricoeur for a feminist theory of symbolism.

20. Cf. David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1975) 32-34, 43-48, and “Particular Questions within General Consensus,” *Consensus in Theology?* ed. Leonard Swidler (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 33-39.

21. Ruether, “A Religion for Women” 309: “All significant works of culture have depth and power to the extent that they have been doing something else besides justifying sexism. They have been responding to the fears of death, estrangement and oppression and the hopes for life, reconciliation and liberation of humanity.” I have attempted to use Tracy’s model of critical correlation in “Theological Anthropology and the Experience of Women,” *Chicago Studies* 19 (1980) 113-28.

22. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Sexism and Conversion,” *Network* 9, no. 3 (May-June 1981) 15-22; cf. also Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: Seabury, 1975) 115-33, 162-85.

23. See, e.g., *Women of Spirit*, ed. Ruether and McLaughlin, and *Women in American Religion*, ed. Janet Wilson James (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1980).

24. See, e.g., *Women and Religion: A Feminist Sourcebook of Christian Thought*, ed. Elizabeth Clark and Herbert Richardson (New York: Harper and Row, 1977); *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974); Margaret A. Farley, “Sources of Sexual Inequality in the History of Christian Thought,” *Journal of Religion* 56 (1976) 162-76.

25. *New Woman New Earth* 24-31; cf. also Elizabeth Janeway, *Man’s World, Woman’s Place: A Study in Social Mythology* (New York: Dell, 1971), and *Woman, Culture, and*

Society, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University, 1974).

26. Christ, "New Feminist Theology" 206.

27. *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 4.

28. *Ibid.* 7.

29. *Ibid.* 22; cf. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* 64.

30. *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* 201-2; cf. also Phyllis Bird, "Images of Women in the Old Testament," *Religion and Sexism* 41-88; Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Women* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979) 75-159.

31. "Interpreting Patriarchal Traditions," *The Liberating Word*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 49

32. *Ibid.* 52; cf. Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations* 161-356.

33. *Ibid.* 53.

34. Cf. "Word, Spirit and Power: Women in Early Christian Communities," *Women of Spirit* 30-70; "Women in the Early Christian Movement," *Womanspirit Rising* 84-92.

35. "'You Are Not To Be Called Father,'" *Cross Currents* 29 (1979) 301-23.

36. It is important to distinguish here between a cultural and a religious tradition, and each of these within both Judaism and Christianity. Religious tradition in each case represents a transcendent horizon. It is not the case that countercultural Christianity is to be seen over against Judaism as a patriarchal unity; the Jewish religious tradition reveals its own transcendent dynamic. I am grateful to Susan Shapiro, who brought this important distinction to my attention. Cf. also Judith Plaskow, "Christian Feminism and Anti-Judaism," *Cross Currents* 28 (1978) 306-9.

37. "'You Are Not To Be Called Father'" 318.

38. "Interpreting Patriarchal Traditions" 61. Similar approaches are followed, in the evangelical tradition, by Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, *All We're Meant To Be* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1974), and, in the Roman Catholic ordination discussion, my essays "The Church in Process: Engendering the Future," *Women and Catholic Priesthood: An Expanded Vision*, ed. Anne Marie Gardiner (New York: Paulist, 1976) 68-88, and "Women's 'Place,' Ordination, and Christian Thought: Old Answers to New Questions," *Listening* 13 (1978) 158-75.

39. See, e.g., Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *Womanspirit Rising* 23-42; Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace*; Carr, "Theological Anthropology and the Experience of Women"; on women and ministry, see the bibliography by Hyang Sook Chung Yoon in *Women and Priesthood*, ed. Carroll Stuhlmueller (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1978) 179-85, and Anne E. Patrick, "Women and Religion: A Survey of Significant Literature, 1965-1974," *TS* 36 (1975) 752-57.

40. *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* 200-201.

41. "You Are Not To Be Called Father" 317.

42. *New Woman New Earth* 65.

43. See Edward Schillebeeckx, *God the Future of Man* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968) 181-86.

44. See David Bakan, *And They Took Themselves Wives: The Emergence of Patriarchy in Western Civilization* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979); Robert Hammerton-Kelly, *God the Father: Theology and Patriarchy in the Teaching of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979). Diane Tennis, in "The Loss of the Father God: Why Women Rage and Grieve," *Christianity and Crisis* 41, no. 10 (June 8, 1981) 164-70, makes too literal and direct a move, I believe, from human fatherhood to God, bypassing the moments of negation or relativization in interpreting the symbol.

45. Cf. Daly, *Beyond God the Father* 37-38; Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Total Presence: The Language of Jesus and the Language of Today* (New York: Seabury, 1980) 25-36.

46. Anne Carr, "The God Who Is Involved," *Theology Today* 38 (1981) 314.

47. See, e.g., Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978) 24-89; Edward Schillebeeckx, *God and Man* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969) and *God the Future of Man* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Idea of God and Human Freedom* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973) and *What is Man?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967); Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), *Reaping the Whirlwind: A Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Seabury, 1976), and *Message and Existence: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1979); David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*; Schubert Ogden, *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965); Hans Küng, *Does God Exist?* (New York: Doubleday, 1980).

48. See, e.g., Johannes B. Metz, *Theology of the World* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969); *Faith in History and Society* (New York: Seabury, 1980); Juan Luis Segundo, *Our Idea of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1974); Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973).

49. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Feminist Theology as a Critical Liberation Theology," *TS* 36 (1975) 605-26.

50. Cf. Margaret Farley, "New Patterns of Relationship: Beginnings of a Moral Revolution," *TS* 36 (1975) 627-46; Anne Wilson Schaefer, *Women's Reality* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1981).

51. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* 295 ff.; John B. Cobb Jr., *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973); Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1978); Frans Josef van Beeck, *Christ Proclaimed: Christology as Rhetoric* (New York: Paulist, 1979); Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Christology and Feminism," *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 45-56.

52. *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury, 1979) 606-12; *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Seabury, 1980) 76.

53. *Jesus* 623; *Christ* 76.