



## Re-Contextualizing Theology

By [Rosemary Radford Ruether](#)

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In his essay on "Black Theology in American Religion," James Cone speaks of the "warring ideals" that have divided African identity and American identity. These same warring ideals continue today for black theologians in the debate between African and Christian identities. For Cone, black theology is distinctly Christian, but contextualized in black American experience with its roots in African culture.

This same kind of dilemma could be posed in the context of any number of alternative theological perspectives arising today among Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asians. And this also applies for indigenous and liberation theologies being developed in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, those worlds that were Christianized primarily as a result of European colonialism. For each, there is a question how to re-contextualize Christianity in an alternative community, especially a community marginalized and oppressed by those very people who brought the Gospel, and also a community with distinct and different cultural traditions from those of Western European Christians.

### I

The re-contextualization of theology arises in a somewhat different way for women. Unlike subordinated races who have preserved some remnants of an alternative culture from a period prior to their enslavement, the subordination of women takes place at the heart of every culture and thus deprives women of an alternative culture with which to express their identity over against the patriarchal culture of family and society. Some cultures give women distinct religious rituals and cults and quasi-autonomous social and economic groupings, providing some basis for a women's culture or "sub-culture." But even these female groupings remain largely invisible to the public culture, defined as male

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culture. Western Protestant Christian society since the Reformation has largely eliminated separate female religious communities, such as women's religious orders. Female guilds also largely disappeared in early modern Europe. Protestant women reinvented many women's groups in the nineteenth century, but the price of integration into the dominant church and educational systems has tended in recent times to mean the elimination of these separate women's organizations.

The question of Christian identity rooted in the Bible is also raised in a more radical way for feminists than it is for ethnic liberation theologies. Black Theology, Asian, and Hispanic theology tend to see their conflicts with Christianity as going back four or five hundred years with the rise of those forms of racism, colonialism, and slave economies that shaped their particular group into an exploited and dependent folk. The Bible, on the other hand, is seen as a positive side of a liberation gospel that can be used to criticize this later church tradition. For American blacks, this confidence in the Bible as a document that is "on their side" comes from identifying themselves with Israel, the people enslaved by Pharaoh and liberated by God.

Forgotten is the question that sorely plagued nineteenth century abolitionists, namely, that the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is predominately "pro-slavery" in the literal sense of both taking a slave society for granted and also justifying it for Israel and for the church. Since slavery was an integral part of the patriarchal family, as it was understood in the Bible, the same passages that justify the subordination of women also justify the maintenance of the master-slave relationship. If contemporary black American theology dealt with the integral relationship of sexism, paternalism, and slavery within patriarchy, it might find itself closer to the questions and issues of feminist theology.

For women, it is clear that the Bible is a patriarchal document that both assumes throughout an androcentric perspective, in which the male is the normative human person and interlocutor with God, and which explicitly justifies the subordination of women by myths of women's intrinsic inferiority, dependency, and sinfulness. The liberation texts that marginated ethnic and economic groups draw upon as their biblical basis do not address the subordination of women within patriarchy as such, but arise from the consciousness of males within economically and ethnically deprived groups. Thus, the application of such texts to the liberation of women involves a more radical translation and re-contextualization where not merely the actors but the sorts of social systems addressed have changed.

## II

Women, faced with the androcentrism and misogyny of the Bible, ask in a much more radical way the question whether it is possible to be feminist and Christian. Some feminists have resolved this conflict in the negative. For them, it is patently clear that the

Bible, and the two major religions that spring from it, as well as other historical religions, such as



Islam, have, as their essential agenda, the subordination of women. "If God is male, the male is God," Mary Daly put it succinctly some years ago. Patriarchal religion is the way that male domination sacralizes itself by making God and all the religious symbols of the divine-human relationship into sacred reiterations of the male domination and female subordination.

Some women attempt to retrieve an alternative cultural base by seeking repressed, female-identified religions from some period before the rise of patriarchy. By claiming that these pre-patriarchal goddess religions survived in subcultures on the margins of Christianity in pagan groups villified as "witches" by the church, and correlating this alternative culture with feminist consciousness today, goddess feminists construct a "lost history" of the religion and culture of women's religion which they see as "rising again" in their own movements.

Other feminists are less sure that such an alternative culture and religion is available in this way. The story of the pre-patriarchal women's religion seems more like the *in illo tempore* of an attractive myth than real history. What they can recover of the religions of ancient goddess worshippers and late medieval women accused of witchcraft does not sound very much like women's liberation. Moreover, they are unwilling to surrender the biblical texts about justice and redemption, however much women may have been ignored in those texts. But that means that they must continually wrestle with the basis for their efforts to synthesize feminism and Christianity into a distinctively new cultural expression.

Does a feminist, liberation Christianity simply operate out of a hermeneutical circle of biblical texts which have some justice perspective and contemporary women's experience? Or must one throw the net of cultural sources and resources more widely? Can one explore marginated Christian groups condemned as "heresies," such as gnostics, Montanists, and others who seem to have female symbols of divinity and gave greater religious authority to women? Can one explore non-biblical religions with female images of the divine and enter into dialogue with Goddess religionists today? Can one write new stories out of women's religious experience today and make them paradigmatic for our religious consciousness? In short, given the poverty of the official Christian tradition for symbols and stories affirmative of women, why should women set any cultural limits to their search for alternative sources for their liberation?

Although the feminist version of this issue is particularly obvious, this ambiguity exists also in other forms of liberation theology that seek to contextualize themselves in the older cultures that were swept aside by Western European Christian proselytizing. Latin Christianity, as it was shaped into its successful form in the late patristic period, was a

synthesis of New Testament faith and Greco-Roman culture, particularly philosophical culture. Moreover, the church shaped itself institutionally by modeling itself after the political institutions of the Roman



empire. Both as an organization and as a culture, Western Christianity made itself in the model of an imperialist society that claimed for its culture universal normativeness. To seek a liberation Christianity is to turn around that process by which the Christian church identified itself within an imperial ruling class over slaves, women, and conquered peoples. To seek an indigenous Christianity in the context of Asian culture, African culture, or Native American culture is to dissolve that process by which Christianity identified its normative cultural vehicle in a philosophical tradition that began with Plato.

These two agendas, liberation and cultural indigenization, do not always mix easily. Latin Americans, who were the pioneers in Third World liberation theology, come from a European Christian ruling class who suppressed and largely destroyed the indigenous culture. Thus, it was easier for them to raise the question of liberation without the accompanying question of indigenization in older non-Christian cultures. There are some Latin American liberation theologians, however, who seek to relate the preferential option for the poor with the folk religion of the poor and soon find themselves in a world beneath the notice of the educated European ruling classes where remnants of ancient pre-Christian culture survive.

For Asians and Africans, this question is more insistent because, for them, the non-Christian religions and cultures are very much alive, and they, as Christians, are a minority among their own people. So, necessarily, they must speak both of a liberation theology and of an indigenous theology that takes seriously a dialogue and perhaps even a new synthesis with non-Christian culture.

### III

The conflict between these two agendas was illustrated for me recently during a conference on religious education for liberation held at the Protestant Theological Seminary in Matanzas, Cuba. One prominent group in the mainly Presbyterian faculty was strongly identified with a liberation theology rooted in the dialogue between Marxism and Christianity. For them, Marxism contained, in secular form, many themes rooted in the critical prophetic tradition of the Bible. One might suggest that there may be some interesting affinity here between Marxism and Calvinism, specifically with the Calvinist traditions of predestination, zealous public enforcement of morality, and the work ethic. For the Christian Marxists, the atheism of Marxism can be understood as an unconscious criticism, not of true biblical religion, but of an idolatrous religion that identified God with the power of the ruling classes.

Another section of the faculty, while no less supportive of the revolution, wanted to go beyond this synthesis of Calvinist Christianity and Marxism. These faculty members tended to be more open to the Spanish Catholic heritage of Cuba, but, more particularly, they sought a sympathetic hearing for Afro-Cuban spiritism or *Santeria*, a Yoruba



religion thinly veiled by Catholic saints which is the major folk religion of most Cubans, especially those of African descent. It was clear that the tension between these two agendas of liberation and indigenization were very deep and volatile within the faculty. For Calvinist-Marxists, comfortable with a liberation critique of the "idolatry" of the religion of the ruling classes, conversation with other "idolaters," Spanish Catholic or African, was scarcely imaginable. For the second group, it was clear that a new Cuban Christianity must not simply adopt an ideology of revolution, but must seek a new cultural synthesis based on the whole of the Cuban historical experience. The difference between these two perspectives was more than an intellectual difference. It was almost a wholly different sense of being. One has a sense that these two groups were speaking out of different "sides of the brain." What was fascinating was simply that they managed to coexist on the same faculty at all.

#### IV

Feminists tend to have a deep suspicion of dichotomized ways of thought and behavior. Whenever two apparently opposite and mutually exclusive options are set in conflict, our suspicion is that some larger context where both have their place has been lost. And so it is with the apparently irreconcilable differences between a biblically-based feminist liberation theology and a feminist spirituality based on a revival of the religion of the Goddess. One suspects that at work here are two different modes of being that have been dichotomized in Western culture and need to find a new whole.

Certainly, for me, the biblical liberation tradition is essential to my feminist (and not just my Christian) identity. It cannot be discarded simply because it has been formulated in an androcentric and ethnocentric optic. It is in these biblical texts that we find the basic shift in the social location of religion which delegitimizes all religion functioning as the sacral ideology of the ruling classes, by locating the word and will of God on the side of the oppressed and despised of history. The denunciation of social practices which "grind the faces of the poor and deprive the widow and the orphan" is elaborated in the prophets and the Gospels into a critique of religion as well; not just a critique of other people's religion, but a critique of the deformation of biblical religion itself into forms and rituals that sacralize social oppression, the privileges of religious and social elites, and which ignores God's agenda of justice and mercy.

This denunciation of oppression and oppressive religion is complemented in prophetic theology by an annunciation of a new social order, a new humanity, a new heaven and earth where "everyone will sit under their own vine and fig tree and none will be afraid";

where "the lion will lie down with the lamb and the little child will lead them"; where "none will hurt and destroy in all my Holy Mountain"; where all creation will be at peace. Even now, God is at work in history to rend and to heal, to "put the mighty down from their thrones and to lift up the lowly."



This pattern of prophetic theology is precious to all concerned with social liberation because it is the cultural prototype of all such movements in Western society. Feminism, too, partakes, even if unawares, of this same cultural pattern in which the denunciation of systems of injustice, and their supporting ideologies, and the annunciation of a new vision of liberation, and a historical project of change, are appropriated and applied to the issues of sexism, patriarchal ideologies of women's inferiority, and hopes and prospects for a new humanity of women and men liberated from gender hierarchy.

But this language of ethical struggle and judgment presupposes an alienated world in conflict between a distorted and evil present reality and a lost option pointing to an imagined future. By contrast, those "nature" religions suppressed by biblical religions and dubbed by them "pagan" (a word which actually means "the countryside," although Jews and Christians have invested it with the meaning of "idolaters" and "demon-worshippers"), often seem to preserve elements of a mode of being where humanity and nature, body and mind, male and female, have not parted company, but remain in the dreaming innocence of an unfallen world. In these religions, the cycles of the seasons and the planets, the rhythms of the body, are the clues to harmonious relationship with ourselves, each other, and the world around us, and with the Great Mother who sustains us all. Harvest homes, winter and summer solstice celebrations, vernal and autumnal equinoxes, puberty and menopause rites, sustain a world where ritual harmonizes rather than dichotomizes the relationship to the reality in and around us.

A feminist liberation theology needs to be able to speak both words. Since patriarchy, with its many forms and expressions of alienation and oppression, still very much shapes our minds and social systems, one cannot pretend to live in an innocent world of the childhood of humanity where all that is is good. One needs to engage in the struggle against evil and to have an ethical language for our denunciation and our hope. But one needs also those foretastes of unalienated life that allow us to enter into the promised land and to taste its presence. The feminist dialogue between biblical and pagan spiritualities seems to me to be seeking a way to bring those two modes of being into right relationship with each other. In so doing, it perhaps seeks to heat the most basic and ancient split of human culture and existence.