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NO GIRLS ALLOWED? ARE THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS INEVITABLY SEXIST?¹

Rita M. Gross

No religion labels itself “patriarchal” or “sexist”. Instead, religions generally teach their members that in “our” religion, women are treated properly, indeed, in the only possible manner. However, the same religion may criticize the treatment of women in *other* religions. This kind of critique reveals an interesting value judgment. All religions agree that women should be treated properly, not abused or mistreated. Some religions, in fact, argue that their current norms represent an improvement in the treatment of women over what their predecessors did. Mistreatment of women is only found in other traditions. Therefore, most people grow up believing that women are well-treated in their religion, if they think about the status of women at all. Even when a religion teaches that women are inferior to men or that women must submit themselves to men, women are especially encouraged to regard these teachings as valuable and useful, rather than problematic. Many religious organizations actively promote the view that feminism is an anti-religious movement and a great danger to the faithful.

¹ This paper is a condensed version of Chapter Four of my book *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 105-48.

Nevertheless, no scholar or theologian who uses feminist² definitions of humanity would pronounce a clean bill of health on any of the world's major religious traditions. Applying standard definitions of patriarchy or sexism to any of the great world religions quickly reveals sexist teachings and institutions. In many cases, men are thought to be spiritually superior to women, more likely to meet the tradition's definition of the ideal believer or practitioner. The birth of males is often preferred to the birth of females; women who give birth to males are rewarded, while those who do not suffer. In most cases, men hold most or all of the roles of authority and prestige in religious organizations. From these positions, they control and dictate the norms of the tradition for all women. Women are often not invited or allowed to participate in the interpretation or construction of tradition. Often women's ability to participate in key rituals is severely limited and they are almost never allowed to be the leaders of such rituals. In the private sphere, men are given authority over females in their households, and women are taught to submit to that authority. Some religious teachings blame women for the limitations and painfulness of human existence. Images of ultimate reality or the divine are frequently male in gender, while female images are forbidden and called idolatry. By feminist standards of evaluation, all these extremely common religious practices and judgments are patriarchal and sexist, hence degrading to women and inappropriate.

Basic Issues in Feminist Theology

In my view, the most difficult question facing a feminist who discovers her traditional religion to be patriarchal and sexist is what to

² By a feminist definition of humanity, I mean that women are regarded as truly and completely human beings, not as adjuncts of men, who are regarded as the primary, important, or normative instance of the human. Therefore, all human concerns and interests would be available equally to women and to men. There would be freedom from the prison of gender roles, what I have long regarded as the fundamental goal and vision of feminism.

do next. Some of the bitterest disagreements within feminist theology concern this question. Will one continue to identify in some way with one of the major religions, despite its sexism? Or will one abandon that tradition as unworkable, but, still wanting a spiritual practice, take up a new, post-patriarchal religion? This question has divided feminists almost from the beginning.

Very early in the feminist theology movement, Carol Christ proposed names for these two points of view. In a 1977 article, she suggested that those feminists who sought to transform religion from within could be called “reformists”, while those who sought to develop a new, non-traditional feminist form of religion could be called “revolutionaries”.³ This distinction is also central to the 1979 collection *WomanSpirit Rising*. In their introduction to the book, Christ and co-editor Judith Plaskow wrote:

*While feminists agree on the general outlines of the critique of Jewish and Christian theology, ... they very much disagree on the reformability of the tradition. For some, the vision of transcendence within the tradition is seen as an authentic core of revelation, pointing toward freedom from oppression, a freedom they believe is articulated more clearly and consistently within tradition than without. Others believe that the prebiblical past or modern experience provide more authentic sources for feminist vision.*⁴

Almost immediately, many rejected these labels as hierarchical. “Revolutionaries”, the word seemed to imply, are more radical and, therefore, “better” than reformists,⁵ though Christ and Plaskow repeatedly insisted that no ranking of the positions was intended or

³ Carol P. Christ, “The New Feminist Theology: A Review of the Literature”, *Religious Studies Review* 3.4 (1977): 203-12.

⁴ Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, *WomanSpirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), 9.

⁵ Plaskow and Christ, *Weaving the Visions: Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 7.

implied. In my view, their terminology may or may not be unwise, but the distinction named by that terminology is real and basic, and the critical difference between the two positions is disagreement over how feminist vision is best served. The degree to which feminists retain personal links and loyalties with traditional religions, rather than how “radical” they are, is the dividing factor. In fact, some “reformists” are exceedingly radical in the changes they want to make in their traditions, but they maintain dialogue with their tradition and recognize kinship with it. “Revolutionaries”, though they sever links with the conventional religions, can be quite conservative in the way in which they identify with ancient traditions they are attempting to revive.

In choosing between these alternatives, two questions are uppermost. Each religious feminist must decide where her efforts at feminist transformation of religion will be most effective. Most “reformists” believe that a feminist transformation of a patriarchal religion has more hope of widespread acceptance than replacing current major religions with new religions created by women. But each feminist must also decide what she needs for her own spiritual survival. Most “revolutionaries” find that the frustration of trying to transform a patriarchal religion into a post-patriarchal religion is simply too agonizing to bear.

Before recounting the achievement of religious feminists who hold these two positions, it is important to highlight their common ground. Most importantly, both positions seek a common goal: feminist *transformation* of religion beyond patriarchy. Both schools also consider the experience of women to be the starting point of all feminist theology. Feminist theologians affirm that women’s experience is a religious authority of utmost importance, never to be overlooked or denied, never to be sacrificed in order to conform to external or traditional sources of authority, such as scripture, theology, or religious institutions. In valuing

women's experience as the primary religious authority, feminist theology makes three central claims.

First, *all* theological or world-constructive thinking is actually grounded in and derives from human experience, even in traditions that call the source of their authority "revelation". This conclusion is inevitable and unavoidable to anyone with any training in the cross-cultural comparative study of religion. The uniqueness of feminist theology is not that it is based on human experience, but that it recognizes and admits this foundation. As Rosemary Ruether has written:

*There has been a tendency to treat this principle of "experience" as unique to feminist theology...and to see it as distant from "objective" sources of truth of classical theologies. This seems to be a misunderstanding of the experimental base of all theological reflection. What have been called the objective sources of theology, Scripture and tradition, are themselves codified collective human experience.*⁶

The question is not whether theology is grounded in human experience; the question is *whose* experience is taken into account. The second major claim of feminist theology is that *women's* experience must be taken into account to create a viable religious tradition. Theological traditions that are based on male experience alone cannot speak to the full human experience. To quote Rosemary Ruether again:

The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women. Whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore, appraised as not redemptive. Theologically speaking, whatever diminishes the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic

⁶ Rosemary Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 12.

*nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption.*⁷

By the 1980s, many were claiming that the phrase “women’s experience” was too often conflated with the experience of white, middle-class, heterosexual women, and that this limitation called into question the validity of feminist theology. Some even questioned whether the phrase “women’s experience” made any sense because women differed so much on the basis of class, race, culture, sexual orientation, and religion, among others. I find this criticism unpersuasive. As a student of comparative religion, it has always been exceedingly clear to me that the phrase “women’s experience” cannot name a universal experience that all women share despite their differing cultures. Rather, the emphasis is that women’s experiences, whatever their cultures, must be taken seriously, in the same way that men’s experiences have always been taken seriously. Therefore, feminists should not abandon the phrase “women’s experience”, but always understand it to be in the plural: “women’s experiences”. Furthermore, in my view, feminist scholarship offers a significant advance over androcentric scholarship on this point. Androcentric scholarship *does* seek universal definitions, norms, and conclusions, while the founding insight of feminist scholarship is the discovery of human diversity. The experience of conversion from androcentrism to feminism often involves simply realizing that to be different is not to be wrong. That experience is radically relativizing, *especially* if it is accompanied by the cross-cultural knowledge that women’s experiences are also diverse. In this situation, it seems to me, that each feminist can do no more than write what she knows best, her own experience and understanding, as example and offering. It is inappropriate to criticize other feminists for not writing from other viewpoints because they could not possibly do so.

⁷ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 18-9.

The third claim of feminist theology is that all feminist theologians, whether “reformist” or “revolutionary”, take as our birthright the ability to “name reality”. This famous phrase originated with Mary Daly, who wrote that under patriarchy, “women have had the power of naming stolen from us”. She points out that in the second creation story in Genesis, the man names all the animals and the woman, who names nothing herself. Daly goes on to write, “Women are now realizing that the universal imposing of names by men has been false or partial.” Since, in her words, “to exist humanly is to name the self, the world, and God”,⁸ the work of feminist theologians, of whatever school, is critical to being human – not only to the humanity of women, but, in my view, to the humanity of men as well.

Feminist Transformations of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

Feminists seeking to transform major religions face remarkably similar problems.⁹ Therefore, one could expect them to use similar strategies to identify and counter practices and beliefs that harm women. The starting point for these strategies is often a text or teaching from their religion that supports a gender neutral and gender free vision.

Having identified such texts or teachings, feminists in many traditions typically proceed to make a distinction that both “revolutionaries” and anti-feminist traditionalists would reject: a distinction between aspects of the tradition that support of women’s empowerment and those that do not. Feminists takes the former to be inspiring, of lasting value and relevance, while understanding the latter to represent the vagaries of history and culture more than they represent the religion. This is not to say that empowering aspects of the religion can be separated from others in time; feminists in all traditions recognize

⁸ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 8.

⁹ See Leonard Grob, Riffat Hassan, and Haim Gordon, *Testimonies of Spirit: Women's and Men's Liberation* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).

that such a perfect moment or time never existed, that practices supporting gender equity have always co-existed with practices supporting patriarchy.

“Reformists” from a variety of perspectives would also probably agree that freedom and spiritual liberation are central to their traditions’ visions, though in different ways. They generally argue that in a patriarchal culture, a religion’s liberating messages are inevitably mixed up with patriarchal forms, imprisoned within them, and even identified with them. Because all of the world’s major religions emerged and evolved in patriarchal cultures, it is not surprising that their teachings have been tainted by patriarchal institutions and ways of thinking. But, since patriarchy and freedom are mutually exclusive, those male-dominated beliefs and institutions are, by definition, part of the culturally conditioned medium in which the religious tradition has taken form, not part of the more basic message of liberation. Reformers, therefore, propose that religion will be truer to its most valuable insights after it is stripped of its patriarchal forms. In fact, the religion itself, properly understood, calls people away from sexism and patriarchy toward equality and freedom – the goals of feminism. Thus, reformers argue that feminist reforms are not merely a side issue or a modern demand based on secular ideologies, but something deeply true to the religion’s heart and core.

In making and supporting such claims, feminist interpreters encounter similar problems. Two of the most basic ones concern working with traditional sources of religious authority, usually texts, that are patriarchal and sexist, and interpreting major teachings of the religion from a feminist perspective. We will examine how Jewish, Christian, and Muslim reformers have dealt with of these issues.

Feminists searching the Scriptures

The three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – rely heavily on scriptures that are believed to be revealed and to provide

an unalterable and supremely valuable charter for the faith. Feminist exegesis of the sacred text is especially important for these faiths because scripture is often used to support traditional notions of women's nature and roles. Study of classic texts is important, but much less crucial, for reformers of other traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and the East Asian perspectives.

At one level, analysis of sacred texts is an extremely complex scholarly enterprise, involving recognition that scriptures are variegated, sometimes self-contradictory documents whose pronouncements derive from the cultural experiences of their human authors. Detailed archaeological, historical, and linguistic study is required to become proficient in the field of historical critical Biblical scholarship, for example. This field daunts even many scholars of religion because its literature is so vast, complex, and specialized. (This method of scriptural study has rarely been applied to the Qu'an, the sacred text of Islam.)

However, most adherents of religious traditions do not read their scriptures in this way. Instead, most members of religious communities are taught to regard their scriptures as the doctrinal charter of their faith, emphasizing their timeless and contemporary relevance. Historical critical questions about who wrote which sacred texts when and for what purposes are less significant to most religious readers of sacred texts outside the academy. Because the latter reading style is so prevalent, it is important to look at its possibilities for feminist commentators. There is no doubt that the scriptures have traditionally been *interpreted* as favouring male dominance because they contain many explicitly patriarchal statements. But is also possible to make a case that the scriptures do not *require* patriarchal interpretation.

Feminist commentators support this claim in several ways. First, they make a distinction between *text* and *interpretation*, while asserting that there is no text apart from interpretation. All readings of a text, from the most patriarchal to the most egalitarian, are *interpretations* of that

text, not an unmediated understanding of what the text “really means”. This distinction is crucial, for those who have traditionally been entrusted with the authority to interpret texts frequently claim that their readings are more than interpretations. They may claim that the text *requires* certain male dominant practices, or that it forbids practices such as the ordination of women. But in fact what is happening is that such interpreters *favour* interpreting the text to require or forbid such practices. By insisting on the distinction between text and interpretation, feminist exegetes can return the debate to its real arena – present values – and ask why more conservative exegetes *prefer* male dominant interpretations of scripture to egalitarian ones.

Another distinction important to feminist exegesis is that between more and less basic narratives and statements found in scriptures. There is no question that, taken in isolation and interpreted literally, statements that subjugate women to men can be found in the scriptures of all three monotheistic religions. It is also clear that these scriptures came out of decidedly male dominated cultures. But no tradition takes all of the passages found in its voluminous scriptures literally. For example, the social milieu in which the scriptures of the three monotheistic religions were written presupposes not only male dominance, but also slavery and other social institutions no longer deemed appropriate by most people. Because social institutions such as slavery and male dominance were so common in the cultures in which the scriptures originated, the scriptures accommodated them. But accommodating them is not the same as requiring them. This distinction becomes clear when we notice that those who argue that male dominance is required by scripture do not generally argue that slavery is also required, even though scripture not only allows and condones it, even legislates its forms and conditions. It is clear that their preference for male dominance grows out of their present value systems, rather than out of their commitment to scripture.

They are not alone; every religious person chooses which passages of scripture to be highlighted and which to deemphasize or even ignore.

Feminist interpretations of scripture frequently claim that certain messages, themes, or passages are more central or more authoritative than those that are interpreted as male-dominant. For Biblical traditions, feminist visions often emphasize the prophetic tradition of protest, based on religious values, against injustice, as in this excerpt from Rosemary Ruether:

*Feminism, in claiming the prophetic-liberating tradition of Biblical faith as a norm through which to criticize the Bible, does not choose an arbitrary or a marginal idea in the Bible. It chooses a tradition that can be fairly claimed, on the basis of generally accepted Biblical scholarship, to be the central tradition, the tradition through which Biblical faith constantly renews itself and its own vision. Again, what is innovative in feminist hermeneutics is not the prophetic norm but rather feminism's appropriation of the norm for women... By including women in the prophetic norm, feminism sees what male prophetic thought generally had not seen: that once the prophetic norm is asserted to be central to Biblical faith, then patriarchy can no longer be maintained as authoritative.*¹⁰

Another important component of feminist textual study is translations. Many times over, translations themselves have proved to be subtly influenced by traditional male dominant interpretations; thus, the very *text* itself may be less patriarchal in the original language than in familiar translations.

One of the most influential demonstrations of this thesis is Phyllis Trible's work on the creation stories at the beginning of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. Though these narratives are not vital parts of most formal Jewish or Christian theology, they have been extremely

¹⁰ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 24.

influential in popular religion for centuries. Many popular Western perceptions of women as morally weak or evil can be traced to interpretations of these narratives; therefore, they are well worth close, word-by-word study. Trible demonstrates, for example, that the familiar Adam of most translations is not referred to as a male until the female human being is also present. *Adham*, the Hebrew term translated as Adam, is a generic term for humanity, and literally means “the earth creature”. Furthermore, in the first creation story, found in the first chapter of Genesis, this earth creature is *initially* created “in the image of God... male and female” (Gen. 1: 27). Thus, the wording of the first creation story indicates that the original “male and female” state of the earth creature mirrors the divine image, which is, therefore, also “male and female”. If this is the case, the “creation” of woman is actually the creation of the first couple out of the original earth creature. Finally, Trible shows that the so-called “curses” proclaimed after the “fall”, especially the curse put on Eve that her husband would rule over her, are *descriptions* of cultural conditions that limit both women and men, not statements regarding an ideal social arrangement that is *prescriptive* for humanity.¹¹

For Christians, New Testament interpretation is even more important than interpretations of the Hebrew Bible. The most famous feminist New Testament claim is well communicated by the title of Leonard Swidler’s 1971 article “Jesus Was a Feminist”.¹² Though this article, like some other Christian feminists’ work, is marred by anti-Jewish rhetoric, its general thesis has been widely accepted in Christian feminist circles. For example, Ruether writes:

¹¹ For a short version of Trible’s exegesis, see “Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Reread” in *Womanspirit Rising*, 74-83. See also “Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, and *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

¹² Leonard Swidler, “Jesus was a Feminist”, *Catholic World* (January 1971), 177-83.

... the Jesus of the synoptic Gospels can be recognized as a figure remarkably compatible with feminism. This is not to say, in an anachronistic sense, that 'Jesus was a feminist,' but rather that the criticism of religious and social hierarchy characteristic of the early portrait of Jesus is remarkably parallel to feminist criticism.¹³

The Gospels do not indicate that Jesus criticized women or acted in ways that would hurt them. They do show that Jesus' words and actions favoured women and accepted them as equal partners in ways that contradicted the norms of his time and culture. For example, in the story of Mary and Martha, he encourages the sister who wished to sit with him learning rather than the sister who complains about not being helped in the kitchen. As Swidler pointed out, he thus encourages women's intellectual pursuits in a time and place when that was not the norm. Significantly, the resurrected Jesus first appears to *women*, whom he commissions to report his resurrection to male followers. The irony that Christianity has nevertheless prohibited women from preaching and sacramental ministries for centuries is often pointed out.

Most Christian justifications of male dominance do not rely on the Gospels, but on the Epistles of Paul (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, and 1 Thessalonians), and even more strongly on later literature whose attribution to Paul is now considered erroneous (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus). The most unambiguously anti-feminist passages in the New Testament, including the passage in 1 Timothy 2: 11-2 exhorting women to learn in silence and submission and forbidding them to teach or exercise authority, occur in pseudo-Pauline passages, rather than in the writings of Paul himself.¹⁴ Most modern commentators consider them to be rather different from the earliest teachings of Christianity and less authoritative.

¹³ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 135.

¹⁴ See Barbara MacHaffie, *Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 26 for a list.

The writings of Paul himself are conceded by all commentators to be self-contradictory and therefore difficult to interpret. For example, many authors point out that passages such as I Corinthians 11: 3-15 seems to subjugate women to men while Galatians 3: 28, asserts that in Christ there is neither male nor female, as there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free. Any reading of Paul's writings must concede the difficulty of finding a consistent interpretation in them. Many commentators claim that the Galatians passage is more authoritative for many reasons.¹⁵

Feminist interpretations of the Qur'an are much less frequent than feminist interpretations of the Bible, but they almost always include a discussion of a passage that has frequently been interpreted as a warrant for thoroughgoing male domination in Islam. The text in question, Surah 4 *An-Nisa'*: 34, reads as follows in one translation:

Men are the managers of the affairs of women because Allah had made the one superior to the other and because men spend their wealth on women. Virtuous women are, therefore, obedient; ... As for those women whose defiance you have cause to fear, admonish them and keep them apart from your beds and beat them.

One of the few Muslim feminist scholars of Islam, Riffat Hassan, has argued that the passage should not be interpreted to mean that men must have complete power over women, but that men in general are responsible for providing for women in general when those women are involved in childbearing and childrearing. She finds that the word usually translated as "managers" actually means "breadwinners" and that the passage is addressed to all men and all women, not specifically husbands and wives.

In simple words what this passage is saying is that since only women can bear children... they should not have the additional obligation of being breadwinners while they perform this

¹⁵ MacHaffie, *Her Story*, 18-21.

function. Thus during the period of a woman's childbearing, the function of breadwinning must be performed by men (not just husbands)...¹⁶

Hassan has also shown that the popular Muslim views justifying male dominance are not found in the Qur'an at all, but came into Islam through androcentric interpretations of the Biblical creation stories, already well known in Arabia when Islam began. According to her, the Qur'an does not make a distinction between the creation of woman and the creation of man. The original creature was undifferentiated humanity, neither man nor woman, as in Trible's reading of the Biblical creation stories. Most Muslims nevertheless believe that woman was made from man, specifically from a crooked rib, which also explains women's inferior nature.

Hassan's findings also dispute the notion, common to Islam as well as Christians that Eve caused "the fall" of humanity. Hassan reads the Qur'an to say that human disobedience is a collective rather than an individual act and was in no way be initiated by Eve. Furthermore, according to Hassan, "There is, strictly speaking, no Fall in the Quran. What the Quranic narrative focuses upon is the moral choice humanity is required to make when confronted by the alternatives by the alternative presented by God and the *Shaitan*."¹⁷ She seems to imply that this moral choice is ongoing, rather once for all, and that making such choices is part of being human rather than an evil deed. Finally, she claims that the popular Muslim view that women was created, not only from man, but also *for* man is equally non-Qur'anic. According to her, "Not only does the Quran make it clear that man and woman stand absolutely equal in

¹⁶ Riffat Hassan, "Muslim Women and Post-Patriarchal Islam", in *After Patriarchy: Feminism and the World's Religions*, ed. Paula Cooney, William Eakin and Jay McDaniel (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), 1991, 54-7.

¹⁷ Hassan, *Muslim Women*, 51.

the sight of God, but also that they are ‘members’ and ‘protectors’ of each other.”¹⁸

Clearly, these few examples of feminist scriptural interpretations show that much of a text’s meaning is in the eye of the beholder and that whether the viewer is wearing androcentric lenses or androgynous lenses matters enormously. As more and more feminist scholars gain the technical skills required, they will undoubtedly reveal more and more ways in which the texts have been interpreted in a more patriarchal fashion than is required.

The examples of feminist scriptural interpretation cited thus far are somewhat traditional in that they regard the scripture as *ultimately* authoritative, which is why interpreting it matters so much. Some feminists who more influenced by modern historical and critical Biblical scholarship probably would regard these strategies as somewhat naive, since they still rely heavily on the words found in the text and ignore the cultural context in which they were written. Feminists who pay more attention to the *history* of the text often readily concede that the Bible is a thoroughly patriarchal and androcentric document; therefore they construe its authority differently. Often they do not regard scriptures as ultimate authorities but significant resources for religious reflection.

One such scholar is Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, well known for her work on reconstructing Christian origins. She has also written several major books on feminist Biblical exegesis, including *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* and *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*. Schussler-Fiorenza argues that locating authority formally in the Bible obscures what really happens in the process of deriving norms from scriptures. For her, authority truly lies in the exegete’s “... own processes of finding and selecting theological norms and visions either from the Bible, tradition,

¹⁸Hassan, *Muslim Women*, 44-54.

doctrine, or contemporary life”.¹⁹ She argues repeatedly that the Bible is best understood as “... a historical prototype rather than as a mythic archetype,” which is to say, “as a formative root-model of biblical life and faith”. A root-model, unlike a mythic prototype, is not an absolute authority, but is “... under the authority of feminist experience”, which itself is an ongoing source of revelation.²⁰ Ongoing revelation manifests in “... a systematic analysis of reality and confrontation with contemporary struggles to end patriarchal oppression”.²¹ The Bible then becomes one resource among many for struggles for liberation from patriarchy.

Given this assessment of the Bible, she goes on to suggest a fourfold strategy for feminist Biblical interpretation. First she begins with a “hermeneutics of suspicion” that “does not presuppose the feminist authority and truth of the Bible, but takes as its starting point the assumption that biblical texts... are androcentric and serve patriarchal functions”. As part of her “hermeneutic of suspicion”, she claims that “... all androcentric language must be understood as generic language until proven otherwise”. Given that modern English clearly differentiates androcentric from gender inclusive language, this principle requires translating parts of the Bible into gender inclusive language. Second, using a “hermeneutics of remembrance” the feminist reader seeks “... to move against the grain of the androcentric text to the life and struggles of women...” Such interpretation reconstructs women’s lives and struggles and places them centre-stage. Third, one must employ a “hermeneutics of evaluation and proclamation’ to assesses the “theological significance and power for the contemporary community of faith” of the Biblical text. Finally, using a “hermeneutics of creative

¹⁹ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 156.

²⁰ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 14.

²¹ Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 159.

actualization”, the reader can “... retell biblical stories from a feminist perspective” to “reformulate patriarchal prayers and create feminist rituals celebrating our ancestors”.²²

Beyond male monotheism: God-Talk in Christianity and Judaism

As the work of Schussler Fiorenza and others shows, questions of textual authority and interpretation cannot be separated from questions of theology. Specifically does the tradition promote an egalitarian or a sexist society? Do the religion’s central symbols and doctrines, properly understood, promote gender equity and egalitarianism or male dominance? In asking these questions a fundamental and intolerable contradiction between the tradition’s vision and its patriarchal or misogynist interpretations and institutions may come to light.

For Judaism and Christianity, no issue is more central to feminism reconstruction than the male imagery consistently used for the deity. Therefore, I will focus on this issue when examining feminist claims that Christianity or Judaism can be liberating religions for women. To envision deity in predominantly male terms is quite unusual in religion; only the three monotheistic religions do so. Few symbols are more entrenched in the Western religious imagination and few are more disempowering for women. Therefore, the ways in which various feminist theologians critique and reconstruct traditional male imagery of deity is one of the most interesting and important topics in the feminist theology of the Western religions.

At its core, the issue is very simple. The masculine pronouns and images traditionally used of the deity do not and never have meant that the deity of Western monotheism is male. The vast majority of believers would agree that God is beyond sexuality, but they nevertheless continue, often insistently, to use male pronouns about that deity, not noticing the self contradiction contained in a statement like “that God is

²² Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 15-22 and *But She Said*, 57-76.

exalted above all sexuality is part of *his* transcendence”.²³ As I wrote in my 1974 essay “Female God Language in a Jewish Context”, “If we do not mean that God is male when we use masculine pronouns and imagery, then why should there be any objection to using female imagery and pronouns as well?”²⁴ In my own later work on that issue, I suggested learning from the rich Indian repertoire of divine feminine imagery and proposed ways that such images could be utilized in monotheistic discourse.²⁵ That suggestion has as yet not been followed up by other feminist theologians, who have taken other routes around the problem.

Rosemary Ruether deals with the issue of God-language in her book *Sexism and God-Talk*, published in 1983. Like other post-patriarchal Christian feminists, she claims that, while some non-sexist God-talk can be found in Biblical tradition, it is also necessary to go beyond the images found there. She considers divine metaphors grounded in images of authority and hierarchy, such as “king” or “queen”, to be inappropriate for feminist Christianity, which should try to foster egalitarian rather than hierarchical human relationships. Furthermore, she cautions against investing too heavily in parental metaphors, though, of course, the mother image should be included when parental metaphors are used. Most importantly, she argues that uncritical, unreflective, literalistic insistence upon the traditional male images for deity is actually idolatry, not faithfulness.²⁶ Ruether proposes “God/ess” as a word for the divine, explaining it as follows:

... I use the term *God/ess*, a written symbol intended to combine both the masculine and feminine forms of the word for the divine

²³ Rita M. Gross, “Steps Toward Feminine Imagery of Deity in Jewish Theology” in *On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 236.

²⁴ Rita M. Gross, “Female God Language in a Jewish Context” in *Womanspirit Rising*, 170-71.

²⁵ Rita M. Gross, “Steps toward Feminine Imagery of Deity in Jewish Theology”

²⁶ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 68-9.

*while preserving the Judeo-Christian affirmation that divinity is one. This term is unpronounceable and inadequate. It is not intended as language for worship, where one might prefer a more evocative term....*²⁷

This God/ess is not so much parent as liberator, not only creator but source of being. While the metaphor of deity as liberator stems from traditional Biblical narratives, such as the Exodus story, Ruether criticizes patriarchal theologies of hope or liberation for their "...negation of God/ess as Matrix, as source and ground of our being". She argues that such theologies then posit a false dualism of matter against spirit, seeing nature as source of bondage and spirit as source of liberation. Rather than affirming spirit and transcendence against matter and immanence, "feminist theology needs to affirm the God of Exodus, of liberation and new being, but as rooted in the foundations of being rather than as its antithesis". This God/ess is both "the material substratum of our existence" as well as "endlessly new creative potential (spirit)".²⁸ Ruether continues to insist that the deity envisioned by feminist theology does not prefer spirit to nature and that such dualistic thinking has been responsible for much Christian misogyny.

Another more recent Christian feminist account of God builds on the foundation of the justifications for and examples of female god-talk already discussed. In some ways it is the most radical of these accounts, and in some ways the most conservative. In *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, one of Elizabeth Johnson's explicit aims is to write about "... the mystery of God recognizable within the contours of the Christian faith", utilizing both new feminist theology and "the traditional language of Scripture and classical theology".²⁹ The result is a book that talks about Trinity and Unity in

²⁷ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 46.

²⁸ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 70-1.

²⁹ Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1993).

deity, and about deity's relationship with the world in ways that are relatively traditional – except that feminine terms and pronouns for deity are used consistently and exclusively throughout the book.

In the beginning of her theology, Johnson appeals to the classical doctrine of *imago Dei, imago Christi* (Image of God, Image or Christ) interpreting it to mean that women are created in the image of God and are “christomorphic” (having Christ-like form) in the same way as men are. According to Johnson, this implication of the classic doctrine was never fully articulated in Christian theology. Therefore, it is appropriate to take “... female reality in all its concreteness as a legitimate finite starting point for speaking about the mystery of God”.³⁰ After an extended and complex discussion of the female metaphors for all three persons of the Trinity, as well as discussion of the trinitarian character of God in terms of “the experience of mutual love so prized in feminist reflection”,³¹ the culmination of her book is a discussion of “One Living God: SHE WHO IS”. Referring to the Biblical story of the burning bush, during which the enigmatic name “I am who I am” is self-disclosed by God, and drawing upon Aquinas’ commentary on the story, Johnson concludes that this name can be rendered “SHE WHO IS”:

The one who speaks there is mystery in a personal key, pouring out compassion, promising deliverance, galvanizing a human sense of mission toward that end.

Symbolized by a fire that does not destroy, this one will be known by the words and deeds of liberation and covenant that follow.

SHE WHO IS, the one whose very nature is sheer aliveness, is the profoundly relational source of being of the whole universe...

She is the freely overflowing wellspring of energy of all creatures who flourish, and the energy of all those who resist the absence of flourishing³²

³⁰ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 75.

³¹ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 196.

³² Johnson, *She Who Is*, 243.

Johnson's book supports the claim I made in my 1974 article "Female God Language in a Jewish Context", a claim with which many feminist theologians have disagreed.

"God-She" is not some new construct added onto the present resource of Jewish God language and separate from it. In other words, the familiar "Holy One, Blessed be He" is also "Holy One, Blessed be She" and always has been."³³

Unlike so many feminist theologians, Johnson does not focus on widening the canon to include previously excluded resources or seeking new images and metaphors for deity. Rather, utilizing both feminist thought and classical Christian theology, she presents the same deity that was previously envisioned in traditional classical theology as SHE WHO IS.

Turning finally from the work of North American Christian feminists to a Korean Christian feminist, we find the issue of female god-language is very different. In her 1990 book *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*, Chung Hyun Kyung claims that "It is natural for Asian women to think of the Godhead as male and female because there are many male gods and female goddesses in Asian religious cultures."³⁴ It is refreshing for Christian female god-talk to be so matter of fact, so natural, so grounded in experience, so devoid of argumentation and justification, so devoid of *problem*. Her writing on God as both female and male, and on God as Mother reminds me of the spontaneous veneration of God as female in Hinduism and Buddhism, as aspect of those traditions that I have long admired.

Chung suggests that "an inclusive image of God who has both male and female sides promotes equality and harmony between men and

³³ Gross, "Female God-Language", 173.

³⁴ Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 48. It is interesting to hear an Asian Christian woman confirm what I had claimed for years about the impact the rich heritage of non-Western female god-talk could have on monotheistic religious imaginations.

women: ‘a partnership of equals.’” Thus, she uses traditional Asian images of divine complementarity to promote the modern idea of gender equality. Chung also posits that “God as a life-giving power can be naturally personified as mother and woman because woman gives birth to her children and her family members by nurturing them.”³⁵ This too is an image thoroughly familiar to Asians. However, in Asia such images have been used to glorify the traditional female gender role and limit women to it. Chung warns against this misuse of complementarity, noting that the values of complementarity and harmony can and are being used against women in Asian “for men’s convenience in order to perpetuate stereotypical roles for women”.³⁶ For her, complementarity must include equality.

Unlike other feminist theologians, Chung’s naming of deity as female does not stop at an androgynous Godhead; she claims that many Asian women also see Jesus as woman and mother, despite his male physiology. Part of that naming stems from Jesus’ compassion and the traditional Asian view of women as the “compassionate mother who really feels the hurt and pain of her child...” Other points of identification between women and Jesus will be more surprising to Westerners. Quoting another Korean woman theologian, Park Soon Kyung, Chung claims that the patriarchy of our present historical situation calls for Jesus to be named as *woman Messiah*. The justification is Jesus’ “identification with the one who hurts the most” – at present women in patriarchal situations. Finally, Chung finds the Jesus who casts out demons easy to image as a woman because Korean shamans, most of whom are women, perform the same task in contemporary Korea.³⁷

³⁵ Chung, *Struggle*, 48, 50.

³⁶ Chung, *Struggle*, 48.

³⁷ Chung, *Struggle*, 64. For an account of traditional Korean shamanism, see Youngsook Kim Harvey, “Possession Sickness and Women Shamans in Korea”, in *Unspoken Worlds, Women’s Religious Lives*, eds. Falk and Rita M. Gross (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1989), 37-44.

Concluding this survey of feminist understandings of monotheism's core symbol – deity – is Judith Plaskow's discussion of these issues in Jewish feminism. Like Judaism in general, Jewish feminism has focused less on theological issues and on God-language than has Christian feminism. Because Judaism is a religion that emphasizes behaviour over belief, many Jewish feminists have been more concerned with women's rituals and with obtaining classical Jewish educations. But Plaskow feels that theology is important for Jewish feminism and in her 1990 book *Standing Again At Sinai*, she addresses what she perceives to be several obstacles to the development of female God-talk in Judaism. First, female God-language is sometimes equated with worshipping the goddesses rejected by Biblical Judaism. As Plaskow explains,

*... the equation of female God-language with Goddess worship either presupposes that the God of Judaism is so irrevocably male that any broadening of anthropomorphic language must refer to a different deity, or it simply make no sense at all. The overwhelming majority of Jewish feminists who have experimented with religious language in no way see themselves as imaging or worshipping a Goddess; they are trying to enrich the range of metaphors Jews use in talking about God.*³⁸

A related concern about female God-language is its implications for monotheism, especially the fear that an androgynous deity would be multiple. Plaskow agrees that it is important to protect and preserve monotheism, but argues that female God-language does not interfere with this goal. Like some Christian feminist theologians, she claims that individual images of deity need to be seen as part of a divine totality, rather than as representing different gods. Monotheism has always included many images and has never consisted of only a single image or picture of God.

³⁸ Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai* (San Francisco, 1990), 150.

Finally, Plaskow finds that female God-language arouses anxiety for the many Jews who associate it with nature and with sexuality in ways that seem “pagan”. Plaskow believes that Jewish feminists must be willing to confront and defuse these fears. In classical Jewish thought, women alone were identified with nature and sexuality, and nature and sexuality have been inappropriately disparaged as a result. Both need to be reclaimed, and the most effective way to so is by recognizing the female aspects of the divine.³⁹

In her own suggestions for feminist Jewish God-language, Plaskow affirms the need to appreciate many images of deity, both traditional concepts and new ones deriving from the experiences of those heretofore excluded from the process of naming deity. Both images for deity taken from nature – God as rock, tree of life, light, darkness – and images of the presence of God in empowered, egalitarian community – God as friend, companion, and lover – are needed.⁴⁰ In her view, feminist God-language has been more successful in the former than the latter task, in part because so many traditional images of the relationship between God and community are hierarchical rather than egalitarian.

When discussing images of God that reflect the experience of egalitarian community, Plaskow makes a particularly strong case for the continued use of anthropomorphic God-language, despite its limitations and dangers. She argues that impersonal language can easily mask the continued presence of old male metaphors of the divine, and that only the introduction of female images can ensure that their hold is broken. These personal, anthropomorphic images should range from “...purposely disquieting female images to female and non-gendered images that express intimacy, partnership, and mutuality between humans and God”.⁴¹ The use of images like “Queen of the Universe” and “Woman of War”, female counterparts to familiar male images for

³⁹ Plaskow, *Standing*, 152-4.

⁴⁰ Plaskow, *Standing*, 165, 167.

⁴¹ Plaskow, *Standing*, 161.

God, would be beneficially jarring. Plaskow also states that anthropomorphic images need to be supplemented with natural and impersonal metaphors, as well as with conceptual terms that express God's relationship with all being and becoming. Thus she suggests The Eternal, co-creator, wellspring, or ground of life.⁴² But in every case, it is important to avoid "... the dualistic, hierarchical misnaming of God and reality that grows out of and supports a patriarchal worldview". Furthermore, that naming should cherish diversity in community, "... even as that diversity has its warrant in the God of myriad names".⁴³

It's Too Broken to be Fixed

The feminist case against feminist theological transformation of traditional religions

The analyses and transformations of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam suggested here are not convincing to all feminist theologians. Their voices are integral to the symphony of feminist theology and enrich the thinking of everyone concerned with undoing and replacing patriarchy in religion.

The case *against* feminist transformation of major world religions has been made most cogently in the case of the Biblical religions. This is simply because religious feminism is more developed in the Biblical religions and, therefore, more well-trained religious feminists have come through Biblical religions, especially Christianity, than through Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism or the East Asian religions. And those who can make this judgment most cogently and effectively are, indeed, those who once sought to work within their tradition as a feminist before abandoning it. Those who have never worked "inside" the tradition in that manner, but have only rejected it and criticize it, have not generally

⁴² Plaskow, *Standing*, 160, 163, 165.

⁴³ Plaskow, *Standing*, 155-69.

had the same tools or brought the same passion to their post-Christian or post-Jewish feminist critiques.

Post-Christian and post-Jewish feminist theologians contend that the Biblical traditions are simply too broken to be fixed, that patriarchal values and symbolism are too essential and too central to their worldviews ever to be overcome. They do not see patriarchy, in its many levels of manifestation and meaning as accidental or secondary to the Biblical outlook, or as merely an unfortunate outgrowth of outmoded cultural habits. Therefore, they contend, no woman will ever experience wholeness, healing, integrity, and autonomy while committed to a Biblical religion. Continuing to claim loyalty to traditions that inevitably and invariably demean women is counterproductive and best and harmful at worst.

Biblical and post-Biblical feminist theologians disagree intensely over what the core symbol of Biblical traditions actually is. Many “reformists” see it as *liberation*, while “revolutionaries” see it as *patriarchy* and argue that without patriarchy, Biblical religions would be unrecognizable. For example, the male deity who rules and judges the world from afar, who calls his followers away from the physical world to a spiritual realm, and who tolerates no diversity or disagreement is an intensely patriarchal symbol. Jewish and Christian feminists consistently reply that this portrait is a caricature of Biblical religions. Post-Christian and post-Jewish theologians respond that if it is a caricature, it must be an extremely accurate one, since so many thinkers, authorities, and laypeople, to say nothing of the radical religious right, do indeed think in such terms. They insist that God the Father is the only way to symbolize deity and they insist that societies and families should mirror that patriarchal image.

But rather than carry on this imaginary debate, we should let the revolutionaries speak for themselves. The two most eloquent such feminists thus far are Carol P. Christ and Mary Daly. Their works are

especially valuable because each began as a radical reformer, publishing important books and essays in which they hoped to make sense of Biblical religions and to call them away from their sexism. Eventually each became convinced that this effort would fail because patriarchy is too integral to the outlook of those religions. Each has written of her conversion process away from Biblical religions to post-Christian feminist spirituality.

Mary Daly's journey, which she recounts in her post-Christian introduction to the second edition of *The Church and the Second Sex*, and continues in a recent autobiography *Outercourse* (1994), began earlier.⁴⁴ One of the very first feminist accounts of Christianity, *The Church and the Second Sex* was written between 1965 and 1967 and published in 1968. In 1969, Mary Daly was given a terminal contract by Boston College, a dismissal that generated widespread criticism of the school. Later that summer, the president of Boston College relented, informing Daly that she had been granted tenure and promotion, "... without congratulations..."⁴⁵ Though the book brought Daly fame, her experience in academia also radicalized her. She began to cease "... to care about unimaginative reform but instead began dreaming of a woman's revolution".⁴⁶

I moved on to other things, including a dramatic/traumatic change of consciousness from "radical Catholic" to post-christian feminist. My graduation from the Catholic church was formalized by a self-conferred diploma, my second feminist book Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation, which appeared in 1973. The journey in time/space that took place between the publication dates of the two books

⁴⁴ Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex*, with a New Feminist Postchristian Introduction by the Author (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1975).

⁴⁵ Daly, *The Church*, 12.

⁴⁶ Daly, *The Church*, 14.

*could not be described adequately by terrestrial calendar and maps.*⁴⁷

The problem with Catholic feminism, Daly wrote, is that it appeared that a door had opened "... within patriarchy..." But later she learned, through her experiences and reflections, "... that *all* male-controlled 'revolutions' are essentially movements in circles within the same senescent patriarchal systems".⁴⁸

Daly concludes this reflection by writing that she longs for the arrival "... of the sisters of Plato, of Aristotle, of Kant, of Nietzsche: sisters who will not merely 'equal' them, but do something different, something immeasurably more".⁴⁹ Her later works demonstrates that "something more" in dense, difficult books that are not readily summarized. One of them, *Beyond God the Father* deals with many of the topics of systematic theology – deity, evil, Christology, morality, the church – but all from the viewpoint of women, who having had their power of naming stolen from them in patriarchal thought, are now naming themselves, the world, and the deity. Such naming involves "a *castrating* of language and images that reflect and perpetuate the structures of a sexist world".⁵⁰ Women, as the "primordial eunuchs" of patriarchy, "... are rising up to castrate not people, but *the system* that castrates – that great 'God-Father' of us all which indulges senselessly and universally in the politics of rape". Thus, the primary event in the arrival of "something immeasurably more" requires the "... death of God the Father in the rising woman consciousness and the consequent breakthrough to conscious, communal participation in God the Verb".⁵¹ God the Verb has been Mary Daly's contribution to the post-patriarchal naming of deity. For her, though she sometimes uses the term

⁴⁷ Daly, *The Church*, 5.

⁴⁸ Daly, *The Church*, 9-10.

⁴⁹ Daly, *The Church*, 51.

⁵⁰ Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 9.

⁵¹ Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 10-12.

“Goddess”, any noun is too static for the meaning that must be communicated by the word that stands for the Be-ing that Daly celebrates and evokes in this and later works.

Carol P. Christ has documented her journey out of Christianity into post-Christian feminist spirituality especially vividly in her book *Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess*.⁵² In contrast with Daly, Christ’s move beyond God the Father has taken her into a re-mythologizing of Goddess, a term she uses frequently in her writings. But in this chapter, I will focus on the rationale behind her journey away from Biblical religion. Christ’s “journey to the Goddess” began with her conviction “from the time I became a feminist that our language for God had to be changed if women were to see ourselves fully in the image of God”.⁵³ In 1975, she experienced her first introduction to the women’s spirituality movement, and very soon thereafter knew she had left the church for good.

Christ left Christianity primarily because of the effects of religious symbols on consciousness. In a reply to Rosemary Ruether’s very strong criticism of the feminist spirituality movement, she writes, “The reason I do not use the biblical tradition as the basis for my feminist vision is a judgment about the effect of the *core symbolism* of Biblical tradition on the vast majority of Christians and Jews.”⁵⁴ Citing Daly, Christ points out that, while the theological tradition may claim that the Biblical deity is beyond gender, that claim has no real impact because of the stranglehold of male language and imagery on the psyche of the average believer. “... The effect of repeated symbolism on the conscious and unconscious mind and imagination”⁵⁵ is to make male domination appear to be normal and legitimate, a mirroring on earth of male authority “on high”.

⁵² Carol P. Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987).

⁵³ Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite*, 105.

⁵⁴ Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite*, 59.

⁵⁵ Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite*, 60.

Like other feminist theologians, myself included, Christ did not realize how profoundly she had been left out of Biblical religions until she said “God-she” or “Goddess”. Doing so can illustrate the power of male language and imagery on peoples’ consciousness from another side. Christ writes,

I must also acknowledge that for me the symbol of Goddess is different than anything I ever found in the Christian tradition. My relationship with Yahweh was a dynamic one and filled with the biblical symbolism of chosenness, demand, judgment, rejection, and ultimate acceptance. ... I was particularly moved by the prophets’ concern for social justice and harmony with nature. For me, the biblical God was “beyond sexuality” as theological tradition asserts, but “he” retained a certain aura of masculine presence and authority. Not until I said Goddess did I realize that I had never felt fully included in the fullness of my being as a woman in masculine or neuterized imagery for divinity.⁵⁶

Christ also disputes the claim of Christian and Jewish feminists that the Bible’s core message is one of liberation. She seeks to show that the Bible also contains core messages of intolerance and xenophobia. She writes that for every prophetic injunction to look after the needy and pursue justice, there is a condemnation of those who worship “on every hill and under every green tree” (Amos 2:6). Many of those thus condemned were women who were at the same time being excluded from roles of religious leadership in the Yahweh religion. In addition, Christ finds it impossible to “embrace the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew bible, which is vindictive against those who worship in other traditions”. She suggests that this prophetic tradition is one of the key roots of intolerance in the West and that the intolerance is not “... incidental to an otherwise liberating vision. I think it is fundamental to the particular shape that monotheism takes in both the Hebrew and the

⁵⁶ Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite*, 67.

Christian scriptures”. Against Ruether and others who cite the Exodus narrative as indicative of the Bible’s fundamental concern with liberation, Christ claims that this narrative is modelled on the “... holy warrior ideal. Yahweh proves himself the most powerful holy warrior by drowning Pharaoh’s horsemen with their horses. This is not for me a liberating vision of divine power.” Finally, she takes up the New Testament models that have inspired many Christian feminist theologians. Though Jesus included women and the dispossessed in his community, Christ writes that the New Testament “... clearly portrays it as *his* community and the message to women is that they must turn to a male to find salvation”.⁵⁷ The idea that women can only be saved by men is not good for women’s sense of self, which is “Why Women Need the Goddess”,⁵⁸ to quote the title of Christ’s most influential essay.

Conclusion

Having concluded this survey of answers to the question, “Are the world’s religions inevitably sexist?” how can we describe what divides those who answer “no” from those who respond “yes”? What separates those who still give their energies and loyalties to one of the mainstream religions, no matter how critical of it they may be, from those who actively dissociate themselves from it? My own training and personal history give me a unique perspective on this question. My commitment to the cross-cultural, historical, and comparative study of religion makes me want to ask the question as a scholar of religion rather than a theologian in the first instance. But I have also contributed feminist theological commentary to two religions – Judaism and Buddhism. Thus, like Christ and Daly, I began my work in the context of Biblical religion, and, like them, did not find Biblical religions sufficient. However, unlike them, I do not feel a need to *write against* these

⁵⁷ Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite*, 61-3.

⁵⁸ Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite*, 117-132.

traditions on feminist issues, though I have criticized them on issues of pluralism and diversity.

In the long run, all feminists, whether Christian, Jewish, post-Christian, post-Jewish, secular, or committed to another religious tradition affirm relatively similar symbols. We all agree that symbols, images, and doctrines that empower women are necessary. Furthermore, within Christianity, virtually all feminist theologians are involved in the task of renaming the central symbol of their tradition – the monotheistic deity. None of them is content with the patriarchal god of the fathers. Those writing for and those opposing Biblical religion affirm many of the same names and symbols of God-She. What once seemed to be a major difference between “reformists” and “revolutionaries” has ceased to be so obvious. But though we all agree, in broad terms, about what needs to change in religious symbolism; we differ about where to put our energies to effect those changes. And, clearly, feminist discourse is by far the richer for that pluralism and diversity. It is a mistake (almost a throwback to male monotheism) to try to settle the question of who is “right”, the “reformists” or the “revolutionaries”.

Nevertheless, commenting more as a historian of religions than as a theologian, I do not think that people usually stay in or leave a religion because of its symbols. This is not because religious symbols and images are unimportant; they are. But symbols do not determine what the religious community will affirm; the religious community determines what symbols it will affirm, and either grows into its post-patriarchal vision of itself or stagnates in patriarchy. As a historian, I do not agree that religious symbols cannot change. Therefore, people leave a religion, not because its symbols cannot change, but because they are unlikely to change fast enough.

One major disagreement between the two schools of feminist theology concerns where feminist reform is likely to be most effective. Feminists wrestling with this decision must take into account the fact

that traditional religions will probably continue to lack, for the foreseeable future, enough *communal use of feminist symbols* to make the community an affirming place for women. Although it is not difficult to fix the patriarchal symbolism of Biblical religion or the patriarchal institutions of Buddhism, it has been very difficult to convince most religious leaders and believers to do so. Thinkers like Mary Daly and Carol Christ have shown how painful this situation can be. But Christian and Jewish feminist theologians, western feminist converts to Buddhism, and many others make a different judgment – that their critical loyalty to their tradition is not a waste of time but will bear fruit in the long run, proving to be worth the pain.

A second major difference, perhaps related with the first one, separates the reformists and the revolutionaries. Some revolutionaries eagerly mine non-Biblical traditions for useful myths and symbols. Though there are exceptions, Christian and Jewish reformers generally do not, remaining much more narrowly within the orbit of Biblical symbolism and the Western theological tradition. Rarely do they study deeply and let themselves be inspired by ancient Goddess mythology or by non-Western religions.⁵⁹ This version of their loyalty is, in my view, the greatest weakness of much Jewish and Christian feminist theology, for the language and the symbolism of “God-she” is more easily inspired through wide acquaintance with the myriad Goddesses of world religions. But I also fault the revolutionaries on this score, for though they love Goddesses, they rarely know much about Goddesses other than those of Western pre-Biblical antiquity.

Despite these differences between the major schools of feminist theology, we should recall what they have in common, for these will become the watchwords for the post-patriarchal future of religion. First, feminist theologies agree that human experience is the source of and

⁵⁹ A notable exception is Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Benares* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), in which Eck writes of how her study of Hinduism has enriched her Christian faith.

authority for authentic religious expression. And, second, adequate religious expressions, expressions worthy of surviving for centuries and millennia must promote the full humanity of women, as they have always promoted the full humanity of men.

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