

# **THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO GENDER**

***New Representations of Four  
New Testament Outcast  
Women***

*Iris Annette*

**I.A. Wilkinson**

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**Supervisor : Claire Hiller**

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## ***Dedication***

**To Carol,**

**Strangers are friends we've never met. ( Anon)**

**I celebrate the day I met you and I dedicate this work  
in honour of your friendship and support.**

**To Steve and Paul and Phil,**

**You are magnificent.**



# Abstract

This dissertation examines the way in which the Christian church, through its various discourses places women in an ideologically inferior position to men. These discourses influence what it is possible for women to say, do and be in the Christian community. Such ideologies are founded on notions of "ideal womanhood" that have their origin in the Old and New Testament of the Bible which is said to be "God's word" for all time. This paper examines the way in which Christianity has been "patriarchalized" by the discourses of First Century Palestine and the surrounding Greco-Roman community. As well as an analysis of contemporary Christian fundamentalist literature, this paper illuminates the way in which women are marginalized, exploited or abused in the church community. By applying the principles of post-structuralism with a Christian feminist perspective I have examined four New Testament stories about "outcast" women and offered alternative readings through the creative process of imaginative identification. Some recommendations for reform as well as suggestions for further research conclude the dissertation.

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# Introduction

*"Woman, the law says is inferior to man in all things. Hence she must obey not force but authority because God has given power to man."*

*Flavius Josephus*

Over the last fifteen to twenty years there has been considerable agitation in the Christian church over the place and role of women. A strange paradox has existed in the Church, almost since its inception in that whilst Christianity claims to free and empower believers, more than half of any church's population is systematically and ideologically oppressed on the basis of their sex. As the widespread activities of the Women's Movement gradually infiltrated the Church, more and more female voices have called into question the way in which women have been represented by theology and traditional teaching which assumes female inferiority.

The Bible, as the Christian's handbook is predominately a book about men, by men, and this bias is reflected in how the Church as an institution has placed men and maleness at the centre of Christian theology. Women have essentially been denied a "past" in Christianity in that from antiquity to the present there is an absence of detailed and concrete information about women and yet there is a profusion of discourse and imagery. Women are more likely to be "represented" than be described or have their stories told and the possibility of telling their own stories was and still is, unthinkable. The majority of biblical characters (and all biblical heroes) are male. Women, when they are referred to, are largely peripheral or cast in supporting roles which belie the impact and role of women throughout history.

Traditional theology has been formulated exclusively by men and while it

claims to speak for both male and female, feminist thinkers have argued that it more adequately reflects a privileged male perception of the world.<sup>1</sup> An observation by feminists that theological notions of sin as pride and grace as sacrificial love formulated by Reinhold Niebuhr and Anders Nygren fails to illuminate women's experience whilst reinforcing women's tendency for self-negation seriously questioned the *universality* of traditional theology.<sup>2</sup>

Feminism, in a broad sense, is committed to honouring and celebrating the dignity and full personhood of women and for this reason one could speculate that Christianity and feminism would have much in common. After all, the gospels stories allude to Jesus' relationship with women as counter-cultural and one could argue that he refused to be bound by the political, racial or social mores of First Century Palestine.<sup>3</sup>

However, on closer inspection the relationship between feminism and Christianity is one of tension which intensifies the contradictions many women experience in relation to Christianity and the Church. The Church claims to offer dignity and purpose for all people but even the most cursory glance at Christianity's history reveals the woman-hating nature of traditional teaching and theology and the deep-seated fear of the feminine characterized by the writings of the Church fathers.

For all that, women still remain committed to the Church in far greater numbers than men<sup>4</sup> and continue to serve their church communities with great devotion and dedication. But how can women reconcile the misogynistic, chauvinistic nature of church life with their commitment to celebrating the full personhood and dignity of all women? Is it possible to reform the Church in order to restore to women full humanity before God ?

These questions have arisen out of my own experience of the clash between

<sup>1</sup> *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* edited by Christ Card and Plaskow, Judith Harper and Row New York 1979 p85

<sup>2</sup> Op cit 27

<sup>3</sup> *The Puzzle of the Gospels* Vardy, Peter and Mills, Mary.M.E. Sharpe New York 1997 pp170-178

<sup>4</sup> Dalziel, Rosamund *Indispensable But Marginalized: Women in the Australian Church* Zadok Institute For Christianity and Society Series 1 paper p6

feminism and faith and the impact that has had on my spirituality. It has been suggested that most Masters or Doctorate theses are autobiographical to some degree and I have found my own voice time and time again in many of the words of feminist theologians I have quoted. When I read for the first time the paper *Why Some Bright Women Quit the Church* I was stunned by the similarity of my own experience. For the first time I was able to **recognize** my own marginalization in the Church and it created a paradigmatic shift in my thinking.

My development as a feminist has been gradual. Some childhood friends claim I was always conscious of sexism and other feminist issues. However like many women who grew up in the 1970's I did not feel comfortable with the term. My own subject position in Christianity reinforced this denial of feminism, after all many of the Christian books I had read had warned against the "selfishness" of "women's libbers". I became committed to becoming the "ideal" Christian woman and fought/forced my naturally exuberant personality into submission into the Christian framework of demure femininity. Further down the track I became the "ideal" Christian wife, trying so hard to be submissive to my husband, serving him, honouring him and **obeying** him. My parenting experiences were haunted by the notion of "spare the rod and spoil the child" even though my own childhood experience of corporal punishment remains to this day a distressing memory. It simply did not occur to me to question the Church's teaching or theology even though it consistently failed to relate to my experience. My response was to deeply despise myself for failing to meet "God's standard", a standard that was continually presented to me through the multifarious discourses within Christianity.

I read and re-read the Bible in order to locate myself more securely in the faith but found few female spiritual role models and many of the women I encountered



were victims of incest, gang-rape or noted for their adulterous or deceptive behaviour. To some degree, reading the Bible simply reinforced my marginalization.

As a result of further study once my children went to school, I took a course in Women's Studies which opened my eyes to the way I had deeply internalized dominant cultural myths such as female inferiority, and how this had impacted on my life, severely restricting my choices, career opportunities and future earning power.

For the first time I began reading the Bible with different eyes and found that the words therein were not necessarily **God's words** but were more likely to be the words of **men**. I began to see the Church in a different light. Instead of simply accepting an exclusively male preaching roster, I began to wonder why some of the well educated and articulate women in my congregation (including myself) were never asked to preach when even the young male youth leader (who left school in Year 10) appeared in the pulpit at regular intervals with his sermons heavily punctuated with "ums" and "ahs".

I felt insulted and outraged at this and many other instances of blatant sexism that reinforce women's second class status which, in turn, lowers the expectations of all women and girls in the church community. I began to push for language reform in hymns and songs and prayers which had contributed to the "linguistic invisibility" of women but was completely unprepared for the vituperative responses from some quarters and I soon developed a reputation as a radical. Occasionally, a young girl would say how much she enjoyed a particular song or prayer sung in inclusive language, however most people complained about the extra syllable in "woman" or argued that inclusive language was "petty" and "uncomfortable" to use.

I began to see that church is no place for an educated and articulate woman,

much less a feminist one, and yet I had always been encouraged by the gospel accounts of Jesus' relationship with women and wondered why in all the years I had been at church had I not heard more about them.

Encouraged by the insights of feminist theologians such as Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Lavina Byrne I decided to study the Scriptures for myself and reclaim the voices of women lost in the androcentricity of the biblical texts.

Using the principles of Post-structuralism which sees patriarchal power relations as changeable, and the insights of feminist theological criticism I have examined how Christianity has become embedded in patriarchal notions of power and authority which marginalize the experience of women and other oppressed groups by insisting on male supremacy and female inferiority.

I am aware that my view of the world is through white, middle class, heterosexual Protestant Christian feminist eyes and that any insights I have gained need to be subjected to the same "hermeneutics of suspicion" that I have applied to patriarchal "norms". When I have read black feminist (Womanist) works I have been humbled by my own colour-blindness and my privileged position as a white, middle class woman.

In Chapter 1 I examine the way in which various discourses operate within the Christian church which keeps women on the margins of the church community and denies them agency and power. In examining ideology, discourse and subject positions, I have attempted to describe the way in which Christianity has **constructed** what is said to be "truth" and how that has impacted on women in the church community. I look at the notion of faith as a discourse, language and subjectivity, as well as genre and reading position which all influence how we locate ourselves in any ideology.

I summarize the ordination of women debate as well as examining the ideology of "ideal womanhood" promulgated by the Church which has heavily influenced

the outcome of this debate.

I discuss at length the marginalization of women that continues to occur in the church community and the abuse of power and violence against women and children that is continuing to come to light.

I examine the way in which lesbian women and women of colour are particularly marginalized by the church's teaching.

In Chapter 2 I conduct an extensive analysis of Christian fundamentalist literature, discussing some of the ways in which Christian women are coerced into becoming the "ideal reader" of this genre.

I conclude my literature review with an examination of feminist theology which has grown out of almost three decades of feminist insight into how the Church has failed to illuminate women's experience of spirituality.

In Chapter 3 I describe my position as a Christian feminist influenced by principles of Post-structuralism as well as the feminist reconstructionist approaches of Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Anne E Carr. I describe the process of imaginative identification I adopt in my reconstruction of four New Testament women's stories, and I look at the core values or discourses of First Century Palestine.

In Chapter 4 I analyse the core values or discourses of First Century Palestine in order to understand "the world behind the text". I uncover the androcentricity of the texts and the way in which androcentric translations have effectively erased women from the biblical record.

I cover the Early Christian movement as well as the development of Marian theology which has served to offer women an impossible model of "ideal womanhood".

I then go on to the biblical narratives of four New Testament outcast women and discuss at length the way in which traditional theology and teaching has

distorted the women's stories.

I revisit the four New Testament women through the creative writing process of imaginative identification (proposed by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza)( *But She Said-Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*, 1992) in an attempt to restore female voices in the text.

I then subject my imaginative identifications to a "hermeneutics of suspicion" in an attempt to recognize my own embeddedness in patriarchal norms.

Chapter 5 is a summary of my approach to the New Testament women as well as my proposal for reform in the Church. I conclude the chapter with some suggestions for further research.



# Chapter 1: Literature Review

*"Do you not know that you are each an Eve? God's sentence on your sex lives on into this generation. Therefore the guilt is of necessity with you still. You are the devil's gateway, you are the plunderer of the forbidden tree, you are the first to break the divine law, it was you who persuaded the man whom the devil was not brave enough to attack. You destroyed so easily man, who is the image of God; on account of you the Son of Man had to die."*

*Tertullian (dc. 220)*

During the last thirty years of what is now a second wave of feminism, feminist thinkers have questioned the way in which women have been subject to forms of oppression based on gender. They have challenged institutions and societal structures which position women as inferior to men. In doing so they have established the reality of the struggle of being a woman in a male-dominated society. Disadvantaged by poorer access to education, unequal employment opportunities and lower wages, subject to discriminative legal practices, and forbidden until this century to vote, women have had a long and laborious history of living under oppression. Judaeo-Christian traditions and institutions have contributed to and legitimated the oppression of women through ideologies, Christology and practices which emphasize the maleness of God and therefore render male authority and superiority to seem natural and proper.

In this chapter I explore ways in which Christianity has embedded in society patriarchal ideologies and discourses which consistently place men in a position of power and authority over women. I will examine how this has impacted on women's life experiences through commonly held versions of Christian theology, biblical interpretation and ecclesiastical praxis.

## Christianity and the Oppression of Women

For virtually the entire two thousand years following the death of Christ, probably in fact from within months of the crucifixion, institutionalized Christianity has contributed to and legitimated the oppression of women. Yet for most of this time female oppression has passed virtually unrecognized or unacknowledged. The history of the Christian Church does record the long standing participation of women in Church life. From the early writings of the New Testament it is apparent that women made their contribution to the spread of Christianity.<sup>5</sup> Prior to Rome's adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the State, women were actively involved in many aspects of church life, though even the New Testament records a bias towards restrictions on women (e.g. see 2 Timothy). However once Christianity became **"public"** property women were not permitted to engage in significant leadership roles. Women's participation henceforth was inhibited by cultural restraints and beliefs which did not accord them with the same public or political rights of men. Many of these beliefs, ideologies and traditions still exist. Not only do they continue to restrict women's participation in the Church, but their influence remains ubiquitous in society. Women's inferior position in the Church is maintained by the literal interpretation of some passages of the Bible which is the Christian's handbook of belief. Written over a period of around 1000 years the Bible is taken by some groups of Christians as the literal **"word of God"** and as such is perceived to reflect God's desires and even instructions for humanity.

The Bible consists of two sections: the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Whilst many Christians assume the Bible has always been an official theological document agreed upon by the 'Church Fathers' from within a hundred or so

years of the death of Christ, it takes less than a little reading to show that

<sup>5</sup>Torjesen, Karen Jo. When Women Were Priests- Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity. Harper San Francisco 1995 pp9-45



the canon of scripture has been fiercely fought over right to the present<sup>6,7</sup>,

that disagreement abounds and is reflected in denominational splits and different biblical versions, so that such a widespread assumption reflects breathtaking (but perhaps comforting) naivety amongst large sections of Christendom. Both these collections of writings have much to say about women, but much reflects a Jewish cultural bias that perceived women as inferior to men. Whilst it might be expected that the Old Testament reflects a strong bias favouring males, the New Testament also contains many instances where men are not only favoured but also given a higher status than women in terms of their role in ministry. This bias in the New Testament would seem a disappointing representation of what were probably Christ's original egalitarian doctrine. Teaching, preaching and pastoring according to some of the New Testament authors, are the sole province of men while women are meant to be silent and submissive. The New Testament does contain important clues however to the significant role women played in the development of the early Church. The only deacon named in the New Testament is a woman, Phoebe, and even the letters of Paul allude to the nature of women's ministry in prophesying roles. The presence of such clues is of enormous significance for Christian feminists who wish to reclaim this invisible past of women in the Church.

Many Christians, when forced to acknowledge the numerous accounts of outrageous treatment to women in the Old Testament simply respond by drawing attention to the 'New Covenant' brought in by Jesus in the form of the New Testament. They would claim a greater allegiance to this 'new law', seeing it as in some way replacing or re-working the old. But is it in fact any

<sup>6</sup> Reviewed in: Funk RW *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millenium*. Hodder & Stoughton, 1996

<sup>7</sup> Reviewed in: Ranke-Heinemann U. *Putting Away Childish Things*. Harper Collins, 1992

different? Is the New Testament any less sexist than the Old? Some Post-Christian feminists have rejected Christianity because they believe the exclusively male symbols of Father, Son and Holy Spirit are irredeemably sexist and as such, are inadequate and detrimental models for female spirituality.<sup>8</sup>

## **Gospel "Truth"**

Many Christians insist that the Bible is inerrant and literally true. Some would argue that the Bible is non-contradictory and that every word or act attributed to people (especially Jesus) is incontrovertibly true. To suggest to such Christians that the Bible is "sexist" or that God's character demonstrates misogynistic tendencies is sacrilegious and heretical. However, a literal reading of the Bible leaves one with no other alternative than to presume that Christianity is a religion designed by men for men and that women's place in it is nothing more than auxiliary. This literal stance however presupposes that the New Testament writings are objective and factual reports of the early Christian movement. Because women are rarely mentioned it is presumed that they were not actively involved in the development of Christianity. However this presumption neglects the insights of form criticism, source criticism and redaction criticism which have demonstrated that the early Christian writings are not objective or factual texts but **"pastorally engaged"** writings.<sup>9</sup>

Christian belief is by no means homogenous as evidenced by the multiplicity of denominations active today. Some denominations have adopted a more literal stance in interpreting the Bible whilst others have expressed a more

<sup>8</sup>Daly, Mary *The Church and the Second Sex* Harper Colophon Books 1968 pp57-9

<sup>9</sup>Fiorenza Schussler *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins* SCM Press LTD 1991 p49

liberal approach, thereby encouraging the fuller participation of women in areas of ministry that have previously been denied them. However liberal a church or denomination may be there is no escaping the fact that the Bible remains a powerful and authoritative religious document which has contributed to the inequity between men and women in history as well as today. Even though a particular denomination may claim to liberate women from the patriarchal bias of scripture, individual congregations may not adhere to this stance in practice. The Anglican Diocese in several states in Australia have advocated for the ordination of women. However, the Sydney Diocese has to-date over-ruled that decision. In Catholicism, the participation of women is more seriously limited by papal statutes such as the insistence that only men can symbolize Christ in the priesthood.

There has been much controversy surrounding the debate of the ordination of women to the priesthood and many questions have been raised about women's roles, femininity and sexuality. Often this debate has been intensely bitter causing much dissent in church communities and when tallied it has shown the voting to be close (in November 1992 the Church of England approved by only a two vote margin the ordination of women priests). For some denominations the question of women as priests raises confronting questions such as the gender of God and how we view (or value) masculinity or femininity.

The Christian Church could not have grown to its present proportions without the contribution of women and yet this contribution has been consistently limited by translations of the Bible that deny women the right to stand in full humanity with men before God. Women can fill the church pews with their



humanity with men before God. Women can fill the church pews with their children and families, serve the coffee, prepare the communion and clean the church, organise floral decoration and take Sunday School classes but they are not permitted to represent God as priests and pastors. They are represented marginally in most church decision making processes and much of the ministry of women in local parishes is of a voluntary nature due to the lack of resources allocated to them in church budgets. So while women constitute more than fifty percent of the church's attendees, they are for the most part marginalized, restricted and in some cases exploited and abused by the religious system that claims to free and empower them.

For many years the public discussion of religion, sex or politics was considered to be poor taste. However over the last twenty years or so, the discussion of all three topics has been of central concern to Christian and Jewish feminists who have sought to name and uncover the patriarchal bias of their faith systems. The interrelation of religion, sex and politics will become increasingly obvious in this paper as I explore the way in which the Christian Bible has been used to define women primarily in terms of biological function and how the politics of ecclesiastical function operate along strict gender lines.

### ***Feminist Post-structuralist Approach***

Patriarchy has been defined as the social structures and ideologies that have enabled men to exploit and dominate women throughout recorded history<sup>10</sup>. Patriarchy operates as a male-female gender dualism which insists on male or femaleness as the essential difference of humanity. Because of this gender

<sup>10</sup>Schussler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *But She Said- Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* Beacon Press 1992 p105

or victimization on the basis of sex and gender.

I have found the principles of Post-Structuralism particularly helpful in understanding the way in which Christianity has become embedded in patriarchal notions of maleness and femaleness and how these operate ideologically to maintain the exploitation and victimization of women.

Post-structuralism offers a framework from which to understand the mechanisms of power that operate in our society and to search for possibilities for change. Post-structuralism understands that patriarchal power is structural and can therefore be changed institutionally and socially.

The body of history and knowledge that exists is viewed by post-structuralists as the patriarchal representation or construction of knowledge that operates to serve the needs of men. For instance, Thomas Aquinas' dichotomous view of the sexes - **"Woman is an occasional and incomplete being, a misbegotten male"** - has positioned men in history as rational and autonomous and women as irrational and dependent, and this has contributed to the way in which society is organized and structured with men's needs being served at the expense of women's.<sup>11</sup>

Chris Weedon's development of a theory of feminist post-structuralism is particularly relevant for she proposes a theory of how language, subjectivity, social organization and power are related. Weedon is interested in why women continue to subordinate their interests to accommodate those of men and how both men and women position themselves in discursive practices. This is of particular importance in the context of religion and the various discourses that operate institutionally and individually. As stated earlier, faith is a powerful

<sup>11</sup>Weedon, Chris. *Feminist Practice and Poststructural Theory*, Blackwell 1987 p2

discourse in which individuals and groups become embedded in systems of thought that appear to be immutable and **"carved in stone"**. However, viewing such systems through a post-structural perspective one can see how these are not immutable laws set in nature but constructed ideologies that exist to serve the needs of those holding positions of power.

## ***Faith as Discourse***

Gunther Kress defines discourses as:

"Discourses are systematically organized sets of statements which give expression to the meaning and values of an institution. Beyond that, they define, describe and delimit what it is possible to say and not possible to say (and by extension-what it is possible to do or not to do) with respect to the area of concern of that institution, whether marginally or centrally. A discourse provides a set of possible statements about a given area, and organizes and gives structure to the manner in which a particular topic, object, process is to be talked about. In that it provides descriptions, rules, permissions and prohibitions of social and individual actions."<sup>12</sup>

Kress's definition demonstrates the power of religion as a discourse and the way it operates to **"define, describe and delimit"** what is possible to say and do.

The way in which individuals become embedded in such a powerful discourse is of particular interest to Post-structural feminists.<sup>13</sup> Post-structuralism identifies institutions such as religion as patriarchal which allocates men positions of power and dominance whilst requiring the subordination of women to that power.

<sup>12</sup>Kress Gunther *Linguistic Processes in Sociocultural Practice* Deakin University Press 1995 pp6-7

<sup>13</sup>Weedon, Chris. *Feminist Practice and Poststructural Theory*, Blackwell 1987 p3



Although the Bible contains female metaphors for God, Christianity has long been associated with an exclusively male God. The Bible has been consistently translated using male pronouns when referring to God. It seems "natural" therefore that men should be in control and have authority for God is also male and he is assumed to be all powerful (omnipotent) and all controlling (omnipresent).

Another statement in the discourse of Christianity is the acceptance of the Bible as **"God's word"** which while recorded physically by men, is said to be **"inspired by God"** (2 Timothy 3:16). This notion of **"God's word"** has a particularly significant role in keeping men in positions of power and women in positions of subservience. Men have defined what it is possible to say and do as men but have had total control over articulating what is possible or impossible for women.

## **Language**

The key factor that interests post-structuralists in examining social organization and power is language. Language is the medium by which our subjectivity is constructed and is therefore not genetically or biologically determined but the product of social practices.<sup>14</sup> The study of language in religion has particular significance for in Christianity God is referred to as **"he"** and other male metaphors such as **"warrior"**, **"king"** and **"father"**. This language construct places women in subordination to the divine and in particular, to the male. This has had direct bearing on women's progress in the Church for they have been confined to serving and submissive roles and been denied access to the priesthood and theological training.

<sup>14</sup>Spender, Dale Man Made Language, Pandora Press 1980. p1

The invisibility of women in the discourse of language (consistent use of male terms which are supposed to be generic but often are not)<sup>15</sup> perpetuates the marginalization of women in history, politics and education but has had a demeaning effect on women in the Church. The sets of statements about God and maleness in Christianity make it impossible for women to image themselves in the divine. The androcentric nature of texts, hymns, prayers and liturgical praxis effectively erase women from the centre of Christian belief leaving them to occupy positions on the margins of the faith community.

## **Subjectivity**

Power relations and social structures are organized through various institutions such as medicine, law, education, media, religion, politics and the family and each of these operate within a particular discursive field. Individuals may take on a subject position in a discursive field only to find that their experiences do not align with that particular discourse. An example of this could be the conflicting emotions that may accompany a new mother as she struggles with the ceaseless demands of parenthood and as she enters the dominant discourse of motherhood. The notion of motherhood as the most fulfilling and worthwhile experience in a woman's life may not be the reality for some women as they struggle with competing demands from other subject positions such as a career or other relationships.<sup>16</sup>

Humanist discourses presuppose that an individual possesses an essential and fixed essence of subjectivity but post-structuralism argues that subjectivity is changeable between discourses. Weedon uses the example of the consciousness-raising groups that were developed by the Women's Movement

<sup>15</sup>Op cit p151

<sup>16</sup>Missing Voices-The Experience of Motherhood edited by Brown, Stephanie et al Oxford University Press 1994 p221

that helped women to see that:

"The collective discussion of personal problems and conflicts, often previously understood as the result of personal inadequacies and neuroses, leads to a recognition that what have been experienced as personal failings are socially produced conflicts and contradictions shared by many women in similar social positions."<sup>17</sup>

This has a particular relevance in the religious context as feminist theology was born out of similar consciousness-raising exercises where the contradictions of Christian tradition and the reality of women's experience became apparent. The dominant discourse of Christian tradition holds fixed notions of femininity and masculinity and positions men and women in supposedly non-negotiable subjectivity. Feminist theology has subverted these fixed ideologies and offered alternative subject positions.

Feminist post-structuralism and Christian feminism are comfortable working partners as they are both committed to uncovering the masked **"structures of male privilege and domination"**<sup>18</sup> as well as offering alternate subject positions than those articulated by patriarchy as **"normal"** or **"natural"**.

## Genre and Reading Position

Gunther Kress stresses the close relationship between subject positions and reading positions and asserts that they are both established through the operation of discourses in texts.<sup>19</sup> Genres operate in a similar way by constructing reader positions. The genre of contemporary Christian literature for example constructs the reading position but the dominant discourse of right-wing conservatism in the text constructs the subject position of the reader. The reader may not necessarily be the **"ideal"** reader but as Kress points out<sup>20</sup> the text attempts to **"coerce"** the reader by insisting on the "

<sup>17</sup>Weedon, Chris Feminist Practice and Poststructural Theory p33.

<sup>18</sup>Op cit p41.

<sup>19</sup>Kress, Gunther Linguistic Processes in Sociocultural Practice Deakin University Press 1995 p37

<sup>20</sup>Op cit p36



**naturalness**" or **"obviousness"** of the position.

Kress introduces the concept of a **compliant** reader who simply adopts the reading position offered in the text and the counter concept of the **resistant** reader who makes a conscious decision to reject the position offered by the contemporary mainstream reading of the text.<sup>21</sup>

A third concept of the **tactical** reader was developed by Michel de Certeau as a way of accounting for those readings of texts which prove to be of use to the reader in spite of their seeming irrelevance in terms of contemporary reading practice.<sup>22</sup> Anne Cranny-Francis argues that the tactical reader is somewhat limited as:

"While the notion of tactical reading may be useful in enabling the critic to understand readings not dependent on mainstream reading practice, and while it also offers the critic a way of categorizing these readings which is not inherently negative, it is important to note its limitations, particularly as the tactical reader has no power to intervene institutionally to challenge her/his society and its discursive practices."<sup>23</sup>

## **Ideology**

Ideologies are sets of assertions, doctrines or bodies of opinion connected to a particular group. Kress states that ideology is intricately connected in the construction of texts.<sup>24</sup> Ideology determines the way in which discourses are presented and the way in which they are articulated in different genres. Discourse and genre can account for what is in a particular text but only ideology can account for **how** it is there. If one were to examine a text from the genre of Christian neo-fundamentalist literature, the discourse of faith would account for what is there. However, it is the ideology of right wing conservatism which would account for how the notion of faith is presented.

<sup>21</sup> Op cit pp33-50

<sup>22</sup>Cranny-Francis, Anne Popular Culture Deakin Press 1994 p10

<sup>23</sup>Op cit p11

<sup>24</sup>Kress, Gunther Linguistic Processes in Sociocultural Practice Deakin University Press 1995 p83

## Ordination of Women

One of the major goals of Christian feminism has been to eradicate all forms of discrimination against women in the Church community. The strategy for change that has precipitated the most debate has been the proposal to ordain women to the priesthood. This strategy has had limited success for only a small number of Protestant denominations allow the ordination of women and Roman Catholicism has maintained an intransigent stand against the practice. I believe much of the opposition to the priesting of women can be accounted for in the ideology of **"ideal womanhood "** that Christianity has promulgated for centuries which is founded on sexist assumptions about women's nature and biology. Tertullian's (dc.220) writing about women as **"the devil's gateway"** has paved the way for those opposing women's ordination by inextricably linking female sexuality with the office of female priest when no such correlation is made with male sexuality and male clergy.

There is little consensus amongst denominations on the issue of women and ordination and even when a decision has been reached, it is not always adhered to. In 1974 the Presbyterian Church decided to ordain women but in September 1991, the General Assembly of Australia decided by a majority of two to one to stop ordaining women.

The Anglican Church in Australia remains divided on the issue as several dioceses have ordained women but the Sydney Diocese refuses to do so.

The Uniting and Baptist denominations have a small number of female pastors but many of these women are employed in subsidiary roles such as assistant pastors or when they are allocated a parish it is usually one that is not attractive to male pastors.

The question of the ordination of women uncovers much of the partially concealed misogyny of Christian doctrine which Christian feminists name as sin. Conservatives however argue that the stance against the ordination of women is **"God's law"** written in Scripture for all time. Troubling questions on

women's nature, sexuality and role have contributed to the controversial nature of the debate and this has highlighted the ambiguity of Christians over female sexuality.

When Barbara Harris was ordained into the Episcopal church in 1989 as the first female bishop, *Time* magazine commented on her red nail polish. Although nail polish has absolutely nothing to do with qualifying for office as a bishop, such a comment by a journalist demonstrates how people

(albeit unconsciously) feel uncomfortable with female sexuality and divinity in close quarters. The *Sun* in Great Britain announced in response to the November 1992 decision by the General Synod of the Church of England to ordain women as priests:

**"THE CHURCH SAYS YES TO VICARS IN KNICKERS !" <sup>25</sup>**

Some of the people most opposed to the ordination of women do not necessarily quote theological argument but rather take their stance on the issue of female sexuality and how they perceive the office of priest highlights the temptations that femininity supposedly represents. The retired Bishop of London, Graham Leonard proposed that women posed a sexual threat to men and said in a radio interview that if he saw a woman in the sanctuary, he would be unbearably tempted to embrace her. As he made no mention of the large number of women in the congregation it seems it is only women in powerful positions that pose such an erotic threat to him.

The debate on the ordination of women is marked with many human emotions such as indignation, anger and frustration. For those women, however, who feel called to minister as priests the emotion they consistently speak of is hurt and the pain of rejection. <sup>26</sup> The continual rebuff of the Church has seen some women give up and form their own separatist spiritual communities. Others have moved to more progressive denominations but in doing so, may have to leave many of their own religious convictions behind.

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<sup>25</sup>Dowell,Susan and Williams,Jane:Bread Wine and Women:The Ordination Debate in the Church of England Virago Press 1994 p6

<sup>26</sup>Op cit p83



Feminist theologians such as Mary Daly argue that the Christian Church is "**inherently sexist**" and beyond feminist reform but others such as Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza argue that change can only be agitated from the inside. She argues that women should not just be fighting for ordination as priests (the lowest rung of the hierarchical ladder<sup>27</sup>) but should primarily be striving for offices such as Bishop, Cardinal or Pope so that real change can filter through the Church. Fiorenza argues that younger women in the Church need role models that emulate achievement not subservience. The debate has brought to public attention the misogyny disguised as theology that has underpinned Christianity for centuries but is now being seriously questioned and challenged by feminist critiques.

### **Marginalization of Women**

Feminists for many years have drawn our attention to the way in which patriarchy allocates power and control to men whilst obedience and submission to that power is required of women.<sup>28</sup> Feminist Post-structuralist theory understands the power relations between men and women as structural in that they exist in the institutions and social practices of society. Such power relations have a marginalizing effect on women for it is not their experience that is central to patriarchy but that of men.

One of the most graphic examples of marginalization of women is in the Church community. While the Church could not exist in its present form without the contribution of women, few women receive the recognition they deserve and are often exploited and used shamelessly by the Church.

Churches continue to use androcentric language in prayers and songs and hymns and the overwhelming majority of sermon-givers are men. Women run service communities such as hospital visitation and crisis care, teach Sunday School but are not represented equally on parish councils or other assemblies

<sup>27</sup>Op cit p86

<sup>28</sup>Scussler Fiorenza, Elisabeth But She Said-Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation Beacon Press 1992 p105

where major decisions are made.

The last few years has witnessed a steady decline in Church attendance by women (most particularly those in paid employment) and many congregations have yet to examine the way in which androcentric thinking in Church practice has consistently ignored the needs of women.<sup>29</sup>

With many more women enrolling in theological colleges the Church will have to address the way in which these women can best use their gifts and training. Women who choose to study theology do so with many obstacles in their way for few opportunities exist in Australia for women to study theology at University which means they do not have access to tertiary allowances or campus-based child-care. This has meant that the study of theology has been primarily in exclusively male theological colleges. Many women now choose to study by correspondence but this can be difficult without the contact and support of others especially if one has not studied for some time.

Women attend Church in consistently greater numbers than men and have been doing so in Australia since the 1880's.<sup>30</sup> Surveys conducted in the 1980's show that there are fifty percent more women than men in Church and P. Kaldor's research (*Who Goes Where ? Who Doesn't Care?*) shows that 59% of all regular attendees are women. Kaldor's study showed that the attendance rates of men and women in full time employment were very similar which suggests that women's increasing involvement in the work-force is highly likely to impact greatly on the Church.

Many ecclesiastical decisions are made without the input of women's experience or gifts and this has served to keep women **"silent"**. In the Anglican Church Perth was the first diocese to admit women to the Synod with Melbourne following in 1924. Women could serve on parish councils in Sydney in 1921 and Melbourne in 1954 but could not be Synod representatives in Sydney

<sup>29</sup>Dalziel, Rosamund Indispensable but Marginalized: Women in the Australian Church Zadoc Institute for Christianity and Society Series 1 Paper p2

<sup>30</sup>Op cit p6

until 1978.

Although women's involvement in decision making is increasing they are still under-represented in the higher levels of Church organization, in synods and other assemblies, theological colleges and finance and property committees.<sup>31</sup>

Churches have contributed to the marginalization of women by glorifying the role of the Christian mother (a common theme in contemporary Christian literature) which disregards the needs of part-time or full-time working mothers and fails to recognise that many stay at home mothers feel trapped and isolated in the role.

Many women who are married to clergymen suffer the impossible burden of being **"all things to all people"** and find themselves subsumed into their husband's career:

"The wife of a priest is supposed to be a permanent, nurturing, serene, ever-present support to her husband in his God-given role. She is expected to maintain an always welcoming open home as gracious and available hostess, producing a well-behaved, well-fed and suitably clad family-acting as back-stop when Father is not available for counselling or parish business, running Sunday School, Mother's Union, girls' club and all women's groups."<sup>32</sup>

It is often with the clash of the two conflicting worlds of Church and work that many women begin to realize how they have been marginalized by their Church. This can be a truly painful awakening and many women leave the Church, never to return.

".....We have no power, our voices aren't heard, little about us matters. I felt a lump in my stomach and as soon as the class ended I went to check the definition of marginalized. There it was: 'a limit or a condition beyond which something ceases to exist or be possible'. The next morning, with aching heart, I went to mass, only this time I was listening with new ears and seeing with new eyes. Only males were on the altar, the images and symbols were all male,

<sup>31</sup>Op cit p8

<sup>32</sup>Feld, Barbara (ed) *Fit For This Office\_ Women and Ordination* Collins Dove, Melbourne 1989p65



the most piercing of all were the words-the scripture and the homily used totally exclusive language. I felt invisible. That weekend my husband and I decided to try a different church and , as the same experience repeated itself, I sat in the pew and wept. When I realized it had always been this way I knew it was over for me and I left. They never missed me, they never even knew I was gone!"<sup>33</sup>

Joan Obanneson in *Woman-Survivor in the Church* (1980) is one of many women who have published their story of the struggle to remain connected to a religion that dehumanizes women whilst claiming to free and empower them.

The struggle of women overcoming the prejudices inherent in androcentric theology is not one confined to the twentieth century. The 12th century nun Hildegard of Bingen fought for most of her life to create a new role for women and argued against the assumptions promulgated by the Church fathers. Hildegard of Bingen spoke of God as a mother and adopted a more holistic theology than the hierarchical forms constructed by male theologians.<sup>34</sup>

## Single Women

The Church's teaching on marriage and motherhood and the subsequent glorification of that role for women can have a dehumanizing effect on women who for a variety of reasons choose to be single. A constant theme in Christian literature is that marriage and motherhood are a woman's highest calling, and anything she does before or after this is inconsequential.<sup>35</sup>

Single women who are devoted to their careers can suffer enormous pressure from Christian friends or colleagues who view such ambition as selfish. Married, childless Christian women commonly experience pressure from others to begin a family, even when they have made it clear that they wish to remain childless.

<sup>33</sup>Chinnici, Rosemary Can Women Re-Image the Church? Paulist Press 1992 p9

<sup>34</sup>Lerna, Gerda The Creation of Feminist Consciousness-From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy Oxford University Press 1993 pp49-64

<sup>35</sup>Harper, Michael Equal But Different-Male and Female in the Church and Family. Hodder and Stoughton 1994 pp177-188

Single women in the Church community can be easily exploited as they do not have the same ties and commitments of married women. Social activities for singles tend to revolve around male interests, which can turn the Church community into a marriage market.

Divorced or widowed women also feel the pressure from **"family oriented"** churches. Many feel they do not **"fit in"** where everyone else is 'happily married' and activities or sermons are directed at married couples. <sup>36</sup>

Unless a woman is attached to a man, she is largely invisible in the Church community:

"Social events are for couples, and single women are for babysitting.....There is a definite determination to pair off the single people, but it is clear that marriage is the aim. An ongoing relationship outside of courtship and marriage is unthinkable.... There is an approved interpretation of Christianity, which gives low status, if not invisibility, to women. Women are seen in the role of helpers (or servants) and this is "justified from scripture". Married women are seen as servants of their husbands and children, and single women as the servants of all. "<sup>37</sup>

Young women growing up in the Church community continually receive the subtle message that they **"are nothing without a man"** and this contributes to the idealized view many have of romance and marriage:

"Some of the forms by which male power manifest itself are more easily recognizable than are others...women have been convinced that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable, even if unsatisfying or oppressive components of their lives. "<sup>38</sup>

Willfully single women pose a threat to male control because in remaining **"unattached"**, they actively demonstrate their independence and autonomy. However, as a group in the Church community, their needs and voices are rarely heard.

<sup>36</sup>Webster, Alison R. *Found Wanting-Women, Christianity and Sexuality* Cassell Books 1995 p22

<sup>37</sup>Op cit p64

<sup>38</sup>Op cit p66

## Lesbian Women

Christian teaching on the complementarity of the sexes is formulated on notions of gender which are male-defined and which perpetuate inequality. The sexes are polarized, two parts of a whole which are said to perfectly complement each other in the mutuality of the marriage relationship. Any relationship other than a heterosexual one falls short of this ideal. The logical outcome of the teaching on complementarity therefore, is heterosexual normativity.

"To choose someone of the same sex for one's sexual activity is to annul the rich symbolism and meaning, not to mention the goals of the Creator's sexual design. Homosexual activity is no a complementary union, able to transmit life....when they engage in homosexual activity they confirm within themselves a disordered sexual inclination which is essentially self-indulgent."<sup>39</sup>

The Christian Church has consistently responded to homosexuals and lesbians with aversion, offering them no place in the Church community. The rejection of these people on the basis of their sexual preference is one that is reinforced by the writings of Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:9,10:

"Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral nor idolators nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God."

The story of Sodom and Gormorrah (Genesis 19) and the purity code in Leviticus 20:13 and I Timothy 1:9,10 all construct homosexuality as perversion. Judges 19-20 relates the story of a Levite and his concubine who arrived in Gibeah one evening and found lodgings with an old man. Some evil men came to the house and demanded to have sex with the Levite but rather than

<sup>39</sup>Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Alberto Bovone. Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,Rome. 1986 p3.



allow his male guest to be so dishonoured, the old man offered his virgin daughter instead but the Levite had sent out his concubine to the men. She was repeatedly raped and left to die. According to this biblical text, heterosexual gang rape and murder is less of an evil than homosexual sex.

Lesbianism is not directly mentioned in the Bible but Romans 1:26 ("*..even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones..*") has generally been interpreted as such. So although the Bible has just a few isolated references to homosexuality and just one debatable verse on lesbianism, the Church maintains its intransigent stance on heterosexual normativity.

Homosexuality and lesbianism are viewed as a type of sickness or a disorder and the Church's solution is to offer "**sufferers**" a place on the proviso that they deny themselves sexual expression. Therefore a gay or lesbian person could still regularly attend Church but in order to receive God's blessing, they must remain celibate.

Lesbian women are largely invisible in the term "**homosexuality**" and yet their experience as women in a male-dominated society is very different from homosexual men. As Adrienne Rich says:

*"Lesbians have been historically deprived of a political existence through 'inclusion' as female versions of male homosexuality. To equate lesbian existence with male homosexuality because each is stigmatized is to deny and erase female reality once again."*<sup>40</sup>

The symbolic significance of lesbian women in the Christian construct of reality is totally different from gay men. Gay men, in loving other men are actually following the script of patriarchy:

*"Man-loving is one rather obvious way in which gay men diverge from lesbians. Gay men desire and love members of the ruling class of men. In this respect gay men are loyal to the basic principle of male supremacy, man-loving. Manhood and masculinity, the symbols and*

<sup>40</sup>Rich, Adrienne Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence. Onlywomen Press, London 1981 pp21-2

behaviour which denote membership of the political class status of men are celebrated in many aspects of gay male culture."<sup>41</sup>

Compulsory man-loving is an essential element of Christianity which has at its head, a male God and at its core, a male saviour. Gay men, although considered perverted by the Church, are still essentially following the party line of patriarchy - glorification of the male. Lesbian women however, pose a huge threat to male supremacy which intensifies their marginalization in the Church community. The term "lesbian Christian woman" is in fact anomalous - Christianity demands of women their subjection to male rule and authority, therefore lesbianism is extremely subversive.

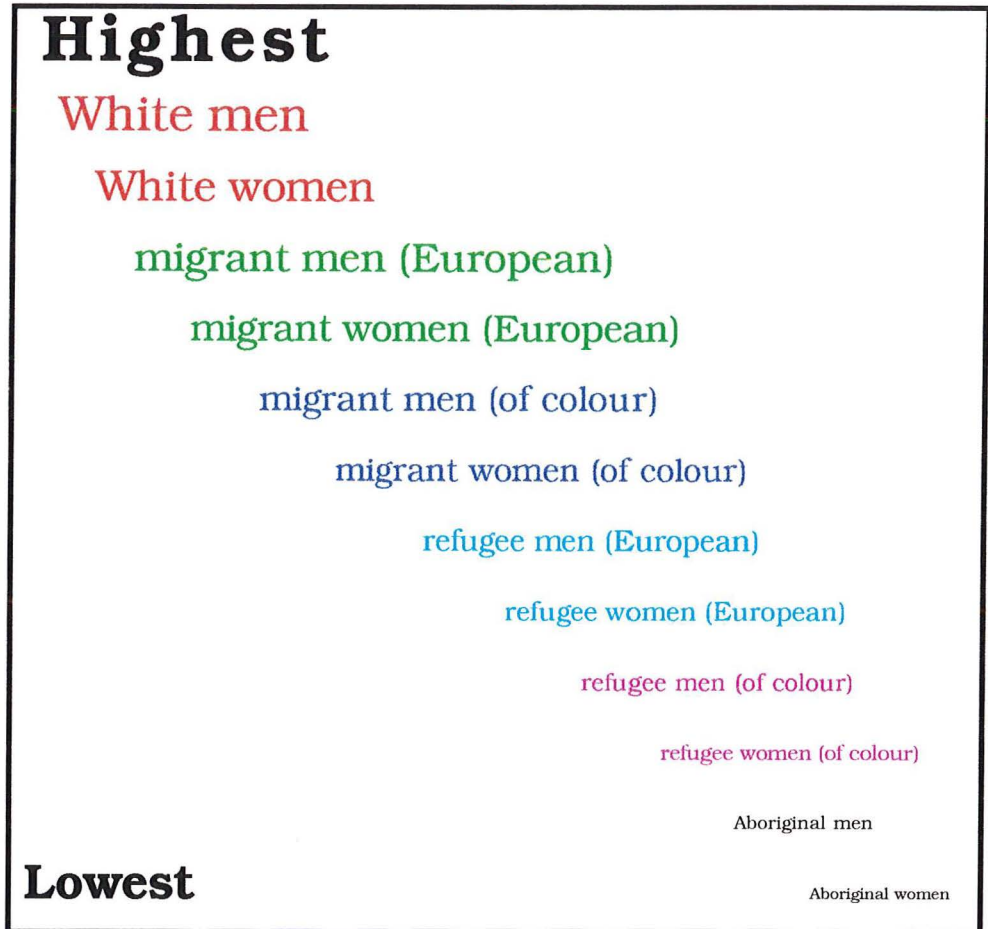
## **Women of Colour**

Australia is a society characterised by its "**cultural mosaic**" nature. As a result of immigration policies, Australia is a country where there are at least 145 different languages spoken by people from 256 countries or national groups. However, as a society, Australia does not have a good history of dealing with diversity. The colonisation, dispossession and attempted genocide of the indigenous people mars Australia's past, and our future is compromised by the activities of politicians such as Pauline Hanson with her 'One Nation' policy.

The rhetoric of sexism is similar to racism and classism. Power and prestige are in the hands of white males and at the bottom of the ladder are women of colour:

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<sup>41</sup> Jeffreys, Sheila. *The Lesbian Hoax: A Feminist Perspective on the Lesbian Sexual Revolution*. The Women's Press, London 1994 p24



Feminists have been criticised by women of colour for being "**colour blind**" in the same way that men under patriarchy have been "**gender blind**". In the context of the global Black womanist movement the limitations of feminism are gradually becoming more and more obvious.<sup>42</sup>

In the same way that traditional theology has failed to illuminate the experience of women, Christian feminism has failed to illuminate, recognise or even name the experience of black women:

"Feminist theology is inadequate for two reasons: it is White and racist."<sup>43</sup>

Many of the assumptions made by feminist theologians about the commonality of women's experience fail to take into account the very different experiences of Black women. Aboriginal women are on the lowest rung of the social ladder which sees them predominately unemployed, restricted to menial jobs,

<sup>42</sup>Thistlewaite, Susan Sex, Race and God-Christian Feminism in Black and White, published by Geoffrey Chapman 1990 p11

<sup>43</sup>Freedom From Entrapment-Women Thinking Theology "Not Yet Tiddas-An Aboriginal Womanist Critique of Australian Church Feminism" Anne Pattel Grey. Dove Books 1995 p166



disadvantaged by little or poor education and pushed to the fringes of the wider community.<sup>44</sup> Black women suffer the tridimensional oppression of racism, sexism and classism and therefore their social experiences of white male rule are quite different from white women.

White women and Black women in Australia have very different experiences in the Church community. The Christian Church has been a direct agent in the oppression of Aboriginal women from the earliest days of the first European settlement. The Church instigated the kidnapping of Aboriginal children from their mothers on the presumption that assimilation could best be carried out if the children were not **"aboriginalized"** by their own people. An Aborigines Department inspector from the North West of Western Australia wrote in 1908:

"It is the duty of the State that they be given a chance to lead a better life than their mothers. I would not hesitate for one moment to separate any half-caste (sic) from its aboriginal mother, no matter how frantic her momentary grief might be at the time. They soon forget their offspring."<sup>45</sup>

Aboriginal women were regularly used as poorly paid domestic servants and many were flogged, beaten or humiliated in an effort to **"keep the Aborigines down"** or **"in their place"**. Many were used as little more than sexual slaves and Aboriginal historians have asserted that White women simply turned a blind eye to this regular abuse.<sup>46</sup>

Aboriginal women had to wait sixty years after **"all Australian women"** were given the Commonwealth vote in 1902:

"The proud boast that Australia was the second nations in the world to federally enfranchise its women ignores the fact that black women and their men in two states had to wait until 1962 to gain access to the ballot-box."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Op cit p 167

<sup>45</sup>Op cit p176

<sup>46</sup>Op cit p170

<sup>47</sup>Op cit p186

Aboriginal women still suffer oppression from White women because of classism

and racism:

"Many Black women experienced White women as the White supremacist group who most directly exercised power over them, often in a manner far more brutal and dehumanising than that of racist White men. Even today, despite predominant rule by White supremacist patriarchs, Black women often work in a situation where the immediate supervisor, boss, or authority figure is a White woman."<sup>48</sup>

The Christian Church has significantly contributed to the theft of Aboriginal culture that has occurred during the last two hundred years or so of White settlement. Widespread missionary activity in order to **"Christianize the natives"** has decimated much of the Aborigines' original culture and beliefs and many Aboriginal dialects no longer exist.

The campaign called **"Thursdays in Black"** initiated by the World Council of Churches was described in one of its promotional pamphlets as a call for:

"women and men to wear black on Thursdays as a protest against rape and violence - the by products of all war and conflict."<sup>49</sup>

The campaign gathered support amongst various white women's groups but Aboriginals were not consulted about how they felt about the symbolic use of the colour **"black"**. Aboriginals were outraged at the racism this initiative demonstrated but were also hurt that they were not a part of the decision making process when Aboriginal women have suffered so much violence and rape, historically as well as today. The dehumanizing of Aboriginals in this way was no doubt largely unconscious, but this demonstrates the way in which Australia is immersed in racist discourses which are invisible when viewing through a **"white lens"**.

Aborigines are still on the margins of the Church community, along with other people of colour. Some progressive churches have **"ethnic"** worship

<sup>48</sup>Op cit p176

<sup>49</sup>Op cit p187

services with interpreters or bilingual pastors, but these tend to be more often associated with large city congregations. Migrants and refugees who mostly live in poorer suburbs do not have access to this type of service.

In the same way that white women are "**kept in a state of psychological dependence on men and male authority**"<sup>50</sup> by the exclusive use of male terms for God, people of colour are kept in a state of dependence on white (usually male) authority. Whilst White Christian feminists have drawn attention to the way in which the Church is "**sexist**", racism and classism which permeate traditional Christian theology and praxis have yet to be adequately reviewed.

### ***The Abuse of Power and Violence Against Women and Children in the Church Community***

The Women's Movement over the last thirty years has brought to public attention many ways in which patriarchy serves the needs of men at the expense of women's needs. It has called into question many aspects of male power and privilege and sought to challenge them. As more and more women found a public voice in the feminist movement patriarchy's most heinous crime gradually came to light. Claims of sexual abuse and incest prior to the 1960's was generally considered to be the ramblings of an over productive imagination and few children were believed or saw justice served. Up until the latter years of the 19th century the testimony of women and children was not thought to be reliable as evidence in a court of law unless verified by a male witness. This practice has its origin in Scripture - a vow made by a girl or married woman needs, to be valid, the consent of father or husband and if this consent is withheld, the vow is null and void (Numbers 30:4-17, my paraphrase).

In some Middle Eastern countries this archaic law is still in place making

<sup>50</sup>Womenspirit Rising- A Feminist Reader in Religion edited by Christ,Carol and Plaskow,Judith. "Why Women Need the Goddess" Carol Christ Harper and Row1979 p275



crimes such as rape completely invisible, unreported and unpunished.<sup>51</sup>

Marilyn French refers to the sexual abuse of women and children as **"the slime under the rug of patriarchy"**<sup>52</sup> and while people in the Church may have acknowledged the disturbing figures on this type of abuse, most would have assumed that it was a problem confined to secular circles.

### *Male Power Linked to Violence*

As reports of sexual abuse by priests and members of the clergy became public knowledge (primarily during the last twenty years) it became increasingly obvious that religious institutions with their heavy emphasis on male control and supremacy were ideal contexts in which to perpetrate such violence. Also, because members of the clergy have long been considered the more morally upright of the community many of their victims had been forced to keep silent about the abuse, living in constant fear and shame.<sup>53</sup>

Even though recent media reports on sexual abuse (such as that perpetrated by the Christian Brothers in the 1960's and 1970's) have drawn public attention to the nature of this crime, there still remains a web of silence surrounding the issue of sexual abuse in the wider Church community.

### *Different Types of Abuse*

Feminists have suggested that Christianity institutionalizes such violence and abuse against women and children with its male-dominated theology that insists on a male deity spoken of as father and **"head"**.<sup>54</sup> Women and children are instructed by biblical texts to **"obey"** their father and as a result a cycle of violence is set in motion which appears to have heavenly sanction. The abuse of women in the Church community is not always of a sexual nature (although the following do often coincide with sexual abuse) for many women speak of financial control by penurious husbands, social control (not

<sup>51</sup>French, Marilyn *The War Against Women* Penguin 1992 pp61-70

<sup>52</sup> Op cit p198

<sup>53</sup>Public Face Private Pain: About Violence and the Abuse of Power Within the Church Community CASA House 1994 pp51-52

<sup>54</sup>Claly, Mary *The Church and the Second Sex* .Harper Colophon Books 1968 pp82-3

allowed to use the car or telephone), spiritual control (not permitted to attend

Church at all or only at his say so.)

## **Women to Blame**

Attitudes are slow to change regarding the issue of violence and many men and some women firmly believe that the problem is not at all serious, or that women need to be better wives as God intended and the problem will simply go away:

"I am genuinely concerned for women but theologically I am convinced that if a woman submits to her husband as God desires then God will give both husband and wife strength to endure anything, even some regrettable abuse." (John-aged 30)<sup>55</sup>

Others believe that some women pose a sexual temptation to men and that men are simply being men for responding:

"Many women and children make allegations about abuse by men but many of these come to nothing because they are not factual. Misunderstandings can arise over certain actions by men towards women; sometimes men are tempted and cannot resist a situation of impropriety with a parishioner." (Ross-aged 55)<sup>56</sup>

A small number of male clergy are becoming more aware of the issue of violence and abuse in the Church community but often find sharing this awareness with their senior colleagues can be an extremely frustrating and sometimes fruitless task:

"I became committed to changing the attitudes of my brother clergy when I realised over five years ago that they were ignorant about domestic violence in the church. I heard enough stories from women to convince me that pastorally the clergy responded from an attitude which said they distrusted women and saw them as somehow causing and deserving the abuse. These patriarchal views are abuse! Changing them is a slow process in the church." (Danny - aged 55).

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<sup>55</sup>Op cit p61

<sup>56</sup>Op cit p59



Some clergy find that in reporting cases of abuse they come face to face with the hierarchy of the Church which decides to ignore the claim, blame the female victim as either neurotic, unbalanced or promiscuous or insist on silencing the claim for fear of damaging the Church's reputation:

"Honestly, sometimes I wonder why I stay in the ministry. I am feeling so let down, over and over again. I try my hardest and feel absolutely betrayed by the hierarchy. I had this situation where a woman came to me who is married to one of the other clergymen. She told me how she's been experiencing all sorts of violence-physical, sexual, psychological. She asked for my help, she feels so trapped in the vicarage with no-one else to turn to. She and her husband and my wife and I have known each other" around the traps" for years. I found it difficult to believe, but I did believe her. Why wouldn't I?

So I went to the bishop for help and he sat me down, offered me a drink and said that, yes, he had heard something of these accusations, other people had come to him thinking that something didn't seem quite right. But he asked me was I aware that this woman was really a bit neurotic, that she'd never been the same since one of their children had died unexpectedly, that she was probably going through "the change" and so needed psychiatric help. He told me the name of the church could be really damaged if I shared this with anyone else.

My wife and I have prayed about this, I don't know what to do. We believe her, but to be blunt, my employment is on the line here and I'm not trained for any other job." (Simon- aged 51) <sup>57</sup>

### ***Traditional Teaching - Sanctity of Marriage***

Much of Christianity's traditional teaching contributes to the misunderstandings on the issue of violence and sexual abuse and can often further increase the suffering of victims. The Christian Church has always maintained the notion of the sanctity of marriage and although some Protestant denominations allow divorce, the Catholic Church insists on the indissolubility of marriage. Christian women can feel the enormous pressure of this teaching and choose to stay in violent and destructive marriages because they feel it is

<sup>57</sup>/Op cit p57



what God requires of them. Phrases such as **"what God has joined together let no man put asunder"** and the promise to **"love, honour and obey"** have been part of Christian marriage ceremonies for hundreds of years and they unquestionably contribute to the way in which Christian women view their relationship options:

"I was a victim of physical violence for 15 years until I left my husband. I had been to a church counselling service during this time and they were no help. They did not encourage me to see leaving as an option." (Lyn-aged 40).

### **Idealized Womanhood**

Christian teaching on **"ideal womanhood"** has also contributed to the problem of violence and abuse in the church as many women cannot possibly meet the standards set primarily by male celibate theologians. The idealization of the virgin Mary is one example where an impossible standard is set for women. No woman can be both virgin and mother and yet Catholicism (and to a lesser degree Protestantism) uphold Mary as a model for all. Biblical, theological and artistic representations of the virgin Mary depict a meek and demure woman who is generally passive and silent. In artistic representations she is more often than not depicted with down-cast eyes, kneeling at the feet of her own son further entrenching the notion of her subordination.

Fundamentalist branches of Christianity promulgate an **"angel in the house"** model of wife and motherhood which insists on women's **"natural calling"** to serving the needs of others in her care. Many Christian authors state that if women will only submit to their husbands properly before the Lord then they will be truly happy and blessed.

"A wife is called upon to create the environment and right climate in which the tender plants of love and marriage can grow and flourish."<sup>58</sup>

Many women feel personally to blame for the violence and abuse in their relationship and live their sad lives entrenched in guilt and shame:

<sup>58</sup>War, Irma The Godly Woman Personal Bible Studies For The Christian Woman The War Foundation, Oklahoma, 1976 p83

"Perhaps if I try harder to be a better wife and mother and don't spend as much time at things like Mother's Union or choir practice, then things will get better. I know I'm being selfish by wanting to do things for myself instead of being a proper homemaker. " (Angela-aged 45)

## Forgiveness

Some of the most basic articles of Christian teaching have had a negative impact on Christian women and most particularly those who find themselves victims of some form of abuse. The command to **"forgive one another"** is one that is almost impossible for victims of sexual violence to come to terms with and unfortunately the Church has been slow to recognize this. When the perpetrator of the abuse is a respected member of the Church community the concept of biblical forgiveness is tinged with a bitter irony. Sometimes in response to claims of abuse members of the clergy have been shielded from appropriate investigation and simply transferred to another parish, the new congregation being in complete ignorance of the allegations that precipitated his removal:

"My priest offered me the pastoral support and friendship I needed as a single mother raising three young children. He began taking my children out to parks to give me a "well earned rest". He sexually assaulted the girls over a period of a year before I found out. I went to the police, laid charges and investigations were started. Meanwhile, the priest was moved to another parish in the country somewhere." (Susan-aged 25)<sup>59</sup>

The New Testament has much to say about forgiveness:

"Forgive and you will be forgiven " Luke 6: 37b;

"If you forgive anyone I also forgive him (sic)"

2 Corinthians 2:10;

"Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

Colossians 3:13.

<sup>59</sup>Public Face Private Pain-About Violence and the Abuse of Power Within the Church Community CASA House 1994 p28

For women who have been victims of some form of abuse hearing these passages Sunday after Sunday can be a very bitter pill to swallow and many interpret their failure to forgive as unchristian and sinful. Most victims find themselves hurled into a crisis of faith and question how God could allow such a thing to happen or alternatively look upon the abuse as **"God's will or plan for my life"** or as God's retribution for past sins. No amount of rationalization can remove the hurt and betrayal felt by those abused and the Church has been negligent in failing to recognize the way in which traditional teaching has contributed to the pain and suffering of victims. It has been suggested that perhaps the Church has often pressurized survivors of abuse to forgive so that it won't have to pursue disciplinary action itself.<sup>60</sup> Christians come to look upon forgiveness as a way of putting right the past, starting afresh with a clean slate. This may well be an effective way in which to deal with petty arguments or misdemeanours but is totally unrealistic for the survivors of sexual abuse or violence. Forgiveness does not make things right, and the Church must accept that some people will never be able to forgive their perpetrator and that this does not make them any less of a Christian.

## **Suffering**

Christian teaching on suffering has also been an area that needs review in the light of domestic violence and sexual abuse figures reported in the Church community. The notion of **"suffering for Christ"** is a popular one in the New Testament:

**"For it has been granted to you on  
behalf of Christ not only to believe on  
him, but also to suffer for him."**

Philippians 1:29;

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<sup>60</sup>Sexual Assault and Other Forms of Violence Within the Australian Community-Religious and Faith Perspectives Seminar Papers CASA House 1993 p46



"But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."

1 Peter 4: 13;

"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

Romans 8: 18;

" Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perserverance, perserverance, character; and character, hope." Romans 5:3.

Christian teaching on suffering combined with the Church's stance on the sanctity of marriage produces a no-win situation for Christian women in domestically violent circumstances. They literally have no choice but to stay and **"endure for Christ"** and **"rejoice "** in their sufferings in the hope of eternal glory.

The concept of suffering as redemptive is something that has gradually developed in the Christian tradition thus theologizing and condoning the powerlessness and suffering of women. The double jeopardy for women in Christian marriage is the enshrinement of the family as one where a dominant male takes full responsibility for those under his authority. Research shows that this traditional model for the family is the most common site of sexual violence.<sup>61</sup> The overbearing patriarchal father who controls the actions and inactions of the household in which he reigns as God's appointed tyrant is a common theme in the stories of abused women and children.

" ...I was brought up in the Church of England and we attended every week with my parents.

<sup>61</sup>Op cit p19

My father was greatly respected and admired by everyone, except me. They thought he was wonderful because he often looked after us kids at home while Mum attended choir practice, but I could not cope with the fact that when she was out at those meetings he would regularly try to have sex with me. Sometimes he was successful, sometimes not. I tried to stop him, but he said I had to "honour my parents" like it says in the bible. I had to do whatever they told me to do...." (Miriam - aged 50)<sup>62</sup>

"When I was a child I believed in God with all my might. There was a silent crying out from deep within me. It said 'Please, please God, take away from me this pain. Take me away from Daddy who uses me for sex.' But nothing happened. Only more of the same. I grew up feeling I was the scum of the earth and wishing that I would die. My father was a staunch church goer. He was even a lay reader in the local Church. Why didn't I tell anyone? Who was there to tell. I felt afraid that I might fly apart at any moment with anxiety, guilt and shame. I know without doubt that if I told anyone about what was going on I would be blamed. I felt stuck and powerless...." (Rosemary-aged 55)<sup>63</sup>

The Christian Church has yet to answer for its construction and maintenance of the traditional marriage model that so seriously disempowers women and children. In fact, Christian literature is still primarily devoted to reinstating men as heads of households and quite openly criticize feminists for rocking the biblical boat.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>62</sup>Public Face Private Pain- About Violence and the Abuse of Power Within the Church Community CASA House 1994 p76

<sup>63</sup>Op cit 84

<sup>64</sup>Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood- A Response to Biblical Feminism Edited by Piper, J and Grudem, W. Crossway Books 1991 p13

## Chapter 2: Christian Literature

Although the Bible is central to Christian thought and theology there also exists a large body of contemporary Christian literature which operates outside of the genre of theology. This type of literature largely reflects the sexist paradigms of the right wing conservative element in Christianity known as fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is a sexist discourse that works in texts to construct a subject and reading position for readers. How readers respond to texts is closely related to the subject position they adopt. The subject position of men in the genre of Christian literature, I would argue, is very different from that of women. Feminist reader-response criticism has alerted us to the way in which patriarchal discourses construct the reader and how gender, race and class also impact on the way we read a text. This is an important consideration when viewing the genre of Christian literature, (and in particular the Bible) for as Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza says:

"Reading and thinking in an androcentric symbol-system entices biblical readers to align themselves and to identify with what is culturally normative, that is, culturally 'male' ".<sup>65</sup>

Reading biblical texts and fundamentalist inspired Christian literature can exacerbate rather than challenge the Church's marginalization of women.

For fundamentalists, the sexes are complementary i.e. **"different but equal"** and exist together in roles that are said to be set in nature through God's creative processes. For fundamentalists there can be no interchange of roles; men must be leaders as God intended and women must submit to male authority. For this reason the bulk of contemporary Christian literature is both implicitly and explicitly anti-feminist. Feminism is perceived as a threat to God's order for the family and thus held responsible for the breakdown of

<sup>65</sup>Schussler Fiorenza, Elisabeth But She Said-Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation Beacon Press Boston, 1992 p35



society and all its evils:

"No organisation can function properly if it has two heads. That is particularly true of the home. One of the great hindrances to a happy home today is the false notion that a woman does not have to subject herself to her husband. Modern psychology and education seem to give women the idea that subjection is an old fashioned notion that went out with the nineteenth century. But when subjection goes out of the home, so does happiness. Today we have more frustrated women, men and children than ever before. With the downgrading of the father image and the rising dominance of the mother role we have witnessed an increase in juvenile delinquency, rebellion, homosexuality and divorce. God intended man to be head of his home. If he is not, he will not have a sense of responsibility but will subconsciously feel he is married to a second mother. His children will soon detect who is boss, and as teenagers they will lose the natural respect for their father that is necessary for their adjustment to life. Usually a wife-dominated home is a quarrelsome home until the husband finally "gives up". He then crawls into his shell of introversion and degenerates into a sub-par human being. The sad thing is, a wife will eventually grow to despise the husband she dominates."<sup>66</sup>

For many people unsettled by the world changing around them, the message of Christian literature can be a seductive one in its call for a return to the **"good old days"**. Authors such as LaHaye are keen to offer simple solutions to very complex problems without examining the wider implications of the way in which the patriarchal model he proposes has consistently disadvantaged and exploited women.

As well as being anti-feminist, much contemporary Christian literature is also homophobic and goes so far as to blame the **"rising dominance of the mother role"** for the 'increase of homosexuality'.

Many Christian authors call for a return to a version of femininity for women which includes submission, passivity and docility. Central to this version of femininity is the role of nurturing others, particularly husbands and children.

<sup>66</sup>LaHaye, Tim How To Be Happy Though Married. Living Books.1968 pp105-6

Marabel Morgan's *The Total Woman* (1973) became a best-seller and has enjoyed many reprintings with her advice on marriage and a happy sex life. Some of the techniques she suggests include: dressing up in baby doll pyjamas to greet him at the door on his return from work, organizing the household so that he never sees an untidy room, becoming the sunshine in the home so that everyone feels good around you and being the sort of wife that lives by the following creed:

" Accept him,  
Admire him,  
Adapt to him and  
Appreciate him. "<sup>67</sup>

The clash between feminism and fundamentalism is intensified by Morgan's recipe for reverence of male authority and her insistence that women surrender their lives to their husband, in what feminists would refer to as a complete loss of autonomy:

"It is only when a woman surrenders her life to her husband, reveres him and worships him, that she becomes a priceless jewel, the glory of femininity, his Queen!" <sup>68</sup>

R.C.Sproul is slightly less scathing of feminism, acceding that some of the aspirations of feminists are indeed "**noble**" however he describes the Woman's Movement as a massive revolt against male supremacy and warns of the dangers of going "**too far**":

"To usurp the authority of the husband is seen by many as the only possible solution to the problem. When this happens, the authentically noble and just aspirations of the Women's Lib degenerate to a peasant's revolt that will have women worse off than they are now. When a good principle or institution is abused there is always the tendency of some to destroy that principle or institution altogether - "throwing the baby out with the bath water." <sup>69</sup>

<sup>67</sup>/Morgan, Marabel *The Total Woman*. Hodder and Stoughton 1973 p49

<sup>68</sup>Op cit p80

<sup>69</sup>Sproul, R.C. *Discovering the Intimate Marriage* Bethany Fellowship Inc. 1975 pp69-72



This type of response to feminism is quite common in Christian literature and is certainly the prevailing one in the Church community, which accounts for the slow response to feminist reform in the churches. Many people perceive feminism as a pro-female ideology which is intent on replacing male power with female power. However, feminism is more correctly described as a pro-human movement which is intent on removing socially constructed limitations from the lives of men and women regardless of race, class, colour or gender.<sup>70</sup> Feminism, therefore is not *feminizing* the world but rather *humanizing* it.

### *Fear of the Feminine*

There is a commonly held assumption amongst Christian authors (and the wider Church community) that if women are given more power, such as in the right to become priests then the Church will become feminized, leaving no place for men.<sup>71</sup> As Borrowdale correctly points out an all male leadership has not attracted more men to the Church and it is worth speculating that with more women involved in priestly function men would not have to feel that the only place for them was 'up-front'.<sup>72</sup>

Christianity has had a long history of fear of female power. The Church was the propelling force behind the 300 year witch hunts from the fifteenth to eighteenth century.<sup>73</sup> The Church fathers wrote consistently of the evil nature of women and the Inquisitors who wrote the *Malleus Maleficarum*, "*The Hammer of the Witches*", explained that women were more likely to become witches than men:

"Because the female sex is more concerned with things of the flesh than men; because being formed from a man's rib they are 'only imperfect animals' and 'crooked' whereas man belongs to a privileged sex from whose midst Christ emerged."<sup>74</sup>

<sup>70</sup>Murphy, Claire Colette An Introduction To Christian Feminism Dominican Publications 1994 p11

<sup>71</sup>Borrowdale, Anne Distorted Images-Changing Christian Attitudes to Women, Men and Sex. SPCK 1991 p47

<sup>72</sup>Op cit p 48

<sup>73</sup>Ellerbe, Helen The Dark Side of Christianity, Morningstar Books 1995 p114

<sup>74</sup>Nigg, Walter The Heretics-Heresy Through the Ages. Dorset Press New York 1962 p277



Christian literature is characterized by this same aversion to female power and female agency with its constant call for women to submit to male authority in marriage and the Church:

"The primary responsibility of authority in the home has been assigned to men....Whether women's activists like it or not, a Christian man is obligated to lead his family to the best of his ability. This assignment does not justify iron-fisted oppression of children or the disregard of a woman's needs and wishes, of course. But God apparently expects a man to be the ultimate decision maker in his family."<sup>75</sup>

Although Dr. Dobson states that **"iron-fisted oppression of children"** is not something he advocates in the Christian family, below are two of the behavioural techniques he has developed and marketed for dealing with **"the strong-willed child"**:

- \* tweaking the disobedient child's shoulder, near the collarbone in order to get their attention;
- \* hitting the child with a wooden spoon or similar object in preference to the parent's hand which is meant to help the child disassociate the punishment from the loving hands of the parent.<sup>76</sup>

Dr. Dobson has strong connections with the anti-abortion movement in the United States and is considered something of a parental guru amongst Christians as he is a popular speaker and has numerous publications which 'focus on the family'. In fact, his twenty year, non-profit organization is called "Focus on the Family" and from this platform Dr. Dobson continues to encourage and coerce women back into the home. He is quite openly anti-feminist and on many occasions has spoken out against the Women's Movement for its role in confusing men about what is required of them:

"Men are in a state of confusion over the meaning of sex-role identity. We know it is unacceptable to be "macho" but we are a little uncertain how a real man behaves. Is he a

<sup>75</sup>Dobson, Dr James Straight Talk to Men and Their Wives. Word Books 1980 p64

<sup>76</sup>Dobson, Dr James Dare to Discipline Tyndale House Publishers 1970 pp 22-29

breadwinner and protector of his family? Well, not exactly. Should he assume a position of leadership and authority at home? Not if he's married to a woman who has had her "consciousness raised". Should he open doors for his wife or give his seat on the train or rise when she enters the room? Who knows? Will he march off to defend his homeland in times of war, or will his wife be the one to fight on foreign soil? Should he wear jewellery and satin shoes and carry a purse? Alas, is there anything that marks him from his female counterpart? Not to hear the media tell it. Again, I must make the point that this confused sex-role identity is not the result of random social evolution. It is a product of deliberate efforts to discredit the traditional role of manliness by those who seek revolution in the family."<sup>77</sup>

Dobson believes that it is imperative that women remain in their traditional marital role in order to prevent an upsurge of social evil. He refers to George Gilder's *Sexual Suicide* in which statistics on male violence, rape, burglaries, suicides and drunk driving are attributed to single males. Both Gilder's and Dobson's point is that single men are a threat to society and to women and children in particular. He argues that men have aggressive tendencies which are largely unbridled and potentially destructive while in contrast, women:

"are naturally more motivated to achieve long-term stability. Her maternal inclinations (they do exist and are evident in every culture throughout the world) influence her to desire a home and a steady source of income. She wants security for herself and her children."<sup>78</sup>

It is Dobson's view that if society continues to reject the traditional role of women in marriage, great evil will come about as a result of men not having clear definitions of what it is to be male. What he implies is that women are in some way intended to be **"God's police"**<sup>79</sup>, and they can only do this by being traditional marriage partners:

"Instead of using his energies to pursue his own lusts and desires, he sweats to build a

<sup>77</sup>Dobson, Dr James Straight Talk to Men and Their Wives Word Books 1980 p155

<sup>78</sup>Op cit pp156-7

<sup>79</sup>N.B. "God's police" is the term used by Anne Summers in *Damned Whores and God's Police* Penguin Books 1975



home and save for the future mad seek the best job available. His selfish impulses are inhibited. His sexual passions are channelled. He discovers a sense of pride - yes, masculine pride - because he is needed by his wife and children. Everyone benefits from the relationship."<sup>80</sup>

There are enough domestic violence and child abuse figures to seriously challenge Dr. Dobson's claim that **everyone** benefits from the patriarchally headed household and yet the majority of Christian authors advocate the same family model without question. If Christian fundamentalism has a blind side then surely this must be it; for while authors *ad nauseum* insist that the best thing for men and children is if Mum stays at home, what may be best for Mum is never explored. When asked by a woman if getting an education was a worthwhile exercise for women who plan to get married and raise children, Dobson's reply was:

"The purpose for getting a college education is to broaden your world and enrich your intellectual life. Whether it leads to a career is not the point."<sup>81</sup>

'Is not the point for whom ?' asks Sue Lanci Villani in *Motherhood at the Crossroads* (1997), a revealing twenty year study of stay at home mothers. While Dobson and his contemporaries wax lyrical on the loftiness of the role of mother, mothers in western society remain an unsupported and invalidated group of people, who are repeatedly penalized career-wise and socially for doing what society expects them to do.<sup>82</sup>

## Gender Dress Code

One of the issues that notably concerns Christian fundamentalist writers is the blurring of gender dress/hair codes, changes to which began in the 1960's and continues to the present. Charles Swindoll, one of Dobson's contemporaries and also a popular writer and public speaker, joins Dobson in his concern over "**vanishing masculinity**":

<sup>80</sup> Dobson, Dr James Straight Talk to Men and Their Wives. Word Books 1980 p157

<sup>81</sup> Dobson, Dr James "Questions" Focus on the Family (November 1995), p5.

<sup>82</sup> Lanci Villani, Sue ( with Ryan, Jane E. ) Motherhood at the Crossroads-Meeting the Challenge of a Changing Role. Insight Books New York 1997 p113



"The separate distinction of male and female is not merely a 'traditional expectation', it's a biblical precept ('male and female He created them'; Genesis 1: 27b). And it isn't simply 'a role system that held civilization together'. It is a foundational block upon which any healthy civilization rests. When the roles get sufficiently blurred, confusion and chaos replace decency and order. When effeminate men begin to flood the landscape, God's longsuffering reaches the end of its tether, ushering in the severest judgement imaginable...a la Sodom and Gormorrah... Worst of all, because more and more men care less about being men, the family is thrown into confusion. Leadership is shifted to the wife and mother, and the children understandably reverse the roles, tragically perpetuating the unnatural trend."<sup>83</sup>

Swindoll's use of words such as **"unnatural"**, **"decency and order"**, **"confusion and chaos"** and **"the severest judgement of God"** demonstrate the investment of feeling that fundamentalists have in their desire to maintain clear cut sex roles. The role of masculinity in Christianity has enjoyed superior and God-like status for many centuries, so that altering it in any way necessitates a change in power relations between the sexes, and it is this that most concerns fundamentalist Christians.

The ideological notion of women being **"biologically determined"** to perform the role of wife and mother is a constant theme in Christian literature. The **"naturalness"** of women's submission and passivity is posited against the **"naturalness"** of male power and control. Hegemonic masculinity, as framed by fundamentalists, requires an exaggerated femininity as its flip-side. In order for hegemonic masculinity to flourish, Christian women are encouraged not to engage with feminism:

"Mom's, that's one of your greatest contributions. Don't lose your tenderness. If you buy into the feminist message of today, you'll become masculine and militant, rough, harsh and even a little mean!" <sup>84</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Growing Wise in Family Life Multnomah Press, Portland .U.S.A.1988p 54

<sup>84</sup>Op cit p75

Swindoll's implication appears to be that both men (by nature) and some women (through engaging with feminism) are rough, militant, harsh and mean. According to the fundamentalist viewpoint, tenderness is the distinguishing feature of womanhood. It is deemed to be **"natural"** and part of the created order and because of it, the role of the mother is glorified and idealized in Christian literature.

## Mother Blaming

Christian women are encouraged to take on the role of wife and mother with unswerving devotion and commitment, therein ensuring the psychological health of their offspring. They are discouraged from seeking a life outside of their home duties and their fulfilment is meant to be derived totally from **"doing what God wants"** in raising a family. Christian literature portrays women with career aspirations or ambitions as **"selfish"**, and projects blame onto those who have been lured away from hearth and home:

"Our world is falling apart for want of a good home life - good wives and mothers. Kids roam our streets filled with the hidden pain of loneliness and fear, trying to prove they are big enough to manage without Mum, without human warmth and softness, without beauty and security. But they aren't big enough, and sadly some will never be, because when they needed Mum, she wasn't there."<sup>85</sup>

Blaming women for society's wrongs is a common feature of a patriarchal society and even after thirty years or more of feminist debate, the practice continues. In 1985 an article in the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* entitled "Mother Blaming in Major Clinical Journals" traced the incidence of mother blaming in 125 articles published during 1970, 1976 and 1982. Mothers were blamed for seventy-two kinds of psychopathology in children and they were more likely to be discussed in relation to a child's behavioural problems. Fathers as individuals were least likely to be discussed and in no article was the mother's relationship to the child described in positive terms. In 74 percent

<sup>85</sup>Brand, Jean A Woman's Privilege SPCK Triangle, London 1985 p133



of the articles the authors used judgmental terms to describe the mothers but only 41 percent for fathers. The study found that mothers were consistently portrayed in a more **"blameworthy light"** and that the **"attributions of offspring's problems to the mother is, of course profoundly misogynist."**

<sup>86</sup> The question raised by this study is how can it be that women create such a range of emotional and psychological disturbances in their children's lives when according to fundamentalists, they are so naturally equipped for mothering?

### ***In Defense of Male Power***

In taking biological determinism to new bounds German theologian, Werner Neuer, insists that women are specifically designed to carry out their duties as wives and mothers. He argues that women are **"designed to be mothers"** in that they develop permanent breasts unlike any other member of the animal kingdom which:

*"has the appearance of motherhood without being a mother. This fact shows that the woman is built for motherhood as the goal and fulfilment of her being."*<sup>87</sup>

Neuer insists that God created women with a domestic destiny in mind, whilst men were designed with a muscle system that is ideally suited for strength and agility:

*"But her activity does not involve her in much pushing forward and overcoming external obstacles, so much as in caring and nursing, in sorting and tidying and polishing. A woman's muscles are particularly suited to their tasks. They are by nature less suited to strong contractions than to active compliance at the right moment."*<sup>88</sup>

For Neuer and other Christian authors like him, there can be no role exchange between the sexes for what feminists call gender dualism, fundamentalists call God's created order for humanity. Neuer states it a little more forcefully

<sup>86</sup>Caplan,Paula J and Hall-McCorquodale,Ian. "Mother Blaming in Major Clinical Journals" American Journal of Orthopsychiatry 55(3) July 1985 p 349

<sup>87</sup>Neuer<Werner Man and Woman in Christian Perspective Hodder and Stoughton 1988 p35

<sup>88</sup>Op cit p34



than most, however the majority of Christian literature pertaining to family-life issues reverberates with the same theme.

The ideology of an **"essential womanhood"** which is said to make women so irrevocably different from men is a recurrent theme in Christian literature. Women are said to be completely different from men because they are meant to **complement** men, not **compete** with them. These differences are not considered to be societal constructions but **"built in"** by God with a divine purpose in mind. The relationships between the sexes are often referred to metaphorically such as **"lock and key"** or **"hand and glove"** suggesting a co-dependant relationship between the two.

Relationships counsellor and author Dr. Larry Crabb suggests that women can only be really fulfilled when they interact with men as God intended, and that anything less short-changes humanity:

"When husbands are masculine, wives tend to go "off duty". They feel relieved of the relentless pressure to make things go as they should. They relax in the strength of an advocate that frees them to more easily realize the other-centred joy of their womanhood. When wives are feminine, husbands gain confidence in handling responsibilities, and are drawn to warmly enjoy and profoundly respect the woman whose involvement with them means more to their hearts than the most coveted honor or achievement could ever mean."<sup>89</sup>

## Romance

The discourse of romance can be traced through most of the Christian literature that deals with marriage and sexuality. Dr. Crabb's portrayal of the co-dependency of the marriage relationship demonstrates the way in which romance is woven into Christianity's message to women. The husband in a Christian marriage is always a hero and he encompasses power, prestige and control similar to the heroes depicted in romance novels. The wife's more

<sup>89</sup>Crabb, Dr Larry Men and Women-Enjoying the Difference Zondervan Publishing House 1991 pp132-3

passive, receptive role is also highly romanticized, her total fulfilment is assured only if she submits to the leadership of her husband.

The constant defense of male power that is so indicative of Christian literature is often taken to ridiculous extremes and as Deborah Cameron, (an English linguistic theorist) states:

"Sex differentiation must be rigidly upheld by whatever means are available, for men can only be men only if women are unambiguously women." <sup>90</sup>

### Women as Readers of Christian Texts

When women read Christian literature they may or may not already be the 'ideal reader', however the texts construct the 'ideal reader' by providing a reading position that seems **"natural and unproblematic"**.<sup>91</sup> As most Christian women are already embedded in patriarchal discourses which marginalize their experience as women, developing a **resistant** reading position may not be as easily achieved as in other genres.

Kress states that the consistently insistent demands of a sexist discourse which tell women how to **"be"** and how to act in certain ways have both long and short-term effects.<sup>92</sup> In the short-term the construction of a reading position by the discourse provides instructions on how to read sets of texts i.e. how to respond, to conform or adapt or take up the stance proposed by the text/s. In the long term subject positions are constructed by the constant reiteration of:

"sets of statements which describe and prescribe a range of actions, models of thinking and being for an individual compatible with the demands of a discourse."<sup>93</sup>

So then, Christian literature works consistently towards constructing a subject position for readers which instructs them on how to be Christian men and women, wives and husbands and mothers and fathers.

<sup>90</sup>Cameron, Deborah *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* Macmillan London 1985 pp 155-6

<sup>91</sup>Kress, Gunther *Linguistic Processes in Sociocultural Practice* Deakin University Press 1985 p36

<sup>92</sup>Op cit p37

<sup>93</sup>ibid

How can Christian women resist the subject and reading positions offered by the sexist discourse in Christian literature? Kress argues that resistant readers need to have some **"distance"** from the discourse. This distance could be provided by another discourse e.g. feminism, or by the fact that the reader is not positioned by the genre.<sup>94</sup> A feminist reader therefore is likely to reconstruct Werner Neuer's text *Men and Women in Christian Perspective* entirely differently from a Christian woman who accepts her subject position as subordinate wife and mother. As Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza states:

"One can only critique an ideology by locating oneself in another one, or by using the contradictions within a single ideology to uncover its disjunctures and opposing relations."<sup>95</sup>

With the bulk of Christian literature reflecting the sexist discourse that has infiltrated the Church through androcentric biblical interpretation, women as reading subjects are caught 'between a rock and a hard place'. For some women, resisting or rejecting the reading position formulated by Christian texts is akin to heresy. In fact, this is how the texts themselves refer to such resistance or non-conformity:

"The feminist viewpoint is destructive because it is grounded in a set of false suppositions regarding the created order. It leads to coercion, failure and censorship. It contributes, directly and indirectly, to the growing uncertainty and confusion of the post-Christian world."<sup>96</sup>

For some women the option of compartmentalizing their lives into separate spheres can serve to relieve the tension between feminist and fundamentalist subject positions. A Christian woman may be committed to her career outside of the home and consider herself an autonomous and equal marriage partner but on Sunday, willingly subject herself to the sexist discourse of sermons and other liturgical practices that diminish her existence as an

<sup>94</sup>Op cit 43

<sup>95</sup>Schussler Fiorenza, Elisabeth But She Said-Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation Beacon Press Boston 1992 p 113

<sup>96</sup>Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood-A Response to Evangelical Feminism Edited by Piper, J and Grudem, W. Crossway Books 1991 p330



authentic human being. This intensifies the way in which women are marginalized by the Church as their lived experiences as women do not count. Rather than relying on personal authority to interpret Scripture and critique Christian dogma, women are encouraged to leave such interpretations to the **"experts"**, but it has only been in the last few years that feminists have alerted us to the fact that these 'experts' have been exclusively male.

Some very recent Christian publications have begun the process of bridging the chasm between feminism and faith. These do not align themselves with the sexist discourse of fundamentalism, however they still fall into the genre of contemporary Christian literature.

Mary Ellen Ashcroft (*Temptations Women Face*, 1991) questions the way in which the Church has tended to attach a higher status on the activities in which men are involved within the Church whilst trivializing women's contributions:

"You walk into a church service on Sunday morning. At the front of the church there are only men who lead the worship, read the scriptures, pray and preach. You might think that this is a church for men only, but you see many women in the pews, more than men in fact. Then you look in the bulletin; here are the opportunities for women! You see that you could go to a women's group and learn to make Christmas decorations and next week you could learn your "colour season". That's not all, you scan the page further down and see some ministries you know are important: you could look after children in the nursery and teach Sunday School (at least up until the children reach a certain magic age). You could also help serve a meal for some homeless people and pray for missionaries. Some trivial and some important activities would be available to you as a woman....If you were a man, you could attend a prayer breakfast and hear a speaker talk on "Paul's theology of judgement". You could stand at the front and read a lesson or lead prayers. There are few opportunities for service, few for working with children. There is no opportunity for a man to learn about his colour season or about making Christmas

decorations. As a woman, attending this church even once, you have been told that your time is assumed to be less valuable than a man's."<sup>97</sup>

Ashcroft seriously challenges the patriarchal discourses in Christianity that reinforce women's inferior status in the Church and infers (along with many feminist theologians) that what has been historically termed the **"word of God"** is more accurately described as the **"words of men"**.

When women have no part in naming their own experience they must rely on other's interpretations that do not often reflect women's best interests. The Church's teaching on anger is an example of the way in which women are severed from their experience and alienated from their real selves when they fail to meet the standards or prescriptions of androcentric norms. Christian women carry two images of women in their mind: the passivity and gentleness of the submissive wife and mother and the nagging shrew. Christian literature speaks of the responsibility that women are called by God to carry out in homemaking and nurturing of relationships and cautions against anger and nagging or other expressions of discontent.

The Church's teaching on **"turning the other cheek"** has not served women well, for it leaves no positive model for anger. Anger in a Christian woman is a contradiction, a paradox, an aberration. Ashcroft suggests that Christian women are left with just two choices when it comes to anger: denial i.e. **"no anger"** or **"destructive anger"**.<sup>98</sup> Women who are angry actively resist the passive and submissive stereotype of the Christian woman and pose a serious threat to male control. When Christian women experience anger it may have to be disguised or packaged in a more acceptable Christian form. Low self-esteem and depression can be symptomatic of unacknowledged anger and this contributes to the way in which women feel alienated from themselves.

## Critical Reading

Christian women are constantly exposed to the reiteration of biblical guidelines through the Church's teaching, theology, literature and liturgy on what it is

<sup>97</sup>Ashcroft, Mary Ellen. *Temptations Women Face*. Intervarsity Press 1991 p90

<sup>98</sup>op cit pp104-5



to be a Christian woman, wife and mother. This constant bombardment which implicitly (and often explicitly) suggests the inferiority of women makes it extremely difficult for women to become critical reading subjects. The patriarchal ideologies that imply the inferiority of the female sex have the solid weight of centuries of Christian theology and praxis behind them. The Church has insisted that the differences between the sexes are "**natural**" and an essential part of God's order for the human race. Although many women throughout history (e.g. Hildegard of Bingen [1089-1179], Christine dePizan [1365-1430], Julian of Norwich [1342~1416]) have seriously questioned the notion of female inferiority, the Church continues to silence women by keeping their questions and struggles out of the canon of Christian thought and theology. Patriarchy has ensured that Church 'fathers' such as John Damascene have had their words enshrined:

"Woman is a sick she-ass ... a hideous tapeworm ... the advance post of hell",

but insights of noble women such as Sarah Grimke (1792-1873):

"I mention this ... only to prove that intellect is not sexed; that strength of mind is not sexed; and that our views about the duties of men and the duties of women; the sphere of man and the sphere of woman, are mere arbitrary opinions, differing in different ages and countries, and dependant solely on the will and judgement of erring mortals" <sup>99</sup>

are struck from history. This marginalization of women's collective experience makes the task of critical readership all the more daunting - the Church has disguised and legitimated sexism by maintaining an idealist understanding of the Bible instead of a more accurate understanding of it as a construction of patriarchal ideology.

Christian literature reinforces this idealist view of Scripture with its view of the relationship between androcentric text and historical reality as a "**mirror**

<sup>99</sup>Lerna, Gerda The Creation of Feminist Consciousness-From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy Oxford University Press 1993 p163



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image" which overlooks the complexity of the ideological construction encoded

in the text. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza argues that:

"The silences, contradictions, arguments, prescriptions and projections of biblical texts, as well as the Bible's discourses on gender, race, class, or culture, must be unravelled to show their ideological inscription of the patriarchal politics of otherness."<sup>100</sup>

Christian literature, fuelled by the ideology of fundamentalism does not permit such an **"unravelling"** of the biblical texts but rather supports a literalist and idealist reading which makes critical readership impossible, forbidden and sinful. Christian feminists over the last two decades have consistently challenged this view and out of this struggle feminist/liberation theology came into being.

## ***Feminist Theology***

Although there are various strands of feminism such as Liberal, Social, Radical, Post-structural, Ecological and Marxist, Christian feminism has grown out of a movement in the Christian Church (primarily but not exclusively by women) which sought to uncover the patriarchal bias of biblical texts and theology that has contributed to the oppression of women in society.

In the light of feminist biblical interpretation of the New Testament gospel accounts of the life and ministry of Christ new insights have been offered into how patriarchy has overridden the **"discipleship of equals"** that Jesus is said to have proclaimed. Whilst some Christian feminists have clung to the biblical example of Christ as a clue to the equality of humanity that God intended instead of the distortion of power relations that patriarchy offers, others have come to the conclusion that Christianity is unredeemable from the patriarchal values from which it evolved.

Many of these women feel more comfortable expressing their belief outside of

<sup>100</sup>Schussler Fiorenza, Elisabeth But She Said \_Feminist Practices of Bibleial Interpretation Beacon Press 1992 p34

the male-dominated church by distinguishing spiritual experiences from religion, Church, theology, spirituality, liturgy and ritual. Many re-image God in female terms that best reflect their spiritual understanding of the Divine. However some post-Christian feminists are critical of female imaging of God because Goddess worship grew out of fertility cults and only women who were consecrated virgins were considered capable of a spiritual life.

Whilst post-Christian feminists see little hope for the established Church successfully addressing the issues that feminism has raised, Christian feminists are more hopeful of change and envisage a Church free from the secular influences of patriarchy with a clearer vision of what Christ is said to have taught about being a community of believers. The emerging flood of feminist theology in the last fifteen years indicates that Christian feminism is a growing movement, addressing issues that have long been unattended.

Many of the first women to publish feminist theology were Nuns. Whilst Nuns are unable to be ordained, because they are without family ties and responsibilities, the pursuit of higher education is an option many take with great aptitude and enthusiasm. It is from this position that many Nuns began to question the limits on their ministry even though they had shown themselves to be excellent biblical scholars. They had also begun to see the essentials of Christ's teaching on equality in a new light and began to speculate about whose interests it serves to keep such a radical message hidden within androcentric texts. For Christian feminists, sexism is a sin and their challenge to the Church is to recognize this and undergo complete reform in theology, interpretative translation, teaching and clerical appointment.

In 1979 Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow edited the groundbreaking *Womanspirit Rising - A Feminist Reader in Religion* which brought together several prominent feminist and post-Christian theologians. This book was and still is considered highly polemical, raising speculation over whether traditional theology could



speak for women's experience or if there was a future for women in the Church given Christianity's past record.

Carol Christ in her own contribution to the book entitled "Why Women Need the Goddess" explores the psychological and political effects for women living under exclusively male religious symbols. She argues that:

"Religious symbol systems focused around exclusively male images of divinity create the impression that female power can never be fully legitimate or wholly beneficent."<sup>101</sup>

Even when people do not consider themselves "religious" these symbols still have their affect, for even the most secular people will at some time find themselves at a church for a wedding or funeral where the symbols associated with these rituals answer a deep or unconscious structure of the mind. Christ suggests that if a woman prays exclusively to a male God, female power becomes anomalous for she can only image herself as like God in denying her own identity. Unlike every male in her culture, she will never have the experience of having her sexual identity affirmed as being in the image and likeness of God. The power that male religious symbols have in keeping women in a state of psychological dependence on men and male authority also legitimates the political and social authority of men in the institutions of society. Women grow up to view male power as salvific but develop distrust of their own power and see other female power as inferior or dangerous.<sup>102</sup>

## **Male Theology**

Feminist theologians have questioned the authority of male theologians to speak for all people. Valerie Saiving's paper in *Womanspirit Rising* was previously published in 1960, at least ten years ahead of other feminist theological reflection, and in it she articulated what was to become the basic premise of feminist theology: that the vision of the theologian is affected by the

<sup>101</sup>Womanspirit Rising-A Feminist Reader in Religion Christ,Carol and Plaskow,Judith (eds)Harper and Row 1979 p275

<sup>102</sup>Ibid

particularities of his or her experience as male or female.<sup>103</sup> Saiving argued

that:

"...the supposedly generic doctrines of "man" turn out on closer examination to be the doctrines of male experience."<sup>104</sup>

Saiving develops this point when she examines the universal theological understanding of sin as pride and grace as sacrificial love. These definitions do not adequately describe women's experience, and Saiving proposes that self-forgetfulness and self-negation would probably be a more accurate description of **"women's sin"**.<sup>105</sup> Saiving asserts that the human condition can only be correctly described by taking into account the experiences of both sexes and traditional theology has failed to do this.

Rosemary Radford Reuther explores the dualistic nature of traditional theology (such as mind/body, good/evil, male/female) and how these have contributed to and maintained sexism in the Church. Reuther calls for a new communal social ethic, one that does not rely on the pattern of domination and subjugation formulated by patriarchy.

Mary Daly takes one step further from both Saiving and Reuther to argue that Christianity and all its symbols are **"inherently sexist"** and therefore beyond feminist reform. Daly's position as a post-Christian feminist is one being embraced by more and more women who no longer feel able to tolerate the sexism and androcentricism of traditional Church forms. The resurgence and growth of woman-centred culture based on the worship of the Great Goddess, the New Age movement and Wicca are indicative of this swing away from the Church.

## Conservative Women

There are many women both inside and outside the Church who do not feel that they experience oppression from men. They feel comfortable in traditional

<sup>103</sup>Ibid

<sup>104</sup>Op cit p 21

<sup>105</sup>Op cit 20

frameworks and consider themselves as complementing men. These women have the support of the Churches but in particular, the affirmation of fundamentalists and other right-wing groups. Feminists see such women as colonised and used and abused by the Establishment, whereas conservative women see feminists as trouble makers causing stress on families by drawing attention to trivial issues such as language.

Conservative women argue for the complementarity of the sexes and see feminist's charges against sex-differentiated roles as political polemics that can only do harm to the family and society.

## **Language**

Secular feminists have questioned the generic use of male pronouns which they argue make women **"linguistically invisible"**.<sup>106</sup> The Church has a long history of androcentric language usage and Christian feminists have fought long and hard for reform. However many churches continually use exclusive language in readings, hymns, songs and prayers as well as other liturgical items and if change has occurred it has usually been accompanied by a long and bitter battle with conservatives who don't see the necessity for change.

Another type of exclusive language identified by Christian feminists is the way in which we speak of God. Traditionally this has always been by the use of male pronouns and yet the Bible does not give God a gender. Although the Bible records that Jesus referred to God as Father, this in itself was revolutionary since to personalize one's relationship to Yahweh in this way was perceived as sacrilegious. Feminist theologians such as Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Reuther suggest that the biblical record is biased by the male authorship and it is highly likely that the words of Jesus could have been misrepresented to fit the patriarchal order.

Gregory Nazianzus (329 A.D.) taught that the terms **"father and son"** as used

<sup>106</sup>Spender,Dale Man-Made Language



in describing the Trinity, are metaphors which refer to relationship, not nature.

Metaphorical terms are useful in adding to our understanding of something that is mysterious, such as God. It has been unfortunate for women, however that the metaphors used for God are exclusively male, which implies that maleness is in closer proximity to the divine than femaleness.

The Hebrew **ruach** (translated "spirit") is feminine, but the corresponding Greek word (**pneuma**) is neuter. In Latin the term is masculine (**spiritus**) which leaves English-speaking Christians with three masculine metaphors to describe God.

Many people in the Church (and secular society) see the language debate as trivial but language reflects reality and the way we image God influences our behaviour and attitudes towards ourselves and others. Feminists argue that the imaging of God as male has entrenched patriarchal power relations thereby condoning sexism as well as racism, classism, colonialism and clericalism.

## **God as Mother**

The Bible contains many images of God that reflect mothering which feminists feel have been selectively ignored by the Church 'fathers'. There are many birth metaphors such as:

"From whose womb did the ice water  
come, and who gave birth to the frost?"

(Job 38:29);

"I have been quiet and held myself  
back; but now I will cry out like a woman  
in labour, I will strain and pant."

(Isaiah 42:41).

The Revised Standard Version says "**You forgot the God who gave you birth**", however in the Jerusalem Bible in 1968 this was translated as "**unmindful**

Other metaphors speak of God's comfort and care and protection in words that are very relevant to the experience of motherhood:

"I have found ease and peace for my  
spirit, just as a child does at the  
mother's breast." (Psalm 131:2)

One of the most profound female images comes from the crucifixion story of Jesus where both blood and water flowed freely from his side as he was speared by one of the soldiers (John 19:33,34). The flow of water and blood at the birth of a baby is a powerful metaphor of Christ's teaching on rebirth into faith in God but one that has been lost to women in preference for exclusively male imagery.

### ***Hermeneutics and Exegesis***

One of the focal points for Christian feminists has been the hermeneutics (science of interpretation) and exegesis (critical explanation or interpretation) in regard to the Scriptures. Feminist theologians argue that the translations we have been handed down reflect the androcentric view of the translators and thus should be re-translated to address this bias.

Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza states:

"The issue of androcentric language has received much attention in the past several years. The biblical texts as they are read by individuals or heard in the liturgy of the Church perpetuate the male bias and exclusiveness of our own culture and language. Without question biblical language is androcentric, but is it deliberately exclusive of women? At a time when androcentric language patterns and linguistic praxis have come to consciousness and are much debated, such unconsciously androcentric language becomes exclusive, male-biased language. Biblical translators, therefore must confront the issue of historically appropriate and philologically correct translation."<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup>Op cit p43.

Schussler Fiorenza states that while the appropriate translation of masculine metaphors and androcentric language is a huge and difficult task, it is not just important for contemporary translation and God-language but also for the "**hitherto-unexplored ramifications**" for our understanding of the biblical texts as historical sources:

"A historically adequate translation must take into account the interpretative implications of androcentric language which functioned as inclusive language in a patriarchal culture. Such androcentric inclusive language mentions women only when their presence has become in any way a problem or when they are "exceptional", but it does not mention women in so-called normal situations .... In other words, androcentric language is inclusive of women but does not mention them explicitly. Such androcentric inclusive language functions in biblical texts the same way it does today - it mentions women only when women's behaviour presents a problem or when women are exceptional individuals."<sup>108</sup>

Schussler Fiorenza suggests that a feminist critical hermeneutics of the Bible must develop theoretical interpretative models that can integrate the so-called counter-culture, heretical and egalitarian traditions and texts into its overall reconstruction of scriptural theology and history:

"Although the canon preserves only remnants of the nonpatriarchal early Christian ethos, these remnants still allow us to recognize that the patriarchalization process is not inherent in Christian revelation and community but progressed slowly and with difficulty. Therefore, a feminist biblical hermeneutics can reclaim early Christian theology and history as woman's own theology and history. Women had the power and authority of the gospel. They were central and leading individuals in the early Christian movement."<sup>109</sup>

Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza argues that the biblical texts which oppress women do not have the authority of sacred Scripture. She suggests a four-dimensional hermeneutical approach:

<sup>108</sup> *Op cit* p44-5

<sup>109</sup> *Op cit* p35-6.



A hermeneutics of suspicion - interrogates the ideological functions of androcentric text, commentary and world construction in language. If there is an indication of non-inclusively, the clues for re-reading the text must be revealed unambiguously.

A hermeneutics of remembrance - is concerned with recovering the submerged biblical history of women in its oppressive and liberative functions. Re-visioning the past can offer a new future to women free as **"the world behind the text"** is uncovered as well as **"the world in front of the text"**.

A hermeneutics of proclamation - insists that androcentric texts are not to be proclaimed as the word of God but **"must be exposed as the words of men, if we do not want to continue to proclaim the Christian God as a God of oppression."**

A hermeneutics of creative actualization (or liberative vision and imagination) - creatively celebrates and makes present the suffering, struggles and resurrection of our foresisters and foremothers.<sup>110</sup>

Kathleen Fischer has developed this fourth dimension for creative spirituality in *Women at the Well - Feminist Perspectives on Spiritual Direction* (1989).

There are on-going debates about hermeneutics and exegesis even among feminist theologians themselves as well as in mainstream theological forums. Schussler Fiorenza critically appraises several feminist theologians such as Mary Daly and Phyllis Trible. Daly has stated that a liberation method involves:

"not only a 'castrating' of patriarchal language and symbols but also a break-through to new semantic fields."

Her book *Gyn/Ecology* is concerned less with the critical analysis of patriarchal theological symbols than with demonstrating how androcentric language and scholarship have **"erased"** women from consciousness."<sup>111</sup>

Phyllis Trible recognizes feminism as a clue between the text and its historical

<sup>110</sup> Confoy, M. Lee, D. A. Nowotny, J. (Eds) *Freedom and Entrapment - Women Thinking Theology*. Dove Publications 1995, pp151-2.

<sup>111</sup> Schussler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. In Memory of Her - A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins p23-4

context. She defines feminism explicitly not as **"a narrow focus on women"**

but rather a **"critique of culture in light of misogyny."**<sup>112</sup>

## ***Sexuality and the Church***

Christian feminists have challenged the patriarchal tendency to polarize masculinity and femininity along with other dichotomies projected by religious teaching. These include sinner/saint, spirit/body, man/woman, good/evil. This practice of polarization has an effect on how we image ourselves, and in particular, women.

The historical perspective on bodily functions (from the Torah) indicates a repugnance with the body. Women's bodily functions are particularly posed as repugnant and various restrictions were enforced in order to keep them from "tainting" priestly function. During a menstrual period or following childbirth a woman was considered unclean and was to stay away from the temple or sanctuary for a number of days. If she gave birth to a daughter, the length of time barred from the temple was doubled from what she was required to do in the event of a male birth (Leviticus 12). Many theologians stress that these are descriptive not prescriptive accounts of Judaic practice and have little bearing on how we see ourselves today. However the notion of women's sexuality and bodily functions as unclean or evil persists today, in particular within the Church. In addition, the passages which refer to women's "uncleanness" are still very much a part of the biblical canon and as such are valued and revered as God's word:

"Christians still have unhealthy attitudes to women's bodily functions. One argument against women administering the chalice, let alone being priests, is that they might be menstruating or pregnant .... Actually, many of those who do not believe a woman can represent Christ have sanitized views of the Virgin Mary, suggesting that she avoided pain

<sup>112</sup>*Op cit* p20.

and bleeding when giving birth-though presumably she did have periods."<sup>113</sup>

Another female function that is still regarded as somewhat unacceptable is the act of feeding a baby at the breast. While naked breasts are accepted in the form of art or newspapers, they are not accepted if they are feeding a baby:

"As with other female bodily processes, the link with sexuality means that breast-feeding is regarded as dirty, or at the least as a very private affair. The thought of a woman breast-feeding in church, even very discreetly, is sacrilegious to some, although religious art has often depicted Jesus at his mother's breast."<sup>114</sup>

The Church 'fathers' had much to say about women and little of it was good:

"Woman! You are the Devil's doorway. You have led astray one who the Devil would not dare attack directly. It is your fault that the Son of God had to die; you should always go in mourning and rags." (Tertullian)

"Amongst all the savage beasts none is found so harmful as woman." (John Chrysostom)

"Woman is an occasional and incomplete being, a misbegotten male. It is unchangeable that woman is destined to live under man's influence and has no authority from her Lord."  
(Thomas Aquinas)

"When I deprecate female suffrage I am pleading for the dignity of woman. I am contending for her honour, I am striving to perpetuate those peerless prerogatives inherent in her sex, those charms and graces which exalt womanhood and make her the ornament and coveted companion of man. Woman is queen indeed, but her empire is the domestic kingdom."  
(Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore)

Each of these texts reiterate that not only are women different, they are also inferior and as part of the textual history of Christianity their bias is continually projected. The Christian tradition has presented us with an ascendant, white male, celibate (in Catholicism) priesthood and put the control and teaching of the Church into their hands. The influence that Church 'fathers' had in

<sup>113</sup>Borrowdale, Anne. Distorted Images-Christian Attitudes to Women, Men and Sex. SPCK 1991, pp15-6.

<sup>114</sup>*ibid*



describing female sexuality from a male perspective had, and still has huge implications for how Church communities respond to male violence against women. The Clergy's response to domestic violence is at best reticent and at worst non-existent, since prevailing attitudes about women and sexuality continue to cloud the issue.

Just how damaging this totally male perspective can be is evidenced by the attitudes to other forms of male violence such as rape:

"Male definitions of sin have left women theologians shaking their heads in disbelief and horror. Students, priests and seminarians, are frequently still taught the hierarchy of sexual sins as defined by Church Father, Thomas Aquinas. He decide that, as the only God-assigned reason for sexual intercourse was reproduction, an act of rape or incest (which has reproductive potential) was a lesser sin than masturbation which 'wasted the seed'."<sup>115</sup>

Women have been blamed for enticing men into uncontrollable passion by the clothes they wear, the way they walk and the way they speak. This has been an affective means of placing the responsibility of behaviour control onto women, instead of into the hands of men. Women are often blamed when they become the victims of male violence; that they "asked for it" is an all too common response from the men involved. These abhorrent attitudes have permeated all tiers of society and the Church is no exception:

"Will all the women present please cross their legs and close the gates of hell"

said the nineteenth century evangelist Billy Sunday, as he began a sermon, and to some degree, this appalling attitude to women still exists. The linking of female sexuality with hell is a common theme in Church history which reflects the dicotomization of the body and spirit, and good and evil.

An important goal for Christian feminists has been to reveal the male bias inherent in Christianity's history and how that bias is still being played out

<sup>115</sup>Public Face-Private Pain-About Violence Against Women and the Abuse of Power Within the Church Community.CASA 1994, p74.

in the Church today. The Church's teaching on marriage and sexuality can have a profound effect on women and how they view themselves as people and as wives. Women who are being regularly abused by church-going husbands may feel that they are to blame for not fulfilling their "role" or for not being submissive enough. Others will feel that this abuse is "suffering for God" and part of the Christian pilgrimage. The Church's long tradition of teaching on the headship of men and submission of women has given a religious sanction for the control of men over women, even when this control is gained through abusive means. Thus it is perhaps more difficult for a Christian woman to envisage a future free from tyranny or abuse as the image of God they have been taught as powerful, in control and male is reflected in the husbands they had promised to obey.

Christian feminists along with mainstream feminists have challenged the notion of the nuclear family with its God-appointed head when statistics bear out the reality of abuse and violence such family structures shield. This **"attack on the family"** is one of the issues that fundamentalists so fiercely defend. They do not acknowledge the susceptibility of women and children being exposed to various forms of abuse, rather they insist that God's blueprint works and that all parties benefit from sex-differentiated roles within marriage. Christian feminism has questioned the limits set on women by the Church's teaching on ordination and preaching and have identified how this can influence those who feel a call to minister. In the face of such hostile opposition, many begin to doubt the authenticity of their call, and thus the authenticity of their faith. For those for whom ordination is not an issue, the impact of restricting how women can represent God can have a subtle but nonetheless damaging affect on how they see themselves before God.

Christian feminists argue that if women really share full humanity with men before God then they should also be able to represent God as women in the pulpit as well as the parish.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>116</sup> Dowell, Susan and Williams, Jane Bread Wine and Women: The Ordination Debate in the Church of England Viango Press 1994 p75

## No Win

The bias of Scripture can be a difficult issue for Christian feminists to raise as it calls into question the authenticity of the Bible, and as God's word - the authenticity of God. Fundamentalists reject feminist theology as it implies that the Scriptures are incomplete, imperfect or incorrect. They maintain the view that the Bible is inerrant and as such, speaks for all time, for all people. Their allegiance to this view even extends to defense of the Bible on issues for which the Bible is silent, such as euthanasia, abortion, *in-vitro* fertilization and genetic engineering. They overcome this problem of biblical silence by projecting their own narrow philosophies to represent **"God's view"**, which they claim to surmise from the nature of the Bible and its teaching on other matters.

Feminist theologians challenge the translatory assumptions laid down by fundamentalists by calling into question the accuracy and consistency of generic androcentric language as well as the projected culture of patriarchy as something God designed. Fundamentalists discard feminist critical analysis as heresy so the possibility of true debate is not forthcoming. Issues such as ordination of women are deemed by fundamentalists as theological issues, not social issues, fixed for all time by the authority of Scripture. Christian feminists acknowledge the Scriptures as **"tainted by patriarchy"** and therefore feel that social reform should precipitate a similar reform in the Church, addressing the long history of bias and male supremacy.

Feminist writer Marilyn French in *The War Against Women* (1992) relates at length the power and influence of fundamentalism that has permeated religion, and which calls believers to discard feminist initiatives as 'the work of the Devil':

"As always, the emancipation of women was equated with the destruction of the family. The fundamentalists knew how to "save" the family: the church had become too "feminized" and had to be returned to male control. Men must



be in authority in every sphere, they said, and women must suffer subordination within the domestic sphere."<sup>117</sup>

French refers to the strict adherence by fundamentalists to the inerrancy of Scripture that along with their **"back to the home and God-ordained family"** rhetoric is a total rejection of the science of Evolution. The fossil record does not fit into the short time-frame apparently documented in the Bible so this particular scientific realm is rejected on the basis that it contradicts Scripture. It is interesting to note that fundamentalists do not reject other forms of scientific progress such as medicine, computers, pharmacology and so on but they insist that Evolution is a grave mistake, fraud or misconception.

### *Lectionary Leanings*

One area of interest to feminist theologians has been the Common Lectionary, which is an ecumenical selection of Bible readings selected for use in liturgical worship. The readings are set out to coincide with particular celebratory Christian events such as Advent and Epiphany as well readings for each Sunday's worship. Pastors have the choice of whether to follow the lectionary readings for the preparation of their sermons and most choose to do so. The American Common Lectionary was published in 1983 after five years of work of scholars from the major denominations: United, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal and Catholic. The Church in Australia is using an older lectionary that has three years of readings to follow. As the readings from Scripture are such an important part of liturgical worship the nature of the reading will have bearing on the nature of the sermon and in fact, on the whole worship atmosphere. The readings can be received simply for their exhortational content but they also become central parts of liturgical teaching. Such readings can hold up models of behaviour or belief that Christians relate to their own faith and response to God. This is why Christian feminists

<sup>117</sup>French, Marilyn. *The War Against Women*, Penguin Books Ltd. 1992, p51.

have looked so closely at the lectionary to see what the readings say about women as well as what models are offered. Christian feminists recognise the patriarchal nature of the Scriptures so it does not seem surprising that males have the dominant roles to play as well as textual focus. However, while that cannot be changed, the selection of readings could offer a more equitable focus.

The choice of reading can influence the content of the sermon so it is of great importance then to analyse what passages have been selected and more importantly, which have been ignored. The selection process is in itself a theological exercise which to some degree reflect values, so if the passages chosen do not represent women, or portray women in a limited way, much of what the Church teaches reflects this bias. Many of the passages selected in the lectionary have a notable absence of women and the readings that do refer to women tend to be selective, or partial accounts so that effectively, women are silenced.

The Old Testament readings chosen for the liturgies of Sundays and major feast days are particularly male-biased as they have been chosen to reflect on the foretelling of Christ's coming through the prophets. Old and New Testament parallels have been chosen to demonstrate the fulfilment of Israel's history through the birth of the Messiah. Several male figures are featured emphatically, such as Abraham and Moses for these men are credited with bringing Israel through to redemption. There are no major female characters in any of the chosen texts for any Sunday or major feast day for the three years of the lectionary cycle. When a woman is portrayed it is often in a diluted way, not consistent with the complete text, for many of the passages selected are partial verses and the turn of events may not be revealed in their entirety. For instance, the readings that deal with Abraham and Sarah are such that Sarah does not speak, is passive, and acquiescent. This is not in keeping

with Sarah's character in Genesis where she is portrayed as active and in command.

The actions and speech of Moses are contained in nearly thirty readings but the women who saved him as an infant are ignored. Miriam, Moses's sister and Pharaoh's daughter and their combined act of civil disobedience prevented Moses from being killed just like every other male Israelite child and their actions bridged barriers of race and class and oppression. The message is unmistakable; Moses is the important one, the women are for all intents and purposes insignificant.

Marie Louise Uhr, (*Changing Women Changing Church*, 1992) criticizes this bias:

"I would suggest that stories of people reaching across barriers of race and class and stories of people gently and bravely ignoring the lethal dictates of tyrants, are critical to our very survival today and have more to tell us than do stories of the founding of nations, even of the nation of Israel."<sup>118</sup>

Uhr is also very critical of the lectionary's selection of readings that emphasise the role of male children in Israel and the blessing this was perceived to be. The intended sacrifice of Isaac was prevented by God and the faithful prayer of Hannah and the Shumannite woman who befriended Elisha were each rewarded with the birth of sons. The common thread of these readings is that God rewarded them for their love, generosity hospitality and prayers by giving them a son:

"No doubt the Israelite people regarded the birth of a son as a great gift from God, and of much more importance than the birth of a daughter...But I question the wisdom today of choosing to feature stories of women which culminate in the giving to them of a son, rather than stories which celebrate the lives and actions of women. Moreover, I question the wisdom of this emphasis on the gift of a son as God's greatest gift. Not only does it seem to deny the value of a daughter, but it proclaims that a woman's prime role is producing children, and that her fulfilment comes from that alone."<sup>119</sup>

<sup>118</sup>Uhr, Marie Louise (Ed) *Changing Women Changing Church*, Millennium Books 1992, p86.

<sup>119</sup>ibid



Marie Louise Uhr is concerned that in order to include the part of the readings that culminated in the birth of sons, other vital parts have been left out. Uhr refers to these omissions as "tragic" as they contain many models that women could particularly relate to in their spiritual lives. Uhr highlights the story of Hannah who prays to God so faithfully, pouring out her heart in complete trust. The lectionary omits her statement **"I was pouring out my soul to Yahweh..."** (I Samuel 1:15-16) so she is not heard as a model for others engaged in deep prayer that stirs the human soul. Uhr suggests we need this type of model as prayer is a difficulty for most people who struggle with openness with God and others.

The story of Adam and Eve has been selected to show that Adam's creation is an essential part of salvation history but Eve's is linked with the institution of marriage. The lectionary selection thus emphasises men as strategic people in salvation history but women are wives and mothers.

The New Testament readings refer to wives submitting to husbands and children obeying parents always but leave out the instruction that **"slaves be obedient to the men who are called your masters in this world"**. These calls for women to submit and the selective emphasis on dominance and submission in human relationships adds weight to the belief that males are the head of the home, it is they who must be obeyed and it is God who has demanded this:

"Indeed the use in the liturgy of this reading from Ephesians seems to me to be very dangerous for women because the author parallels God's position over the Church with the husband's position over his wife: it says that as "Christ loved the Church...and made her clean... in the same way....husbands must love their wives" (italics Uhr's). This is open to the interpretation that a husband's love and domination will make a normally-dirty woman clean and whole. How much wife-battering and incest have followed from the Church's continuing to give head-of-household power to men and to give it in the name of God? Will we ever know?"<sup>120</sup>

<sup>120</sup>Op cit p88

Uhr's examination of the Gospel readings reflect the tendency to omit the vital elements of women's experience even though the Gospels do portray women in a more involved way, particularly in the ministry of Jesus to them. However the omission of the witness of the women to the passion, death and burial of Jesus seems to imply that this is not central to the story of the Christian faith.

The lectionary readings show a tendency to legitimate the notion of women primarily as wives and mothers, passive, subordinate and irrelevant to salvation history. As this is a common image that both men and women have been influenced by women have tended to accept this portrayal of themselves, and this image of the passive subordinate Christian woman is strongly reinforced by the lectionary selection which represents God's Word.

The total omission from the lectionary of any of the biblical accounts of torture, rape and violence committed against women fuels the view that women are not central to salvation history, they are disposable, for it is just the men and the stories about them which count.

Uhr stresses the importance of changing this pattern in future lectionaries. Women and men need to hear the stories that show the pain, depth and faith of women in Christian history and to continue to omit their experiences is to perpetuate the notion of male supremacy which denies women full humanity before God.

The work of Christian feminists has continued to expose the way in which women are marginalized and stereotyped by many elements of Christian teaching and Church practice. Nothing has escaped their attention and examination for even the most seemingly insignificant element of a Sunday service can influence both women and men negatively, in how they view themselves as well as others. This is a particular concern for women as they occupy such a negative space in patriarchy, and to move from under its yoke is a task for many, not the marginal few.

### ***Moving Towards Change***

Historically fundamentalism and feminism have occupied two ends of a wide spectrum and it is only in recent years that debate has seemed possible. Their **"divorce of irreconcilable differences"** has in the past seemed too big to



address and yet small numbers of Christian authors and thinkers are beginning to affirm much of the feminist view point whilst graciously dealing with tradition and established belief. This has come slowly and has left much debris in its wake but it offers hope to women and men who are trying to **"uncompartmentalize"** their belief system from the reality of their daily lives. Lavinia Byrne (*Women Before God*, 1988) suggests that it cannot be long before the fundamentalist reasoning behind the refusal to ordain women will soon be seen for what it is - injustice rather than anything else.

The challenge of critically examining one's belief system is a courageous one which has a particular poignancy for women, who may for the first time come to consciousness about the negative portrayal they receive from Christian texts and history. This can create a crisis of belief and many women leave the Church in anger and confusion. Others struggle to incorporate their feminist ideology within the male-dominated ideology of their Church, continually facing opposition and alienation from both men and women who either do not acknowledge the sexist teaching of the Church, or are of the opinion that feminism is a social issue with nothing to do with spirituality. Raising the consciousness of whole communities of believers is an incredibly difficult process and few would feel adequate to the task. Many Christian women have witnessed great anger when they have suggested the use of a version of the Bible that does not use gender exclusive language, or suggested the removal of such language from well known hymns or prayers. The extreme resistance to such change hints at a deep seated fear of the loss of tradition as well as an undercurrent of aversion to anything remotely associated with feminism.

Lavina Byrne states that the

"burden of tradition is such that as women we have additional work to do in appropriating ourselves as known and loved by God."<sup>121</sup>

Traditional practices in the Church however, are not necessarily as traditional as most may assume, for many reflect particular moments in cultural history and have little relevance to the teaching of Jesus. Jesus was not a Christian and Christianity was formed well after his death and resurrection. Sister Angela of Stroud suggests:

<sup>121</sup>Byrne, Lavinia. *Women Before God*, SPCK 1988, p64.



"Frankly, I think Jesus, if he were here now,  
would say of the Church, "What's this?"<sup>122</sup>

The way forward is a long and arduous journey that many people will not wish to participate in. Those who are already involved in the process of change can testify to its painful challenge for the enemy is not necessarily the 'Devil' as our Sunday school teachers would have us believe, but rather the male-biased interpretations put on tradition and teaching that so seriously affect women and their spirituality.

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<sup>122</sup>Uhr, Marie Louise (Ed) Changing Women Changing Church, Millennium Books 1992, (Interview of Sister Angela of Stroud by Elaine Lindsay) p146.

# Chapter 3:

## Methodology

### *Requirements of a Christian Feminist Approach*

When looking at biblical texts one of the key questions that feminist theologians are concerned with is **how** and **by whom** the Bible has been interpreted. Post-structuralist theory poses the question- **whose** interests are being served in the interpretative process and **what** power relations are being maintained/institutionalized by the text. My position as both a Christian and a feminist forces me to examine closely how the Church has translated its message through its various discourses. I have found the work of Anne E. Carr in hermeneutics and critical theory particularly helpful, but much of my approach is heavily influenced by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and her recommendations for feminist biblical interpretation.

Many people both inside and outside of the Church consider the terms **"feminist"** and **"Christian"** to be completely incompatible and express surprise and horror that I have united them. Christian friends cannot understand how I could possibly align myself with a "radical" political movement that represents for them the breakdown of society as we have known it, and feminist friends respond with equal disdain that I could remain committed to an institution that has legitimated and contributed to the oppression of women for centuries. My position as both feminist and Christian demands that I examine closely the tradition that I have become part of and review it critically in the light of insights which feminism has offered me. The three critical requirements of a feminist theological approach that Carr has proposed combined with three strategies for biblical interpretation proposed by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza enable me to operate within the existing tradition and yet facilitate an adequate critique of it in response to feminism.

Carr proposes firstly, the need to view theological tradition critically and

constructively in view of contemporary questions which may add new insights.

In doing this, one is still somewhat bound by the traditional symbols and language. However the work of critical social theorist Jurgen Habermas has shown that the universal linguisticity of past tradition is questionable. Besides language and texts, Habermas maintains that there is also a history of work and power (or force and domination) and that language itself can be ideologically distorted.<sup>123</sup>

A second requirement of feminist theological approach is an understanding of religious symbols, especially how they participate in the reality they signify.

Feminist interpretation of symbols must call into question ideological notions of symbols that contribute to the loss of humanity for women. The doctrine of God and the Christology which has served to legitimate the subordination of women are examples of the idolatrous use of symbols for God, who is said to be beyond gender and yet is consistently referred to as "He". Human metaphors are acknowledged to be inadequate in describing God but Christian feminists argue that male metaphors position women negatively and operate ideologically to oppress them.

A third requirement of an adequate feminist theological approach must include a critique of the social and ideological uses of symbols and doctrines as well as offering transformative models that offer women full humanity.

The transformation of the male/female relational dichotomy and the doctrine of God that exploits women as the subjected "other" will provide new interpretations of human self, freedom and justice.

Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's recommendations for an adequate feminist biblical interpretation incorporates ten strategies; her first three are of particular relevance in my analysis of four New Testament women. The first approach recommended by Schussler Fiorenza has both a **remedial** and **revisionist** aim. Schussler Fiorenza argues that most of her students when asked to do

<sup>123</sup>Quoted in: Carr Anne B. Transforming Grace Christian Tradition and Women's Experience Harper Collins 1988,p100



so, cannot list a dozen biblical women. They can often name Mary or Eve or recall some of the nameless women such as the woman at the well but conversely, even those without a religious training background can successfully name the leading male figures in the Bible.<sup>124</sup> This approach not only seeks to recover the forgotten traditions of women but is also committed to uncovering the layers of centuries of androcentric interpretation that distort the meaning of the text.

The second of Schussler Fiorenza's approaches in feminist biblical interpretation is concerned with the **androcentricity** of the biblical texts. This is particularly important when one is trying to recover the lost tradition of women for as Schussler Fiorenza states:

"From studies of the transmission of biblical texts and their variant readings, it appears that texts about women's leadership actually were actively eliminated."<sup>125</sup>

The third of Schussler Fiorenza's approaches of feminist biblical interpretation is concerned with **imaginative identification** and this is the platform for my creative narratives of four New Testament women. Personal identification and biblical imagination not only focuses on the female characters in stories where their presence is not explicitly mentioned, but the use of storytelling or 'bibliodrama' can draw the women out from under the androcentric layers of traditional biblical interpretation. Imaginative identification is a valuable means by which to rediscover female voices in the texts and although some bibliodrama could be charged as anachronistic, the main goal of this approach is more concerned with breaking "...the marginalizing and obliterating tendencies of the androcentric text" and makes no apology that "...feminists tell biblical stories in which women are silenced or not present at all differently."<sup>126</sup>

Feminist post-structuralism and Christian feminism have much in common for they are both committed to uncovering the masked structures that operate

<sup>124</sup>Schussler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *But She Said-Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* Beacon Press Boston 1992 p22

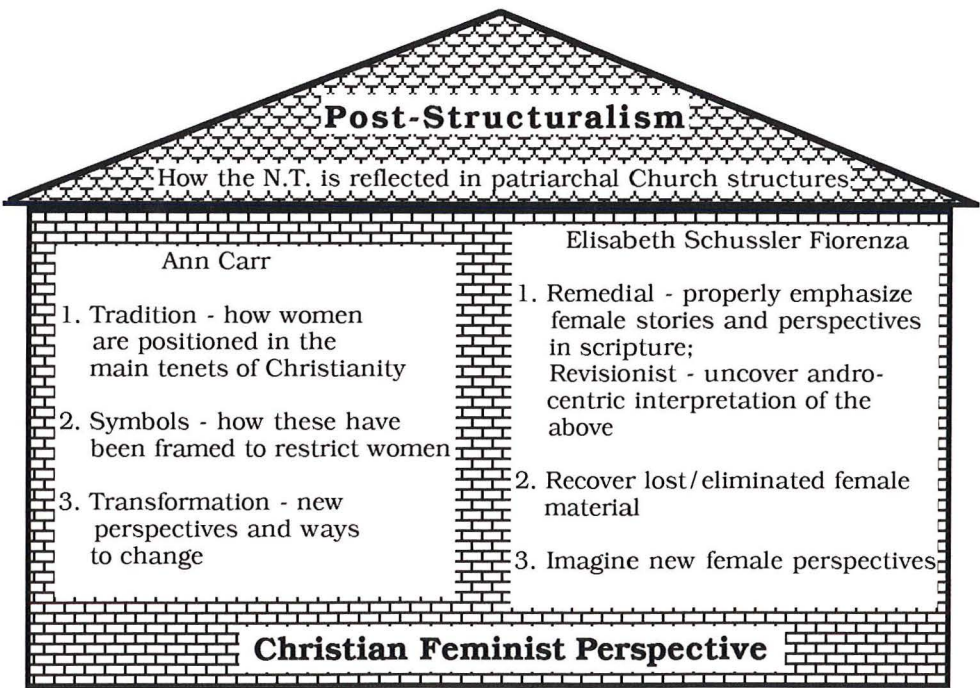
<sup>125</sup>Op cit p24

<sup>126</sup>Op cit 26

advantageously for men whilst serving to oppress the advancement of women.

Both are keen to look at ideological notions of masculinity and femininity and to challenge the dominant discourses that support these stereotypically narrow constructs. Feminist post-structuralism and Christian feminism demonstrate the same understanding of patriarchal power evidenced by their iconoclastic similarities, however at the core of Christian feminism is a desire to transform the tradition in such a way as to restore women to their rightful place as equal participants in grace.

The partnership of Christian feminism and feminist post-structuralism that I wish to adopt in examining the patriarchal bias on Scripture can be represented as follows:



In combining aspects of both these Christian Feminist approaches into an analytical framework, overarched by the post-structuralist objective of uncovering patriarchal structures, it is important that the framework satisfy several basic requirements in order to produced a substantiable analysis:

- 1) The framework has to **explain the texts** being analysed, and the explanation must be adequate and reasonable;

2) The framework has to **take into account the culture** out of which the texts have arisen;

3) The framework has to **account for the traditions, structures and symbols which have arisen** from the text;

4) The framework has to adequately **explain the current reactions/attitudes/responses** to the texts and their derived traditions/structures.

The framework described above and to be used in this dissertation also reflects the revisionist approach of feminist theologian Phyllis Trible as well as the liberationist approach of Rosemary Radford Ruether. However it is the reconstructionist approach of Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza that has particular relevance to me as a Christian feminist post-structuralist.

The application of such a framework is required because of the inadequacies of traditional Christian frameworks of interpretation of New Testament writings. The essential questions of how and by whom the scriptures have been interpreted offer feminist theologians such as Schussler Fiorenza vital clues to the origin of ideologies that posit women as the subjected "other". In illuminating oppressive ideologies Christian feminists can uncover the "hidden tradition" or "heritage" of women in Christianity that has been made invisible through the androcentricity of the biblical texts.



# Chapter 4:

## Four New Testament Outcast Women in Feminist Perspective

*"I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare.....While I was still searching but not finding ~ I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all."*

*Ecclesiastes 7: 26,28.*

### The World Behind The Text - Core Values/Discourses of First Century Palestine

In an attempt to understand the way in which biblical writings have contributed to the oppression of women it is important to recognise the culture from which these writings emerged. This has been referred to by feminist theologians as "the world behind the text" and it is an important tool of biblical interpretation which has generally been neglected by conservative biblical scholars.<sup>127</sup> The Judaic culture from which Christianity had its origins had four core values (or discourses) that were an essential part of life in first century Palestine:

**1. Honour/Shame:** The dichotomy of honour and shame was a powerful ideology inherent in the Mediterranean world. A person's place in the community was determined almost exclusively by the status of the father of the family as well as the status of the tribe or group. People were expected to act in ways that were appropriate to their status and it was deemed dishonourable to try

<sup>127</sup>/Schussler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. In Memory of Her - A Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins. SCM Press Ltd 1983 pp 42-5

and elevate oneself further up the status line. The duty of honour-maintenance required of men that they take their father's place on his death as family head and in doing so, maintain the family's honour by sponsoring the females in the group.

Only males were accorded honour for women were recognized only through their relationship with a man: father, husband, uncles, sons, brothers or grandfathers. Having no honour of their own they were required to reflect the honour of their male sponsor otherwise they would incur shame on his name.<sup>128</sup> Essentially this meant that women had to appear demure and take particular care that their actions could not be misconstrued as promiscuous by speaking to men in public or by associating with men below their sponsor's status. Virginity was of primary importance because it symbolized women's sense of shame so public honour was maintained *for men* by the private chastity of the women associated with them. Because of the danger of disrupting the honour/shame dichotomy, women were required to live a more private life but men had access to the full public arena.

**2. Subsumed Identity:** It is important to recognize that the perception of ourselves as individuals entitled to various rights was an unknown concept in the Mediterranean world. People were embedded in the identity of another person such as the family or tribe or the city or district or country. People were referred to as **"the son of"** or **"the daughter of"** or if they were from a particular district they may have been referred to as **"Saul of Tarsus"** or **"a woman of Samaria"** or indeed, **"Jesus of Nazareth"**. Because of the subsumed identity of individuals into others, large groups of people could be dishonoured by the action of a member of the group.

This lack of individualism is most pronounced when we examine New Testament accounts of women. Women had no identity as women but in the relationship they had with a man. Without an appropriate male sponsor women were of no value and were often required to resort to a life of prostitution in order to

<sup>128</sup>Torjesen Karen Jo When Women Were Priests-Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity Harper San Francisco 1995 pp136-43

survive if their only male relative or sponsor died or abandoned them.

**3. Life Limits:** Another notion that is unfamiliar to twentieth century western society is the notion of being limited by your life's circumstances. In this age of bank loans and investment finance it is difficult to comprehend that in the Mediterranean world, poor people stayed poor and rich people became richer through the exploitation of others. It was almost impossible to rise above the life situation you were born into which is a concept unfamiliar to our western world where poor immigrants have gone on to become millionaires.

**4. Clean/Unclean:** Perhaps the most powerful ideology of the Mediterranean world was the notion of being clean or unclean. These notions of "**purity**" have little relevance to our notions of hygiene but are more to do with the proper place for certain things. Bodily fluids belonged in the body and once they were emitted they ceased to be in their proper place so therefore posed a threat to the community. Various rituals were performed to insure that the good of the community was maintained such as bathing after sexual intercourse, washing outer garments after public journeys and purification rites after childbirth. Many of these rituals were complicated and intense and Jews were threatened by the notion that other groups of people did not also perform such rituals and therefore posed a threat to them if contact was made. The Gentiles (and the less strict Samaritans) were considered "**unclean**" for they did not uphold the same purity codes and this is a vital clue to understanding many of the gospel accounts of Jesus' interaction with both Gentiles and women who were known to be "**unclean**".

### ***Early Christian Movement***

Some scholarly sources suggest that during the period following Jesus' death and the formation of the Nicene Creed (convened in 449 AD) the early Christian Church was functioning with equity between men and women but this soon reverted to patriarchal processes from which the Church has yet to



recover.<sup>129</sup> Once the early Church communities moved from the home-based into more hierarchical and public structures the contribution of women was severely curtailed in keeping with the honour/shame dichotomy of early Jewish society.

The Christian movement following the death of Christ was not the corporate affair it is today. Early meetings were held in the homes of believers which placed women in a more active role due to the private, home-based nature of such gatherings. Colossians 4:15 is an example of the way in which androcentric interpretation has eliminated the leadership role of women from the Bible. The author greets the community at Laodicea (4:13) and the person called *Nympha(s)* and the church in her/his house. *Nympha* can be a man's name - *Nymphas* or a woman's name - *Nympha*. The variant reading of Codex Vaticanus, some Minuscules and the Syriac translation have the greeting addressed to a woman as a leader of a house church- (*autes* = her). The Egyptian text uses the word (*auton*) which is ambiguous as it can refer to either male or female. The Western and Byzantine variants by the use of (*auton*) insist unequivocally that the person being addressed is a man. As women in later times were not permitted to take up leadership roles, the earlier more difficult reading "in her house" (*autes*) according to general methodological rules probably represents the original text. However up until very recently, most biblical editions use "his house" (*auton*). Therefore, the female tradition of leadership in the home churches of the early Christian period is effectively struck from the record.

For about two hundred years Christianity was essentially a religion of the private domain (home-based) but during the third century this gradually changed. Once Christianity became a public religion it became the domain of men for while women could figure prominently in the domestic sphere, the public sphere was denied them.

Instead of meetings being held in homes where women could actively teach and share, the move into public temples or basilicas required the subjugation

<sup>129</sup>Op cit pp 9-45

of women in line with the rest of the Graeco-Roman community.

Women in Judaic communities were not usually educated and did not have any property or civil rights since they were under the authority of their nearest male relative. A woman maintained her chastity by keeping to the private sphere, therefore once a woman entered public life, she was actively compromising her reputation and that of the men connected to her. It was not appropriate for any woman to hold public office for she would no longer be considered chaste. A good woman was a chaste woman, and hence a private woman. As a result there are several references in the New Testament that insist on women being silent and submissive and this notion of ideal womanhood has developed into a dominant ideology in Christianity from which it is yet to transcend.

The notion of male honour and female shame is not exclusive to Christianity and Judaism but it is still a powerful ideology underpinning the Church today. The concept of women's purity as a source of honour for men has meant that women had to occupy more private and subordinate positions in society to keep from bringing shame upon the men they were connected to. The notion of male sexual purity was not an issue, because the honour of the male was based on the sexual purity of the women related to him.

Male virtues of courage, justice and self-control were posited against female virtues of chastity, silence and obedience, and the only way to remain chaste, silent and obedient was to guard their sexual purity which could best be done at home under the protection of a male relative. Political authority and public life demonstrated men's sexual freedom but female sexuality was best protected through dependence and vulnerability. This is still a powerful ideology which is sustained by contemporary Christian fundamentalist literature which insists on the maintenance of biblical **"roles"** for men and women.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>130</sup>Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood- A Response to Evangelical Feminism edited by Piper J and Grudem, W. Crossway Books 1991 pp 31-59

The elements of the second part of the Bible (the New Testament) were completed by around 100 A.D. Many of the writings are in the form of letters to new churches throughout the Mediterranean region and contain valuable information in a historical sense, about the culture of that time. It has been generally assumed that the Bible has had an exclusive male authorship, although some scholars have questioned this assumption and argued that a few of the biblical texts are so inexplicably different in content and form (e.g. *Song of Songs*, *Judith*, and *Mark's gospel*) that perhaps a woman was responsible.<sup>131</sup> However the predominant trend in theological textual scholarship is to assume an exclusively male authorship.

Deciding what is culturally bound and what is relevant for Christians today has caused many a heated debate, since issues such as the ordination of women are complicated by words of scripture that are often ambiguous or misleading. This apparent inconsistency in the Bible has caused much dissension in the Church as women struggle to express themselves in a male-dominated religion, caught between the 'new-age' teachings of Jesus on equality and personal worth and the 'old-covenant' teachings of sin, condemnation and judgement.

### ***The Weaker Sex***

One of the problems associated with translations of any sort is the limitations of a particular language. In some languages there may be no equivalent English word so a word close to its meaning has to be used. This is not a problem confined to biblical translation as any foreign exchange student will testify to the fact that near enough is not always good enough in the exchange of meaning. Often a word may be used that does not translate culturally so

<sup>131</sup>Schussler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *But She Said-Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* Beacon Press Boston 1992 pp28-30



we are left with an incomplete picture, or a partial understanding. Some commonplace assumptions about women have their origin in such restricted translations and subsequent interpretations of scripture.

The notion of women as the 'weaker sex' or weaker vessel' came from Tyndale's translation of the New Testament in 1526 and was reinforced by the King James translation:

"Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner ('sex' or 'vessel' in other translations) and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers" (I Peter 3: 7).

By 1600 the phrase 'weaker vessel' was in frequent usage by Shakespeare and others either referring to women in the collective or a particular woman.

Throughout the following century, the influence of Paul's words on wives and their submission in Ephesians 5 and the words of Peter cited above were combined to form part of the Protestant marriage ceremony as an alternative to a sermon. This made it extremely likely that all women would hear this at some time or other, either on their own wedding day or somebody else's. The precise nature of this **"weakness"** was alluded to but not described fully, nor agreed upon universally. Were women morally weaker, less able to withstand temptation ? If so, this would account for Eve's behaviour in the Garden of Eden, but some thinkers suggested women were actually spiritually inferior. The notion that women were without souls was more or less rejected out of hand, but it was commonly thought that the male and female soul were not equal.<sup>132</sup> An excellent review of transmission of the Bible through history by John Romer (1988) clearly illustrates the almost exclusive male dominance of translation, copying and commissioning of the Bible and formation of the

<sup>132</sup>Fraser, Antonia *The Weaker Vessel Woman's Lot in Seventeenth Century England*. Methuen Books, 1984.

The notion of woman as physically weaker was reinforced by high mortality rates in childbirth and the generalised suffering associated with child-bearing.

The **strong/weak : male/female** dichotomy was no doubt reinforced by the power men had over women through marriage and sex. Sex held its own power over women for without the reliability of sophisticated contraception women were very likely to die from the complications of pregnancy and childbirth. This fact has contributed to the aura of power that being male incurred. It has only been this century when we have had the ability to inhibit the procreation of life that this power crucible has begun to dissemble.

The insertion of the notion of women's **"weakness"** into the discourse of Christianity has had a profound effect on what is perceived appropriate for women to participate in within the Church community. The ideology of women's weakness has not been simply confined to physical expression such as muscle strength or bone density but rather there has been a subtle shift in the Church's history to incorporate a more generalized weakness of character or moral fibre that was assumed to be peculiar to women. Predicated on literal readings of Genesis which suggest that Eve was responsible for the downfall of humanity by yielding to sin, women have since been associated with an inherent propensity for **"falling from grace"**. This was a popular theme of many of the Church father's writing on women such as Tertullian who called Eve **"the devil's gateway"**.

<sup>133</sup> Romer, J. *Testament: The Bible and History*. Michael O'Mara Books Ltd, 1988, reprinted 1989, based on the Seven Part Channel Four (UK) Television Series.

The sin most commonly associated with women in biblical times was promiscuity or adulterous behaviour. The association of female sexuality with temptation and danger to men has a long history in Christianity and Judaism. The Old Testament warns of the dangers of the adulterous woman who will stop at nothing to entice unwary men into her clutches (Proverbs 1, 5 and 7).

Female sexual voracity has long been a topic of frequent discussion and there has been much speculation about women who once introduced to sex, would be insatiable as a result. The popularized term of "**lusty widow**" in the Middle Ages signifies this and most people (usually male) decided that an experienced woman without sex was a woman looking for sex.

The weakness of women's intelligence was also frequently discussed and in the period of time prior to the death of Queen Elizabeth 1 in England, most people of both sexes agreed that female intelligence was inferior to that of male.

Each of these notions of weakness came about through a particular translation of the Bible and its subsequent versions but the culture from which these documents originated had already positioned women negatively and all that subsequent translations have done is to give it divine approval. The male / female dichotomy that insists on female weakness and passivity as opposed to male strength, autonomy and independence operates ideologically to confine women to a subordinate life, serving the needs of men. Biblical notions of masculinity and femininity have been promulgated as polar opposites, equal but different which insists on their complementarity.

The Christian religion up until the second half of this century has had an unrivalled influence on the way people perceive masculinity and femininity.



The last few decades have seen a shift away from the dictates of established Christianity, with church attendance figures well down on those set by previous generations. However for all that, many of the assumptions about the sexes remain, for the most part, unchallenged and unchanged.

Reading through the New Testament one encounters many stories about men and women and the way Christianity developed. Some of the stories in the four gospels have women as central characters and given the generally androcentric nature of the Bible, the inclusion of such stories in the canon is highly significant.<sup>134</sup>

For many believers, who have a "high" view of scripture, the gospel accounts are literal and inerrant; gospel literally means **"something regarded as true and implicitly believed"**.<sup>135</sup> However, all recorded information contains a bias or a perspective that constructs the **"truth"** in a certain way and history as we know it demonstrates this bias. So too with the gospel accounts, for they construct a perspective and each of the four gospels differ in how they relate information about the same subject. In reading the four gospel accounts it is noticeable that there are variations of particular stories as well as discrepancies and different emphases. There are many variations in the gospels of how a particular story is related; often a story that appears in three gospels is noticeably absent in the fourth, or perhaps only appears in one gospel. Biblical scholars still debate which of the synoptic gospel accounts were used as a source for the others. Most speculate that Mark was used as a source for Matthew and Luke, however there is much independent material in both Luke and Matthew. Identifying differences in stories or tracing different emphases can be useful in understanding an author's commitment to a particular ideology e.g. John's gospel constructs his accounts of various stories

<sup>134</sup> Susan Fierza, *Elisabeth In Memory of Her: A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins* SCM Press Ltd 1983 pp-89

<sup>135</sup> The Concise Macquarie Dictionary. Doubleday Books p534.

with an emphasis on the messiahship of Christ while Matthew's gospel is

constructed in such a way as to appeal primarily to a Jewish audience<sup>136</sup>.

## The Biblical Mary



Velázquez (1599–1660), *Coronation of the Virgin*, Prado, Madrid. Mary assumes a regal role as she is crowned Queen of Heaven. She has become a majestic figure far beyond the reach of other women. In Velázquez's painting, the three members of the Trinity participate in her coronation; Father and Son together place the crown on her head while the Spirit (represented as a dove) hovers over her.

In examining the gospel narratives of four women in the New Testament I have decided to firstly take a look at the biblical Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. The gospel accounts of Mary construct an ideology of womanhood that has been used by the Christian Church (and in particular Catholicism) as a marker for all women, for all time. For this reason, it is important to gain some understanding of the workings of this ideology before we move on to look at the four women in the gospels that have been used to construct different notions of womanhood.

Mary is central to Catholic theology as the holy mother of God, an example of purity and sinlessness. This stature of Mary in Catholicism is not equalled in Protestant theology, however Mary is highly regarded in the latter for her example of obedience at great personal cost.

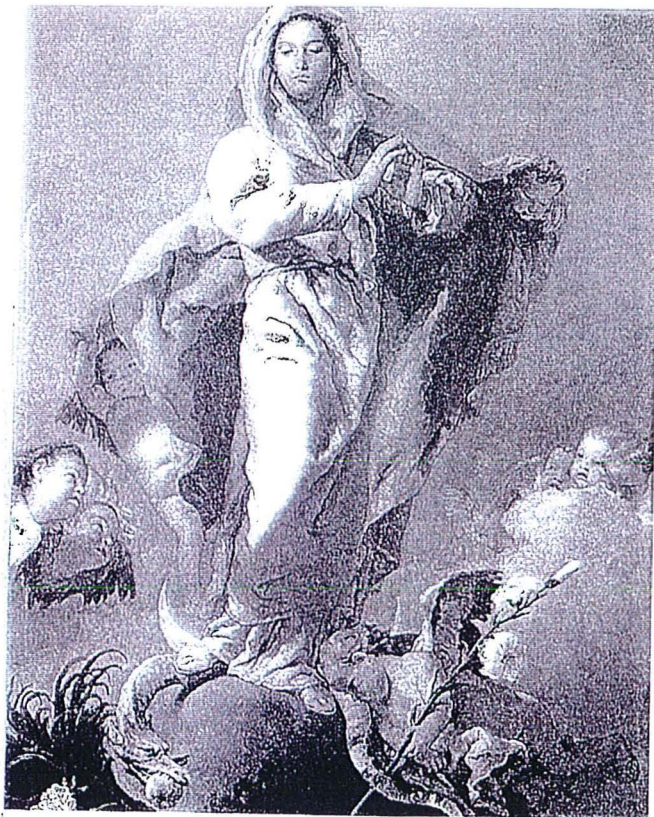
<sup>136</sup> Excellent analyses of the construction of the four gospels is given in two recent works: Funk RW: *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium*. Hodder & Stoughton 1996; Vardy P, Mills M. *The Puzzle of the Gospels*. ME SHARPE, US. ©1995 (First US ed 1997).



## Immaculate Conception

Mary's innocence and purity are foundational to the immaculate conception of Christ, by God the Father. This innocence and purity is a notion that has translated through centuries of Christianity as the ideal state for young women. In Catholicism, the internment, albeit voluntarily, of young women into convent life is mirrored by the biblical authors' accounts of Mary's unswerving devotion to God and His purpose. For many Christian women however, the model of Mary is an unrealistic one for the simple reason that no woman can be both a mother and a virgin at the same time. The notion of Mary's virginity negates female sexuality, positioning it ideologically at least, as something less than holy.

Further, whilst motherhood is given sanctification by Mary's example, her means of achieving motherhood is in a category all of its own and no woman in history can ever share it with her.



Tiepolo (1696–1770), *Immaculate Conception*, Prado, Madrid. Mary's head is crowned with twelve stars, and the crescent moon is under her feet. She appears invincible as she crushes the serpent underfoot.



The ideology that insists on Mary being the "**ideal woman**" reduces all women to a sexualized definition, something that is not required of men. In being classified as either virgin or mother women are considered in terms of sexual function for virginity implies the absence of a sexual relationship and motherhood is evidence of sexual activity. The notion of "**ideal**" womanhood promulgated by the Church (and in particular Roman Catholicism) is a male construct of what is deemed an appropriate state for women. This is a notion that has been primarily formulated by celibate males which provides a clue to the necessity for women to be defined within strict parameters that do not pose a continual sexual threat. A celibate virgin and a perpetual mother (without access to contraception) do not pose the same sexual threat that perhaps ordinary women might. However **all** women are measured by these two categories and whether they are relevant or not, women are forced to adopt a subject position within one or the other. As Bishop Shelby Spong puts it

"Women may deny their sexuality by becoming virgin nuns, or women may indulge their sexuality by becoming prolific mothers."<sup>137</sup>

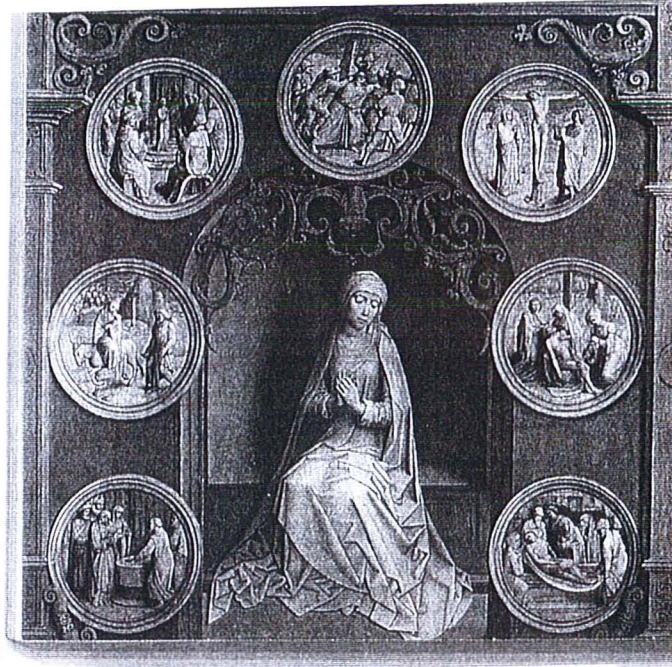
The idealized notion of womanhood that Mary the mother of Jesus represents has been a particularly damaging one for women. It is an ideal that no ordinary woman can really meet and it offers a model for women of subservience and docility that can only be dangerous for their safety and detrimental to their autonomy.<sup>138</sup>

### **Mother of Sorrows**

The gospel of John briefly mentions the presence of Mary at Christ's crucifixion and this fuelled the thinking that Mary was somehow intimately involved in Christ's suffering. In the late Middle Ages Mary came to be honoured as "**Mother of Sorrows**" and as the cult of the sorrows spread seven sorrows were identified with her. As Mary, Mother of Sorrows was so closely involved with Christ in the redemption she became **co-redemptrix**.

<sup>137</sup>/Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman-A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus*. Harper San Francisco 1992, p2

<sup>138</sup> Leonard, Richard SJ *Beloved Daughters-100 Years of Papal Teaching on Women* David Lovell Publishing 1995 pp 51-63



Isenbrand, *Virgin of Seven Sorrows* (1551), Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels. Surrounded by her seven sorrows, Mary is depicted as intimately sharing in Christ's suffering.

The ideology of the ideal woman evolved from the birth narratives contained in Matthew and Luke's gospels, Mark and John do not refer to the alleged circumstances of Jesus' birth and neither does Paul who wrote before the four gospels were recorded. It seems highly unlikely that the apostle Paul would have overlooked such a remarkable account of Jesus' birth especially if it was to be of such importance for Christian theology and yet there is no mention of it in any of the writings attributed to him.

The gospel of Matthew quotes a text from the prophet Isaiah to support his account of the virgin birth and yet the connotation of virginity is not present in the original Hebrew text. The Hebrew word for virgin was "**betulah**" but the word used in Isaiah is "**almah**" which means young woman. Matthew's gospel quoted the Hebrew text in Greek where virginity is implied by the word

"**parthenos**".<sup>139</sup>

<sup>139</sup> Spong, John Selby *Born of a Woman -A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus*, Harper San Francisco 1992 p214



For many Christians, and in particular those belonging to the Catholic Church the virgin status of Mary is a major article of belief and any suggestion that this doctrine was falsified or constructed in order to fulfil Old Testament prophecy is tantamount to heresy. Bishop Spong claims that few biblical scholars today take the virginity of Mary literally, however he acknowledges with some concern that members of the laity are for the most part kept in ignorance of the scholarly scepticism that surrounds this issue.<sup>140</sup>

If the laity are not generally aware that there is a scholarly rejection of a literal reading of the birth narratives that support the notion of a virgin birth then the notion of the **"ideal"** woman will be less likely questioned or critically reviewed. The continuation of this distorted model of womanhood in the Christian Church has far reaching consequences that are in some areas only just coming to light. Some members of the clergy are becoming aware of how this ideology impacts on the lives of women and men in their parish and often struggle personally with the clerical impact of this notion of appropriate womanhood.

The way in which the symbol of Mary's virginity has damaged women is something Michael Costigan witnessed himself whilst attending a Roman Catholic seminary:

"It may be argued that the elevation of Mary implies the elevation of women and to that extent was a good development. But even in the most exaggerated statements of Marian piety, hers was seen as essentially a subordinate, Christ-related role and therefore a serving role. And I suggest that the feminist writers are not so wide off the mark when they conclude that the implication was that this is woman's true role vis-a-vis man."<sup>141</sup>

Costigan goes on to describe the segregation of the male priesthood from the world that women were allowed to occupy citing that while women were

<sup>140</sup>Op cit p 6

<sup>141</sup>*Deliver Us From Eve* edited by Barbara Thiering Australian Council of Churches 1977 p5



cooking, laundering and taking care of the men in seminary college, the men

were repeatedly warned about "**the daughters of Eve**" or the more euphemistic

**"even a blessed candle can burn!"**.<sup>142</sup> How this seminary experience is

translated in priestly practice is an area of increasing concern particularly of

late with allegations of the sexual abuse of children by Catholic brothers

which have come to public attention. Costigan relates at length the inadequate

training men of the priesthood receive on relating to women and that the

male celibacy mandate holds a particular danger when priests are meant to

advise and guide couples in marriage and relationships. While priests are

taught in theory that men and women are equal in God's sight, this is not

reflected in the Church at all. The exclusion of women from priestly functions

further compounds how male clerics relate to women.

The sexual danger that women represent to men is an ideological threat for it

is because women are viewed as the **"desired"** or the **"object"** of the male

**"desirer"** or **"subject"**. This is patriarchy at its most potent and it continues

today with the sexual double standard that exists in the West

(i.e. women "asking for it") and the enforced purdah and/or veiling of women

in the East, which sees female sexuality as a threat unless it is hidden from

view.

Patriarchy offers men power over women and a by product of that power is

control over female sexuality. In post-structuralist's terms this is not just

male control over female sexuality but **constructive** power over what is

ultimately perceived as appropriate femininity. It is in the ideology of Mary as

the **"ideal"** woman that we see this construction of femininity and the subject

<sup>142</sup>ibid

positions offered to women within it.

The symbol of Mary is one that pervades society at all levels and not just the religious sphere for even the most secular Christmas representations include the demure, submissive and docile Mary either holding her son in her arms or kneeling in adoration at his feet. The secular model of the ideal woman has been cast in the same mould as Mary for patriarchy requires docile and dependent women who respond to the needs of men in preference to their own.

While Christianity may claim to offer freedom and equality for men and women, this is really little more than lip service, for men and women are not ideologically equal in theological practice. The biblical Mary, for all the glory attributed to her in being the mother of Jesus, represents a woman in first century Palestine who answered to men, including her son (at the wedding at Cana, John 2:1-11) and her value was not in who she was but what she represented - a chaste and submissive woman.

The growth of this ideology can be traced to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E. after which Christianity spread without the opposition of Sadduceal Judaism. The language and thought processes of Greece occupied the Gentile world of the Mediterranean basin and major streams of Christianity were strongly influenced by the dualistic Neoplatonic mode of thought.<sup>143</sup>

The separation of mind from body was part of this system of thought where higher regard was placed on the processes of the mind over those of the body.

The association of the body and its animal appetites and desires were perceived

<sup>143</sup>Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman- A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus*. Harper

San Francisco, 1992 p208

as evil and greater esteem was given to the pursuit of higher human nature associated with the soul or spirit. This dichotomy elevated men to the superior realm of intellect and spiritual excellence but reduced women to carnality and the evil realm of the irrational and uncontrollable flesh.

Under the influence of such dualistic thinking the birth narratives offer an alternative. The notion of Mary as a young virgin who in submission to God allowed **"the spirit"** to impregnate her removes the mother of Jesus from the fleshy realm and into the spirit realm. In constructing the birth narratives it became important to establish that Jesus was not simply a good man but he was **"conceived by the Holy Spirit"**. The question of Jesus' origins in the development of Christianity became of paramount importance and the ideology of a virgin birth gave credence to what had been reported about his life and ministry. Mary's importance grew to such an extent that notwithstanding the heavily male-dominated aspects of early Christianity, by the early part of the second century Mary was a dominant figure. The way in which Mary was defined reflects the male value system operating where the notion of an ideal woman was constructed around her silence, chastity and obedience.

This dominant notion of the ideal woman posited sexual desire and childbirth as evidence of carnality and evil and much of the writing of the early Church fathers reflects this. John Chrysostom, Tertullian and Aquinas had much to say about the carnal state of women and the threat they posed to men. The only way a woman could redeem herself from the effects of Eve's original sin was to live the life of a virgin. Virginity was the higher calling so therefore the sexual desire that female flesh stirred in men was considered intrinsically evil and perceived as women's fault.



Once the notion of a virgin birth was established it became even more important to keep the mother of Jesus well away from the association of the flesh so that not only was she considered a virgin at the time of Jesus birth but also after it. The gospels (John 7:2 and Mark 3:31) as well as Paul's letter to the Galatians (1:9) refer to the brothers and sisters of Jesus but this relationship is down-played or produces much speculation from biblical translators. John Selby Spong suggests that the removal of siblings from the texts was a calculated attempt to establish Mary's perpetual status as a virgin, untainted by human sexual appetites or desires.<sup>144</sup>

Uta Ranke-Heinemann also sees the construction of Mary's perpetual virginity as a deliberate attempt by biblical translators to cover up the embarrassment of Mary the mother of Jesus as a wife and mother of several children.<sup>145</sup>

The notion of a saviour who was born untainted by the original sin that was allegedly brought about through Eve has constituted much of the post-Augustinian theology that the Christian Church rests on today. The sinlessness of Jesus could only be established through the virgin status of Mary, and human salvation (according to Augustine) required a saviour without sin. Hence the birth narratives became central to theology. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is merely one step further which ensures that Mary was not tainted by Eve's sin.

Because of the association of sex with evil, a life of celibacy was an honourable choice for women but if women were to chose to be married then the saving grace of marriage (according to Jerome) was that such a union would result in the production of more virgins. John Selby Spong suggests that it is this

<sup>144</sup>Op cit p212

<sup>145</sup>Ranke-Heinemann, Uta. *Eunuchs For The Kingdom- Women, Sexuality and the Catholic Church* Penguin Books pp 341-8

mentality that has influenced the Catholic tradition to prohibit the use of contraception and Marina Warner adds to this by demonstrating in her analysis of the role of the virgin in history that in those countries where the virgin was particularly popular, the status of women was correspondingly low.<sup>146</sup> Paul Kennedy<sup>147</sup> uses The United Nations Population Division's statistics (see Tables 1 and 2) to demonstrate the disturbing correlation of women's poor level of education with a high birth rate and suggests that in some countries such as in parts of South Asia, Africa and the Muslim world where a high birth rate is most problematic, the status of women remains appallingly low and fixed due to strict gender roles. The relationship of poor female education with high birth rate, poor contraception, maternal and child health and a range of other negative correlates is clearly illustrated in over 400 pages of graphs, statistics and commentary in the recently released United Nations Proceedings on Population and Women:

"Despite recent gains, in Latin America more than 20% of women aged 25 or over remained illiterate, more than 40% in eastern and South eastern Asia and as many as 70% in sub-Saharan Africa and Southern and Western Asia. Thus, there had been notable progress in combating illiteracy, but poorly educated women would constitute the majority in much of the developing world for many years to come".<sup>148</sup>

The role the Christian Church has played in sanctioning male control over female sexuality (including women's own education regarding their reproductive mechanisms and sexuality) can be traced back to this early idealized view of Mary. It has filtered down through centuries of male-dominated thought and theology and still operates today in controlling and marginalizing women and reducing them to a biological status.

<sup>146</sup> Warner, Marina *Alone of All Her Sex*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976p183

<sup>147</sup> Kennedy, P. *Preparing for the Twenty-First Century*. Harper Collins 1993 page 342

<sup>148</sup> Population and Women. Proceedings of the United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Population and Women, Gaborone, Botswana, 22-26 June 1992. United Nations Publ., N.Y., 1996. See also Appendix 1 of this dissertation which reproduces Table 31 (p238) from this report.

| Country             | Adult Female Literacy Rate | Total Fertility Rate |
|---------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| Afganistan          | 8%                         | 6.9%                 |
| Oman                | 12%                        | 7.2                  |
| Yemen Arab Republic | 3                          | 7                    |
| Honduras            | 58%                        | 5.6%                 |
| Bukina Fasso        | 6                          | 6.5%                 |
| Sudan               | 14                         | 6.4                  |
| Singapore           | 79                         | 1.7                  |
| Canada              | 93                         | 1.7                  |
| Chile               | 96                         | 2.7                  |
| Hungary             | 98                         | 1.8                  |
| Thailand            | 88                         | 2.6                  |

**Table 1:** Adult Female Literacy Rate and Total Fertility Rate:  
Selected Countries (From: Kennedy P: *Preparing for the Twenty-First Century*).

| Country  | No Education | 7+ Years of Education |
|----------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Benin    | 7.4          | 4.3                   |
| Sudan    | 6.5          | 3.4                   |
| Haiti    | 6.0          | 2.8                   |
| Ecuador  | 7.8          | 2.7                   |
| Jordan   | 9.3          | 4.9                   |
| Pakistan | 6.5          | 3.1                   |
| Portugal | 3.5          | 1.8                   |

**Table 2:** Average Number of Children By Mothers' Years of  
Education (From: Kennedy P: *Preparing for the Twenty-First Century*).

The literal reading of biblical texts such as the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke compound the problem of the marginalization and control of women in the Church today. It is the common goal of post-structuralism and feminist theology to deconstruct ideologies and symbols so that women can define for themselves what it means to live as a woman. The biblical Mary and the subsequent development of Marian theology have been collaborative forces in defining a version of womanhood that is not attainable for any woman, thus reinforcing women's position in patriarchy as the **"subjected other"**. Marian theology appears to offer women a sense of essential womanhood which Mary ostensibly emulates in her devotion to her son and in her role as **"Mother of**



**Sorrows"**, and her docility and chastity are key elements which are offered as a model for all women. However, these qualities or attributes of the biblical Mary are not necessarily ones that best equip women for living within patriarchal contexts but rather contribute to the greater vulnerability of women and girls in a male-dominated system.

### *Madonna of the People*

Mary's intercessory role on the behalf of all people (developed through the Middle Ages) came to represent the patriarchal family pattern whereby a powerful, devoted and understanding mother interceded for her family to her husband. Hence, the relationships in heaven had an earthly mirror where Mary could beseech her son and heavenly Father to answer the requests of the faithful. Barocci's *Madonna of the People* (1528-1612) depicts this function of Mary which contrasts with Eve (as Tertullian would have her) as "the devil's gateway" for now Mary is the gateway to heaven.



Barocci (1528–1612), *Madonna of the People*, Uffizi, Florence. Mary becomes a powerful intercessor between God and the people. She is the gateway to heaven. At her request the Spirit descends.

Thus, Mary as **"Queen of Heaven"** can undo the past damage of Eve who was responsible for original sin. Mary was not herself a product of original sin (immaculate conception) and therefore by giving birth to a sinless son (fathered by God) she could intercede for people (Madonna of the people) like an indulgent mother pleading with the authoritarian father over the much loved but wayward children. The development of these beliefs about the biblical Mary have contributed to the seductive appeal of a gentle and soothing, intercessory mother model promulgated by Christian fundamentalist literature.

#### *Four Outcast Women of the New Testament*

The following stories of women in the New Testament have been chosen for their commonality in how they represent the outcast status of women in first century Palestine. Three of the women were reported to be unchaste, the fourth (the woman with the haemorrhage) is not recorded as sexually promiscuous but is included for the totality of her outcast status. When these biblical women are viewed in the light of Marian theology the chasm between them and Mary widens considerably. When Mary the mother of Jesus is juxtaposed with the Samaritan woman, the woman who anointed Jesus and the woman caught in adultery we can see the disparity between the idealized version of womanhood of Mary and the more realistic view of women that the gospel women represent. The four gospel women represent the oppression of women under patriarchy, the exclusion of women from public space, the exploitation of women and the sexual double standard of a male-dominated society.

The first part of the analysis will involve a review of the stories in the light of the core values of first century Palestine which a feminist perspective demands in order to understand the way in which women were viewed and subsequently



oppressed. The second part of my analysis of each of the gospel women will involve a creative writing exercise that highlights the male dominated lens of Scripture that for the most part leaves the women in the stories without a voice.

### *The Woman Who Anointed Jesus*



Modern forgery of baroque art. Imitation of Vermeer or van Meegeren, Christ and the Magdalen.

### *Biblical Narrative*

The following story which appears in each of the four gospels demonstrates the outcast status of women in first century Palestine. Editorial differences provide clues to how the dominant ideology of the anointing woman as sexually immoral has developed. In the Matthew, Mark and John accounts the story remains similar but Luke's gospel constructs the story quite differently. Further, John's gospel, although textually similar to Matthew and Mark, has a different tone from each of the other accounts. Matthew's account of the anointing of Jesus is:



"While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table." (Matthew 26:6,7)

Mark also has Jesus at Simon the Leper's house:

"While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head" (Mark 14:3).

Luke's gospel has Jesus dining at an unnamed Pharisee's house and instead of anointing his head, the woman pours the nard on his feet, wiping them with her hair.

"Now one of the Pharisee's invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them" (Luke 7:36-38).

John's gospel has Jesus at Lazarus' house and names the anointing woman as Mary, Martha and Lazarus' sister. Both Luke and John have the woman anointing Jesus' feet.

"Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, whilst Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." (John 12: 1-3)

Matthew, Mark and Luke's gospel do not name the woman at all. Matthew, Mark and John's accounts do not reveal any information regarding the woman's life in terms of her reputation but for Luke, the woman's "sinful life" is the predominant theme.

### *The Distortion of Mary Magdalene*

Many artistic representations have Mary Magdalene as the woman who anointed Jesus, however Luke 8:2 names her as a former demoniac that Jesus had cured. Mary Magdalene is portrayed in the gospels as a woman closely involved in the life and death of Christ; she helped support Jesus' ministry (Luke 8:1-3), was at the crucifixion (Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:40, John 19:25), and at Jesus's burial (Matthew 27:61, Mark 15:47). When any of the four gospel writers refer to the women associated with Jesus, Mary Magdalene is always listed first. Luke's gospel reports her financial backing of Jesus's ministry, and Mark (16) and John (20) portray the special relationship she had with Jesus. However, through the ages Mary Magdalene has come to be closely correlated with sin and sexual immorality. She is often referred to as the **"great sinner"** and yet this is not substantiated by the biblical text.

Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel traces the sexual symbolism in Mary Magdalene's demoniac healing and uncovers the way in which patriarchal forces in the Church have distorted the character of a woman who was described by fathers of the early church as **"Apostle of all Apostles"**.<sup>149</sup>

Moltmann suggests that demonic possession in a woman in First Century Palestine could only be interpreted as **"unbridled passion-lust, carnality, licentious sexuality."**<sup>150</sup> Over time, Mary Magdalene has been incorrectly merged with the anointing "sinful" woman in Luke 7:37 and with the anointing

<sup>149</sup>Moltmann-Wendel, Elisabeth and Moltmann, Jurgen. *Humanity in God* The Pilgrim Press 1983 pp 10-11

<sup>150</sup>ibid

Mary in John 12:3 which Moltmann describes as:

"..the greatest and - for women - the most effective patriarchal distortion of history in western Europe."<sup>151</sup>

Traditional theology has erroneously located sin in the human body and in particular, in the body of a woman which has contributed to the notion of women's inferiority.

The distortion of Mary Magdalene's character by patriarchal bias included the speculation about the possibility of a sexual relationship between her and Jesus. Moltmann suggests that this speculation has

"filled a fundamental desire for an erotic dimension not overtly present in the New Testament." <sup>152</sup>

Martin Luther chose to use the distorted image of Mary Magdalene to describe his doctrines of sin and grace and his expressions to describe her relationship with Jesus overtly suggest sexual intimacy; she

"loved him with a hearty, lusty, rutting love".<sup>153</sup>

## Anointing

Although Mary Magdalene has long been associated with the anointing of Jesus, the biblical texts do not affirm this association. The anointing woman is named once in John's gospel as Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, described by biblical authors as "close friends of Jesus". Only in Luke's gospel is the woman called "sinful" and it is only in Luke's account that the woman weeps over Jesus. Luke develops the notion of the "great sinner" by Simon's

<sup>151</sup>ibid

<sup>152</sup>Op cit p12

<sup>153</sup>Op cit p14



aversion to the woman:

"If this man were a prophet he would know  
who is touching him and what kind of woman  
she is- that she is a sinner "  
(Luke 7:39).

Luke's gospel has Jesus respond with a parable of a money-lender who cancels the debt of two people, one of whom owed him a far greater amount than the other:

"Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have  
been forgiven-for she loved much. But he who  
has been forgiven little loves little."(Luke 7:47)

Matthew, Mark and John do not contain this parable nor do they construct the notion of the woman as a "great sinner". They each report an accusation of waste by those present; the money could have been used for the poor (nard was extremely expensive) and Jesus' response is identical in all three accounts:

" You will always have the poor among you,  
but you will not always have me". (John 12:8)

The anointing of feet was a common social practice in the first century Mediterranean world, the anointing of heads was a more regal practice for Kings and Emperors. Matthew and Mark have the woman anointing Jesus' head in the manner of Kings and Luke and John have her anointing his feet. John's account is textually close to that of Matthew and Mark but in naming the woman as Mary, Martha and Lazarus' sister, an element of familiarity and sensuality appears in the text:

"Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard,  
an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus'  
feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the  
house was filled with the fragrance of the  
perfume." (John12:3)

For feminist theologian Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, (*In Memory of Her- A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 1983) the woman who anointed Jesus is much more significant than many of the Old Testament female characters. The woman's recognition of Jesus as the messiah, demonstrated by the way in which she anointed him is highly significant. Although the New Testament states that twelve men were chosen as Jesus' disciples, it is a **woman** who actively and publicly acknowledges him as Lord. Feminist theologians have questioned why such an important woman has been so distorted in theology and scripture to such a degree that her significance as a female disciple is overlooked or downplayed. Female biblical characters like this one are often neglected by Christian teachers and preachers so that they remain invisible or marginally insignificant, and so the male focus of scripture is furthered.<sup>154</sup> Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza entitled her renowned feminist theological volume *'In Memory of Her'* because very few have remembered her even though Jesus reportedly claimed:

"I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached  
throughout the world, what she has done will also  
be told, in memory of her" (Mark 14:9).

The anointing woman is unnamed in Matthew, Mark and Luke and yet the New Testament names many minor male characters such as the high priest's servant, Malchus in John's gospel whom Simon Peter attacked with a sword cutting off his right ear (John 18:10). One might wonder at the significance of such an omission - if Jesus was so determined that this woman would be remembered for all time as the gospel accounts suggest, it seems likely that

her unnamed status in three gospels is a somewhat deliberate attempt to

<sup>154</sup>Grassi, Joseph A. *The Hidden Heroes of the Gospels- Female Counterparts of Jesus*. Collins Dove Australia, 1989. p10

downplay her role.

The story of the anointing woman has come to symbolize sexual immorality and the need for forgiveness. Male sinfulness is not described or alluded to as sexual immorality in the gospels but rather as pride, greed or foolishness.

## Female Shame

What does the story of the anointing woman tell us of life as a woman in first century Palestine ? Which core values of the Mediterranean world do these narratives allude to ? The notion of female shame is central to Luke's narrative. Women *per se* were considered potentially unclean by virtue of the regularity of bodily processes such as menstruation and childbirth. However, the connotation of sexual impropriety in Luke's account alludes to the more serious threat of contamination through sexual immorality. This type of immorality was perceived to be peculiar to women, men were not tarnished with the same brush for women were considered the tempters of male desire and not the reverse.

This is an ideology that has found its way into twentieth century Christian literature with many authors alluding to the dangers of being compromised by women in certain situations. Warnings for pastors visiting women at home alone is just one way in which female sexuality is positioned as a threat to authentic godly manhood. Billy Halliday, a nineteenth century evangelist began a sermon with a command that demonstrated his allegiance of this ideology:

"Will all the women present please cross their legs and close the gates of hell."<sup>155</sup>

<sup>155</sup>Borrowdale, Anne Distorted Images-Christian Attitudes to Women, Men and Sex. SPCK London 1991 p66



The ready association of femaleness with sex is one reason why some people oppose the ordination of women in the Church for they perceive that women in preaching or leading roles will distract the men in the congregation by nature of their femininity.<sup>156</sup> There is a perception that women will **sexualize** the sacred sanctuary of Church simply by performing roles that men have been performing for centuries without the taint of sex. There seems to be even in the more liberal churches a sense of discomfort with pregnant women in pastoral roles and many non-clerical women speak of their discomfiture at having to soothe a fretting baby in church by breast-feeding as if it is **"not quite nice"**.<sup>157</sup> The disturbing consequence of such a long standing association of femininity with sex has meant that many women perceive themselves as **"polluters"** and it is in the Church context this is at it's most damaging.

The social worth of a woman in First Century Palestine was in her publicly demonstrable chastity. To some degree, this honour/shame dichotomy still exists for women today. Western Society has made it very clear what is expected of women in terms of dress or behaviour for if a women finds herself the victim of male sexual violence, her mode of dress or the amount of alcohol she has consumed is considered provocative. A recent Australian study of young people's attitudes to sexual violence revealed that a significant proportion of young men believe that it is acceptable for a man to pressure a woman into having sex. Some of the reasons for doing so include: he has spent a lot of money of her, she has had sex with other boys, she is stoned or drunk, she's led him on.<sup>158</sup>

Sexual immorality in women continues to incur far greater penalties than

<sup>156</sup>Leonard, Richard SJ Beloved Daughters-100 Years of Papal teaching on Women. David Lovell Publishing 1995 pp 52-66

<sup>157</sup>Borrowdale, Anne Distorted Images-Christian Attitudes to Women, Men and Sex. SPCK 1991 p29

<sup>158</sup>Young People's Perceptions and Attitudes To Sexual Violence National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, Published by the National Clearinghouse For Youth Studies, Hobart, Tasmania 1995 pp 46-7

sexual immorality in men, and even though the Christian Church has made a huge contribution to this double standard, it consistently refuses to acknowledge it, or indeed apologize for it.

The following creative narrative attempts to subvert the dominant ideology of the "great sinner" in the story of the anointing woman. Creative narratives such as this can illuminate the androcentricity of biblical texts and offer readers an opportunity to hear the woman's "voice" hidden in the traditional story.

### ***Creative Narrative - Of Feet and Friendship***

Dear Diary,

Jesus came for dinner today. Actually, it was not just any old dinner, it was a special meal to honour Jesus for all that he has taught us. I couldn't wait until he got here, Martha was at me to help her with the meal but my mind was not with it at all. I kept drifting off and dreaming about how I could show Jesus how much he means to us all. He has been such a good friend to Lazarus, Martha and I. He allowed me to sit at his feet while he was teaching just like the men do. No one else would have allowed a woman to do so but Jesus said I had chosen well. I think he thinks women have a right to be part of everything,

including education. There is just no one like him!

At last he arrived and we all sat around and ate and talked while I waited for my special moment.

I got up in front of them all and opened a jar of nard. Yes, I know it is frightfully expensive but Jesus is worth every drachma.

I poured the nard over Jesus' feet, they were tired and dusty from all the walking but they were still king's feet to me. I used my long hair to smooth the perfume over his feet and the aroma filled the air. It felt so sensual, my hair draped over his legs and feet and the fragrance filling the whole house. I told him his feet were beautiful, just like the prophet Isaiah who said: "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news." I was so absorbed in stroking and massaging that I quite forgot the others were there!

Wouldn't you know it, Judas the biggest kill-joy around (now isn't that the truth!) carried on about the waste and how the money should have been given to the poor. I don't see him handing over any of his money! Anyway, Jesus



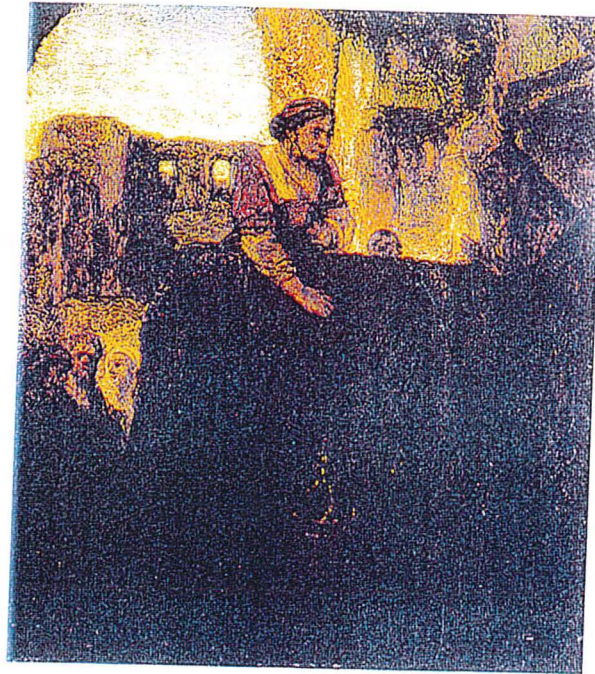
said I had done a beautiful thing and that the poor will always be around, but he won't always be there. I hope he isn't going to go away and leave us, I love him so much. There, I've said it. I LOVE HIM.

Mmmmm I can smell the nard on my hair and on my fingers. There is still a hint of it in the rest of the house even though everyone left hours ago. Perhaps it is the fragrance of friendship.....here to stay.

My narrative is constructed on the story in John 12:1-10 in order to reject the notion of the woman's sinful life in favour of the friendship John's gospel describes. John's account is extremely sensual, highlighted by the familiarity of the characters involved for the text describes Mary, Martha and Lazarus as close friends of Jesus. This gives the story a slightly different atmosphere than the other gospel stories which make the woman a stranger to Jesus.

The woman does not speak in any of the biblical narratives, the conversations about the waste of money and the poor are carried out between Jesus and the other male characters. Mary's words in my narrative have her quoting the prophet Isaiah, a practice uncommon to women who were generally not taught from the Torah.

This creative narrative offers readers a glimpse at **"the world behind the text"** and while some aspects of the narrative may simply be speculative or imaginary, it still fulfils the purpose of illuminating the male bias of scripture.

*The Samaritan Woman : Biblical Narrative*

REMBRANDT, *THE SAMARITAN WOMAN AT THE WELL*, 1664  
*Christ and the Samaritan Woman at the Well.*

The story of the Samaritan woman at the well only appears in the gospel of John. Jacob's well, where the encounter took place is mentioned nowhere else in scripture. In the 5th century BC the Jews were exiled from Jerusalem, but the rural dwellers were left behind to manage the land. These rural workers held a less rigid version of Judaism which was more in keeping with their role as farmers. In the 4th century BC the Babylonians repatriated the Jews to Jerusalem and Ezra led a group of Jews back with workers and temple fittings in order to reinstate Judaism and rebuild the temple. The indigenous Jews (rural workers) resented the return of the repatriated Jews with their strict purity codes. The rural workers came to be known as the Samaritans (Samaria is to the north of Jerusalem) and were considered to be "unclean" as they resisted the purification codes of the newly reinstated Jews. As a result it was not customary for Jews to associate or speak with Samaritans for strict Jewish laws on purification prohibited contact with other people



who could render one "unclean" by close contact. Speaking to a woman in

public was not encouraged by the old rabbinic proverb: **"Talk not much with**

**womankind"**<sup>159</sup> and although some evidence indicates separation was more

strict among the wealthier urban classes, it was generally not customary even

in the country for a man to engage in conversation with a strange woman.<sup>160</sup>

The conversation between Jesus and the woman related in John's gospel is

one of the longest one-to-one conversations recorded in the gospels.

The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans) Jesus answered her, "If you knew who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?" Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water." He told her, "Go call your husband and come back."

"I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is true." "Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said, "I know that the Messiah (called Christ) is coming. When he comes he will explain everything to us." Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he." (John 4:9-26).

<sup>159</sup>Proverb of Jose b. Johanan of Jerusalem, c150 BC, quoted in Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, SCM Press 1971 p 360

<sup>160</sup>Op cit pp362-3



This conversation is intensely theological and is quite similar to the encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman who challenged him to offer salvation to other races instead of just the Jews (Matthew 15: 21-28).

In engaging in such a conversation with a disreputable outcast woman from Samaria, Jesus, in John's gospel, demonstrated the iconoclastic nature of his ministry similarly reported in the other gospels.

For feminist theologians, the encounter with the woman at the well reported in John demonstrates the extent to which Jesus was counter-cultural.<sup>161</sup> Instead of avoiding the woman, he actively engages her in a lengthy theological conversation and freely admits to her that he is the expected Messiah. The second half of John 4 relates that as a result of the woman's testimony over her encounter with Jesus, many Samaritans were converted. Verse 40 states that Jesus took up the Samaritans invitation to stay with them, moving on two days later.

All four core values/discourses of the Mediterranean world are reflected in this narrative of the Samaritan woman at the well. The discourse of honour/shame features in the reference to the woman's sexual past and as she was not represented by a legal male her identity became subsumed into the equivalent of a prostitute - ("**The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband..**" John 4:18). Limited by her birth as a Samaritan, the woman is "unclean" and "untouchable" and the author of John's gospel uses this as a central theme of the narrative. The text describes the disciples' surprise at seeing Jesus talking with a woman (verse 27) and as is often the case elsewhere in the gospels, the disciples

<sup>161</sup>Murphy, Claire Colette *An Introduction to Christian Feminism* Dominican Publications 1994pp30-40

reactions are used to highlight the counter-cultural nature of Christ's teaching.

Ideologically this story has been used to reinforce the stereotype of a loose or immoral woman, her only hope lying in male salvation. The text constructs the notion of her immorality by having her draw water at the sixth hour; noon was the hottest part of the day and generally the only people who ventured out at this time of the day were outcasts. Secondly, the woman herself acknowledges her outcast stature by questioning Jesus on why he would request a drink from her, a Samaritan (verse 9). Thirdly, in verses 17 and 18 Jesus speaks of her past husbands and the defacto relationship (adulterous) she was currently in. The fourth part of the exchange between Jesus and the woman revolves around the issue of worship that caused such dissension amongst the rural Samaritans and the Jerusalem dwelling Jews. The Samaritans worshipped at Mt. Gerizim but the Jews insisted on worshipping in the temple in Jerusalem. The Samaritan woman expresses her hope for resolution and explanation **"when the Messiah comes"** (verse 25) and Jesus admits to her **"I who speak to you am he"** (verse 26).

John's gospel describes the great impact of this encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman on the woman herself, but also on those who heard her testimony (verse 39).

The story of the Samaritan woman is a significant one and yet it only appears in one gospel. An outcast woman, after an encounter with Jesus is able to convince many others of her new found faith which revolutionized their position as outcast, displaced people.

Given the androcentric nature of scripture, any stories which feature women as central characters are highly significant and this story, with its lengthy

featuring in the synoptic gospels.

### **Creative Narrative -He Knew Me So Well**

*Dear Miriam,*

*You'll never guess what happened to me the other day! I just had to write and tell you for I can hardly believe it myself.*

*I went to the well for water at my usual time at noon because as you know there is usually no one else there at that time so I can go quickly without being harassed. It makes me feel so cheap and tarnished but what can I do? At least I have come to know some of the other sad women who live by selling themselves. I also know that everyone thinks I am one too and when you think about it, the way I've worked my way through five men perhaps they're right. Anyway, I was trying to tell you about this amazing thing that happened at the well.*

*I met a man.*



No, not that sort of man (is there any other sort of man ?) I hear you ask and I have to answer that there is an incredible man out there who has the most amazing ability to see every facet of your life.

Scary thought eh? But no, he was so sweet and caring and spoke to me like a queen or something. When I think of how that creep Cyrus speaks to me if his dinner is not on time and compare it to Jesus' words to me ....(that's his name - have you heard of him?)

Anyway, he asked me for a drink!! Can you believe that? A respectable Jewish man asked me, a Samaritan outcast woman for a drink in broad daylight where anyone could have seen! We had this weird conversation where he got all esoteric on me about living water and never having to drink any more but I think I kinda missed the point a bit. I gave it a lot of thought later though and I can't help thinking he has something

there.

p.s. He knew about Gus, Julius, Simon and Levi! How do you think he knew about them ????? Write soon !

yours

Mary

p.p.s. He is staying with my friends in the hills for a couple of days! Wait till some of those 'wouldn't-touch-you-with-a-barge-pole' Jews get wind of this !!!!

p.p.p.s.

I am now a bit of a hero since everyone in the neighbourhood is running after Jesus because of what I told them about him ! Get that ?!!! People are taking notice of what a woman has said at last !!!! Is this a revolution or what ?!!!!

In my creative narrative of the Samaritan woman at the well I wished to illuminate the way in which the traditional text downplays the role of the woman's testimony to her people. The Samaritan woman is a highly significant biblical character in that she is an outcast, a woman with a reputation as well as a member of a alien community and yet she engages in a deep conversation with Christ, a Jewish male. As a result of this conversation many people from the Samaritan community embraced the revolutionary

message of Jesus on the discipleship of equals. This in itself seriously challenged

their status as outcasts and posed a major threat to the strict Jewish code.

That a woman was the harbinger of such news also subverted the dominant ideology of male power and agency.

Later in the gospels the testimony of women is not believed in relation to the resurrection of Christ:

"But they did not believe the women, because  
their words seemed to them like nonsense."  
(Luke 24:11)

In my narrative I chose to continue with the Johannine theme of the woman's unchaste reputation for the purposes of shedding light on the way in which women could be so easily taken advantage of by men in early Jewish communities, leaving them little choice but to live as prostitutes, or to be accused as such. Women without a male sponsor were vulnerable and unprotected from the exploitation of others. This is not made apparent in the biblical text - rather the way in which Jesus refers to the woman's previous partners suggests that the fault was entirely her own.

Reading biblical texts against their patriarchal grain is a tactic Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza encourages in order to become a resistant reader. She argues that:

"The androcentric biblical text derives its  
seductive as well as critical 'power' from its  
generic aspirations."<sup>162</sup>

This means that while women may read stories about Jesus in the Bible without consciously giving significance to his maleness, Catholic theology primarily (and to a lesser degree Protestantism) emphasizes the maleness of Christ as an essential symbol for the priesthood. Therefore Christian identity is maintained as masculine identity:

<sup>162</sup>Schussler Fiorenza, Elisabeth But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation Beacon Press, Boston 1992 p.36



"Focusing on the figure of Jesus, the Son of the Father, when reading the Bible, 'doubles' women's oppression. Women in the act of reading not only suffer from the alienating division of self against self but also from the realization that to be female is to be neither 'divine' nor 'a son of God'".<sup>163</sup>

Many of the stories that deal with women in the New Testament "**double women's oppression**" by the way they have been translated. Even Mary the mother of Jesus says very little in the four gospels (the Magnificat in Luke's gospel is a hymn of praise<sup>164</sup>, not conversation). When the women in the stories have no voice, just like women in history, they become marginal or indeed, invisible.

### *The Woman Taken in Adultery: Biblical Narrative*



Rembrandt, *The Woman Taken in Adultery* (National Gallery, London).

Human sexuality and Christianity have had an ambiguous relationship for nearly two thousand years. Although sexual intercourse is recognized as a God-given expression of human love which ultimately culminates in the birth

<sup>163</sup> Ibid

<sup>164</sup> Luke 1:46ff, modelled by Luke on 1 Samuel 2:1ff

of children, many people in church history and in the church today experience some discomfort with the subject of their own sexuality. Sexuality is rarely the topic of a sermon and is often referred to euphemistically in Christian literature. Also, the Church has had a long history of negativity and aversion to anything other than an exclusively heterosexual expression of sexuality. The corollary of Christianity's uneasy relationship with sexuality is Christianity's uneasy relationship with women and in particular, female sexuality. The Church fathers constructed a view of female sexuality that was little less than demonic and promoted the view that women were naturally adulterous and intent on luring men away from the 'straight and narrow'. The Book of Proverbs warns of the dangers for men who submit to the adulterous woman (Proverbs 6:24-29, 7:10-27, 9:13-18, 23:26-28) and the Old Testament often refers to Israel as an "unfaithful wife".

John's Gospel gives an account of a woman who was caught committing adultery by a group of Pharisees. This story only appears in John's gospel and editorial notes in the New International Study Bible point out that it is absent from almost all of the important early manuscripts. The Johannine text describes an interaction between the Pharisees, the woman and Jesus which suggests that the Pharisees were hoping to catch Jesus out over a technicality but instead found the focus of attention on themselves instead of the woman they had used to trap Jesus:

"She was brought to where he was teaching in the temple by the Pharisees . The Pharisees were intent on hearing Jesus' view on Moses law which stated that such women should be stoned. Jesus bent down and drew on the ground with his finger as they kept questioning him and eventually he straightened up and spoke to them. 'If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.' Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this , those who heard began to go away, one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, ' Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you ?'

'No one sir', she said.

' Then neither do I condemn you', Jesus declared. 'Go now and leave your life of sin' "(John 8:7-11).



The inclusion of this story in John's gospel, even though no other literary sources add authenticity to it is significant for the central focus of the story is a sinful woman. As stated earlier, references to adulterous women are frequent in the Bible, usually with a blaming emphasis but this story departs from that trend in the non-judgemental approach of Jesus. In keeping with the honour/shame dichotomy the Pharisee's saw sexual impurity as the woman's sin for there is no record of the male partner - it is only the woman who is dragged before Jesus. As mentioned earlier, male sexual purity was not questioned for it was only female sexual impurity that brought about shame. The biblical notion of adultery contains a double standard that is often missed in ecclesiastical circles. The seventh commandment in Exodus 20 states that **"You shall not commit adultery"** however men in Old Testament times could have many wives and concubines to service their sexual needs as well as providing many offspring to continue the family tribe. Adultery was not described as multiplicitious sexual partners for men but rather became adultery only if one of those sexual partners belonged to another man by marriage.

Rape also was defined as a crime against the male sponsor of the victim rather than a crime against the woman herself. Women of the Deuteronomistic period in the Old Testament were regularly used as spoils of war and kidnapped, killed or raped in retribution for similar crimes perpetrated against the opposing side. The rights of women as individuals were not considered since any act of violence committed against them was simply seen as a crime against the men who owned them.



There is a trend in cases of public adultery to place the blame on the woman who is often seen as the sexual lure that has distracted an innocent man. This is a recurrent theme in popular culture such as in film media where movies such as **Fatal Attraction** reinforce the ideology of an unsuspecting man being consumed by the sexual advances of a woman. More recently the film **Disclosure** based on Michael Crichton's novel by the same name has the central female character in a predatory sexual role which is more commonly associated with men in powerful positions.<sup>165</sup> It seems a patriarchal society is slow to recognize men's contribution in adultery and the tendency to use the "other woman" as scapegoat is a common response.

The impact of the story of Jesus' encounter with the woman caught in adultery is easily lost when one overlooks the cultural bias that formulated female sexuality so negatively. Years of viewing from a male vantage point can obscure the unexpected and revolutionary approach Jesus is described as adopting and the story is robbed of meaning. Centuries of male-dominated thinking about female sexual behaviour is a sad legacy of Christianity for it has failed to adequately recognize and highlight how texts such as John 8:1-11 have been used to position women as sexual sinners.

### ***The Demonization of Female Sexuality***

Christianity and the expression of human sexuality have always experienced a tenuous relationship evidenced by the negativity of many of the Church fathers in their writings on fleshy passion at war within the rational man.

<sup>165</sup>Janssen-Jurreit, Marielouise Sexism-The Male Monopoly on History and Thought. Pluto Press 1976 pp 223-238

Female sexuality was perceived to be responsible for this war of the soul and consequently denigrated. The notion of sexual desire as a symbol of moral evil developed through Augustinian thinking which suggested that demons held sexual power over people. Once sexuality was considered demonic, a new type of woman was constructed - the medieval witch. It is estimated that for over four centuries millions of women were burnt at the stake, often as a result of hearsay or gossip which suggested that they exhibited some sort of power over people. It was thought that the devil could take on the female form and have sexual intercourse with a man and gather his semen. Once he had done this he could then take on the form of a man and have intercourse with a woman thus depositing the previously collected semen. We may find some amusement in these notions in the light of twentieth century biology, however the by product of such outlandish notions has been firstly, that female sexuality is subject to demonic control and secondly, that female sexual power is fuelled by the devil.

The Old Testament book of Proverbs speaks of the insatiability of female sexuality in Proverbs 30 : 15,16:

"The leech has two daughters. 'Give! Give!' they cry. There are three things that are never satisfied, four that never say 'enough !' The grave, the barren womb, land which is never satisfied with water and fire which never says 'Enough!'"

Earlier translations speak of the "**mouth**" of the womb rather than the "**barren**" womb of later editions. The etymology of the Latin word for woman **Femina** comes from **Fe** (faith) and **Minus** (less) and now, centuries later, women are still confined to a stereotype which insists on their intellectual inferiority to men and their susceptibility to greater evil.

The medieval document **Malleus Maleficarium** reinforced these notions about women and evil suggesting that if the world were without women and their propensity for wickedness, it would be free of "**innumerable dangers**".<sup>166</sup> The authors of **Malleus Maleficarium** insisted:

"Since women are feebler both in mind and body, it is not surprising that they should come under the spell of witchcraft. For as regards intellect, or the understanding of spiritual things, they seem to be of a different nature from men."<sup>167</sup>

Sexual passion was considered a rebellion against the rational soul of man and this was likened to rebellion against God. The celibacy of monastics and clerics worked towards bringing men closer to God through sexual abstinence, however in denying sexual impulses female sexuality became a threat which loomed large in the minds of celibates.

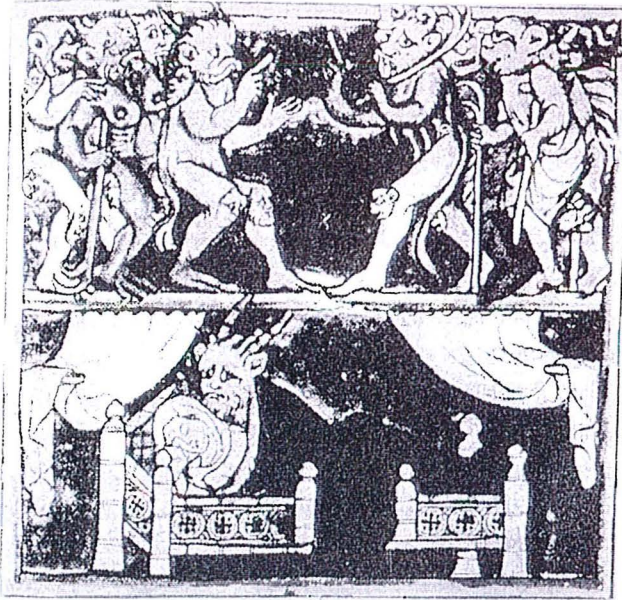
Artistic representations of women's supposed sexual dalliance with the devil appeared and four centuries of slaughter continued unchecked.

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<sup>166</sup>Malleus Maleficarium, translated by Rev.Montague Summers (New York: Benjamin Blom, reproduced 1970).

<sup>167</sup>ibid





*The Incubus: The Begetting of Merlin.* Throughout history, thousands of women have been accused of sin and heresy in the form of witchcraft charges. Allegedly, these women gave themselves sexually to the devil, thereby becoming instruments for inflaming uncontrollable sexual desire. Fourteenth-century French manuscript. Courtesy of Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

## The Woman Caught in Adultery

### Creative Narrative - Love and Other Bruises

*Day I*

*Dear Diary,*

*I can't believe that after years of abuse and neglect from all the men I've known that I finally have found someone like Tetria. It is wonderful having someone who knows exactly how I feel and accepts me, without wanting to change me or own every moment of my life.*

*Day 19*

*Dear Diary,*

*It is so tricky getting time together... Tetria is still legally married to Pheanus (he doesn't let Tetria out much) and there would be an outright scandal if Tetria and I were found out. At least I am free of ties, that pig Malchus has disappeared for good, back to his wife that doesn't understand him I suppose.*

*Day III**Dear Diary,*

*I have arranged to meet Tetria tomorrow - I hope the coast is clear. It is so frustrating that we just can't simply be together and do the things that lovers do. There are so many obstacles to our love and yet I dream and hope for a future where we can be as we are without shame.*

*Day IV**Dear Diary*

*As I write this I am shaking for I can't believe what has happened but I simply must write it down.*

*The worst possible thing happened this morning....I had arranged to meet Tetria and we were embracing and suddenly the door burst open. There was shouting and scuffling and shoving and some Pharisee men grabbed me (and groped me I might add) and in the midst of all noise and disorder Tetria completely disappeared. I found out later that it was really me they came for. They dragged me to this temple where a man was preaching and they asked him about Moses' law on adultery. Adultery! I like that! I trembled as I waited for this man Jesus to reply, I knew the law....it says that women like me must be stoned. I already felt like I'd been stoned, those men were so rough and I was bruised and aching. I actually didn't care at that moment if Jesus ordered my stoning, I didn't want Tetria to suffer the shame of the public knowledge of our relationship and this would be a way out for both of us. But he did the strangest thing. He bent down at my feet....get that? At my feet! Everyone else was towering over me but he bent down and started drawing with his finger in*



*the dust. He then said that yes that was the law but if anyone there was sure they had never done anything wrong then they could throw the first stone.*

*There was this dead silence and one by one every man left, the older ones went first and eventually the younger ones left too. I stood there with my head bowed with feelings of shame, sadness, surprise and a flicker of hope all mixed up until I could hardly think.*

*Jesus stood up and asked me, "Where are they? Has no one condemned you?" and I replied, "No one sir."*

*Then he looked me in the eyes and said softly,*

*"Neither do I condemn you."*

*I still can't believe all this, it just doesn't seem real but I know that there is one man out there who thinks I am worthy of respect and fairness and that gives me hope that I might learn to be fair to and respect myself as well.*

*Day V*

*Dear Diary,*

*I am going to a friend of Jesus' house tomorrow to help in the home.*

*They asked me to and I accepted with tears in my eyes at their kindness.*

*I am not living my life in the shadows any more, I am OUT!!!!!!*

*Day VI*

*Dear Diary*

*Tetria is leaving that no hoper of a husband and is going to live with me.*

*I am so happy.*



In responding to John 8:1-11 in creative prose I have chosen to subvert the story of the woman caught in adultery by portraying her as a lesbian. Although this is a major shift away from the biblical text, it is important to remember that the process of imaginative identification defeats its purpose if it simply reinforces the androcentric view of women portrayed in the Bible. Subjecting my own stories to a **hermeneutics of suspicion** revealed that I had previously neglected to rise above the androcentricity of the text which portrays the woman as unchaste. In casting the woman as a lesbian and having her lifestyle accepted and defended by Jesus subverts the dominant theme of the biblical text which presents the woman as an accused adulterer, forgiven and commanded by Jesus to **"Go and sin no more"** (verse 11).

Lesbianism is a much bigger threat to patriarchy than homosexuality for homosexual men are ostensibly loyal to the basic principle of male supremacy - man loving. Lesbian women are therefore a considerable threat to the Church for nowhere is compulsory man-loving more obvious.

The biblical text constructs the woman as guilty and yet does not reveal who her partner was and why (he) was not also dragged before Jesus. The story only appears in John's gospel and while its inclusion is still the subject of editorial debate, the notion of women's sexual unchastity remains a dominant myth in Christianity.

Women without a male representative in First Century Palestine were at the mercy of others and could be easily exploited. This is sadly still the case today with the widespread **"feminization of poverty"** where women and children are the most likely to suffer some form of abuse or exploitation.<sup>168</sup>

<sup>168</sup>French, Marilyn The War Against Women Penguin 1992 pp23-35

The Samaritan women, the women who anointed Jesus and the woman caught in adultery are all androcentric narratives that contribute to the notion of innate female immorality. The women's stories are not told and the reader is expected to take on the same perspective as the narrator. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza suggests that the way in which the Bible has been interpreted androcentrically contributes to the **"silencing of women's anger and rebellion"** in the stories that deal with women and she encourages a **"hermeneutics of suspicion"** rather than a simple acceptance of what is written.<sup>169</sup> One must also question not just what was written but also what has been decided is worth **remembering**. This is particularly important when we view what has been constructed as knowledge about women, for in the hands and minds of men much of what is considered **"truth"** or **"adage"** can be traced to patriarchal bias. The inclusion of the story of the woman caught in adultery in John's gospel is an example of how patriarchal notions of female sexual impurity are constructed editorially and then institutionalized by the Church.

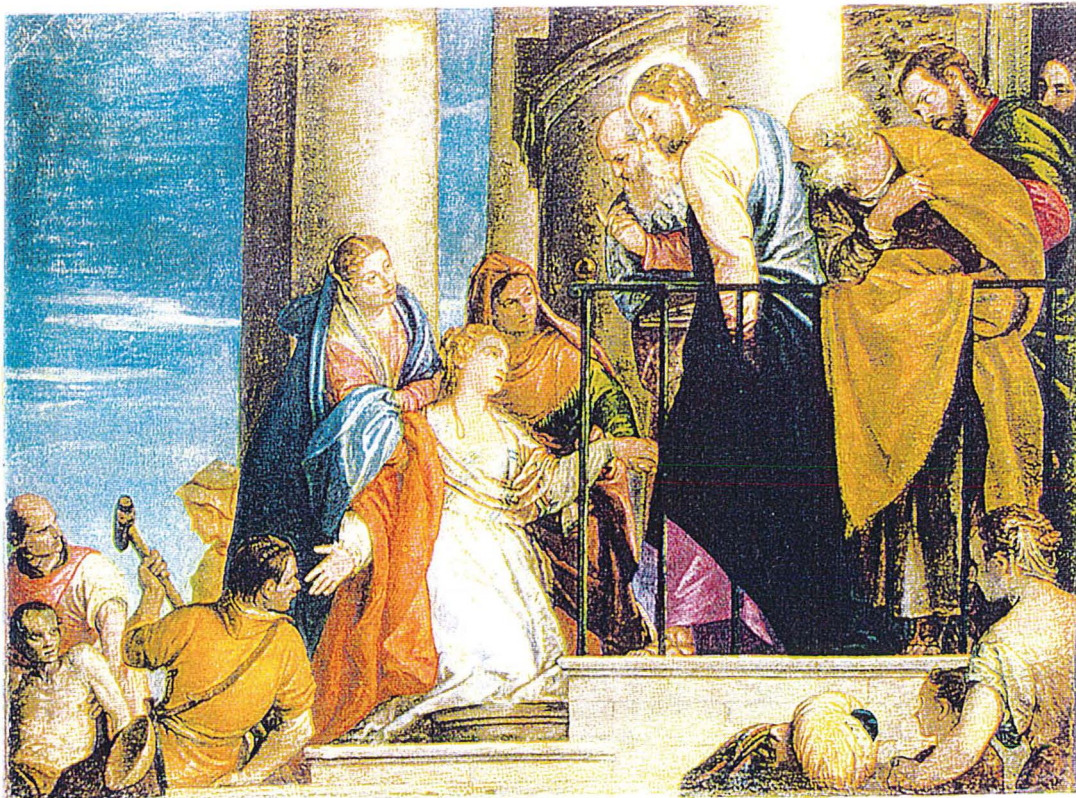
The association of negativity with female sexuality has been a distorting and damaging one for it still underpins much of society as we know it. The notion of women **"asking for"** rape by the manner of their dress is one such working of this ideology and it has influenced how the crime of rape has been perceived and punished.

The way in which the Church has idolized and idealized the biblical Mary (as referred to earlier) is another way in which women are misrepresented in scripture and ecclesiastical life. Acceptable or ideal womanhood is couched in

<sup>169</sup> Schussler Fiorenza, Elisabeth, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins* SCM Press Ltd, 1983 pp33



such terms as to make it impossible for any normal woman to meet the expectations which, by and large have been framed or constructed by celibate men. The glorification of the mother role, a constant theme in Christian literature promotes unrealistic expectations in the lives of women who may fail to live up to such an elevated ideal.



PAOLO VERONESE, *Christ healing the woman with the issue of blood*

### ***The Woman with a Haemorrhage: Biblical Narrative***

One of the most disturbing consequences of the male/female dichotomy that allocates rationality and the mind to men and irrationality and bodily function to women is the ideology of uncleanness. The Old Testament describes all female bodily functions (menstruating, gestating, childbirth, post-partum recovery and lactating) as ceremonially unclean (Leviticus 12). The purification code contained an unmistakable bias that favoured males as the birth of a female child incurred twice the number of purification days that the birth of a male child would incur. So it is no surprise that along with lepers and other



**"untouchables"** some accounts of women in the New Testament view women in the collective as unclean. In fact, a Jewish daily prayer for men thanked God for not making them Gentiles, slaves or women and this is the ideology that underpins much of what is written in the Bible about women.

Leviticus 15:19-30 contains the Judaic laws which speak of menstruating women as **"ceremonially unclean"** and offers the guidelines for men to avoid contamination:

"When a woman has her regular flow of blood, the impurity of her monthly period will last seven days, and anyone who touches her will be unclean till evening." (Leviticus 15:19)

Anything a menstruating woman lies or sits on will be unclean (verses 20,21) and if anyone touches her or what she has touched will also be unclean (verses 22,23). If a man has intercourse with a menstruating woman he will be unclean for seven days and any bed he subsequently lies on will also be unclean (verse 24). If a woman has a discharge of blood other than her monthly period she is unclean until the discharge ceases (verses 25-27). After her period or discharge has ceased a woman had to count off seven days and then she would be ceremonially clean. This meant that with the average menstrual cycle of twenty-eight days, only for fourteen of those would a woman be ceremonially clean. The rest of the time she would be considered an outcast and potentially contaminating and this contributed to the low status of women in social and political life. Since the common era the ideological notion of women's unclean status has lessened but there is still remains a stigma attached to women and bodily functions and processes that time has not shifted.

The story of the woman with the haemorrhage appears in Matthew, Mark and Luke's gospel and each account varies in the way in which the woman's suffering is described.

Matthew's gospel covers the story with just three verses:

"Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. She said to herself, 'If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed.' Jesus turned and saw her. 'Take heart, daughter,' he said, 'your faith has healed you.' And the woman was healed from that moment."  
(Matthew 9:20-22)

Matthew's narrative does not develop the theme of the woman's suffering to the degree of Mark and Luke. Matthew's narrative simply states that the woman was "subject to bleeding for twelve years" (verse 20). The following portion of Mark's narrative focuses on the desperation of the woman who had been exploited by the doctors who over the years had failed to cure her.

"And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, 'If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed'. Immediately her bleeding stopped and she was freed from her suffering"  
(Mark 5:25-30).

Mark's narrative alludes to the desperate plight of the woman whose condition had deteriorated even though she had spent all she had on trying to find a cure. Luke's gospel does not develop this other than to state that "no one could heal her" (Luke 8:43) and instead develops the notion of Jesus' intuition that healing power had left him via the woman's touch.

While Matthew's narrative has Jesus simply turn and see the woman who had touched him, in Mark's account (and also Luke's) this is described as Jesus "realizing that power had gone out from him" (Mark 5:30):

"And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, but no one could heal her. She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped.

"Who touched me?" Jesus asked. When they all denied it, Peter said, "Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you." But Jesus said, "Some one touched me; I know that power has gone out from me." Then the woman, seeing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at his feet. In the presence of all the people she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed. Then he said to her, "Daughter your faith has healed you. Go in peace." (Luke 8:43-48)

The woman with the haemorrhage does not speak in any of the biblical narratives other than to herself in Matthew and Mark: **"She said to herself, 'If I only touch his cloak I will be healed'"** (Matthew 9:21). In Luke's narrative the woman addresses the group: **"In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed"** (verse 47) but the narrator does not tell us her words. The silencing of the woman in this way intensifies the way in which the androcentric texts mute the suffering of women under patriarchy. The three gospel narratives all downplay the woman's situation and although Mark hints at the exploitation of her suffering at the hands of many doctors is not the predominant theme of the narrative. The narratives do not make it clear that the woman was an outcast due to her unclean status which, according to Leviticus 15, would have seen her in this unclean, untouchable state for twelve years. Everyone she touched or anything she touched became unclean and yet the texts do not really focus on this at all.

Just like the Samaritan woman at the well and the woman caught in adultery, the woman with the haemorrhage was at the mercy of those who wished to



exploit her because no legal redress existed in First Century Palestine to protect women disadvantaged in these ways. The woman with the haemorrhage had a double jeopardy to contend with, because she was firstly a woman, and secondly, a menstruating woman. Her constant unclean status would have made marriage non-viable (the texts do not give her marital status) since her husband would have been unclean if he touched her, slept with her or lay on the same bed (Leviticus 15:19-28).

There still exists today an ideology of women's unclean status and there is no doubt that such ideology has been rooted and fed through Christian sources. The refusal to admit women to the priesthood is one such outcome of this ideology for the dominant ideology of God as male and Christ as an extension of that divine maleness denies women the ability to represent God as ***imago dei***. The association of female bodily processes with witchery and sorcery has a long history, for the menstrual cycle was known to be influenced by the lunar cycle and thus it was presumed that women had secret powers. Modern biology has done a lot to dispel the various imaginations that have long been associated with women but for all that enlightenment, some ideologies remain in the human consciousness. The menstruation cycle still has a public taboo attached which can be verified by the euphemistic referral to it by advertisements for sanitary protection as well as the derogative comments of men and boys (which often plagues newly menstruating girls at school) as numerous sexual harassment reports testify.<sup>170</sup> In fact, sanitary protection was not even allowed to be advertised on television until the 1980's and even now that it is, it still causes some people to be offended. Even the name of the major company responsible for the removal and replacement of sanitary disposal bins in

<sup>170</sup>Figes Kate Because of Her Sex-The Myth of Equality for Women in Britain. Macmillan London 1994 pp209-15

public conveniences has a connotation of disease and vermin attached, in being called **Rentokil**. Women and girls themselves often view their menstrual cycle with a type of loathing and it is still referred to as "**the curse**".

Kate Fige's study showed that more than 12 per cent of girls experience menarche without any preparation or knowledge at all<sup>171</sup> which suggests that parents (and in particular mothers) are still somewhat uncomfortable with broaching the subject of menstruation.

Christians have been slow to recognize how responsible Christian tradition is for many of these distortions of a bodily process that should be celebrated for its life giving properties. In some cultures it is celebrated as a rite of passage but in the West the predominant feeling has been negative and this perspective offers little positivity to women. For many teenage girls the onset of menstruation precipitates a plummet in self-esteem while teenage boys of the same age have a rapid increase in power and autonomy.<sup>172</sup>

What is alas overlooked in a negative view of menstruation is the possibility that for some women, having a period may increase their libido, remove (temporarily) the fear of pregnancy, or generally give them a feeling of release.

Some of the opposition to women being ordained has been formulated on a distorted view of female bodily processes with some people arguing that they would not be comfortable receiving communion from a menstruating or lactating woman. On a secular level, it has been customary up until recently for pregnant women in some work places to be transferred out of sight as their pregnancy became more obvious.

Christian tradition has much to answer for and without an urgently needed overhaul of Christian teaching on sexuality, women and girls will continue to

<sup>171</sup>Op cit p 210

<sup>172</sup>Op cit 209

regard their bodies with ambivalence. The Christian Church has been quick to criticise the activities of other institutions but has failed to subject its own ideologies to adequate critique. The feminist debate has raised many questions to which the Church has yet to respond effectively. However a successful reform of the Church rests on the hope that it may eventually do so.

## **Woman with a Haemorrhage - Creative Narrative**

### ***This is my body, this is my blood***

*This is my body,*

*No one wants it.*

*This is my life and I can't live it.*

*This is my blood,*

*The torment of my soul,*

*This is my poverty,*

*My money has flowed like the red, red blood that stains my life.*

*I have nothing left... just blood*

*and breath that is not worth breathing.*

*But I still breathe*

*and I still bleed.....*

*I have heard of a metaphysical physician,*

*Perhaps he can help me like no doctor before,*

*My health has furnished many doctor's wealth in the past*

*so I will not consult him professionally.*

*I will touch him.*

*If he is as good as they say then he will know it is me,*

*What have I got to lose except more blood?*



*What if the crowd turns on me and kills me?*

*I will say "kill me and watch me bleed!"*

*I can almost reach him,*

*I stretch out my trembling hand towards his purple cloak,*

*But I can't quite get...there....*

*I've done it ! My fingers felt the cord of his cloak,*

*The tassel flowed across my fingers*

*And my bleeding body slowed*

*And stopped.*

*He knew it was me,*

*He felt his power flow from him into my ghostly frame.*

*This is my body.*

*I am living*

*This is my faith,*

*It has made me well.*

*"This is my blood that is poured out for you and for many" I heard them say in the temple many years later,*

*His blood...*

*His body...*

*I know how that feels.*

For my creative narrative I chose to use Mark's gospel as a source as it is the longest of the three texts and also because Mark's narrative is the only one that alludes to the way in which the woman with the haemorrhage was destitute after spending all her money on doctors who were unable to heal her. My narrative highlights the way in which women were likely targets for such exploitation in a male dominant society where women were without legal rights and protection unless they had a male sponsor. These aspects of

life in First Century Palestine are not made apparent in the biblical texts for the androcentricity of the translation reflects a male bias. The story about a woman is really a story about the man who healed her and all three biblical narratives reinforce this bias. The woman has no voice in the texts and although my narrative does not remedy this, I have chosen to link the woman with the haemorrhage with the celebration of the Eucharist which will no doubt be offensive to some. However, this is one way in which feminists can subvert dominant ideologies by juxtaposing them with new visions of womanhood. The symbols of Christ's body and blood can be subverted to restore to women a sense of sacredness of their own bodies and its various functions which traditional Christianity has denied them. John's gospel is the only one that describes blood and water flowing from Jesus' side at the crucifixion (John 19:34) and many biblical scholars have described this as spectacular evidence of Jesus' divinity whilst ignoring the fact that every time a woman gives birth to a child she is participating in an equally divine event through the simultaneous emission of both blood and water. Reclaiming female images of sacredness in the Bible has long been the goal of Christian feminists and many male biblical scholars are now also committed to this goal.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>173</sup>Smith, Paul Is It Okay To Call God "Mother"?-Considering the Feminine Face of God Herndrickson Publishers 1993 pp 51-77 and Wren, Brian What Language Shall I Borrow?- God-Talk in Worship: A Male Response to Feminist Theology Crossroad New York 1995 pp 123-136

## Chapter 5 Summary

*"Among all the savage beasts none is found so harmful as  
woman."  
(John Chrysostom)*

There is much divided opinion amongst Christian feminists regarding the future of the Christian Church. Some such as Mary Daly argue that the Christian Church and all its symbols are **"inherently sexist"** and little hope is held for reform. Others such as Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza argue that Christianity's history and the biblical documents contain a **"hidden tradition"** of women's active service and that symbols such as Mary the mother of Jesus offer women, at the very least a mythological representation of divine femininity. Anne E. Carr encourages the reform of male-dominated theology so as to include the experience of women with a view to communal harmony that she feels is compromised by religious feminist separatism.

In analyzing the major religious symbols that Christianity presents one encounters all three observations of the feminist positions adopted by Daly, Fiorenza and Carr. In looking at the construction of the **"ideal woman"** proposed by Marian theology I can agree with Mary Daly that religious symbols such as the virgin status of Mary, the doctrine of a male deity and the construct of male authority are the product of patristic thought that has little to offer women.

Conversely, the assertions of Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza regarding the hidden or concealed history of women in Christianity offers those within the tradition a chance to reclaim the past and acknowledge the **"fore-mothers"** of the faith. The opportunity that Catholicism offers to worship the feminine in the divine in the symbol of Mary is one way in which Fiorenza herself is able to



remain within the Church even though she is most outspoken on the distortion of Scripture that has served to marginalize women. The way in which Marian theology has developed and been subsequently used to narrowly restrict women to biological function presents a problem to me as a Protestant Christian feminist but I acknowledge that for many Catholic women, Mary offers the chance to engage with the feminine in close association with the divine which is sadly lacking in Protestantism.

## **Transformation**

Anne E. Carr's development of a feminist perspective that takes into account the tradition and the religious symbols that support it offers a transformative option for those who wish to remain connected to the community of believers. For Carr, the possibility for reform hinges on understanding the way in which the tradition and its symbols have operated to restrict the full participation of women in the Church.

The deconstruction of symbols of power is also a central feature of feminist Post-structuralism and in viewing the New Testament notions of **"ideal womanhood"** we can gain insight into how systems of power and dominance have been instituted and whose interests such systems serve. In analyzing the biblical notions of ideal womanhood it is easy to conclude that issues of power and dominance are central to the construction of masculinity and femininity in the New Testament. Male power is posited against female submission and the doctrine of a male God further institutionalizes and sanctions male power as a divine authority. For Christian women the subject position they take up in their religious experience centres on these notions of power and dominance and their response to them. The question that has

occupied many Christian feminist theologians is whether or not this system of power and dominance is an authentic representation of divine purpose or if it is in fact a distortion brought about through the androcentric nature of the tradition.

Reinterpreting biblical texts from a feminist perspective is a valuable exercise but because of the pervasive structure of patriarchy, even these recreated stories need to be submitted to a **"hermeneutics of suspicion."** Otherwise, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza has warned, there is an unconscious reproduction of the Western romanticist and individualist ideal of the **"White**

**Lady"**<sup>174</sup>:

"If imaginative biblical reinterpretation does not go hand in hand with a hermeneutics of suspicion but instead uncritically embellishes the women characters in the androcentric text, it invites readers to identify positively with the feminine role models that the androcentric text constructs. In doing so, such a reinterpretation actualizes and reproduces the very images and myths of true womanhood from which it seeks to be free."<sup>175</sup>

Casting a **hermeneutics of suspicion** over my creative narratives was a revealing exercise which precipitated the rewriting of the woman caught in adultery in order to give a lesbian voice to the story. My own embeddedness in patriarchal norms was both a revelation and a surprise, confirming to me the necessity of critical review of ideologies, even when they are expressed as "feminist".

Notwithstanding the androcentricity of the texts and translation, the four biblical stories are still, when all is said and done, four stories about women.

Any **"embellishment"** of the women was done in a critical sense in order to illuminate the discourses that operated in First Century Palestine to keep

<sup>174</sup>Schussler Fiorenza, *Elisabeth But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1992) p.27

<sup>175</sup>Ibid

women out of the public and political sphere.

The results of sexism are deep and pervasive in women's lives and to a large degree, women (as well as men) have internalized the dominant cultural myths that patriarchy formulates. Christianity has made this **internalization** process all the more powerful by constructing power relations that are said to reflect God's will. The Bible, as "God's word" is a powerful tool in the **naturalizing** of female subordination to male power and as Schussler Fiorenza argues, even a feminist reinterpretation is not always immune from patriarchal bias.

It is commonly stated that feminist theology draws on the experience of women as a source of content and as a criterion of truth.<sup>176</sup> However, the principle of experience is not a unique feature of feminist theology for all theological reflection is founded on subjective sources. Scripture and tradition have been called the objective sources of theology but as Reuther asserts, these too are **"codified collective human experience."**

The religious symbols and laws that have been inherited through the tradition become authenticated through their ability to interpret experience and if a symbol ceases to speak authentically it must be changed or reframed to provide newer, more relevant meaning. This relationship between inherited symbols and experience has been ignored by the dominant power systems of authority and the symbols themselves are used to dictate **what** can be experienced as well as the **interpretation** of experience. Feminist theological reflection then, insists on the inclusion of women's experience which has in the past been completely disregarded. Once we come to realize that classical theology is founded on male experience instead of on universal human

<sup>176</sup>Reuther, Rosemary Radford. *Sexism and God-Talk- Towards a Feminist Theology*

Beacon Press 1983 p12.



experience we can uncover the androcentric bias that symbols, laws and religious formulas present as divine and universal authority. It is only then that we can **resist** the constructed meaning of texts, symbols and laws and offer a transformative view that is inclusive of all people.

## Subject Positions

Christian women occupy a subject position in the dominant discourse of traditional theology which the Church continues to promulgate. Even though feminist theologians have established that classical theology does not speak to the lived experience of women, Christian women in the church community are rarely given an alternative view. Women in the church tend to distrust their own spirituality because they never encounter anything but male spirituality.<sup>177</sup> This has also been the case in the discipline of Psychology where theories have been developed using the male as the standard norm resulting in the marginalization of women's experience as something **"other"** or **"abnormal"**.

It is often a Christian woman's subject position in another sphere that provides a clue to her marginalization in the Christian tradition and once this realization takes place her subject position in Christianity may change. This has been my own personal experience and it appears to be a common one for many of the feminist theologians referred to in this paper attest to similar **"eye opening"** experiences.

Sometimes the impact of further education or employment and the subject positions occupied in them by Christian women will provide the impetus to call into question the systems of power the Church has continued to authorize.

<sup>177</sup>Chinnici, Rosemary *Can Women Re-Image the Church?* Paulist Press 1992 p38.

Once this questioning process begins, it can often end in a sad and lonely pilgrimage out of the Church. Eileen Diesendorf conducted a study of seven Christian women entitled ***Why Some Bright Women Quit the Church*** in which she examined the reasons why some women abandon their church commitments. The study found that each of the seven women found the Church to be an oppressive institution even though it claimed to make its members "free". Each of the women took a considerable time to recognize this inconsistency but once they did, it precipitated a gradual but complete move away from the Church. The women spoke of the way in which the Church had told them what they should be as wives, mothers or singles and for some time, each believed that they were personally at fault when they failed to meet the expectations set by the Church's teaching. Some women after experiencing intellectual freedom in academic studies or in their careers found their choices in the church severely limited by male clergy who insisted they had to act or think in a certain way:

"I left because I did not have the freedom to explore without being viewed as a stirrer, as a thorn in the side."  
"My husband was told I must be brought into line as I had to learn to submit to the males."<sup>178</sup>

For many women in the church community a ***compartmentalizing*** process begins and they remain within the Church simply by disregarding or ignoring the inconsistencies connected with traditional Christianity. While a woman may adopt feminist initiatives in her workplace or academic institution, she may quite happily expect to be a "submissive wife" in her marriage and never expect to preach or teach in her church. For other women such as feminist

theologians Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Reuther, the

<sup>178</sup>Diesendorf, Eileen *Why Some Bright Women Quit the Church*. Zadok Perspectives-Zadok Institute For Christianity and Society, no 21 March 1988 p21

response has been to uncover theological bias and reformulate theological thinking that more adequately reflects authentic womanhood.

My own position is not easily defined for while I have recently left my own parish community I am conscious that in doing so I have removed the one voice there that has consistently spoken out and fought for reform. Many young women grow up in the Church hearing countless accounts of male biblical heroes related to them by exclusively male preachers. This experience of the Church fails to offer them female spiritual role models and as women are rarely seen to be acting out anything other than auxiliary roles within the church community their sense of spiritual inferiority is intensified. Church has always held appeal for women: they represent more than half of the church's population and yet it fails to speak personally to them. The ideology of self-sacrificial service in Christianity is one that holds particular appeal for women and as society has also codified this as authentic femininity many women may find it impossible to disregard it.

It has been an observation of mine that in advocating change one must maintain some form of contact with the system that requires reform. This is certainly true when dealing with troubled interpersonal relationships and I can see similarities in my struggle with the Church. There is hurt, violation and marginalization but there is also potential for hope, love and healing. Whilst my agitation for reform will be primarily on the fringe of the church community it is my goal in this struggle to offer women still within the Church an opportunity to join my voice in articulating their spiritual experiences that have been so long silenced by a male dominated system.

In some sense I can relate to Betty Friedan's notion of **"the problem without a name"** for many women in the church community express dissatisfaction,



self-esteem problems and feelings of inadequacy but often do not really understand why. The Church has told them they **should** be happy as mothers and wives, they **should** submit willingly to their husbands and they **should** be silent and obey. But the Church has been noticeably silent on issues that affect women so profoundly such as domestic violence, sexual abuse and rape and has failed to acknowledge the role in which patristic teaching has contributed to the way in which these crimes are perceived.

I maintain my position on the fringe of the Church in order to offer hope and love and healing to those who are oppressed, for those who are blind, for those who are in prison and for those who are without voice. I believe that the teachings of Jesus as recorded/constructed in the gospels offer a model of equality for all people regardless of gender, race, class or sexual persuasion. I agree with Schussler Fiorenza that the New Testament epistles also contain clues to the activity of women in early Christianity in leadership and teaching roles but that this part of women's history has been down-played or made invisible by androcentric translation and theological frameworks. In Schussler Fiorenza's words:

"Patriarchal imagery and androcentric language are the form but not the content of the biblical message."<sup>179</sup>

Uncovering and reclaiming women's participation in the early church communities as followers and leaders is essential for women's agency today. Judy Chicago, the artist who created **The Dinner Party** (a collection of women at a dinner table symbolically representing the lost history of women's contribution to the world) observes:

"Sadly most of the 1938 women included in the Dinner Party are unfamiliar, their lives and achievements unknown to most of us. To make people feel worthless,

<sup>179</sup>Schussler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. In Memory of Her - A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins SCM Press LTD 1983 p 15

society robs them of their pride : this has happened to women. All the institutions of our culture tell us-through words, deeds and even worse silence-that we are insignificant. But our heritage is our power."<sup>180</sup>

## *Re-inventing the Wheel*

As women are for the most part invisible in recorded history, many of the accomplishments of women from previous generations are lost to women of subsequent generations. This results in women having to 're-invent the wheel' so to speak, in each generation as they are unlikely to be aware of all that has gone on before in the name of feminism. This has been a concern of second-wave feminists who express dismay over younger women who are likely to jeopardize the gains of the battles fought by their mothers through their ignorance of the way in which feminism has represented the interests of all women.

In the development of feminist biblical criticism this trend of the invisibility of previous work done by women is particularly disturbing. Gerda Lerner (*The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, 1993) documents one thousand years of feminist biblical criticism that remains invisible and partially inaccessible for students of the Bible. So as each generation questions and struggles with issues that have been questioned and struggled with before the heritage of biblical criticism is concealed and the wheel is re-invented religiously in every generation. Fourteenth century author Christine de Pizan penned a Bible commentary in which she questioned the male bias of the account of the fall of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. Time and time again in this and subsequent works Christine de Pizan responded to and rejected the patristic teaching on women's nature as well as every other misogynistic charge laid at women's door. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Anne Askew burnt at the

<sup>180</sup>Chicago, Judy The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage (New York Double Day, Anchor Books, 1979, pp246-249)

stake in 1546 on a charge of heresy), Marguerite de Navarre (1492-1549),

Aemilia Lanyer (16th century) and Sarah Grimke (1792-1873) are all women who struggled and questioned the male bias of the biblical account but it is clear from the reading of their work that few of them knew of the other's work or existence.

I observe a parallel today in the Church where modern Christian feminist scholarship is ignored whilst male theology is taught exclusively and non-ecclesiastical women and men remain oblivious to the questions marks over all the major articles of Christian belief. Uncovering and naming the lost heritage of women in Christianity is a primary goal of Christian feminists and the development of feminist or liberation theology has been the vehicle through which this is realized. However, the Church has tended to adopt the **"shoot the messenger"** strategy and many feminist thinkers become so alienated by the Church's response to feminist insight that it appears unlikely that their message will be heard while the gun shots are firing so loudly.

### ***Main Goal of Feminist Theology***

The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women and whatever denies, diminishes or distorts this is not of the divine.<sup>181</sup> Symbols, religious formulas and laws that insist on the subordination of the female to the male are said, by feminist theologians, to be an aberration or distortion constructed by patriarchy to serve the needs of men. Women's experiences of spirituality are not realized under such a regime, nor is the notion of femininity represented in the symbols or metaphors used to describe God. This effectively pushes women in the Church to one side, denying them

<sup>181</sup>Reuther, Rosemary Radford. *Sexism and God-Talk- Towards a Feminist Theology*. Beacon Press 1983 pp 18,19.



access to power through the structure of an all male God-head and through the use of a system of an exclusive male hierarchy that is validated by the notion of God as male.

## **Transformation**

What then is the future of Christianity in a feminist age ? Is it possible to create a new vision of equitable and non-hierarchical relationships which serves the needs of all ? Or has patriarchy become so enmeshed in Christianity that it is impossible to extricate them ? Is it a worthwhile investment of energy for women to try to change the Church given its history of abuse and exploitation of them ?

There is no doubt that reform is needed in the universal Church. Whether it is possible or even likely is another matter of faith. It seems reasonable to suggest in the light of decreasing Church attendance figures periodically reported in the press that Church is increasingly becoming irrelevant to many people. I would suggest that it is particularly irrelevant to women, most particularly to those who have grown up through a feminist era.

In pressing for reform in the Church it is daunting to realize that one is effectively undermining the historical tradition and what we have been taught to regard as "**truth**" by calling into question symbols and formulas that no longer reflect authentic human experience. Because this is such a difficult task, I propose a path for change and reform that is multi-faceted in order to incorporate several aspects of life into the Church community.

**These are :**

### **RECOGNIZE:**

It is important for congregations to understand Christianity's heritage of patristic thought and practice

that has been used to construct theology and define God. Ways in which to encourage people to look at this issue individually or collectively could include: Consciousness-raising study groups, women's groups, friendship circles, shared reading material, sermons, Sunday School lessons, visiting speakers, seminars or book reviews.

**RESTORE:**

In order for women and other oppressed groups to be authentic members of a church community patterns of exploitation or exclusion must be overturned. Women need to be restored to their rightful place as fully human, autonomous and valuable participators in the spiritual community. Ways in which to facilitate this could include: the removal of sexist language from hymns, songs, prayers and other liturgical sources, equitable representation on all church rosters such as creche, flowers, catering as well as readings, speaking or teaching/preaching and business and property management committees.

**RECONCILIATION:**

Where there have been long standing patterns of oppression and exclusion a process of healing must take place. Adequate attention must be paid to those who have been denied a voice in the past in order for them to contribute in new ways not previously open to them. Ways in which to encourage reconciliation in the Church community could include: formal meetings where

decisions that impact on the whole church community should not be made without an adequate representation of women, an appropriate person should be (employed) or appointed to address issues of domestic violence and abuse that have been predicated on Christian teaching on the subordination of women. Church leaders must adopt a pattern of **listening** so as to facilitate feedback to those with institutional power from those who are under that power.

**RECLAIM:**

Women have been previously denied the right to study theology, to publicly preach and to minister as priests. The early church communities up until the mid-third century offered women opportunities for leadership and ministerial roles but with the impact of Rome's adoption of Christianity as the state religion women were denied this public space and Christianity reverted to its Judaic origins of patriarchy. It is important to reclaim women's right to full and equal participation in all church life as modelled by the gospel accounts of Jesus in his interaction with women. Ways in which to facilitate this include: theological training programs for women, guest speakers, conferences etc. opportunities to speak publicly, offering role models for women and girls in the choice of reading material written by female academics and female pastors.

**REGENERATE:**

In the same way that the environment needs a period



of restoration after a natural disaster( or human influence such as deforesting or pollution) so too will the Church in order to recover from a long history of patriarchal power and influence. Ways in which this could be instituted include: marriage and relationship programs or seminars that offer participants a model of relationship founded on mutuality, replacing the pattern of power and dominance that constitutes the patriarchal model taught by the Church. Special services could be incorporated into Church life to commemorate important events or dates in women's history. Mapping the local church's history and rediscovering the women who have played important roles but been overlooked or forgotten e.g. pastors wives, volunteers, charity workers, missionaries, women in history who have championed the right of women to participate fully in the Church. Special services for the survivors of sexual abuse or violence could be incorporated into the Church's calendar as a public demonstration of commitment to and advocacy for those who have suffered in this way.

**RELATIONSHIP:** The relationship many women have experienced in the church community is one of exploitation, marginalization and invisibility. In order to restore women to their proper place as equal participants in the message of hope that Christianity represents, their relationship to the Church and to the power-holders of

the Church must change. Women should be actively represented on all church committees and organizations so that they have input into decisions that affect them in the church community. The ideology of Christian service as self-sacrificial martyrdom is an ideology framed by men and has more to say about men's relationships than women's. Women's relationships have traditionally been based on little else than selfless devotion which has made the road to full autonomy fraught with guilt and a sense of obligation to serve others needs at the expense of their own. This association of women with service, needs to be overhauled and other options explored. It is easy to assume that a hospital visitation program will consist of women armed with flowers and sympathy but this does not have to always be the case. Many men are being denied the opportunity for service in the church community by the rigidity of gender roles which have been, until now, unchallenged.

### **Step Process - A Way Ahead**

The difficulty for many Christian feminists is that in the context of their denomination or church experience reform may only be successful if it is worked on in stages. An example of this process for change could start with the local church realizing that the use of gender exclusive language in hymns and readings and liturgy does not speak for women and severely restricts their worship. Alternative language may be incorporated in the services

and updated hymn books and bibles may be purchased.

This initial step may then precipitate a secondary move in the church to address God in less male-dominated terms so as to represent femininity in the divine.

A third step could be a commitment to presenting sermons and teaching that adequately reflect the experience of both men and women and a public recognition of the distortion of Christ's teaching that has continued in the Church to deny women full humanity before God. A deeper look at the male-encoded theology of the Church fathers with incorporation of liberation theological insights would follow.

Perhaps a final stage could be the appointment of a female pastor and while this may be successful at this point, such a move may not be accepted in stage one or even stage two as the congregation may be unwilling to see a woman in this role before they had become aware of the ideology that has denied her access in the past. Of course there will always be those who refuse to acknowledge the distortion of Christian teaching and will therefore cling to fundamentalist notions of **"biblical"** manhood and womanhood with renewed vigour.

The reality is that change or reform in the Church is most likely to be slow and partial and therefore a Christian feminist approach may need to be tiered in some way to facilitate a progression through the various stages. This means that initially change may be prompted by access and equity programs that encourage the fuller participation of women in the church. A more radical stage may be to uncover the hidden tradition of women in the Church's history and a further stage may be to incorporate social change as a result of uncovering the past.



## Conclusions

Many people would argue today that the Church is no longer a powerful force in the lives of people in this post-modern, post-Christian world but what is overlooked in that assumption is the fact that religious dogma underpins much of Western society as we know it and continues to have an effect on how we view the world. Our judicial system, educational system and our political arrangements have been founded on ideological frameworks that have their origin in Christian theology.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the nineteenth century outlined a three-fold argument about why a scholarly and feminist interpretation of the Bible was politically necessary, and her argument still has as much relevance at the eve of the twenty-first century as it did then:

*i. Throughout history and especially today the Bible is used to keep women in subjection and to hinder their emancipation.*

*ii. Not only men but especially women are the most faithful believers in the Bible as the word of God. Not only for men but also for women the Bible has a numinous authority.*

*iii. No reform is possible in one area of society if it is not also advanced in all other areas. One cannot reform the law and other cultural institutions without also reforming biblical religion which claims the Bible as Holy Scripture. Since "all reforms are interdependent," a critical feminist interpretation is a necessary political endeavour, although it might not be opportune. If feminists think they can neglect the revision of the Bible because there are more pressing political issues, then they do not recognize the political impact of Scripture upon the churches and society, and also upon the lives of women.<sup>182</sup>*

<sup>182</sup>Cady Stanton, Elizabeth. *The Women's Bible 'They Weren't Prepared To Hear: A Closer Look at the Women's Bible.'* Andover Newton Quarterly 16.1976

The outcome of a recent election in Tasmania demonstrates the need to continue to publicly challenge and reject the sexism that has its origin in the Church. Voting for the Legislative Council in the North-West of the state known as the "**conservative Bible belt**" was held. Two outspoken conservative men, staunch opponents of gay reform who were reputedly guardians of public morals failed to be re-elected and two women took their place. Mr Rodney Cooper's response to his defeat by a woman revealed the misogyny that permeates our political system:

"Women have never done much for the human race. They caused a few problems in the garden of Eden and I don't think these two are going to improve things much."<sup>183</sup>

Mr Cooper's denigrating comments reinforces for me, the importance of the feminist debate in the Church community. Although it is unlikely that reform in the Church will be totally successful, it is imperative that this type of misogyny as espoused by Mr Cooper is rejected as non-representative of the Christian community of discipleship of equals.

## *Education*

Our education system reinforces the way in which people view male leadership and control as normative. While various affirmative action reforms have taken place in the classroom for students, very little has been done to achieve a more equitable balance of men and women within the teaching profession. Children see few women in the more powerful positions at the top of the hierarchy as either head teachers or departmental heads and this reinforces

<sup>183</sup>The Tasmanian Mercury Monday, June 2nd 1997 p5

notions of innate gender differences which lowers girl's expectations. However, an overwhelming majority of infants, primary and nursery school teachers are women and since it is wrongfully assumed that younger children are easier to teach, lower pay and lower status accompany these positions.

The assumption that nursery school teachers primarily "care" for the children instead of being active agents in their education has seen these teachers with shorter training schemes and even lower pay and status than any other teachers. Few men will be attracted to infants teaching as a career while it continues to be gendered in this way as an extension of the mother role and children will continue to exclusively associate the care of the young with women.

## **Christian Schools**

The God-like status of male teachers in our education system makes the process of the subordination of women to male power and control seem natural. This process is intensified if a child attends a Christian school where the emphasis is on educating the student from a biblical perspective. This can mean different things in different schools where emphases may vary, however the primary goal of these types of schools is to give the pupils **"a Christian education"**. Research has been shown that the educational outcomes for boys and girls in secular education vary considerably and it seems reasonable to speculate that this would also be true for Christian schools.<sup>184</sup> If Christian schools follow the trend of most churches in keeping women **"linguistically invisible"** by the continued use of androcentric language and negation of female sexuality through the promotion of an exclusively male God one can

<sup>184</sup> Gilbert, Pam and Taylor, Sandra Fashioning the Feminine Girls, Popular Culture and Schooling Allen and Unwin 1991 pp 26-8



only speculate on what affect this has on girls in the long term. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza argues that reading the Bible can intensify women's marginalization so an education based on its uncritiqued principles will unquestionably do the same.<sup>185</sup>

## **Not Just Sexism**

As a result of the widespread action of the Women's Movement over the last three decades, many issues of oppression besides sexism have come to light. Racism, ageism, discrimination against people with disabilities, exploitation of the environment and pollution are just some of the issues that have been illuminated. Various reforms have been activated and although much still needs to be done to more adequately meet the needs of the aged, indigenous people and people with disabilities as well as protecting the environment and our resources, this last century has been for all that, a momentous one.

It is my hope that it will be a momentous one for the Church in which it owns and acknowledges the role it has played in the oppression of women in the name of Christianity. Although I acknowledge the male bias of scripture, I believe the gospel accounts of the life of Jesus to be very significant for the way each constructs a picture of a Jewish Rabbi who ministered in a counter-cultural way. Each gospel author has alluded to this in both similar and different ways and given the androcentric nature of the texts, it is highly significant that issues surrounding women have been included. Although many of these issues themselves are linked to the patriarchal culture (prostitution, adultery, outcasts) feminist insight into the stories offer a transformation of the gospel message that I believe the Church has, for the

<sup>185</sup> Schussler Fiorenza, Elisabeth But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation Beacon Press Boston 1992, p85

most part, overlooked. The message of the gospels is a word of hope to the oppressed, to the exploited and to the enslaved and to these belong the (Kingdom) *sic* community of God/dess. Instead, the Church has become a structure of power and dominance, of exclusion and bigotry, exploitation and loss of hope for those for whom the Church should be advocating.

I do not wish to reject the Church out of hand, I have personally spent some of my early years in wonderful faith communities which I look back on with a great deal of warmth. However, while I don't wish to view the Church as totally beyond hope of reform, even though I acknowledge the **"inherent sexism"** that Mary Daly sees in all its symbols and rituals, my experience over the last ten years or so of my efforts to introduce reform has left me somewhat less hopeful of positive and lasting change.

If the message of Jesus is to continue to be one of hope for the oppressed, sight for the blind and words for the dumb then it's a message of particular relevance to women in this age. Women are beginning to move out from under oppression, to see clearly for themselves instead of what they have been told to see, and to speak for themselves instead of being told to be silent. The challenge for Christian feminists today is to raise awareness regarding the bias contained in Scripture and Church practices and continually fight against the perpetuation of such bias. This is not an easy task by any means but a necessary one if the Church is to have relevance and meaning in the lives of women. The challenge for the Church, is to 'have eyes to see' and 'ears to hear' beyond blindness and deafness to its own pervasive oppression of females - a blindness and deafness for which its very founder came to give eyes and ears - and was so totally rejected by his own religious institution.

## ***Suggestions for Further Research***

**An analysis of Pastoral awareness of gender bias in theology and praxis  
(survey / questionnaire / interview)**

**Exploration of Christian women and self-esteem, looking for links between  
traditional teaching and how women view themselves in the tradition**

**An analysis of Sunday school material to identify what proportion is  
devoted to teaching on women in the Bible and how/if they are posited  
as role models**

**An analysis of a Christian School biblical curriculum to investigate the  
proportion of biblical stories that feature women as central characters**

**Generation gap study- investigating different age groups of women within  
the Church and how they perceive their place in the tradition**

**Conscious-raising group analysis- introduce a small group of women to a  
work of liberation theology (An Introduction to Christian Feminism by  
Claire Colette Murphy, 1994) analysing the results of subsequent  
interviews on their response to the book.**



# Appendix

TABLE 31. HYPOTHESIZED EFFECTS OF MATERNAL EDUCATION ON FERTILITY THROUGH CHANGES IN THE SITUATION OF WOMEN AND THE INTERVENING FACTORS AFFECTING FERTILITY

| Intervening factors  | Effect of maternal education on intervening variables |               | Effect of this intervening variable on children ever born (3) | Effect of maternal education on children ever born through specific intervening variable (4) |
|--|---|---------------|---|--|
|  | Through (1)   | Direction (2) |   |  |
| Supply of children   |   |               |   |  |
| 1. Age at marriage .....   | a,b,o   | +             | -   | -  |
| 2. Breast-feeding .....  | a,c,d   | -             | -   | +  |
| 3. Post-partum abstinence .....                                    | a,c,d   | -             | -   | +  |
| 4. Child mortality .....   | a,b,c,d   | -             | +   | -  |
| Demand for children  |   |               |   |  |
| 5. Desired family size .....                                       | a,b,c   | -             | +   | -  |
| 6. Son preference .....  | a,b,c   | -             | +   | -  |
| 7. Children's labour contribution in childhood .....               | a,b,c   | -             | +   | -  |
| 8. Children's financial and residential support in adulthood ..... | a,b,c   | -             | +   | -  |
| 9. Children as a source of prestige .....                          | b   |               |   |  |
| 10. Economic costs of children .....                               | a,b,c   | +             | -   | -  |
| 11. Time and opportunity costs .....                               | a,b,c   | +             | -   | -  |
| Fertility regulation and obstacles to use                          |   |               |   |  |
| 12. Method awareness .....   | c   | +             | -   | -  |
| 13. Approval .....   | a   | +             | -   | -  |
| 14. Spousal communication .....                                    | a,d   | +             | -   | -  |
| 15. Contraceptive use .....  | a,b,c,d   | +             | -   | -  |

NOTE: a = decision-making autonomy; b = control of resources (family, own); c = knowledge of and exposure to modern world; d = husband and wife closeness; o = direct, other.

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