

FEMINIST THEOLOGY AS A CRITICAL THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

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WRITING AN ARTICLE on feminist theology for an established theological journal is as dangerous as navigating between Scylla and Charybdis. Radical feminists might consider such an endeavor as co-operation with the "enemy" or at best as "tokenism." Professional theologians might refuse to take the issue seriously or might emotionally react against it. Even though the women's movement has been with us almost a decade, it is still surrounded by confusion, derision, and outright refusal to listen to its arguments. Yet, since I consider myself a feminist as well as a Christian theologian, I am vitally interested in a mediation between feminism and theology. And good theology always was a risky enterprise.

In the first part of the article I intend to circumscribe the concrete situation in which feminist theology is situated, insofar as I summarize some of the main tenets of the feminist critique of culture and religion and its reception by churchmen and theologians. The second part will present feminist theology as a critical theology. First, I will attempt to point out the feminist critique of the practice of theology by professional theologians and institutions. Then I intend to show how in the tradition, androcentric theology functions to justify the discriminatory praxis of the Church toward women. A final part will deal critically with myths and images of women. Even though the Mary-myth has emancipatory elements, it was not used to promote the liberation of women. Therefore it has to be balanced and replaced by a new myth and images which evolve from a feminist Christian consciousness and praxis. The article concludes with such an example of the feminist search for new liberating myths and images.

FEMINISM AND THEOLOGY

The analyses of the women's liberation movement have uncovered the sexist structures and myth of our culture and society.¹ As racism defines

¹ The literature on the women's liberation movement is so extensive that it is impossible here to mention all works from which I have learned. Especially helpful were V. Gornick & B. K. Moran, *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness* (New York, 1971); J. Hole and E. Levine, *Rebirth of Feminism* (New York, 1971); E. Janeway, *Man's World, Woman's Place: Studies in Social Mythology* (New York, 1971); *Kursbuch 17: Frau, Familie, Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt, 1969); A. Vesel Mander & A. Kent Rush, *Feminism as Therapy* (New York, 1974); B. Roszak and T. Roszak, *Masculine/Feminine: Readings in Sexual Mythology and the Liberation of Women* (New York, 1969); S. Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* (London, 1973).

and oppresses black people because of their color, so sexism stereotypes and limits people because of their gender. That women are culturally oppressed people becomes evident when we apply Paulo Freire's definition of oppression to the situation of women:

Any situation in which 'A' objectively exploits 'B' or hinders his [*sic*] pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression. Such a situation in itself constitutes violence, even when sweetened by false generosity, because it interferes with man's [*sic*] ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human.²

In a sexist society woman's predominant role in life is to be man's helpmate, to cook and work for him without being paid, to bear and rear his children, and to guarantee him psychological and sexual satisfaction. Woman's place is in the home, whereas man's place is in the world earning money, running the state, schools, and churches. If woman ventures into the man's world, then her task is subsidiary, as in the home; she holds the lowest-paid jobs, because she supposedly works for pocket money; she remains confined to women's professions and is kept out of high-ranking positions. G. K. Chesterton's ironical quip sums up the struggles and results of the suffrage movement: "Millions of women arose and shouted: No one will ever dictate to us again—and they became typists." In spite of a century of struggle for equality, women have not yet succeeded in getting leading positions and equal opportunity in the public and societal realm. On the contrary, they were incorporated into the economic system and moral values of our sexist culture, which merely organized women's capabilities for its own purposes.³

Feminist Critique of Culture and Religion

Whereas the suffrage movement did not so much attempt to change society as mainly to integrate women into it, in the conviction that women would humanize politics and work by virtue of their feminine qualities,⁴ the new feminist movement radically criticizes the myth and

² P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, 1970) pp. 40 f.

³ Cf. the various analyses in *Liberation Now! Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York, 1971); C. Bird, *Born Female: The High Cost of Keeping Women Down* (New York, 1968); J. Huber, *Changing Woman in a Changing Society* (Chicago, 1974).

⁴ B. Wildung Harrison, "Sexism in the Contemporary Church: When Evasion Becomes Complicity," in A. L. Hageman, ed., *Sexist Religion and Women in the Church* (New York, 1974) pp. 195-216, makes the very helpful distinction between "radical" or "hard" feminism and "soft" feminism. See also her article "The Early Feminists and the Clergy: A Case Study in the Dynamics of Secularization," *Review and Expositor* 72 (1975) 41-52. For the documentation and analysis of the first women's movement, cf. E. Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge, 1966); A. S.

structures of a society and culture which keep women down. The women's liberation movement demands a restructuring of societal institutions and a redefinition of cultural images and roles of women *and* men, if women are to become autonomous human persons and achieve economic and political equality.

The feminist critique of culture has pointed out that nature and biology are not the "destiny" of women, but rather sexist culture and its socialization. Women are denied the full range of human potentiality; we are socialized to view ourselves as dependent, less intelligent, and derivative from men. From earliest childhood we learn our roles as subservient beings and value ourselves through the eyes of a male culture.⁵ We are the "other," socialized into helpmates of men or sex objects for their desire. Journals, advertisements, television, and movies represent us either as dependent little girls (e.g., to address "baby"), as sexy and seductive women, or as self-sacrificing wives and mothers. Teachers, psychologists, philosophers, writers, and preachers define us as derivative, inferior, and subordinate beings who lack the intelligence, courage, and genius of men.

Women in our culture are either denigrated and infantilized or idealized and put on a pedestal, but they are not allowed to be independent and free human persons. They do not live their own lives, but are taught to live vicariously through those of husband and children. They do not exercise their own power, but manipulate men's power. They usually are not supposed to express their own opinion, but to be silent or to voice only that of their fathers, husbands, bosses, or sons. Not only men but women themselves have interiorized this image and understanding of woman as inferior and derivative. Often they themselves most strongly believe and defend the "feminine mystique."⁶ Since women have learned to feel inferior and to despise themselves, they do not respect, in fact they even hate, other women. Thus women evidence the typical personality traits of oppressed people who have internalized the images and notions of the oppressor.

In the face of this cultural image and self-understanding of women, feminism first maintains that women are human persons, and it therefore demands free development of full personhood for all, women and men. Secondly, feminism maintains that human rights and talents or weaknesses are not divided by sex. Feminism has pointed out that it is

Kraditor, ed., *Up from the Pedestal: Selected Writings in the History of American Feminism* (Chicago, 1968).

⁵ This is elucidated from a linguistic point of view by R. Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place* (New York, 1975).

⁶ Cf. the now classic analysis of B. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (Baltimore, 1965).

necessary for women to become independent economically and socially in order to be able to understand and value themselves as free, autonomous, and responsible subjects of their lives. If women's role in society is to change, then women's and men's perceptions and attitudes toward women have to change at the same time.

Feminism has therefore vigorously criticized all institutions which exploit women, stereotype them, and keep them in inferior positions. In this context, feminist analysis points out that Christianity had not only a major influence in the making of Western culture and sexist ideology,⁷ but also that the Christian churches and theologies still perpetuate the "feminine mystique" and women's inferiority through their institutional inequalities and theological justifications of women's innate difference from men. Christian ethics has intensified the internalization of the feminine, passive attitudes, e.g., meekness, humility, submission, self-sacrifice, self-denying love, which impede the development of self-assertion and autonomy by women. "The alleged 'voluntarism' of the imposed submission in Christian patriarchy has turned women against themselves more deeply than ever, disguising and reinforcing the internalization process."⁸

Responses to Feminist Critique

As society and culture often respond to the feminist analysis and critique with denial, co-optation, or rejection, so do the Christian churches and theologians in order to neutralize the feminist critics so that the social and ecclesial order remains unchanged.

1) They deny the accuracy and validity of the feminist analysis and critique. They point out that women are in no way inferior and oppressed but superior and privileged; e.g., Pope Paul's various statements on the superior qualities of women thus serve to support the "feminine mystique." Since women have most thoroughly internalized the ideals and values of this mystique, this repudiation is most effectfully carried out by women themselves. Middle-class and middle-aged women who have learned to suppress their own interests, abilities, and wishes in order to support their husbands' egos and careers feel that they become obsolete because of the feminist critique. They sense that the abolition of

⁷ S. de Beauvoir's analysis is still paradigmatic: *The Second Sex* (New York, 1961); see also the discussion of her position by M. Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (London, 1968) pp. 11-31.

⁸ M. Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston, 1973) pp. 140 and 98-106. Cf. also G. Kennedy Neville, "Religious Socialization of Women within U.S. Subcultures," in Hageman, *Sexist Religion*, pp. 77-91; N. van Vuuren, *The Subversion of Women as Practiced by Churches, Witch-Hunters and Other Sexists* (Philadelphia, 1973), deals with the "traits due to victimization" from a historical perspective.

gender stereotypes and traditional roles threatens the value and security of their lives. As in the nineteenth century the Beecher sisters glorified domesticity and sang the praises of motherhood,⁹ so today some women's groups behind the anti-ERA campaign idolize women's security in marriage and their protection by law. They support their claim by theological references to the divinely ordained order of creation.¹⁰ Theological arguments justify the privileged status of middle-class women. These women do not realize that they are only one man away from public welfare and that even middle-class women's economic status and self-identity is very precarious indeed.

2) Another way of dealing with the feminist critique is to co-opt it by acknowledging some minor points of its analysis. The establishment can adopt those elements of the feminist critique which do not radically question present structures and ideologies. For instance, Paul VI maintains that the Church has already recognized "the contemporary effort to promote 'the advancement of women'" as "a sign of the times" and he demands legislation to protect women's equal rights "to participate in cultural, economic, social, and political life."¹¹ Yet he maintains that women have to be excluded from hierarchical orders on the grounds of an antiquated and simply false historical exegesis.¹² Similarly, "liberal" Protestant theologians and churches pay lip service to the equal rights of women; for, even though they ordain women, they erect "qualifying standards" and "academic quotas" which effectively keep women out of influential parish or seminary positions.¹³ Some theologians participate in this process of co-optation after the feminist movement has become "acceptable" in intellectual circles and in the publishing industry. In writing articles and books on women in the NT or in the Christian tradition, in filling church commissions on "the role of women in the Church," they not only demonstrate they are still in charge but also enhance their professional status. Another way of co-opting the feminist critique is to turn women against women—"religious" women against "lay" women, moderate theologians against radical ones—or to

⁹ See G. Kimball, "A Counter Ideology," in J. Plaskow and J. Arnold Romero, *Women and Religion* (Missoula, 1974) pp. 177-87; D. Bass Fraser, "The Feminine Mystique: 1890-1910," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 27 (1972) 225-39.

¹⁰ M. H. Micks, "Exodus or Eden? A Battle of Images," *Anglican Theological Review* 55 (1973) 126-39.

¹¹ Cf. E. Carroll, "Testimony at the Bicentennial Hearings of the Catholic Church, Feb. 4, 1975, on Woman."

¹² See *National Catholic Reporter*, May 2, 1975, p. 17.

¹³ Anonymous, "How to Quench the Spirit without Really Trying: An Essay in Institutional Sexism," *Church and Society*, Sept.-Oct. 1972, pp. 25-37; N. Ramsay Jones, "Women in the Ministry," in S. Bentley Doely, *Women's Liberation and the Church: The New Demand for Freedom in the Life of the Christian Church* (New York, 1970) pp. 60-69.

endow certain women with "token status" in order to turn them against their not so "well-educated" or so "well-balanced" sisters.

3) Where co-optation of the feminist critique is not possible, outright rejection and condemnation often takes its place. The reaction is often very violent, because the feminist demand for institutional and theological change is always a demand for far-reaching personal change and giving up of centuries-old privileges. Whereas the "liberal" Christian press and "liberal" Christian theologians in general pay lip service to the goals of the women's movement, they often label it "anti-Christian," because the feminist critique holds, to a great part, Christianity responsible for the "rationalization" of women's inferior status in our culture. In other words, male theologians are accountable for the ideologization of women's image and role in Christian theology. Being male and being male theologians, they no longer can uphold their "liberal" attitude toward the feminist cause, since they are already personally involved. They declare Christian feminism as "anti-male" and "anti-Christian" in order to avoid radical conversion and radical change.

Those of us who are men can not escape the crisis of conscience embodied in that moment [the ordination of Episcopal women] because whatever our politics on the issue, we are as men associates in the systematic violence done to women by the structures of male supremacy. . . .

As men we must support the movement for equality by women, even as it becomes more radical. And, as men, we must examine and repent of our own parts in the sexist mindset that dehumanizes us. . . .¹⁴

The unwillingness for radical repentance and fundamental change is the Achilles' heel of the liberal male theologian and churchman.

Christian feminists respond to the systematic violence done to women by ecclesial institutions and male representants basically in two different ways. They do not differ so much in their analysis and critique of the cultural and ecclesial establishment and its ideologies, but more in their politics and strategies. Those who advocate an exodus and separation from all institutional religion for the sake of the gospel and the experience of transcendence point, as justification, to the history of Christianity and their own personal histories, proving that the submission of women is absolutely essential to the Church's functioning. In the present Christian structures and theologies women can never be more than marginal beings.¹⁵ Those Christian feminists who hope for the

¹⁴ J. Carroll, "The Philadelphia Ordination," *National Catholic Reporter*, Aug. 16, 1974, p. 14.

¹⁵ See M. Daly's "autobiographical preface" and her "feminist postchristian introduction" to the paperback edition of *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York, 1975). Cf. also S. Gearhart, "The Lesbian and God-the-Father," *Radical Religion* 1 (1974) 19-25.

repentance and radical change of the Christian churches affirm their own prophetic roles and critical mission within organized Christianity. They attempt to bring to bear their feminist analysis and critique in order to set free the traditions of emancipation, equality, and genuine human personhood which they have experienced in their Christian heritage. They do not overlook or cover up the oppression and sin which they have experienced in Christian institutions and traditions, but brand them in order to change them. Aware that not only Christian institutions but also Christian theology operates in a sexist framework and language, they attempt to reconceptualize and to transform Christian theology from a feminist perspective.

FEMINIST THEOLOGY AS A CRITICAL THEOLOGY

Historical studies and hermeneutical discussions have amply demonstrated that theology is a culturally and historically conditioned endeavor. Moreover, historical-critical studies and hermeneutical-theological reflection have shown that not only theology but also the revelation of God in Scripture is expressed in human language and shares culturally conditioned concepts and problems. Revelation and theology are so intertwined that they no longer can be adequately distinguished. This hermeneutical insight is far-reaching when we consider that Scripture as well as theology is rooted in a patriarchal-sexist culture and shares its biases and prejudices. Scripture and theology express truth in sexist language and images and participate in the myth of their patriarchal-sexist society and culture.

The feminist critique of theology and tradition is best summarized by the statement of Simone Weil: "History, therefore, is nothing but a compilation of the depositions made by assassins with respect to their victims and themselves."¹⁶ The hermeneutical discussion has underlined that a value-free, objectivistic historiography is a scholarly fiction. All interpretations of texts depend upon the presuppositions, intellectual concepts, politics, or prejudices of the interpreter and historian. Feminist scholars, therefore, rightly point out that for all too long the Christian tradition was recorded and studied by theologians who consciously or unconsciously understood them from a patriarchal perspective of male dominance. Since this androcentric cultural perspective has determined all writing of theology and of history, their endeavor is correctly called his-story. If women, therefore, want to get in touch with their own roots and tradition, they have to rewrite the Christian tradition and theology in such a way that it becomes not only his-story but as well her-story recorded and analyzed from a feminist point of view.

Yet a hermeneutical revision of Christian theology and tradition is

¹⁶ S. Weil, *The Need for Roots* (New York, 1971) p. 225.

only a partial solution to the problem. Radical Christian feminists, therefore, point out that the Christian past and present, and not only its records, victimized women. A hermeneutics which merely attempts to *understand* the Christian tradition and texts in their historical settings, or a Christian theology which defines itself as "the actualizing continuation of the Christian history of interpretation," does not suffice,¹⁷ since it does not sufficiently take into account that tradition is a source not only of truth but also of untruth, repression, and domination. Critical theory as developed in the Frankfurt school¹⁸ provides a key for a hermeneutic understanding which is not just directed toward an actualizing continuation and a perceptive understanding of history but toward a criticism of history and tradition to the extent that it participates in the repression and domination which are experienced as alienation. Analogously (in order to liberate Christian theologies, symbols, and institutions), critical theology uncovers and criticizes Christian traditions and theologies which stimulated and perpetuated violence, alienation, and oppression. Critical theology thus has as its methodological presupposition the Christian community's constant need for renewal. Christian faith and life are caught in the middle of history and are therefore in constant need of prophetic criticism in order not to lose sight of their eschatological vision. The Christian community finds itself on the way to a greater and more perfect freedom which was initiated in Jesus Christ. Christian theology as a scholarly discipline has to serve and support the Christian community on its way to such eschatological freedom and love.

Toward a Liberated and Liberating Theology

Feminist theology presupposes as well as has for its goal an emancipatory ecclesial and theological praxis. Hence feminists today no longer demand only admission and marginal integration into the traditionally male-dominated hierarchical institutions of the churches and theology; they demand a radical change of these institutions and structures. They do this not only for the sake of "equal rights" within the churches, but because they are convinced that theology and Church have to be liberated and humanized if they are to serve people and not to oppress them.

Although we find numerous critical analyses of hierarchical church structures,¹⁹ we do not find many critical evaluations of the theological

¹⁷ Against E. Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith* (New York, 1974).

¹⁸ J. Habermas, "Der Universalitätsanspruch der Hermeneutik 1970," in *Kultur and Kritik* (Frankfurt, 1973) pp. 264-301; *id.*, "Stichworte zu einer Theorie der Sozialisation 1968," *ibid.*, pp. 118-94. For a discussion of Habermas and the critical theory, see the Spring-Summer 1970 issue of *Continuum*, which was prepared by Francis P. Fiorenza. Cf. also A. Wellmer, *Critical Theory of Society* (New York, 1974) esp. pp. 41-51.

¹⁹ See, e.g., E. C. Hewitt and S. R. Hiatt, *Women Priests: Yes or No?* (New York, 1973);

profession as such. Most recently, however, liberation theologians have pointed out that theology in an American and European context is "white" theology and, as such, shares in the cultural imperialism of Europe and America.²⁰ Theology as a discipline is the domain of white clerics and academicians and thus excludes, because of its constituency, many different theological problems and styles within the Christian communities. Whereas in the Middle Ages theology had its home in cloisters and was thus combined with an ascetic life style, today its place is in seminaries, colleges, and universities. This *Sitz im Leben* decisively determines the style and content of theology. Since theology is mainly done in an academic context, its questions and investigations reflect that of the white, middle-class academic community. Competition, prestige, promotion, quantity of publications, and acceptance in professional societies are often primary motivations for the members of the theological guild.

Feminist theology maintains that this analysis of the life-setting of theology does not probe far enough. Christian theology is not only white-middle-class but white-middle-class-male, and shares as such in cultural sexism and patriarchalism. The "maleness" and "sexism" of theology is much more pervasive than the race and class issue. The writers of the OT lived in Palestine, and Augustine in North Africa, but their theology is no less male than Barth's or Rahner's. Today established theologians often feel free to tackle the social, class, and race issue, precisely because they belong as males to the "old boys club," and they themselves are neither poor nor oppressed. They generally do not, however, discuss the challenges of feminist theology, precisely because they refuse to begin "at home" and to analyze their own praxis as men in a sexist profession and culture. Therefore the much-invoked unity between theory and praxis has to remain an ideology.

Since the NT beginnings and the subsequent history of Christianity were immersed in cultural and ecclesial patriarchy, women—whether white or black or brown, whether rich or poor—never could play a

C. H. Donnelly, "Women-Priests: Does Philadelphia Have a Message for Rome?," *Commonweal* 102 (1975) 206-10. C. M. Henning, "Canon Law and the Battle of Sexes," in R. Radford Ruether, *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York, 1974) 267-91; L. M. Russell, "Women and Ministry," in Hageman, *Sexist Religion*, pp. 47-62; cf. the various contributions on ministry in C. Benedicks Fischer, B. Breneman, and A. McGrew Bennett, *Women in a Strange Land* (Philadelphia, 1975), and the NAWR publication *Women in Ministry* (Chicago, 1972). I find most helpful the collection of articles by R. J. Heyer, *Women and Orders* (New York, 1974).

²⁰ See F. Herzog, "Liberation Theology Begins at Home," *Christianity and Crisis*, May 13, 1974, and "Liberation Hermeneutics as Ideology Critique?" *Interpretation* 28 (1974) 387-403.

significant rather than marginal role in Christian theology. When women today enter the theological profession, they function mostly as “tokens” who do not disturb the male consciousness and structures, or they are often relegated to “junior colleagues” dependent on the authority of their teachers, to research assistants and secretaries, to mother figures and erotic or sex partners; but they are very rarely taken as theological authorities in their own right. If they demand to be treated as equals, they are often labeled “aggressive,” “crazy,” or “unscholarly.”

How women feel in a sexist profession is vividly illustrated in an experiment which Professor Nelle Morton devised. In a lecture “On Preaching the Word,”²¹ she asked her audience to imagine how they would feel and understand themselves and theology if the male-female roles were reversed. Imagine Harvard Divinity School, she proposed, as a school with a long female theological tradition. All the professors except one are women, most of the students are women, and all of the secretaries are men. All language in such an institution has a distinctly feminine character. “Womankind” means all humanity; “women” as generic word includes men (Jesus came to save all women). If a professor announces a course on “the doctrine of women” or speaks about the “motherhood of God,” she of course does not want to exclude men. In her course on Christian anthropology, Professor Ann maintains that the Creator herself made the male organs external and exposed, so that man would demand sheltering and protection in the home, whereas she made the female reproductive organs compact and internal so that woman is biologically capable of taking her leadership position in the public domain of womankind.

Once in a while a man gets nerve enough to protest the use of Mother God, saying that it does something to his sense of dignity and integrity. Professor Martha hastens to explain that no one really believes that God is female in a sexual sense. She makes it quite clear that in a matriarchal society the wording of Scripture, of liturgy and theology, could only come out in matriarchal imagery.²²

This experiment in imagination can be extended to all theological schools or professional societies. Imagine that you are one of the few men at a theological convention, where the female bishop praises the scholarly accomplishments of all the women theologians without noticing that there are some men on the boards of this theological society. Or imagine that one of the Roman Catholic seminarians tells you, who cannot be ordained because you are a man, that (after her ordination) she will be

²¹ N. Morton, “Preaching the Word,” in Hageman, *Sexist Religion*, pp. 29–46, and “The Rising Women Consciousness in a Male Language Structure,” in *Women and the Word: Toward a Whole Theology* (Berkeley, 1972) pp. 43–52.

²² Morton, “Preaching the Word,” p. 30.

essentially different from you. If your consciousness is raised and you complain that you are not considered a full human being in your church, then a liberal colleague might answer you that you yourself should protest, since after all it is not her problem but yours. And all this is done to you in the name of Christian sisterhood!

Such an experiment in imagination can demonstrate better than any abstract analysis how damaging the masculine language and patterns of theology are to women. Therefore feminist theology correctly maintains that it is not enough to include some token women in the male-dominated theological and ecclesial structures. What is necessary is the humanization of these structures themselves. In order to move towards a "whole theology," women and men, black and white, privileged and exploited persons, as well as people from all nations and countries, have to be actively involved in the formulation of this new theology, as well as in the institutions devoted to such a "catholic" theologizing.

What, then, could feminists contribute to such a new understanding and doing of theology? Naturally, no definite answer can be given, since feminist theology is an ongoing process which has just begun.²³ I do not think that women will contribute specifically feminine modes to the process of theology.²⁴ However, I do think that feminist theologians can contribute to the development of a humanized theology, insofar as they can insist that the so-called feminine values,²⁵ e.g., concreteness, compassion, sensitivity, love, relating to others, and nurturing or community are human and especially central Christian values, which have to define the whole of Christian existence and the practice of the Christian churches. Feminist theology thus can integrate the traditionally separated so-called male-female areas, the intellectual-public, and the personal-emotional. Insofar as it understands the personal plight of women in a sexist society and church through an analysis of cultural,

²³ See P. A. Way, "An Authority of Possibility for Women in the Church," in Doely, *Women's Liberation*, pp. 77-94; also M. A. Doherty and M. Earley, "Women Theologize: Notes from a June 7-18, 1971 Conference," in *Women in Ministry*, pp. 135-59. For a comprehensive statement of what Christian feminist theology is all about, see the working paper of N. Morton, "Toward a Whole Theology," which she gave at the Consultation of the World Council of Churches on "Sexism," May 15-22, 1974, in Berlin.

²⁴ Here I clearly distance myself from those Christian feminists and authors leaning in the direction of Jungian psychology. The "equal or better but different" slogan is too easily misused to keep women in their traditional place. Nevertheless I appreciate the attempt to arrive at a distinct self-identity and contribution of women based on female experience. For such an attempt, cf. S. D. Collins, *A Different Heaven and Earth* (Valley Forge, 1974).

²⁵ For philosophical analyses of how these "feminine" values contribute to women's oppression, see J. Farr Tormey, "Exploitation, Oppression and Self-Sacrifice," *Philosophical Forum* 5 (1975) 206-21, and L. Blum, M. Homiak, J. Housman, and N. Scheman, "Altruism and Women's Oppression," *ibid.*, pp. 222-47.

societal, and ecclesial stereotypes and structures, its scope is personal and political at the same time.

Against the so-called objectivity and neutrality of academic theology, feminist theology maintains that theology always serves certain interests and therefore has to reflect and critically evaluate its primary motives and allegiance. Consequently, theology has to abandon its so-called objectivity and has to become partisan. Only when theology is on the side of the outcast and oppressed, as was Jesus, can it become incarnational and Christian. Christian theology, therefore, has to be rooted in emancipatory praxis and solidarity. The means by which feminist theology grounds its theologizing in emancipatory praxis is consciousness-raising and sisterhood. Consciousness-raising makes theologians aware of their own oppression and the oppression of others. Sisterhood provides a community of emancipatory solidarity of those who are oppressed and on the way to liberation. Consciousness-raising not only makes women and men aware of their own situation in a sexist society and church, but also leads them to a new praxis insofar as it reveals to us our possibilities and resources. Expressed in traditional theological language: feminist theology is rooted in conversion and a new vision; it names the realities of sin and grace and it leads to a new mission and community.²⁶

As theology rooted in community, feminist theology finds its expression in celebration and liturgy.²⁷ Feminist theologians maintain that theology has to become again communal and wholistic. Feminist theology expresses itself not only in abstract analysis and intellectual discussion, but it employs the whole range of human expression, e.g., ritual, symbol, drama, music, movement, or pictures. Thus feminist celebrations do not separate the sacral and the profane, the religious and the daily life. On the contrary, the stuff of feminist liturgies is women's experience and women's life. In such liturgies women express their anger, their frustrations, and their experience of oppression, but also their new vision, their hopes for the coming of a "new heaven and earth," and their possibilities for the creation of new persons and new structures.

In conclusion: Since feminist theology deals with theological, ecclesial, and cultural criticism and concerns itself with theological analysis of the myths, mechanisms, systems, and institutions which keep women down,

²⁶ See *Women Exploring Theology at Grailville*, a packet prepared by Church Women United, 1972, and S. Bentley and C. Randall, "The Spirit Moving: A New Approach to Theologizing," *Christianity and Crisis*, Feb. 4, 1974, pp. 3-7.

²⁷ Cf. the excellent collection of feminist liturgies by A. Swidler, *Sistercelebrations Nine Worship Experiences* (Philadelphia, 1974), and S. Neuffer Emswiler and T. Neuffer Emswiler, *Women & Worship: A Guide to Non-Sexist Hymns, Prayers and Liturgies* (New York, 1974).

it shares in the concerns of and expands critical theology. Insofar as it positively brings to word the new freedom of women and men, insofar as it promotes new symbols, myths and life styles, insofar as it raises new questions and opens up different horizons, feminist theology shares in the concerns and goals of liberation theology.²⁸ But because Christian symbols and thought are deeply embedded in patriarchal traditions and sexist structures, and because women belong to all races, classes, and cultures, its scope is more radical and universal than that of critical and liberation theology. Feminist theology derives its legitimization from the eschatological vision of freedom and salvation, and its radicalism from the realization that the Christian church is not identical with the kingdom of God.

Tension between Christian Vision and Praxis

Christian feminism is fascinated by the vision of equality, wholeness, and freedom expressed in Gal 3:27 ff.: in Christ Jesus "there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female." This magna carta of Christian feminism was officially affirmed by Vatican II in the Constitution on the Church (no. 32): "Hence there is in Christ and in the Church no inequality on the basis of race and nationality, social condition or sex, because there is neither Jew nor Greek . . . (Gal 3:28)." Yet this vision was never completely realized by the Christian Church throughout its history. The context of the conciliar statement reflects this discriminatory praxis of the Church, insofar as it maintains the equality for all Christians only with respect to salvation, hope, and charity, but not with respect to church structures and ecclesial office. The failure of the Church to realize the vision of Gal 3:28-29 in its own institutions and praxis had as consequence a long sexist theology of the Church which attempted to justify the ecclesial praxis of inequality and to suppress the Christian vision and call of freedom and equality within the Church.

A feminist history of the first centuries could demonstrate how difficult it was for the ecclesial establishment to suppress the call and spirit of freedom among Christian women.²⁹ Against a widespread theological apologetics which argues that the Church could not liberate women because of the culturally inferior position of women in antiquity, it has to be pointed out that the cultural and societal emancipation of

²⁸ L. M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A Theology* (Philadelphia, 1974); J. O'Connor, "Liberation Theologies and the Women's Movement: Points of Comparison and Contrast," *Horizons* 2 (1975) 103-13.

²⁹ Cf. my forthcoming article "The Role of Women in the Early Christian Movement," *Concilium* 7 (January 1976).

women had gained considerable ground in the Greco-Roman world. Paul, the post-Paul tradition, and the Church Fathers, therefore, not only attempted to limit or to eliminate the consequences of the actions of Jesus and of the Spirit expressed in Gal 3:28, but also reversed the emancipatory processes of their society.³⁰ They achieved the elimination of women from ecclesial leadership and theology through women's domestication under male authority in the home or in the monasteries. Those women who did not comply but were active and leading in various Christian movements were eliminated from mainstream Christianity. Hand in hand with the repression and elimination of the emancipatory elements within the Church went a theological justification for such an oppression of women. The androcentric statements of the Fathers and later church theologians are not so much due to a faulty anthropology as they are an ideological justification for the inequality of women in the Christian community. Due to feminist analysis, the androcentric traits of patristic and Scholastic theology are by now well known.³¹

Less known, however, is how strong the women's movement for emancipation was in the various Christian groups. For instance, in Marcionism, Montanism, Gnosticism, Manicheism, Donatism, Priscillianism, Messalianism, and Pelagianism, women had authority and leading positions. They were found among the bishops and priests of the Quintillians (cf. Epiphanius, *Haer.* 49, 2, 3, 5) and were partners in the theological discourses of some church theologians. In the Middle Ages women had considerable powers as abbesses, and they ruled monasteries and church districts that included both men and women.³² Women flocked to the medieval reform movements and were leading among the Waldenses, the Anabaptists, the Brethren of the Free Spirit, and especially the Beguines. The threat of these movements to the church establishment is mirrored in a statement of an East German bishop, who "complained that these women [the Beguines] were idle, gossiping vagabonds who refused obedience to men under the pretext that God was

³⁰ See the excellent article by K Thraede, "Frau," in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 8 (Stuttgart, 1973) 197-269, with extensive bibliographical references Cf also C Schneider, *Kulturgeschichte des Hellenismus* 1 (Munich, 1967) 87-117, and W A Meeks, "The Image of the Androgyne Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity," *History of Religion* 13 (1974) 167-80, who also point out that the emancipation of women in Hellenism provoked in some groups misogynist reactions

³¹ Representative is the work of R Radford Ruether, see especially her article "Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church," in *Religion and Sexism*, pp 150-83

³² See my book *Der vergessene Partner Grundlagen, Tatsachen und Möglichkeiten der beruflichen Mitarbeit der Frau in der Heilssorge der Kirche* (Düsseldorf, 1964) pp 87-91, and J Morris, *The Lady Was a Bishop The Hidden History of Women within Clerical Ordination and the Jurisdiction of Bishops* (New York, 1973)

best served in freedom.”³³ Such an emancipatory her-story is surfacing in the story of the mystics of the twelfth-to-fourteenth centuries³⁴ or in that of the witches; in figures like Catherine of Siena, Elizabeth I of England, Teresa of Avila; in groups like the Sisters of the Visitation or the “English Ladies” of Mary Ward, in Quakerism or Christian Scientism.

Feminist theology as critical theology is driven by the impetus to make the vision of Gal 3:28 real within the Christian community. It is based on the conviction that Christian theology and Christian faith are capable of transcending their own ideological sexist forms. Christian feminists still hope against hope that the Church will become an all-inclusive, truly catholic community. A critical analysis of the Christian tradition and history, however, indicates that this hope can only be realized if women are granted not only spiritual but also ecclesial equality. Twelve years ago, in my book on the ministries of women in the Church, I maintained that women have to demand ordination as bishops,³⁵ and only after they have attained it can they afford to be ordained deacons and priests. Today I would add that the very character of the hierarchical-patriarchal church structure has to be changed if women are to attain their place and full authority within the Church and theology. The Christian churches will only overcome their patriarchal and oppressive past traditions and present theologies if the very base and functions of these traditions and theologies are changed.³⁶ If there is no longer a need to suppress the Spirit who moves Christian women to fully participate in theology and the Church, then Christian theology and community can become fully liberated and liberating. Church Fathers and theologians who do not respect this Spirit of liberty and freedom deny the Christian community its full catholicity and wholeness. Feminist theologians and Christian feminists will obey this call of the Spirit, be it within or outside established church structures. They do it because of their vision of a Christian and human community where all oppression and sin is overcome by the grace and love of God.

Christian feminists are well aware that this vision cannot be embodied in the “old wineskins” but has to be realized in new theological and

³³ N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (Essential Books, 1957) p. 167.

³⁴ E. L. McLaughlin, “The Christian Past: Does It Hold a Future for Women?” *Anglican Theological Review* 57 (1975) 36-56.

³⁵ Schüssler, *Partner*, pp. 93-97.

³⁶ This is not sufficiently perceived or adequately stressed by G. H. Tavard, *Women in Christian Tradition* (Notre Dame, 1973). See also his statement in his article “Women in the Church: A Theological Problem?” in G. Baum, ed., *Ecumenical Theology No. 2* (New York, 1967) p. 39: “Once a Christian woman knows—not only in her intellect, but in her heart and in her life—that in her mankind is fulfilled, it makes no more difference to her that, in the present circumstances, she cannot be ordained. . . .”

ecclesial structures. If change should occur, a circular move is necessary.³⁷ Efforts concentrated on bringing women's experience and presence into the Church and theology, into theological language and imagery, will not succeed unless the ecclesial and theological institutions are changed to support and reinforce the new feminist theological understanding and imagery. On the other hand, efforts to change the ecclesial and theological institutions cannot be far-reaching enough if theological language, imagery, and myth serve to maintain women's status as a derivative being in church and theology. Structural change and the evolution of a feminist theology, and nonsexist language, imagery, and myth, have to go hand in hand.

TOWARD NEW SYMBOLS, IMAGES, AND MYTHS

Whereas theology appeals to our rational faculties and intellectual understanding, images and myths provide a world view and give meaning to our lives. They do not uphold abstract ideals and doctrines but rather provide a vision of the basic structure of reality and present a model or prototype to be imitated. They encourage particular forms of behavior and implicitly embody goals and value judgments. Insofar as a myth is a story which provides a common vision, feminists have to find new myths and stories in order to embody their goals and value judgments. In this search for new feminist myths integrating the personal and political, the societal and religious, women are rediscovering the myth of the mother goddess,³⁸ which was partially absorbed by the Christian myth of Mary, the mother of God.

Yet feminist theologians are aware that myths have also a stabilizing, retarding function insofar as they sanction the existing social order and justify its power structure by providing communal identity and a rationale for societal and ecclesial institutions. Therefore, exactly because feminist theologians value myths and images, they have first to analyze and to "demythologize" the myths of the sexist society and patriarchal religion in order to liberate them.

Feminist Critique of the Mary-Myth

Since the "myth of Mary" is still today a living myth and functions as such in the personal and communal life of many Christian women and men,³⁹ it is possible to critically analyze its psychological and ecclesial functions. From the outset it can be questioned whether the myth can

³⁷ This is also pointed out by S. B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" in M. Zimbalist Rosaldo and L. Lamphere, *Woman, Culture and Society* (Stanford, 1974) pp. 67-87.

³⁸ See, e.g., B. Bruteau, "The Image of the Virgin Mother," in Plaskow and Romero, *Women and Religion*, pp. 93-104; Collins, *A Different Heaven*, pp. 97-136.

³⁹ A. M. Greeley, "Hail Mary," *New York Times Magazine*, Dec. 15, 1974, pp. 14, 98-100, 104, 108.

give to women a new vision of equality and wholeness, since the myth almost never functioned as symbol or justification of women's equality and leadership in church and leadership in church and society, even though the myth contains elements which could have done so. As the "queen of heaven" and the "mother of God," Mary clearly resembles and integrates aspects of the ancient goddess mythologies, e.g., of Isis or the Magna Mater.⁴⁰ Therefore the myth has the tendency to portray Mary as divine and to place her on an equal level with God and Christ. For instance, Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis, demonstrates this tendency in the sect of the Collyridians, which consisted mostly of women and flourished in Thracia and upper Scythia: "Certain women adorn a chair or a square throne, spread a linen cloth over it, and on a certain day of the year place bread on it and offer it in the name of Mary, and all partake of this bread."⁴¹ Epiphanius refutes this practice on the ground that no women can exercise priestly functions and makes a very clear distinction between the worship of God and Christ and the veneration of Mary. Through the centuries church teachers maintained this distinction, but popular piety did not quite understand it. The countless legends and devotions to Mary prove that people preferred to go to her instead of going to a majestic-authoritarian God.

Yet, although this powerful aspect of the Mary-myth affected the souls and lives of the people, it never had any influence upon the structures and power relationships in the Church. That the Mary-myth could be used to support the leadership function of women in the Church is shown by the example of Bridget of Sweden,⁴² who was the foundress of the Order of the Most Holy Savior, a monastery which consisted of nuns and monks. She justifies the leadership and ruling power of the abbess over women and men with reference to Acts 2, where Mary is portrayed in the midst of the apostles. This instance of a woman shaping the Mary-myth for the sake of the leadership and authority of women is, however, the exception in the history of Mariology.

On the whole, the Mary-myth has its roots and development in a male, clerical, and ascetic culture and theology. It has very little to do with the historical woman Mary of Nazareth. Even though the NT writings say very little about Mary and even appear to be critical of her praise as the natural mother of Jesus (Mk 3:31-35),⁴³ the story of Mary was developed

⁴⁰ For a wealth of historical material, cf. H. Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion* (2 vols.; London, 1963), and C. Miegge, *The Virgin Mary* (Philadelphia, 1955).

⁴¹ Epiphanius, *Panarion* 79. Cf. F. J. Dölger, "Die eigenartige Marienverehrung," *Antike und Christentum* 1 (1929) 107-42.

⁴² Schüssler, *Partner*, p. 91.

⁴³ The interpretation which points out that the fourth Gospel conceives of Mary as the prototype of a disciple overlooks the fact that the scene under the cross defines her as "mother" in relationship to the "Beloved Disciple."

and mythologized very early in the Christian tradition. Even though some aspects of this myth, e.g., the doctrine of her immaculate conception or her bodily assumption into heaven, were only slowly accepted by parts of the Christian Church, we find one tenor in the image of Mary throughout the centuries: Mary is the *virginal* mother. She is seen as the humble "handmaiden" of God who, because of her submissive obedience and her unquestioning acceptance of the will of God, became the "mother of God."⁴⁴ In contrast to Eve, she was, and remained, the "pure virgin" who was conceived free from original sin and remained all her life free from sin. She remained virgin before, during, and after the birth of Jesus. This myth of Mary sanctions a double dichotomy in the self-understanding of Catholic women.

First, the myth of the virginal mother justifies the body-soul dualism of the Christian tradition. Whereas man in this tradition is defined by his mind and reason, woman is defined by her "nature," i.e., by her physical capacity to bear children. Motherhood, therefore, is the vocation of every woman regardless of whether or not she is a natural mother.⁴⁵ However, since in the ascetic Christian tradition nature and body have to be subordinated to the mind and the spirit, woman because of her nature has to be subordinated to man.⁴⁶ This subordination is, in addition, sanctioned with reference to Scripture. The body-spirit dualism of the Christian tradition is thus projected on women and men and contributes to the man-woman dualism of polarity which in modern times was supported not only by theology but also by philosophy and psychology.⁴⁷ Moreover, the official stance of the Roman Catholic Church on birth control and abortion demonstrates that woman in distinction from man has to remain dependent on her nature and is not allowed to be in control of her biological processes.⁴⁸ According to the present church "fathers,"

"This image of Mary led in Roman Catholic thought to the ideologization of womanhood and to the myth of the "eternal woman." Cf. G. von le Fort, *The Eternal Woman* (Milwaukee, 1954), and my critique in *Partner*, pp. 79-83; see also Teilhard de Chardin, "L'Eternel féminin," in *Ecrits du temps de la guerre (1916-1919)* (Paris, 1965) pp. 253-62; H. de Lubac, *L'Eternel féminin: Etude sur un texte du Père Teilhard de Chardin* (Paris, 1968).

⁴⁵ G. H. Tavard, *Woman*, p. 136: "Pope Paul clearly asserts one basic notion about woman: all her tasks, all her achievements, all her virtues, all her dreams are derived from her call to motherhood. Everything that woman can do is affected by this fundamental orientation of her being and can best be expressed in terms of, and in relation to, motherhood."

⁴⁶ V. L. Bullough, *The Subordinate Sex: A History of Attitudes toward Women* (Baltimore, 1974) pp. 97-120.

⁴⁷ Numerous analyses of the treatment of women in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy exist; cf., e.g., P. Chesler, *Women and Madness* (New York, 1972).

⁴⁸ Cf. the analyses of phallic morality by M. Daly, *Beyond God*, pp. 106-31; J. Raymond, "Beyond Male Morality," in Plaskow and Romero, *Women and Religion*, pp. 115-25; J. MacRae, "A Feminist View of Abortion," *ibid.*, pp. 139-49.

as long as woman enjoys the sexual pleasures of Eve, she has to bear the consequences. Finally, all the psychological qualities which are associated with mothering, e.g., love, nurture, intuition, compassion, patience, sensitivity, emotionality, etc., are now regarded as "feminine" qualities and, as such, privatized. This stereotyping of these *human* qualities led not only to their elimination from public life but also to a privatization of Christian values,⁴⁹ which are, according to the NT, concentrated and climaxed in the command to love.

Second, the myth of the virginal mother functions to separate the women within the Roman Catholic community from one another. Since historically woman cannot be both virgin and mother, she has either to fulfil her nature in motherhood or to transcend her nature in virginity. Consequently, Roman Catholic traditional theology has a place for women only as mother or nun. The Mary-myth thus sanctions a deep psychological and institutional split between Catholic women. Since the genuine Christian and human vocation is to transcend one's nature and biology, the true Christian ideal is represented by the actual biological virgin who lives in concrete ecclesial obedience. Only among those who represent the humble handmaiden and ever-virgin Mary is true Christian sisterhood possible. Distinct from women who are still bound to earthly desires and earthly dependencies, the biological virgins in the Church, bound to ecclesial authority, are the true "religious women." As the reform discussions and conflicts of women congregations with Rome indicate, dependency on ecclesial authority is as important as biological virginity.

The most pressing issue within the Catholic Church is, therefore, to create a "new sisterhood" which is not based on sexual stratification. Such a new sisterhood is the *sine qua non* of the movement for ordination within the Roman Catholic community.⁵⁰ Otherwise the ordination of some women, who are biological virgins and evidence a great dependency on church authority, not only will lead to a further clericalization and hierarchization of the Church, but also to an unbridgeable metaphysical split between woman and woman.⁵¹

Traditional Mariology thus demonstrates that the myth of a woman preached to women by men can serve to deter women from becoming fully independent and whole human persons. This observation has

⁴⁹ E. Hambrick-Stove, "Liberation: The Gifts and the Fruits of the Spirit," in *Women Exploring Theology at Grailville*.

⁵⁰ The issue is correctly perceived by G. Moran, "The Future of Brotherhood in the Catholic Church," *National Catholic Reporter*, July 5, 1974, p. 7, and G. B. Kelly, "Brothers Won't Be Priests Because Priests Won't Be Brothers," *ibid.*, July 18, 1975, p. 9 and 14.

⁵¹ For an exegetical and theological discussion of the notion of priesthood in early Christianity, see my book *Priester für Gott* (Münster, 1972) pp. 4-60.

consequences for our present attempts to emphasize feminine imagery and myth in feminist theology. As long as we do not know the relationship between the myth and its societal functions, we cannot expect, for example, that the myth of the mother goddess in itself will be liberating for women. The myth of the "Mother God"⁵² could define, as the myth of the "mother of God" did, woman primarily in her capacity for motherhood and thus reduce woman's possibilities to her biological capacity for motherhood. We have to remain aware that the new evolving myths and images of feminist theology necessarily share the cultural presuppositions and stereotypes of our sexist society and tradition, into which women as much as men are socialized. The absolute precondition of new liberating Christian myths and images is not only the change of individual consciousness but that of societal, ecclesial, and theological structures as well.

Yet, at the same time, feminist theologians have to search for new images⁵³ and myths which could incarnate the new vision of Christian women and function as prototypes to be imitated. Such a search ought not to single out and absolutize one image and myth but rather put forward a variety of images and stories,⁵⁴ which should be critical and liberating at the same time. If I propose in the following to contemplate the image of Mary Magdalene, I do not want to exclude that of Mary of Nazareth, but I intend to open up new traditions and images for Christian women. At the same time, the following meditation on Mary Magdalene might elucidate the task of feminist theology as a critical theology of liberation.

Image of Mary Magdalene, Apostle to the Apostles

Mary of Magdala was indeed a liberated women. Her encounter with Jesus freed her from a sevenfold bondage to destructive powers (Lk 8:3). It transformed her life radically. She followed Jesus.

According to all four Gospels, Mary Magdalene is the primary witness for the fundamental data of the early Christian faith: she witnessed the life and death of Jesus, his burial and his resurrection. She was sent to

⁵² This does not mean that we ought not to revise our sexist terminology and imagery in our language about God. It is absolutely necessary, in my opinion, that in a time of transition our vision and understanding of God be expressed in female categories and images. However, I do think we have to be careful not to *equate* God with female imagery, in order that Christian women remain free to transcend the "feminine" images and roles or our culture and church and be able to move to full personhood.

⁵³ On the relationship of the image to the self, cf. E. Janeway, "Images of Women," *Women and the Arts: Arts in Society* 2 (1974) 9-18.

⁵⁴ A creative and brilliant retelling of the biblical aitiological story of the origin of sin is given by J. Plaskow Goldenberg, "The Coming of Lilith," in Ruether, *Religion and Sexism*, pp. 341-43.

the disciples to proclaim the Easter kerygma. Therefore Bernard of Clairvaux correctly calls her "apostle to the apostles."⁵⁵ Christian faith is based upon the witness and proclamation of women. As Mary Magdalene was sent to the disciples to proclaim the basic events of Christian faith, so women today may rediscover by contemplating her image the important function and role which they have for the Christian faith and community.

Yet, when we think of Mary Magdalene, we do not think of her first as a Christian apostle and evangelist; rather we have before our eyes the image of Mary as the sinner and the penitent woman. Modern novelists and theological interpreters picture her as having abandoned sexual pleasure and whoring for the pure and romantic love of Jesus the man. This distortion of her image signals deep distortion in the self-understanding of Christian women. If as women we should not have to reject the Christian faith and tradition, we have to reclaim women's contribution and role in it. We must free the image of Mary Magdalene from all distortions and recover her role as apostle.

In her book *A Different Heaven and Earth*, Sheila Collins likens this exorcising of traditions to the process of psychoanalysis. "Just as the neurotic who has internalized the oppressive parent within himself (herself) must go back to the origin of the trouble in his (her) childhood, so the oppressed group, if it is to move from a condition of oppression to one of liberation, or from self-contempt to self-actualization, must go back to its origins in order to free itself from its psychic chain."⁵⁶ Just as black people⁵⁷ search history for models of identification that indicate the contributions of blacks to culture and history, just as they strive to eliminate racist interpretations of history and culture, so too women and men in the Church must attempt to rewrite Christian history and theology in order to recover aspects that have been neglected or distorted by patriarchal historians and theologians.

A close examination of the Gospel traditions discloses already in the beginning of the tradition a tendency to play down the role of Mary Magdalene and the other women as witnesses and proclaimers of the Easter faith. This tendency is apparent in the Markan tradition, which stresses that the women "said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (16:8). It is also evident in the comment of Luke that the words of the women seemed to the Eleven and those with them "an idle tale and they did not believe them" but instead checked them out (24:11). It is,

⁵⁵ *Sermones in Cantica*, *Serm.* 75, 8 (PL 183, 1148).

⁵⁶ *Op. cit.* p. 93.

⁵⁷ For the justification of such a comparison, cf. H. Mayer Hacker, "Women as a Minority Group," in Roszak, *Masculine/Feminine*, pp. 130-48, especially the comparative chart on p. 140 f.

moreover, reflected in the Lukan confessional statement "The Lord has risen indeed and appeared to Simon" (24:34). This Lukan confession corresponds to the pre-Pauline credal tradition quoted in 1 Cor 15:3 ff., which mentions Cephas and the Eleven as the principal Resurrection witnesses, but does not refer to any of the women. This tendency to play down the witness of Mary Magdalene is also apparent in the redaction of the fourth Gospel that takes pains to ensure that the Beloved Disciple, but not Mary Magdalene, is the first believer in the Resurrection (20:1-18).

The apocryphal traditions acknowledge the spiritual authority of Mary Magdalene, but can express her superiority only in analogy to men. They have Jesus saying: "I will make her male that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven."⁵⁸

The liturgy and the legend of the Western Church have identified Mary Magdalene with both the sinner in the house of Simon and the woman who anointed Jesus' feet before his death. Modern piety stresses the intimacy and love of the woman Mary for the man Jesus.

In looking at these various interpretations of Mary Magdalene, we find our own situation in the Church mirrored in her distorted image. Women still do not speak up "because they are afraid"; women still are not accepted in theology and the Church in positions of authority but only in junior ranks and special ministries because they are women. The measure of humanity and Christianity is still man even when we stress that the term is generic, for only those women can "make it" who play the male game. Love and service is still mainly the task of women.

Looking at this distorted image of Mary Magdalene and of ourselves, we are discouraged and in danger of trying to avoid suffering. Thus we tend to fall back into the bondage of the "seven evil spirits" of our culture. Let us therefore recall the statement of Bernard: Mary and the other women were chosen to be the "apostles to the apostles." The first witness of women to the Resurrection—to the new life—is, according to all exegetical criteria of authenticity, a historical fact, for it could not have been derived from Judaism nor invented by the primitive Church. Christian faith and community has its foundation in the message of the "new life" proclaimed first by women.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ *The Gospel of Thomas*, Logion 114. See also the apocryphal writings *Pistis Sophia*, *The Gospel of Mary* [Magdalene], and *The Great Questions of Mary* [Magdalene] in Hennecke-Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha* 1 (Philadelphia, 1963) 256 ff., 339, and 342 f.

⁵⁹ This meditation was first published in the *UTS Journal*, April 1975, pp. 22 f. It formed part of a liturgy which was led by women of Union Theological Seminary. I am grateful to the women at Union for the experience of sisterhood. They and the Feminist Scholars in Religion of the New York area helped me to sharpen my thinking on some issues of feminist theology.