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Sexism and Misogyny in the Christian Tradition: Liberating Alternatives

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The oppressive patterns in Christianity toward women and other subjugated people do not come from specific doctrines, but from a patriarchal and hierarchical reading of the system of Christian symbols as a whole. These same symbols can be read from a prophetic and liberating perspective. So what I will do in this essay is to show how Christian symbols have been read as a system of domination, on the one hand, and then how they can be read as a system of liberation, on the other hand.¹ The framework for reading Christian symbols as a system of domination derives from patriarchal slaveocracies, the social system in which Christianity was born. Yet Christianity also began as critique of this system that proposed prophetic-liberating alternatives to it that were then partially repressed.

The New Testament is shaped in the context of this struggle. It contains testimonies to a subversive vision which has been partly repressed by reimposed patriarchal patterns. Thus the New Testament itself is the main source both for canonizing a sexist and slave social system and also for reconstructing an alternative egalitarian vision. In this essay I will first summarize the patriarchal reading of Christianity as it became the dominant interpretation between the second and sixth centuries, with further elaboration in medieval scholasticism. I will address this reading of Christianity under the five symbols of anthropology, sin and grace, God, Christ, and the Church. This will show that the patriarchal reading of these symbols is not a problem of the prejudices of particular theologians, but a comprehensive worldview. I will then analyze these same symbols and show how they can (and, in my view, should) be read from a prophetic-liberating perspective.

I begin with the issue of anthropology. How is gender, male and female, related to humanness? Early Christianity saw a close relation between the human soul, understood as mind or reason, and the divine *logos*, which was seen as the divine nature of Jesus as the Christ. They interpreted the text of Genesis 1:27, "God created the human in the image of God," to refer to the mind or soul in each human person. The human soul as mind or reason mirrors on a created level the divine *logos* or reason manifest in Christ. The human soul thus partakes in a created fashion in God's nature and so is immortal and capable of eternal life.

But do women possess reason? Are they made in the image of God, or only male humans? The Greek philosophical tradition, particularly in Aristotle, which shaped early Christian views on this, believed that women lacked autonomous reason and were therefore inherently inferior and dependent on the male. For Aristotle, slaves and Asians (i.e., barbarians) were also dependent on ruling-class Greek males, who alone were fully rational.² Thus Greek philosophy gave Christianity both a strongly gendered and also a classist and racist reading of anthropology.

The Jewish tradition was ambivalent about whether women were equally made in the image of God. Some rabbinic teachers defended the belief that women were equally made in God's image, while others argued that Adam alone was God's image.³ This ambivalence is reflected in Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 11. Here Paul says, "But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife and God is the head of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:3, NRS). Paul lays out a cosmic hierarchical order of headship of God over Christ, Christ over the male human, and the male human over the female human as the basis for his argument that the woman should cover her head, but the male should not cover his head. "For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but the woman is the reflection of man" (1 Cor. 11:7).

Paul goes on to insist that "man was not made from woman but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man. For this reason a woman should have a symbol of authority on her head" (1 Cor. 11:8–9). But then he seems to reverse himself, insisting that the two are now interdependent. Although the woman was created from the man originally, now "man is born from woman, and all things are from God." Appealing to his congregation, he cries, "judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head unveiled?" Paul here touches on a key issue disputed in his churches.

Modern egalitarian readings of Paul have seen him as confused at this point between his pre-Christian views of gender hierarchy and the "true line" of his thought in Galatians 3:28. There baptism in Christ is seen as overcoming race, class, and gender hierarchy: "There is no longer Jew and Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." These hierarchies exist in a fallen and sinful world, but have been overcome in the redeemed order in Christ and so should no longer exist in the Christian community.

But these two texts are complex, historically and in Paul's thought. The Galatians formula "no longer male and female" seems to have been derived from pre-Pauline baptismal text based on the belief that humans were originally androgynous and only with a fall into sin were they separated as male and female. Baptism was seen as restoring humans to their original androgyny. Later the pairs "slave and free" and "Jew and Greek" were added as expressions of a liberated vision of the Christian community.⁴ Paul himself was primarily interested in the overcoming of the distinctions of Jew and Greek.

But some women in his congregation focused on the "no longer male and female" phrase, claiming a return to original androgyny in baptism that permitted them to discard both marital relations and head coverings in prayer. Paul is aware of this

implication in the baptismal formula. He himself had adopted eschatological celibacy, but was reluctant to endorse it for everyone lest males be led into sexual sin when incapable of maintaining celibacy. While allowing some to adopt celibacy, he prefers most to remain married. He also prefers that gender hierarchy and slavery remain intact until Christ returns, an event he expects very soon, in any case (1 Cor. 7). Thus the relation between gender hierarchy in the original cosmic order of creation and its abolition in the new eschatological order anticipated in baptism was unresolved in Paul's thought.

Later writers in the New Testament tried to resolve the conflict by insisting that equality in Christ is only spiritual and does not change the actual power of masters over slaves, husbands over wives, and fathers over children. "Wives obey your husbands, slaves obey your masters, and children obey your parents" becomes a theme in the later strata of the New Testament, repeated in several epistles, such as Ephesians 5 and 6, Colossians 3, and 1 Peter 2–3. The repetition of these demands testifies to the extent to which traditional power relations in the family had been challenged by an incipient liberationist movement in early Christianity.

The first epistle to Timothy, written in the generation after Paul, seeks to give the final basis for women's subordination in the church and to refute any idea that this subordination had been overcome in Christ. Women are said to have been both created second after the male and also to have been guilty of originating humanity's fall into sin. "For Adam was formed first and then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became the transgressor" (1 Tim. 2:13–14). This text locates women as both inherently secondary in creation and also as punished for initiating the fall into sin. The consequences of this status are made clear: Women are to exercise no authority in the church. Their task is to bear children. "Let woman learn silence in full submission. I permit no women to teach or to have authority over a man. She is to keep silent. . . . Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith, love and holiness with modesty" (1 Tim. 2:12,15). A similar text was inserted into Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians by a later hand: "As in all the churches of the saints, women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, even as the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church" (1 Cor. 14: 34–35).

Christianity was committed from its beginnings to women's capacity to be redeemed and to be baptized. Yet how could she have a redeemable soul if she is not made in the image of God? St. Augustine seeks to resolve this problem in his commentaries on Genesis. His solution was to distinguish between the spiritual capacity of woman's soul and her psychological and physical nature as female. The spiritual nature of women's souls is made in the image of God equally with males. This inner soul in both men and women is nongendered and is the basis of their capacity for redemption and eternal life. But the woman in her sexual body is not the image of God, but rather images the body as carnal and prone to sin. As female, even in the original creation in paradise, woman was created to be subject to the male in her sexual roles as wife and childbearer.⁵

This split view of woman as redeemable nongendered soul and subjugated female body and social roles becomes the dominant Western Christian tradition. It was repeated by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century in a worsened way. Aquinas adopted Aristotle's view that woman is biologically defective physically and mentally. Only the male possesses the power of procreation, while the woman provides only the material substance shaped by the male seed. When the male seed fully forms female matter, a male is created, but when the female matter partially resists this formation, a defective human or female is created. The product of an incomplete gestation, women are inherently inferior in body, mind, and will, and so are incapable of autonomous existence and must be under male subjection. They cannot exercise any leadership in society. Aquinas applied this view to his Christology, arguing that Christ had to be male to represent full humanity and therefore only males could represent Christ in the priesthood.⁶

This Augustinian view of woman as second in creation, first in sin, subordinate by nature, and not permitted to exercise public leadership in society or the church was inherited by the Magisterial Reformers Luther and Calvin in the sixteenth century. Luther and Calvin also worsened the early Christian tradition by denying that women can exercise the power of prophecy. They asserted that although this was allowed women in the New Testament period as a special dispensation, it was not continued in latter Christianity.⁷ This view departs from the patristic and medieval views that denied women priesthood but allowed their role as prophetesses, on the grounds that this is God's power working in them, not their own power. Yet Luther and Calvin do not maintain the Aristotelian view of women's defective nature. Female subordination to the male is a matter of social order decreed by God to establish proper relations of authority between genders and also social classes, not a matter of inherent inferiority of some humans to others. Women accept their subordination as obedience to the divinely established social order, not because of a defective human nature.

This western Christian tradition of female subjugation in the original order of creation was worsened by the view of woman's primacy in sin. The locus classicus for this doctrine is 1 Timothy 2:13–14, in which women are said to be both second in nature and first in sin. Augustine understood this to mean that woman was created subordinate to the male in creation, but in her primacy in sin she behaved in an insubordinate manner against both God and her male head. So she is punished by being placed under a coercive subjugation to her husband, and her pains in childbirth are worsened. Both church and social authorities should enforce this coercive subjugation of woman to man, to guard against woman's tendencies to disobedience.

Medieval scholastics and Magisterial Reformers continue this view. Luther, for example, argues that the subordination of woman to man would have been an easy and consensual partnership in the original creation. But due to the Fall a split has appeared between the private domain of the home and the public realm of the state, and women are coercively barred from the public realm.

This punishment too springs from original sin and the woman bears it just as unwillingly as she bears those other pains and inconveniences that have

been placed on her flesh. The rule remains with the husband, and the wife is compelled to obey him by God's command. He rules the home and the state, wages war, defends his possessions, tills the soil, plants, etc. The wife, on the other hand, is like a nail driven into the wall. She sits at home. . . . If Eve had persisted in the truth, she would not have been subjected to the rule of her husband, but she herself would have been a partner in the rule which is now entirely the concern of men. . . . In this way Eve is punished.⁸

In this theory of woman's punishment for primacy in sin as added subjugation, redeeming grace does not overcome subordination, but rather reinforces it. The good Christian woman demonstrates her converted mind and heart by interiorizing her secondary place in creation and her deserved punishment for Eve's sin. She quietly and submissively accepts her husband's rule over her, as well as that of other males in authority, even their harsh words and blows. By redoubling her submission, she shows herself worthy of redemption and presumably wins her husband's care and affection. This remains woman's place in the Christian era.

It will be overcome only in heaven, when women's sexual roles as wife and mother no longer function. Then women who have lived the spiritual life in divine grace will shine as gloriously as men. There will be no social or gender hierarchy in heaven. But on earth this hierarchy remains as the order of creation, to be coercively enforced to counteract the fallen proneness of women to disobedience. To this coercion all women, married or unmarried, should submit.

The patriarchal interpretation of God reinforces this patriarchal reading of Christian doctrines of creation, sin, and salvation. Indeed it is the capstone of this reading by seeing God as a patriarchal divine male who created the world as a system of rule of men over women, masters over slaves, and rulers over subjects. No form of Christianity other than Mormonism sees God as physically a male. Ironically, this view in Mormonism also demands that God be dual, with a physical divine female counterpart as his silent wife. Yet dominant Christianity sees the patriarchal male metaphors for God as appropriate to express God's nature. God rules with sovereign authority to dominate and punish. Rationality and ruling power are seen as male qualities to be exercised by males and inappropriate for women.

This view of God reinforces the view that female metaphors are inappropriate for God. There was some dispute about this in early and medieval Christianity, especially since Christianity inherited from Judaism a powerful female metaphor of divine Wisdom for God. This was controversial in the second to fourth centuries because main-line Christianity was combatting forms of Christian gnosticism that used androgynous images for the divine *pleroma*. Syriac Christianity also used a female-gendered term for the Holy Spirit, and developed a rich tradition of female metaphors for this aspect of God. Images of God's word as milk furthered ideas of God or Christ feeding us with mother's milk from their own breasts. The dominant view of the Eastern Church fathers is that God is nongendered, neither male or female. Gender images are drawn from the body and cannot be taken literally for God.

For Greek Church fathers, such as Gregory Nyssa, gender is also ephemeral for

humans. Not only is God a nongendered spiritual being, but humans were originally nongendered as well. Gender appears only with sin, to make reproduction possible after the fall into mortality. But gender will disappear with the resurrection, when all will become spiritual and immortal. Jerome declares that gender language for God is a function of linguistic grammar. For example, the Spirit is “feminine in Hebrew, masculine in Latin and neuter in Greek,” but gender images are not to be taken literally.

Yet the tendency of both the Greek and Latin Church fathers to use feminine terms to symbolize the lower passions and bodily nature, and the masculine to symbolize the higher rational and spiritual nature, affected their view of gender metaphors for the spiritual and the divine. Augustine follows this tradition in identifying *sapientia* or wisdom as the higher or male part of the mind and *sciencia* or sense knowledge as the female lower part of the mind. He argues that divine wisdom, although grammatically female and imaged as female in the Biblical tradition, is male. Gender images cannot be used interchangeably for God, because God’s nature is purely spiritual and intellectual. This must be imaged exclusively as male.

This Augustinian view of gender images for God had a decisive effect on the official God language of the church, both East and West, in the fourth century, eliminating the Syriac feminine images for the Holy Spirit. Female Wisdom images for God would again appear in medieval mysticism. The Magisterial Reformation generally abolished this more diverse and sacramental imagery for God for strictly patriarchal language, although female images continued in some forms of Protestant mysticism, such as that of the Lutheran mystic Jacob Boehme. Most Christians, however, are unaware of this feminine language for God, which has been suppressed again and again but never entirely disappeared. Using female images for God, especially in liturgy or public prayer, continues to be controversial and surprising to most Christians.

The doctrine of Christ in Christianity reinforces both a concept of God as masculine, if not physically male, and also of masculinity as normative humanity. The divinity of Christ was identified, historically, with God’s *logos* or words, which are seen as male qualities. The divine side of Christ as the incarnation of God thus represents God as masculine. The human nature of Christ, as a perfect, complete, and sinless human who restores the original and redeemed potential of humans also enforces a normative masculine idea. For Aquinas, as we have seen, Christ could only be incarnated in a male because only the male represents normative and complete humanity. Women are incomplete or “misbegotten” beings with incomplete humanness, lacking full bodily power and intellectual capacity. Thus for Aquinas Christ’s human or bodily nature must be male.

Yet even those Christians who lack this Aristotelian view of women’s incomplete and defective nature tend to see Jesus’s maleness not just as a historical “fact” but a necessity to represent humanity as a whole, even if for sociological rather than ontological reasons. A female Christ, it is argued, would not have been listened to, would not have had authority. Christ has to appear as a human male to be historically and socially influential. It is assumed that Jesus’s maleness includes women. Women are redeemed through Christ, even though they could not have been the normative

expression of Christ. But the reverse is not the case. Christ could not have appeared as a female, and femaleness is not seen as including the male.

This discussion of the normative masculinity of both the divinity and the humanity of Christ also implies a close relation of a masculine Christology with normative masculine priesthood or ministry in the church. Again it is Thomas Aquinas who makes both sides of this correlation explicit. Not only must Christ be male to represent full or normative humanness, but only males can represent Christ as priests since only they possess this normative humanness. Women are not only barred from priesthood juridically, but by nature they cannot validly receive the sacrament of ordination. Their intrinsic defectiveness means they cannot exemplify excellence or exercise sovereignty.

This view continues in Roman Catholicism today. This was expressed in the recent condemnation of women's ordination in the Roman Catholic Women Priest movement in which the Vatican compared the ordination of women to the priesthood with sexual abuse of children. Most Catholics and others were shocked by this comparison, which seemed to them incomprehensible. But the underlying assumption of this bizarre comparison is that the application of the rite of priestly ordination to the inappropriate female body violates the sacrament itself in a way that is similar to normatively celibate male priests violating children sexually.⁹

The view that women are by their very nature incapable of receiving the sacrament of ordination continues in the Catholic tradition despite its apparent abandonment of the Aristotelian idea that women are defective in the 1976 Catholic Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood. Here the Vatican claimed that women cannot be ordained because the priest represents Christ. Maleness is intrinsic to Christ's nature and so to represent Christ the priest must be male. Yet the declaration avoids the Thomistic view that only males are fully human, that Christ has to be male to be fully human, and that the priest must be male to represent Christ.

The declaration tries to make this a question of "natural symbols." Since Christ was male historically, a priest could not be recognized or accepted as representing Christ unless he was male. Yet Christ was also a Jew. Why not argue that all priests must be Jews to represent Christ? Clearly the theory of "natural symbols" remains limited here, while the abhorrence of women as priests reveals its visceral character in the Vatican comparison of it with sexual abuse of children by priests.

As we have seen, the Protestant Magisterial Reformers also rejected the ordination of women, and even extended this to the exercise of prophecy, a role for women that was being claimed by some radical reformers. Yet Luther and Calvin based this exclusion on the divinely established social authority of men, not the ontological superiority of men over women. This perhaps made it easier, in modern times, to change this bias and allow women to be ordained in many Protestant groups. But this continues to be contested. The Southern Baptists have reversed this reform and returned to an insistence that women's silencing in Scriptures forbade their incorporation into ministry, a view also followed by some conservative Lutherans. Some conservative Anglicans also reject women as priests and even more as bishops. These churches continue

to try to balance these conflicts with difficulty. Thus the idea or feeling that women cannot or should not represent the public voice of God and Christ in the church remains potent in much of Christianity today.

Having surveyed the problem of sexism and misogyny in Christianity in terms of its anthropology, views of sin, God, Christ, and ministry, I turn to the other side of the argument. How can and should these same touchstones for Christianity be used in a prophetic and liberating fashion to overcome patriarchy and create communities of egalitarian mutuality? How has such prophetic-liberating use of these symbols actually existed, at least partially, in many forms of Christianity in the past?

I argue that the prophetic-liberationist tradition provides an alternative framework for reading all the symbolic touchstones of Christianity. The prophetic-liberationist perspective is rooted in Christianity's Jewish roots. In this worldview God stands on the side of the poor and the oppressed, rather than representing the mighty, the kings and rulers, the patriarchs of society. Through the prophets God denounces those who oppress the weak and the vulnerable and announces a new world that is dawning in which "the mighty will be put down from their thrones and the poor lifted up."

This prophetic-liberating perspective was generally used for class relations, for the poor versus the rich and powerful, and, nationally, for the relation of Israel to the great empires. But in the Jewish movements that birthed Christianity some prophetic Jews began to include the subjugated groups within the patriarchal family, women and slaves, in this vision. A new liberated humanity was seen as rising, particularly at the end of history, where women would take their place as equals with males, and slavery would disappear.

This more inclusive prophetic liberating view was partly present in Christianity's beginnings. Although marginalized and repressed, it never entirely disappeared. Movements that expressed this liberating vision of Christianity continued alongside the dominance of patriarchal Christianity, partly in separate groups and communities, partly interpenetrating dominant Christianity. Elements of this liberation perspective were so pervasive in the early church as an integral part of many of its key struggles that they remained embedded in the New Testament texts. Women's movements throughout Christian history have continually rediscovered and renewed versions of these liberated readings from the New Testament itself.

The history of a liberationist reading of Christian symbols is found in various second century forms of radical Christianity, such as the Montanists, who clung to the prophetic vision of redemption found in the early Jesus movement. They believed the outpouring of the Holy Spirit dissolved gender differences and liberated women to be prophets announcing an imminent transformation of the world. Priscilla, one of the Montanist prophets, declared a revelation to her of Christ in female form: "Under the appearance of a woman, clothed in a shining robe, Christ came to me and revealed to me that this place (the Montanist holy city) is sacred and it is here that Jerusalem will descend from Heaven."¹⁰

The liberating tradition was included in elements of women's monastic movements in the Patristic and medieval periods who believed that women's equality of soul superseded their gender subordination and allowed them to be vehicles of God's

revelatory presence. Some Christian female and male mystics reclaimed the view of God as female-personified wisdom. For example, in Julian of Norwich's famous visions, she affirms that "God all Wisdom is our kindly Mother . . . as truly as God is our Father so truly is God our Mother."¹¹

One radical humanist of the early sixteenth century, Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, challenged the woman-blaming view of the Fall into sin. Agrippa claimed that women were fully equal in God's original creation and even have a special affinity with divine Wisdom that gives them moral and spiritual superiority. The subordination of women is not due to either divine mandate or female inferiority, but rather to male tyranny: "women are forced to yield to men like a conquered people to their conquerors in war, not compelled by any natural or divine necessity or reason, but rather by custom, education, fortune and tyrannical device."¹²

The Quaker tradition in the second half of the seventeenth century paralleled elements of Agrippa's rereading of Genesis. They too affirmed that women and men together were originally created by God in unqualified equality. There was no original subordination of women to men in paradise. Rather, the subordination of women and other forms of domination, such as class hierarchy, are themselves the primary expression of the fall into sin, which they defined as "the usurpation of power of some over others." In Christ women's original equality is restored. This is manifest in the true prophetic church, where women are mandated to preach and minister. In her 1666 treatise, "Women's Preaching Justified, Proved and Allowed of by the Scriptures," Quaker foundress Margaret Fell argues that Christ appeared first to women so that men would have to receive the good news from women, thereby also acknowledging the legitimacy of women's preaching.¹³

This Quaker tradition was inherited and developed by nineteenth-century feminist pioneers Sarah and Angelina Grimke, Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. It has been developed in twentieth-century feminist liberation theology as the authentic vision of the gospel message. The foundation of an egalitarian Christian theological anthropology starts with rereading Genesis 1:27. Feminists insist that the male pronouns in this text are inclusive, generic references to a human species identity shared by men and women. Both are created in the image of God.

But what does it mean to be in the "image of God"? Classical Christianity understood this to mean the quality of the human soul that reflected the divine *logos*. They believed that both men and women possessed this quality in a nongendered way. But the Jewish tradition understood the possession of the "image of God" to mean primarily the human representation of God in domination over the lower creation. This could only be held by ruling class males, the patriarchal class. Women did not possess domination, but were included under it.

These two meanings of the term "image of God," the spiritual quality of the soul to reflect God and dominion over the lower creation, are the roots of the ambivalent reading of this text in Christianity. Paul's denial that women possess the image of God in themselves is based on his assumption that this entails "headship" or dominion. The church fathers read the "image of God" as the spiritual capacity of the soul for redemption and included women in it. Augustine recognized the need to accom-

moderate both meanings. So he split the two, applying the spiritual quality of the soul equally to women, but interpreting her social and physical femaleness as subjugated to the male and under male dominion, a tradition continued through the Reformation. Calvin, with his legal mind, clearly understood the double meaning of the term “image of God.” He affirmed that women possess the image of God in the sense of spiritual capacity for redemption, but asserted that women lack “that part of the image of God that has to do with dominion.”¹⁴ With this division re-enforced as punishment for sin, women are excluded from exercising any rule in church or society.

The Quakers, by contrast, gave women original equality in the image of God but reinterpreted dominion as sin. For them dominion was not part of the original creation, but rather expressed the fall into sin. Nineteenth-century Quaker feminist Angelina Grimke, however, accorded women not only equality in the image of God but also shared dominion. For her there is no dominion of some humans over others, which is sinful, but men and women share dominion over the lower creation. As she puts it in her 1837 “Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women,” “They were both made in the image of God; dominion was given to both over every other creature, but not over each other. Created in perfect equality, they were expected to exercise vice-regency entrusted to them by their Maker in harmony and love.”¹⁵

This inclusion of women in dominion shifts the meaning of equality in the image of God. Instead of referring to a spiritual redemption to be realized in heaven after death, it now becomes this worldly. The laws of ownership and power must be changed so that women can share equally in rule, ownership of property, and exercise of political power. This is key to the modern feminist understanding of women’s liberation, as well as class, racial and national liberations. Equality in the image of God means not only the capacity to be redeemed in Christ, but overcoming economic and political domination for shared power in society.

Contemporary ecologists and ecofeminists, however, raise questions about the idea that God gave humans dominion over the lower creation of animals, plants, and the earth. For Angelina Grimke this was unproblematic. When humans don’t dominate each other, she assumed that they would be good caretakers of Earth together. But contemporary ecologists see human dominion over the earth as the basis for widespread pollution and destruction of the natural world.

Yet modern Earth history sees humans as a very recent species. The natural world, animals, and plants preexisted humanity by billions of years. There was no human dominion over the earth for most of Earth’s history, since humans either did not exist or existed in a largely powerless way in relation to the rest of nature. Humans, particularly ruling classes, have appropriated more and more power over the earth only in the last two to three thousand years. Since this has become more and more destructive, there need to be ways of limiting human domination over the earth, finding space for the healthy living of the rest of the creatures of the earth, as well as humans with each other. We need a much more complex understanding of the term “image of God” that both recognizes cultural differences in understanding of humanness and promotes mutuality across both human and nonhuman relations.

Gender equality in the image of God means both equivalence in human capacities and shared power, but shared power now has to be seen in a much more global and ecological way. This changes the classical Christian understanding of sin and the Fall. The assumption that the Fall is a historical event at the beginning of Earth's history must be questioned. A modern understanding of Earth history, and recent human evolution with it, precludes the idea of an original paradise, followed by the Fall into sin, as a "historical event" in the first "day" of Earth's history. Rather, we should think of a tension in human existence between "is" and "ought," between our larger potential and our present existence, between individuality and community-building relationality, egoism and altruism.

These tensions can be translated into social structures and ideologies that institutionalize domination, the expropriation of wealth and power in the hands of ruling classes, and domination over the earth. But these tensions can also give birth to critical transformative movements that question such ideologies and promote justice and mutuality.

This brings us to how we image God. Feminist liberation theology draws on the Christian tradition that all our metaphors for God are only partial pointers to the reality of God that transcends our language. To take any images for God literally is idolatry. But divine transcendence is not best understood as infinite spatial separation between us and God who rules over us from beyond. This model of transcendence is based on a masculinist hierarchical view that separates mind from body, male from female, heaven from earth. Rather we should think of divine transcendence as God's radical freedom from our systems of lies and oppression, while also being closer to us than we are to ourselves. God's grace grounds and renews our freedom to overcome oppressive patterns, while also putting us back in touch with our good potential.

Feminists draw on gender-inclusive language. God is truly our Mother, as well as our Father. But it also means an understanding of God as liberator who sides with the poor and puts the mighty down from their thrones. These mighty that need to be put down from their thrones include sexist, classist, racial, and global imperial systems of domination. God ever lures us to seek the peaceful kingdom, the kingdom of justice where all humans and the earth are in harmonious partnership. This means going beyond anthropocentrism that sees only humans and not the rest of nature as images of God. We are not called to rule over but to enter into life-sustaining mutuality with all nature, human and nonhuman.

Turning from ideas of God to Christology, we should say that a feminist liberation Christology moves away from the hierarchical view of Christ back to Jesus, the Jewish prophet of the Gospels, as the starting point. There Jesus represents God as one who heals and frees the poor, particularly poor and despised women. He reaches out to the most marginalized women, the woman with the flow of blood, the Samaritan woman, the prostitute, as those who best understand his message. He also critiques the teachers of the law, the clerical class, who oppose his teachings to the poor and to women. To follow Jesus is to follow him in his mission of liberating the oppressed and affirming the despised of the dominant society and religion. But this also means

following him in risky witness that might lead to retaliation and even death at the hands of those who seek to shore up the existing systems of power and religion.

This leads us to a consideration of what should be meant by church and ministry. For a feminist liberation theology, church means redemptive community, the continual recreation of communities of equals, men and women across class and race. Not only male domination but also clericalism must be dismantled. In communities of redemptive liberation, ministry and community are dynamically interconnected, not set up as a clerical caste ruling over a silenced, disempowered laity. The church is called to be a place where the redeemed community of equals is tasted and celebrated in nascent form. It is called to be the place where a struggle is carried out against the ongoing systems of domination that rule the world and the church, a place where we can also heal from our inner compulsions to lift up ourselves by dominating others.

In this mission to create redemptive community, the church continues to be a risky witness to Jesus. It risks retaliation and sustains its liberating and celebrative energy in the midst of hostility and counterattack from the powers that be, including those who claim to be the church. Again and again it falls and becomes a collaborator in domination and oppression. But the memory of Jesus and the power of divine wisdom empower it to rise and to rise again. Creating redemptive community is an ongoing process, not a final achievement, in history.

NOTES

1. This essay is an extensive rewrite and condensation of material found in my book with Rita Gross on Buddhist-Christian feminist dialogue: *Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet: A Buddhist-Christian Conversation* (New York: Continuum, 2001), pp. 88–101, 126–139.

2. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254a–b.

3. See Rosemary Ruether, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), pp. 24–30.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 24–25.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 73–74.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 94–96.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 121, 124–125.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

9. The statement was released by the Vatican July 15, 2010; see Richard McBrien, “Linking Sexual Abuse and the Ordination of Women,” *National Catholic Reporter*, September 2010.

10. Ronald E. Heine, *The Montanist Oracles and Testimonia* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1989), 49.1.

11. See Ruether, *Women and Redemption*, pp. 110–111.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 138–139.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 163.