

God in Context:
A Comparative Study of the Images of God in
Three Select Local Christian Groups of Women

By
Judith Mary Buller Thurlow

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Abstract

This thesis, grounded in a select group of women's experience, critiques the exclusive images for God presented by the Church in its language and liturgy. My contention in this thesis is that in an emerging democracy such as South Africa, the metaphors and language used are increasingly restrictive - in terms of both the empowerment of women and the enrichment of men. I look at how feminist scholarship has focussed on the implications of patriarchy for women and the claim by feminist theologians that the ensuing symbols have been damaging for women. The analysis includes means to recover traditional images for God and suggestions of ways to discover alternative images. Following the feminist analysis, I argue for a hermeneutic which locates the meaning of the tradition within the experience of three local, select groups of women.

Declaration

This thesis is original work by Judith Mary Buller Thurlow and has not been submitted in any form to any other university. Where use was made of the work of others it has been acknowledged in the text.

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Preface

Spinning the Dance of Life

When I was twelve years old I was taken to see the Bayeaux Tapestry in France. The immensity of the work overwhelmed me even then - its significance much later.

This is a huge tapestry, sewn by the women of Bayeaux while their husbands, lovers, sons, brothers, and uncles were fighting the Crusades. Gone for years, the women were left to fill their time “making tapestry.” Just two weeks ago I learnt that this expression is equivalent to one in English, “to be a wallflower.” “To be a wallflower” means to be a girl sitting on the sidelines of the dance-hall, waiting for a boy to ask you to dance. And he never does.

Today women are re-claiming the wallflower. We have realised that we like wallflowers; they are sturdy plants, rooted in earth embedded in a brick wall that was built perhaps for protection or privacy. Rich colours and variegated, beautiful like all flowers though designated a weed in England, it grows in the hardest of conditions: the wallflower is sturdy and strong.

I chose the image of weaving and sewing for the headings of this essay before I learnt that “making tapestry” means not making the choice yourself, waiting, always waiting for someone else to invite you to join in the Dance of Life.

So the score is before us, the instruments are in tune. This study is merely the first note, my fingers tentatively on the chords. The *music* is the invitation to all women to join the dance - why wait for somebody to invite you?

This work is dedicated to Margi Inglis and Leonie Prozesky. Margi and Leonie were members of the research groups. They are icons of women of strength, insight, love and hope that will never die. Margi stayed within the structures always believing that they would change for the better, one day. Leonie lives with a vision of all that love-in-community can be. We have heard the tune you dance to, Margi and Leonie, and we shall carry on the dance.

God in Context:
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Introduction

Viewing the Tapestry: Who Chooses the Threads?

Let us be careful that no image but that of God take shape in our minds.

St. Columbanus

I believe God is everything, says Shug---She says, my first step away from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all.

Alice Walker (1991: 14)

This thesis has emerged, in part, as an extension of an honours dissertation in which the focus was to analyse selected women's images of God in order "to unmask the distortion within Christian tradition that has subordinated women on the basis of gender" (Johnson 1992: 87). It also sought to outline some of the implications that such a critique might have for liturgical language in the church.

The underlying principle of that study, and this one, can best be understood in the words of Dorothee Soelle. She states that "'God' imprisoned in a certain language, limited by certain definitions, known by names that have established certain socio-cultural forms of control, is not God but becomes instead a religious ideology... 'Therefore I ask God,' writes Meister Eckhart, 'to rid me of God.' That is no heresy but rather the petition for liberation from the prison of a language which is too small for God" (Dorothee Soelle 1995: 38-39).

The present work is an extension of the earlier study. Chapter One presents examples of works in feminist scholarship, which critique the traditional concept of God as male and

presents alternative images. Chapter Two explores a hermeneutics that allows for a concept of God that incorporates the experience of particular women. Chapter Three describes the methodology used in collecting the experiences from selected groups of women, and it in turn creates space for dialogue between tradition, analysis and experience in Chapter Four. Of the three selected groups, one was chosen as having grounded its spirituality from within a traditional liturgical setting, the Julian Group. The other from outside it, although I am (as are they) only too aware of the influence of the Christian Symbolic Universe and the inevitability of fusion.¹ This study is an attempt to meet at the interface of these two positions; that of re-forming and that of rejection, recognising that neither is an absolute. It expects to find that in an emerging democracy, with a comprehensive and inclusive constitution, the dominant patriarchal images of God are increasingly restrictive. I also expect to find that a greater awareness of the incompatibility exists in the group of women from the Alternative Church Group, than in the two other select groups, both of which exist within normative church structures.

Threads Discarded: Women's Experience

Feminist thinking has developed and extended its understanding of experience. Women's experience can no longer be seen as universalised. The emergence of numerous feminist groupings has exposed the distortion of such presuppositions. Mary McClintock Fulkerson in her book *Changing the Subject* examines this issue of particularity and difference and challenges the claim that feminism speaks for all women. Poststructuralist constructionalism "refutes the very notion of the natural or non-historical, non-constructed character of the subject woman...feminists turn to signifying, then, to argue that we cannot get at things outside the semiotic processes by which they come to have meaning" (Fulkerson 1994: 8). Her demand for specificity requires a move away from a claim of universality of 'women's experience' toward inclusionary strategies that respect difference. She cites Barbara Johnson, "Difference is not engendered in the space between identities; it is what makes all totalizing of the identity of a self or the meaning of a text impossible" (Johnson 1978 cited in Fulkerson 1994: 382).

It is therefore, with the understanding of the need to respect difference that I locate myself

¹ See unpublished masters thesis, *What is Really Real?: A Feminist Critique of the Christian Symbolic Universe* by Garman (1996).

in this study within my own experience as a European, Africa-based woman, heterosexual and middle-class. I come out of a tradition of high church, as opposed to an evangelical background and am ordained as priest in one of the so-called 'mainstream' churches. As I write these words I recall reading a passage which said that searching into our spirituality and reflecting on our faith is a luxury that not all people have time for, many are just getting on with the business of survival, of themselves and of their families. I acknowledge that privilege. In addition I should mention that my experience in South Africa has contributed considerably in developing a concern for social justice, particularly in those areas where discrimination and marginalisation flourish. This concern has been grounded in my study of liberation theology. This thesis adheres to the three steps of the method of liberation theology: by analysing the situation, searching the tradition for what contributes to the oppression, by searching again for a hermeneutic that allows for women's liberation, and finally presents a dialogue between the second and the third (Johnson 1990: 99).

As a feminist theologian, my studies have focused on women's spirituality and the growth of women's interest in a rich variety of images and concepts of God, extending beyond the traditional exclusive images and metaphors of church liturgy and into the empowering and creative initiatives of women's spirituality circles.

Examining the Threads: Exploring Alternative Language for God

A key factor in the emerging women's circles is the use of inclusive language and the insights that are to be found in the discovery of new images and symbols. Psychoanalysis has made familiar many keywords: image, symbol and symbolism, while research into "primitive mentality" has revealed the importance of symbolism in archaic thinking and its part in the life of every primitive society (Eliade 1952). This development, he suggests, stems from a reaction against the 19th century's rationalism, positivism and scientism, which became a marked characteristic of the second quarter of the twentieth century. "But this conversion to the various symbolisms is not really a 'discovery' to be credited to the modern world: in restoring the symbol to its status as an instrument of knowledge, our world is only returning to a point of view that was general in Europe until the 18th century and is, moreover, connatural to the other, non-European cultures, whether 'historic' (like those of Asia or Central America for instance) or archaic and 'primitive'" (Eliade 1952: 9).

It is this recognition of the importance of the symbol and image as “an instrument of knowledge” and the unconscious role they play, which has prompted feminist theology to challenge the extant images and symbols of the Christian faith, and attempt a rediscovery of Christian images which are liberating for women. “It is the pluralism of images, metaphors and concepts of God which is most manifest in feminist theology” (Grey 1993: 98).

Alongside the critique of extant images, feminist scholarship’s critique of language has at the very least “sensitised language-users to the non-neutral nature of linguistic representation. What was previously unquestioned or indeed unnoticed in our usage is now the site of a struggle for meaning...” (Cameron 1998: 13). Cameron focuses on the complex relationship between language, culture and reality. She reflects on the “the absence of women’s voices and concerns in the most prestigious linguistic register (e.g. religious ceremonial, political rhetoric etc.)”, and specifically identifies the problem of the representation of women in language. “Language...encodes the culture’s values and preoccupations, and transmits these...to each new generation...linguistic representations both give a clue to the place of women in the culture and constitute one means whereby we are kept in our place” (:12). Cameron maintains that the most important point is to resist the detaching of language from its historical, cultural and social context – the idea that language has a life of its own. This resistance is achieved “...by acknowledging that conventions of representation have been historically and socially constructed, we are also suggesting they can be de- and re-constructed: organising to bring about change is not a futile activity, whereas waiting for ‘the language’ to change itself is” (:13). She categorises three areas that are of concern: women silent, women spoken about, and women speaking. It is these areas that require critique for they reinforce and reproduce attitudes.

This study is allowing women to speak and have their voices heard, for feminist discourse has been most ardent in its cry for the validation of women’s experience. So long silenced by the consuming and subsuming fire of tradition that has been fuelled by the use of distorted biblical texts women are rising anew from the ashes. The following chapter allows us to hear the voice of feminist scholarship as it searches for new ways to illumine theology.

Chapter One

Re-weaving the Cloth: Seeking Emancipatory Speech about God

Each of us has a well of images within, which are the saving reality and from which may be born the individual myth carrying the meaning of life. That new images are now emerging in the tales and poetry of our time is now beyond doubt. But any truly valid “new myth” cannot be rationally invented. It must be born out of the crucible of our own struggles and suffering as we affirm our new freedom without rejecting the perennial truth of the feminine way.

Helen M. Luke (1995: 9)

Introduction

This chapter analyses selected feminist scholarship on God-language, locating it first within the broad framework of the feminist movement, then in particular within the area of feminist spirituality. Its examination of feminist theology looks at the rejectionist approach, identified in the Goddess movement, and the writings of Mary Daly, both of which critique the Christian tradition as androcentric and irredeemable for women, and secondly, the reformist approach, which includes the scholarship of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Sally McFague and Elizabeth Johnson.

The Framework: The Broader Picture

The Feminist movement emerged as women sought to express their dissatisfaction in the world around them. As women realised the extent of their marginalisation, so the movement became more widespread and diverse. “Thus the contemporary feminist quest,

concerned with many specific issues, can symbolically be described as showing one's face, seeing a vision and finding a voice of one's own to proclaim it" (King 1989: 2). The current prolific production of feminist poetry, sculpture and art bears witness, not only to this need for women to find expression in their cry for articulation, but also to the historical denial of such creation. Letty Russell, a feminist theologian, describes it as evidence of that universal groaning for freedom referred to in Romans 8: 22-23.¹

It is this vision which has motivated and demanded proclamation as more and more women have become aware of their position of oppression. As women attain positions of leadership in society, from politics to religion to the arts and business, so a vision for transformation may be realised, both for the self-actualisation of women and for the whole of society (Aburdene and Naisbitt 1993). Ruether (1983: 18) defines the underlying principle of feminism as "the promotion of the full humanity of women". This definition can be expanded still further according to Schüssler Fiorenza (1984: xv), who contends that the feminist movement is a liberation movement with its goal "not simply the 'full humanity' of women, since humanity as we know it is male-defined. The goal is women's (religious) self-affirmation, power, and liberation from all patriarchal alienation, and exploitation".

But it would be misleading to perceive feminism as a unitary movement, for it is made up of different ideologies and political viewpoints. Bouchier (1983: 177) in the study *The Feminist Challenge* describes feminism "as a universal movement touching every aspect of politics and daily life. In its broadest definition, feminism includes women and men who advocate pro-women issues in governments, political parties, trade unions, schools, universities and the mass media, as well as socialist groups, radical separatists, consciousness-raising groups, peace campaigners and women's centre volunteers". Because of its very diversity and because of its many meanings, I need to clarify my use of the term within this study.

I understand feminism to be an alternative world-view with its emphasis on the

¹ "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (cited in Russell 1974: 28).

interconnectedness of all creation.¹ It upholds, like other liberation movements, an option for the marginalised and oppressed which is founded on a model of freedom and justice, but by its very nature it focuses on the concerns of women and their search for wholeness.² It is a movement working to dismantle patriarchy and androcentricism, structures which are deeply destructive for women; it is a movement which is flexible and inclusive of both men and women who seek a society where all can live in mutuality and equity. These fundamental principles are reflected in the rich variety of material emerging from women today, denoting their intention to touch all areas of life, particularly where their voices were unheard, or have been deliberately silenced.

One such area is women's spirituality. Rarely granted a voice over the centuries, those women who did have an opportunity to express their understanding of God were fortunate to be in situations where their experiences could be recorded and preserved. I am thinking particularly of women's writings, such as that of Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avilla. Other women's experiences, no less valid, have been lost for all time.³ For this reason, it is heartening to see the extent and depth of women's spiritual thinking reflected in the volume of work currently being produced; it is the surging up of a spring, buried deep under unyielding ground for aeons.

For women are learning to define for themselves what is sacred for them. Restrained and shackled by men's notion of spirituality and its accompanying images and metaphors for centuries, women are delving deep within themselves and their history, to dredge up what is powerful and true for them. They claim that society is compelled to live by metaphors that are discordant with what is 'healthy' for women, and has resulted in justifying violence and rape. "Feminist theologians want to eliminate the androcentric fallacy, and rely on themselves for understanding the God they have found to be theirs, though mediated to them by a religious tradition which causes them profound problems as one powerful form of mediating that fallacy" (Loades 1990: 2).

For some women this has meant stepping out beyond the traditional religions and into the

¹ Anderson and Hopkins 1991: Chapter 5: "Inside the Sacred Garden".

² See Johnson E S (1992) for a more expansive definition of feminism.

³ "It is difficult to gain access to the past where data about women are often hidden, buried or left unrecorded." (King 1993: 55).

history of the Goddess religions. This resurrection of ancient religions denotes the desire of some women to unearth, and earth, their spirituality outside the patriarchal religion of Christianity. For others, whose spirituality is beyond the Christian Symbolic Universe, yet are not able to embrace the Goddess religion, their struggle to find expression continues.¹ This chapter examines those positions, but its focus will be on that area of feminist scholarship in which the writers have accepted the limitations of the Christian tradition yet have decided to remain within it.

Any attempt to categorise the many types of feminist theology is fraught with difficulty for the field is vast and varied. Because of this I have made use of definitions from others where they prove useful, though there again their limitation needs to be conceded. There are two categories according to Johnson: one is called *revolutionary* feminist theology, the other *reformist*. Johnson (1990: 97) understands the former to be those women who find Christianity “hopelessly irredeemable – these women have voted with their feet and have left the church”. The male-dominated tradition allows them no space to explore and nurture their own visions. They are on the edge, as one woman describes it, with no guidelines except a listening ear to the inner voice (Anderson and Hopkins 1991: 56). This approach is called ‘radical romanticism’ by Ruether (1983: 108), defining it as a self-sufficient utopian dream of an alternative world, devoid of male culture, as epitomised by Mary Daly (1973) who has rejected Judaeo-Christianity in its entirety.

This radical position is understood by King (1989: 34) for she says, “Feminists ask with radical sincerity what in the past of religion is, and remains, usable for women today. This is radicalism in the original sense of the word, in the sense of going back to the original creative experience in which all religion is grounded”. For this reason, whilst acknowledging its radical element, I shall use the term ‘*rejectionist* feminist theology’, referring to those women who have opted for an alternative expression of their spirituality to Christianity, but making it clear that this is not a value statement.²

Because for many women the challenge comes in claiming the essential Gospel message of liberation and love within the Christian tradition, so they seek a re-formation of the church,

¹ See Garman (1996) for her personal exploration.

² Garman (1996: 21), calling herself ‘post-Christian’ for purposes of identification, found it a thoroughly unsatisfactory way to describe her theological position.

both in its structures and in its interpretation of theology. For this second category I shall use the term '*reformist* feminist theology', for this is the thinking of those women who live with the hope of transformation. Again there are many different approaches, according to Johnson (1998), 'fundamentalist, symbolic, liberal', but each is, whilst acknowledging its male-dominated character, able to find liberatory elements within the tradition. Johnson (1990: 98) notes how a number of Catholic feminist theologians such as Ruether, Schüssler Fiorenza and Carr, "work with the liberation model in the sense that they seek the dismantling of patriarchy and equal justice especially for the dispossessed". The operative word here, for Schüssler Fiorenza, would be in the 'dismantling', for it is not enough for the individual to dream of freedom and to experience personal liberation. "Individual freedom and the freedom of all women are linked when one has reached the critical consciousness that we are united first in our unfreedom" (Fiorenza 1984: xvi).

Threads of Texture

I have previously stated that within this search for freedom there are many strands, for women's voices are coming from a variety of experiences and situations. At this juncture it is appropriate that I refer briefly to '*womanist* theology', although as outlined in the introduction, this thesis is limited to the considerations of a particular group of women's experience.¹ "If '*feminist* theology' were to mean only the theology of white Western privileged women, deluding themselves that they spoke for *all* women, this would be a catastrophic mistake" (Loades 1990: 8) (emphasis added).

Womanist theology emerged as black women disclaimed a common experience with the feminist movement from the Western world. Dolores Williams (1993: xii) has questioned the cultural gap, entering into dialogue with womanist and feminist theology by focusing on different and common, understandings of certain terms, such as *virginity* (as in *Virgin Mary*). Always she seeks to construct a theology from the point of black women's experience within the Afro-American context, searching for a spirituality and an honesty which exposes the exploitation of black women in their churches and in their wider community. She makes reference, for example, to the way black women are abused, both sexually and racially: "I am convinced that this kind of activity in the denominational

¹ See the comments on *particularity* and *difference* in the introduction of this thesis, as well as in *Changing the Subject* by Mary M. Fulkerson (1994).

churches will only stop when black women open their mouths and tell their stories.” She challenges the ambiguity of the Bible when confronted with the issue of the equality of non- Jewish people and their values: “The testaments are silent about the abolition of the institution of slavery in the ancient world. Womanist theologians might ask: Can the liberation norm in black theology be validated today by the Bible, which sends out equivocal messages about the liberation of slaves, especially about the liberation of female slaves?” (Williams 1993: 268).

Although feminist concerns may overlap, it is necessary to distinguish between feminist theology (seen as emerging out of white women’s experience) and womanist theology (reflecting black women’s experience). In addition, there are many other women’s experiences still not being heard. Recent feminist scholarship, named ‘Feminist Third World Theology’ (King 1994), recounts the stories and search of women in the so-called Third World, Asia and Africa for instance, whose need is to validate their spiritual experiences from within their own cultural context and their own struggle for liberation.

Despite the diversity of approaches, there are similar characteristics that are critical to feminist theology.¹ Foundational to feminist theology is the fact that it is rooted in women’s experience.² Second, there is a commitment towards personal and social transformation, and theological reflection arising out of praxis. Feminist theology is also dynamic and pluralistic and it contains both deconstructive and reconstructive elements, for as it critiques patriarchy, sexism and androcentrism, so it seeks a reinterpretation of tradition, especially of the Bible and its core symbols (King 1993: 5).

One of the most controversial issues in feminist theology has been that of symbolism about God. Mary Grey (1993: 98) writes, “It is the pluralism of images, metaphors and the concepts of God which is most manifest in feminist theology”. Accepted and unquestioned by millions of people for nearly two millennia, the exclusive use of male imagery for God is being challenged by feminist theologians. It is this issue, more than any other, which has initiated the resurrection of the Goddess movement as many women struggle to reconcile their spirituality with an image of a traditional male God. The next section looks at those whose choice has been to reject the traditional images and metaphors.

¹ I use this as a general term to mean women who are concerned with discrimination against women

² See Fulkerson (1994) on her questioning of women’s experience.

Threads of the Background and Foreground

...There was a time when you were not a slave, remember that.
You walked alone, full of laughter bathed bare-bellied.
You say you have lost all recollection of it, remember.
...You say there are no words to describe this time, you say it does
not exist.
Make an effort to remember. Or failing that, reinvent.

Monique Wittig (1985: 89)

Many women are being drawn to the Goddess as 'nature' as a way of seeking wholeness, a means of integrating matter and spirit (Ruether 1983: 69). It is an attempt to counter the mechanistic, reductionist world-view which has dominated since the Enlightenment, and which has perpetuated the dualism of Greek thought. Getty (1990: 29) says, "Some scientists...in confronting the urgency of the environmental problem, are now calling our planet by the name of Gaia, after the Greek Earth Goddess known as the 'Oldest of the Divinities'...Complex living things always have order and wholeness as a feature of their existence, and Gaia is no exception". 'Gaia' is a name that emerges again as feminist theologians search for the feminine face of God.

The Goddess as 'nature', for some women, is a source of renewal and spiritual strength; she is a symbol of life living in harmony with its environment. As Getty (1990: 31) comments, "The Goddess returns to us at this time as a reminder of who we are, where we come from and where we are going. Through her we may find ourselves once again living in a sacred context".

It is this longing for acknowledgment for what is meaningful, deeply rooted and true of women's experience that is undergirding this resurgence of interest in the Goddess. The female deity symbolises for them the birth of new woman who no longer lies submerged and subjugated beneath the smothering spirituality of an alien God, one which is perceived as having denied, diminished and degraded her very biological being. On the contrary, it is the 'earthiness' so long despised that is being resurrected and is the cause for rejoicing, for the Goddess symbol embodies a source of power unique to women, that of bringing new

life into the world. It is not surprising therefore that the movement is closely associated with a deep reverence of the earth. The eco-feminist (be she Goddess or Christian worshipper) is mining deep within history and herself, to resist the domination and destruction that has destroyed rather than created, slaughtered rather than saved. It is a spirituality that is grounded in matter, it is the immanent and transcendent valued equally.

In the West, the Goddess movement resonates for many thousands of women. *Time* magazine, according to Aburdine and Naisbitt (1993: 286), describes Goddess worship as “the effort to create a female-centred focus for spiritual expression”. They cite *The Wall Street Journal* as saying that Goddess worship has been around a long time, “but a recent spate of academic books on Goddess religions and growing debate in traditional faiths about male bias in theology, have brought about a new wave of believers.”

Carol Christ (1979: 10) says this move back into pre-Christian tradition enables women to reject teachings that deny their personhood and so espouse a worship which permits them to seek the divine within themselves. She sees the essential core of traditional religion as so “irreformably sexist that it is pointless to tinker with them in the hope of change.” Instead, she says, the history of Goddess worship is inspirational for feminist theology and spirituality, for only by rejecting the biblical past can female power be affirmed and counteract the symbols of God as male.

Ruether (1992: 151) challenges Carol Christ and others who support the notion of a gynae-centric, egalitarian (both gender and class) and ecologically harmonious world, a society whose central focus of worship was a female deity, the Goddess. Ruether sees the problem in its post-Christian Romantic construction of the “feminine.” She challenges the assumption that archaeological evidence of a non-violent society and a ‘goddess-dominated’ culture provides proof that the ‘good values’ of mutuality and partnership existed. She says that such projections, however desirable, are questionable. She further suggests that the story of a pre-patriarchal, gynae-centric society is important for Carol Christ and other women because it plays both a mythological role, and also “affirms a faith in the nonessentiality of relations of domination” (Ruether 1992: 154). However, Ruether insists that such a claim requires further historical substantiation. King (1993: 118) questions whether this is the key issue for these women, asking whether hard historical proof is *the* issue in their search for a deity which holds meaning and is powerful for them.

King (1993: 118) states that, "It is important to realise that most contemporary women's interest in the Goddess is less concerned with historical evidence than with the existential significance of her presence in their lives now". Harvey (1997: 84), in his book on contemporary paganism, says, "By both remembering and reinventing, Goddesses and women are raising themselves, liberating themselves, creating themselves and expressing themselves. They are also going out into the world to 'do justly and love mercy'."

Yet if it is the intention to find a model which is liberatory and transformative for both women and men, then to idealise the matriarchal structure and deny its critique is, according to Aburdine and Naisbitt (1993: 306), to run the risk of replacing one form of domination with another. "Sometimes the Goddess movement is so intent on advocating 'feminine values', it appears to reject the ideal of a complete, balanced human being" (Aburdine and Naisbitt 1993: 306). This essential critique of matricentricity, argues Ruether (1992: 171), is absent in the female-identified vision of both Carol Christ and Mary Daly.

Threads of Different Hue: The Rejectionist Approach

Feminist scholarship would concede that Mary Daly is the forerunner in the feminist critique of patriarchy, publishing *Beyond God the Father* in 1973. A former Roman Catholic, her book was written during her stage as a 'post-Christian radical feminist', a definition she gives to herself in the Original Re-introduction to the book's reprinting in 1985. Since its publication, Daly has written other highly original books, such as *Gyn-Ecology* and *Outercourse*. At this stage she would no longer describe her position as 'post-Christian', because for her, Christianity is irredeemable for the cause of liberating women. Its language allows no space for women's identity or voices. Its images stifle and subdue, permitting only a dependent, child-like passivity. And yet Daly claims that it is this very bondage that is creating the bonding of a sisterhood for liberation. This bonding stems from a shared recognition of a sexual caste system that is extremely difficult to change. The consent of both victim and perpetrator is obtained through *sex role socialisation*, a conditioning process that starts from birth and is enforced by most institutions (Daly 1973: 2).

She argues that it is the institution of the Christian church which has contributed the most

damage, not least by its condemnation of women by church leaders, from Tertulian to Karl Barth, from Augustine to Martin Luther, who variously named woman as “the devil’s gateway”, “ontologically subordinate to the male”, “not made in the image of God”, and the “spoiler of creation” through Eve. Such ‘mysoginism’ leaves women as outcasts in a patriarchal society. However, she insists that it is the religious symbolism and concepts that have been most covertly destructive for women. For the power of naming has been stolen from women. She states that, “We have not been free to name ourselves, the world or God,” while further maintaining that “the liberation of language is rooted in the liberation of ourselves” (Daly 1973: 8). But this liberation is only possible when there is “a *castrating* of languages and images that reflect and perpetuate the structures of a sexist world” (Daly 1973: 9).

Mary Daly makes a point of distinguishing between “women who are too ‘damaged’ to free themselves spiritually from patriarchy, and those who are not” (Morris 1990: 37). Daly recognises that some women are unable to distinguish between their co-option and their own opinion, seeing the impossibility of their being able to dialogue and discourse; it is the *Painted Bird* as opposed to the *Gyn-Ecologist*. The Gyn-Ecologist is the woman who is strong enough to resist the paint of the infection and who is able to stand spiritually firm in the integrity of her ‘Be-ing’. Daly’s theory advocates the notion of radical separatism, or a biological determinism between males and females.¹

Secondly, Daly posits that there exists a difference even *between* women. This radical separatism is “based not only on dissociation from men, but on dissociation from women who are not of the ‘race’ of women” (Morris 1990: 46). Daly forms an intention of “elaborating a politics of the spiritual.” “It is these women, *the multiply mobile*: the movers, the weavers, the Spinners,” who form Daly’s Gyn/Ecological identity, those who seek to reunite spirit and matter, and emerge out of the destructiveness of mind/body dualism which is the origin of the “Fall” (Morris 1990: 39).

Daly critiques the traditional separation maintaining that it has contributed to patriarchy’s denial of women, and she urges them to focus on their need for discovery of their ‘Be-ing’,

¹ According to Helen Luke (1995: 7), “Those who assert that the only difference between men and women is biological, and that in every other way they are equal and have the same inborn potentialities, have disastrously missed the point.” Luke argues that there is a fundamental difference involving the psyche.

to discover the 'Other' in themselves, and to acknowledge their sexuality rather than deny it. It is, she says, the process of *liberation-castration-exorcism* that will dislodge the images and symbols which have proved to be oppressive for women. Loades speaks of Daly by saying that "[Daly] wanted people freed from *a priori* stereotypes, with polarity between groups of human characteristics fostering egoism, getting from the "other" what "I" lack" (Loades 1990: 186). Daly argues that it cannot be assumed that adequate models from the past can be extracted. Indeed she questions the value of such assumptions, suggesting that women's experience should be given priority. It is not sexism alone that has caused Christianity to be oppressive, but it is the core symbolism itself, that of God as Father and Christ as male, which has dictated society's domination and subjugation of women.

In a sermon given at Harvard in 1971 (cited in Loades, 1990: 186) Daly expressed her irritation at the pacifiers who quote the line 'in Christ there is no male and female'. Daly said that even if this is true, everywhere else there is evidence of it, so little of value can be extracted from the Christ-image as male. Past revelation, she said, should not have prior claims over present experience, for women have the option to prioritise their own experience without the need to validate it from the past.

Such a questioning of beliefs and values, Daly (1973: 14) says, "may well be the greatest single hope for survival of spiritual consciousness on this planet." Challenging present images, symbols, structures and beliefs, will act as catalysts for change and from this position transformation will emerge. But a change of symbols "grow(s) out of a changing communal situation and experience", and these will only flow from an evolving woman-consciousness and the recognition that the dominant image of the Father-God has brought about an ambivalence which has not always been conducive for the liberation of women (Daly 1973: 15). The masculine "Supreme Being", the interchangeability of God as Divine Spirit and Watchful Father, however abstract in their conceptualisation, are projected into a belief system that seems to justify the social infrastructure. The belief system becomes hardened and objectified, seeming to have an unchangeable and independent existence and validity of its own (Loades 1990: 187). Daly's much-quoted, "if God is male, then the male is God", urges women to see the need for de-reifying God, as this image is projected into a realm of beliefs that stultify and oppress. "The divine patriarch castrates women as long as he is allowed to live on in the human imagination" (Daly 1973: 19).

Daly (1973: 33) argues that a relativity of symbols and images would eliminate the possibility of idolatrous fixation, and until there is this liberation, the image of God as male and God as Father will continue to be used oppressively against women. It provides justification for women's subordination, interpreted as God's will, and upholds the continued use of male language and symbolism which is both sexist and exclusive. She suggests that a noun is not an appropriate type of word for God. "Why not a verb – the most active and dynamic of all?... The anthropomorphic symbols for God may be intended to convey personality, but they fail to convey that God is Be-ing. Women now who are experiencing the shock of non-being and the surge of self-affirmation against this are inclined to perceive transcendence as the Verb in which we participate – live, move, and have our being."

Mary Daly's contribution to feminist scholarship lies in the power she grants to language, not only through her own creative reversal of words traditionally demeaning and derogatory of women, but by her claim that within gender-exclusive language and symbolism has lain the means to undermine and disempower women. It was her conviction of the relation between power and language and its patriarchal imagery that led to her writing *God the Father*, her work which it is reasonable to claim has been the primary instigator of the feminist theologians' concern with inclusive language in liturgy. Twenty years on, feminist scholarship today may question Daly's assumption of language as representation and her claim that "the medium is the message" (Daly 1973: 13). Certainly her understanding of 'sisterhood' and universal experience can be, and has been challenged, yet none can dispute the power of her work and its powerful effect on feminist thinking.¹

Other Threads of a Different Hue: The Reformist Approach

Hidden God,
Whose wisdom compels our love and unsettles all our values;
Fill us with desire to search for her truth
That we may transform the world
Becoming fools for her sake,

¹ This concept is expanded on in Fulkerson (1998: 40).

Through Jesus Christ, Amen.

Janet Morley (1992: 8)

The work of Ruether, *'Sexism and God-Talk'* in 1980 was an important publication in feminist scholarship, as it presents a deconstruction of the distortions of the patriarchy which permeated, and continues to permeate, the established church and its theological doctrines. Hers was the first systematic critique from a feminist position as she explored the problem of inherited tradition and envisioned transformation. Loades acknowledges the "exceptionally important place Rosemary Radford Ruether occupies in the whole movement of feminist theology...Her language is that of 'liberation Christianity', which is not peculiar to Roman Catholicism, but seeks active, committed believers in a covenanted community" (Loades 1990: 135).

Ruether, a reformist feminist, rather than a rejectionist, also explores the ancient Goddess culture. She does so as part of the retrieval process, but also as a way of understanding the reaction to feminine imagery. "Liberals who have advanced to the point of accepting inclusive language for humans often exhibit a phobic reaction to the very possibility of speaking of God as "She" (Ruether 1980: 47). She interprets this need for a transcendent male God image as the desire of the male ego to conquer nature symbolised as Mother. Concluding her examination into the ancient worship of the Goddess she states, "Gender division is not yet the primary metaphor for imaging the dialectics of human existence," yet suggests that the imaging of God as Goddess provides a powerful alternative "to the symbolic world generated by male monotheism" (Ruether 1980: 52). She surmises that male monotheism may have emerged as a consequence of the nomadic life-style of the Judeo people, which denied them their opportunity to cultivate the land, the opportunity to develop an agricultural culture, and may have resulted in hostile relations toward the agricultural people and a denial of the Earth Mother. As a consequence Ruether (1980: 52) concludes, "Male monotheism reinforced the social hierarchy of patriarchal rule through its religious system in a way that was not the case with the paired images of God and Goddess." The males were adopted as "sons", God's representatives, and the women were repressed as a dependent servant class. They were the ones, along with children, to be ruled over as the males were ruled over by God. They were to relate to man as man relates to God. Women therefore were denied a direct relation to God as this symbolic hierarchy

becomes the cosmic principle. In addition, the hierarchy of God-male-female creates a dualism – as the male is seen as made in the image of God. The woman becomes not merely secondary through the denial of her right to be created in the image of God, but she is seen as the image of the lower, material nature. “Gender becomes a primary symbol for the dualism of transcendence and immanence, spirit and matter” (Ruether 1980: 54).

This dualism not only supplanted the equality of the divine, but also reversed the symbol system by its reduction of the woman to inferior and merely matter. The Bible speaks clearly of the struggle as people make their choice between Baal, the Canaanite’s God of agriculture, and Yahweh, the patriarchal God of the nomadic Hebrews. The result, a concept of dualism in which nature and spirit is divided, became the means of justifying the subordination of women. This history of struggle, as Baal is replaced by Yahweh as consort of the Canaanite Goddess, Asherah, is explored further by Ruether as she explains the apparent disappearance of a female deity and the emergence of dualistic thinking. Yet, she says, it was the fear of alien Gods, not female Gods, which created the tension. “It is not insignificant that most of the polemics against Canaanite religion in the Old Testament are against Baal, not Anath or Asherah. Yahweh does not do warfare primarily against the Goddess. Rather it is Baal, her male consort, who must be replaced” (Ruether 1980: 56). However the Goddess is not replaced so much as absorbed into the religion of Yahweh. The imagery for God becomes a mixture of both male and female; it is God as both a man of war and as a woman crying out as in child-birth (Is. 42: 13-17).

Ruether says that the use of female imagery can be seen again in the Wisdom tradition. In this instance, “the female image appears as a secondary persona of God, mediating the work and will of God to creation...She is the subtle power of the presence of God, permeating and inspiring all things. ‘For she is the breath of the power of God and pure emanation of his almighty glory’” (Wisdom of Solomon 7: 25-26 cited in Ruether 1980: 57). However, Hebrew thought denies the autonomous expression of a female God. Instead she becomes the dependent manifestation of the transcendent male God. The Wisdom image disappears from Judaistic tradition and is replaced by the image of Shekinah or ‘Presence’ as God’s mediating expression in female form. Christian tradition preferred the Greek ‘Logos’, which Ruether suggests “obscures the actual fluidity of the gender symbolism by appearing to reify as male a “Son of God” who is, in turn, the image of the Father” (Ruether 1980: 58).

To counter this, Ruether suggests the use of church as a broader concept of God. Although Ruether (1980: 61) admits to the “sacrilization of patriarchy”, she claims to extract elements in Biblical theology that reject the predominately male images of God. In her attempt to rise above the idea of the feminine side of God, which she believes reinforces the image of God as male, Ruether goes beyond “the assumption that the highest symbol of divine sovereignty still remains exclusively male.” She questions whether there is not a language beyond patriarchy. In acknowledging that Jesus himself used male language for God, *Abba*, she argues that this was an attempt to explain the loyalty required of his disciples, in so far as they were to place God above all. “The patriarchal family is replaced by a new community of brothers and sisters” (Matt. 12: 46-50 cited in Ruether 1980: 65). But Ruether admits to an obvious ambivalence. “...again and again throughout Christian history this anti-patriarchal use of God-language has been rediscovered by dissenting groups. The call to ‘obey God rather than men’ has perhaps been the most continuous theological basis for dissent in the Christian tradition.” Ruether states that as long as there was this call to assimilate God as Father and king there was the authority to sacrilize human lordship and patriarchy. “The radical meaning of *Abba* for God is lost in translation and interpretation.” There is a need, she claims, to find a new language that cannot be “so easily co-opted by the system of domination” (Ruether 1980: 66).

Seeking new language, Ruether challenges the existing and literal interpretation of God as male. “When the word *Father* is taken literally to mean that God is male and not female, represented by males and not females, then this word becomes idolatrous” (Ruether 1980: 66).¹ She presents examples of God in female metaphors as well as in male metaphors using the New Testament parables (the woman making bread folding in the leaven or the story of the woman searching for the lost coin). Ruether says that such images exist as reminders of the saving aspect of God, and are not intended to reinforce an image of God as mother or father. The parental aspect is insignificant.

Ruether’s hermeneutics seeks a liberatory image of God for women focusing on the historical aspect of the Biblical text. She examines the ancient Goddess worship and seeks its remnant in Christianity. She unearths the manifestation of God as Wisdom or Sophia, but acknowledges its replacement for Jesus by the symbolic male *Logos*. In her conclusion,

¹ See also the works by Sandra Schneiders (1991; 1993)

Ruether (1980: 59) reconstructs a female image of God as the Spirit, yet admits that it was historically marginalised “by a victorious Greco-Roman Christianity that repressed it.” However to invoke a female image with the model of parent, suggesting a parent-child relationship, is not always helpful for women, although an inclusive image of both Mother-Father is preferable to an exclusive male God. “Parenting language for God reinforces patriarchal power rather than liberating us from it. We need to start with language for the Divine as redeemer, as liberator, as one who fosters full personhood and, in that context, speak of God/ess as creator, as source of being” (Ruether 1980: 70).

Ruether (1980: 70) is adamant that a rejection of all aspects of the dualism of nature and spirit is vital for feminist theology. She concludes that “We have no adequate name for the true God/ess, the ‘I am who I shall become.’ Intimations of Her/His name will appear as we emerge from false naming of God/ess modelled on patriarchal alienation.”

Ruether (1980: 197) outlines the fundamental changes that must take place in the church and its theologies if it is to be a place without exclusion. “The Spirit is no discriminator among persons on the basis of gender but can empower whomever it will,” and proposes a model of church as liberation community. It is the image of a transformed church and of a God/ess as Initiator of that transformation which makes Ruether’s contribution helpful for women. It offers a movement toward an image of God/ess which is liberatory as it rejects the traditional image of a dominating, male concept of God and offers an alternative image in the form of God-as-a-community-of-faith which is grounded in the Trinitarian model.

This image of the church as God is developed by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. She makes “the *locus* of revelation not simply the Bible or the tradition of a patriarchal church but the ‘church of women’ in the past and in the present” (cited in Fulkerson 1998: 35). Schüssler Fiorenza, a German/American theologian, is a pioneer in the field of feminist biblical hermeneutics. Calling herself ‘a resident alien,’ she remains within the church in order to bring about change. “But we are like aliens. It’s a foreign language, a foreign culture and the structures were not created for us” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993: 185). With the intention of seeking a way for women to overcome their deepest self-alienation, she presents the *ekklesia of women* as able “to fill the hermeneutic space where a feminist reconstructive and constructive rhetorics has to position itself” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1992: 134). She too challenges the essentialist universalistic terms by which women are defined. “Instead they

(feminist theologians) must carefully analyse their own assumptions as well as those of mainstream christological discourses to determine how much they take into account the diverse cultural-religious contexts, the historically shaped subjectivity, and the diverse voices of wo/men” (Fiorenza 1994: 188).

Fiorenza and Ruether “have in common that both are prepared to struggle for the future of the Christian tradition” (Loades 1990: 135). Fiorenza recognises the validity of the critique by post-biblical feminists that biblical religion is irretrievable for women who are committed to the liberation of women, but she argues that there is the danger of conceding too easily that women do not have an authentic history within biblical religion. Such a surrender or relinquishing denies the validity of the self-empowerment and vision which many women derive from biblical religion, however she says that the feminist Christian approach must be critical in its “interpretation and evaluation of biblical religion in general and biblical texts in particular. In my own work I have attempted to formulate a feminist Christian theology as a ‘critical theology of liberation’” (Fiorenza 1984: 85).

Fiorenza’s feminist critical hermeneutic of liberation is based on the need to distinguish between a hermeneutic which is...

...in danger of formulating a feminist biblical apologetics instead of sufficiently exploring the oppressive function of patriarchal biblical texts in the past and present. It would be a serious and fatal mistake to relegate the household code trajectory, for example, to culturally conditioned biblical traditions no longer valid today and thereby to overlook the authoritative-oppressive impact these texts still have in the lives of Christian women. (Fiorenza 1984: 87)

The image of women-church or *ekklesia gynaike* obtains its authority from the experience of God as a liberating power re-enacting the struggle from oppression. So Scripture is understood to be not the sole theological authority, says Fiorenza, for therein lies a hermeneutic which perpetuates the ideological character of androcentric language and patriarchal culture; a model which has been used to subdue women. Instead, a hermeneutic is required which identifies a liberating principle as its authoritative norm of the Bible. “The main task of a feminist theological hermeneutics in the rhetorical space of women-

church is not to defend biblical authority. Rather it is to engender critical discourses which can claim the theological authority of the “others” to engage in a deliberative process of biblical interpretation” (Fiorenza 1992: 150). She challenges the dominant models of biblical interpretations and proceeds to construct a model of God as Sophia – wisdom within the *ekklesia gynaikon*. This she suggests offers space for women’s experience to be valued and to prove itself as transformative:

For that reason I have argued here that God-language, ...must remain embedded in feminist liberation movements and practices of transformation. They are to be contextualised in the praxis of the discipleship of equals, which provides the fecund ground and theological matrix in which new symbols, images, songs, hymns, prayers, rituals, and feast days are growing. (Fiorenza, 1994: 189)

Fiorenza (1983: 121) understands the need for a holistic vision, one that allows equality for all people within the community, without prejudice or elitism. “Not the holiness of the elect but the wholeness *of all* is the central vision of Jesus.”

Sally McFague, like Fiorenza, endorses the interpretation of God within a liberation theology, a theology that is de-privatised and developed in community. She critiques the present models as either anachronistic or conservative and presents a theological perspective using metaphor as the basis for language about God:

One of the serious deficiencies in contemporary theology is that though theologians have attempted to interpret the faith in new concepts appropriate to our time, the basic metaphors and models have remained relatively constant: they are triumphalist, monarchical, and patriarchal. Much *deconstruction* of the traditional imagery has taken place, but little *construction*. If, however, metaphor and concept are, as I believe, inextricably and symbolically related in theology, there is no way to do theology for our time with outmoded or oppressive metaphors and models. (McFague 1987: xi)

McFague attempts a *remythologizing* of God's relationship with the world, by experimenting with the models of God as mother, lover, and friend, and the image of the world as God's body. Theology is an expression, in metaphors and models, stating the claims of Christianity in a "powerful, comprehensive, and contemporary way." On the insistence that the mystery of God is not camouflaged by petrified metaphors or by a denial that our concepts are derived from metaphors, so arises an imperative that in order to be true to God's vision of life and fulfilment, new pictures must be examined and attempted. From these new models and metaphors emerges contemporary ways of talking about God, with a holistic or ecological, evolutionary view of reality. Whilst acknowledging her social context as privileged middle-class American, McFague lays claim to 'a liberation theology' by its demand for a change of consciousness which assumes a different view of reality, which in turn precedes action.

This change in the viewing of reality, for McFague, is grounded in a theology that allows for a different understanding of power, love and relationships. She presents a framework for interpreting Christian faith in an holistic, nuclear age, with models which challenge the traditional concept of God which she sees as exclusive, oppressive and inappropriate for our time. This image of God as absolute monarch is intrinsically hierarchical whether the divine rule is accomplished through dominance or benevolence. It is a dangerous picture and one that perpetuates the pattern of 'asymmetrical dualism' between God and the world:

It supports conceiving of God as a being existing somewhere apart from the world and ruling it externally either directly through intervention or indirectly through controlling the wills of his subjects. The feelings of awe created in the subjects are countered by feelings of fear and humiliation: God can be God only if we are nothing. The understanding of salvation that accompanies this view is sacrificial, substitutionary atonement, ...we as abject subjects must rely totally on our sovereign God who 'became man' in order to undergo a sacrificial death, substituting his great worth for our worthlessness. (McFague 1987: 30)

McFague (1987: 64) rejects this picture – the monarchical model – for its inability "to serve as the imaginative framework for an understanding of the gospel as a destabilising,

inclusive, non-hierarchical, vision of fulfilment for all of creation.” This monarchical model fails in three respects, she states: “God is distant from the world, relates only to the human world, and controls that world through domination and benevolence...in this picture God is worldless and the world is Godless” (McFague 1987: 65). This imagery of God as all-powerful monarch, and we as mere subjects, creates a picture of God as separate from the world and basically uninvolved. “The king’s power extends over the entire universe, of course, but his being does not: he relates to it externally, he is not part of it but essentially different from it and apart from it” (p. 65). Here there is a connection with Reuther’s argument stated earlier, when she critiqued the monarchical model (Reuther 1980: 52).

In addition, the anthropocentrism of this model is both hierarchical and dualistic, and it is this dualism that has been exploited for oppressive purposes. As in the hierarchical king/subject pattern, so others have emerged and encouraged different forms of oppression: male/female, white/coloured, rich/poor, Christian/non-Christian, and mind and body. “The monarchical model encourages a way of thinking that is pervasive and pernicious, in a time when exactly the opposite is needed as a basic pattern” (McFague 1987: 67).

The key issue for McFague lies in her concern for theological relevancy:

Does Christian theology involve, either through translation or through interpretation, using the metaphors and concepts of Scripture (and the tradition), or does it involve taking scriptural texts as a model of how to do it, that is, of how to do it in the language of one’s own time? I believe the second option is the necessary and appropriate one, and this will, quite obviously, involve significant departures. (McFague 1987: 30)

New metaphors and concepts are needed to meet the requirements of a present age theology. What McFague calls ‘thought experiment’ must be bold and constructive, a new way of expressing new thinking and not merely as an alternative way of expressing the same traditional metaphors. To achieve this the use of imagination is required because “belief is related to an imaginative and credible picture or myth of the relationship between God and the world” (McFague 1987: 32). A primary task then, if theology is to be a constructive and metaphorical enterprise, is the need to remythologize, as opposed to

demythologize, to identify metaphors from contemporary experience in powerful and numinous ways. It necessitates an elucidation of these at both imagistic and conceptual level.

McFague defines a metaphor as a word or phrase used *inappropriately*, or in other words that it belongs in one context but is used in another. She suggests the following examples: the arm of a chair, war as a game of chess, God the father. Originally used as an embellishment, in order to elaborate or decorate a description, the symbol is used more recently as a less direct way of describing something. "Here, metaphor is a strategy of desperation, not decoration; it is an attempt to say something about the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar, an attempt to speak about what we do not know in terms of what we do know...Metaphor always has the character of 'is' and 'is not': an assertion is made but as a likely account rather than a definition." (McFague 1987: 33). To talk of God as mother is to assume that all talk about God is indirect, that it is describing what is unfamiliar in terms of the familiar. It is the association of the quality of mothering that is being used to elaborate an understanding of God; the metaphor is intended to deepen a relationship with God.

A metaphor becomes a model when the metaphor has gained 'staying power', which then presents a pattern for explanation. McFague (1987: 34) cites the image of God the father as an example:

If God is seen as father, human beings become children, sin can be understood as rebellious behaviour, and redemption can be thought of as a restoration to the status of favoured offspring. As the creeds of the church amply illustrate, models approach the status of concepts: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are models of the divine life that inform the tradition's most central concept, the trinity.

These have become fixed metaphors, says McFague, which have left little opportunity for imagination or new metaphors. But metaphorical theology is a heuristic enterprise which permits experiment and is "one that thinks in an as-if fashion, that imagines possibilities that are novel, that dares to think differently" (McFague 1987: 36). It also bears similarities to hermeneutical and constructive theology in that heuristic theology, although not tied to

the images and concepts in Scripture, is bound to models that are appropriate and illuminating for the present time. It also relates with constructive theology for it asserts that “our concept of God is precisely that – *our concept* of God – and not God...But a metaphorical, constructive theology has a distinctive emphasis: it will be more experimental, imagistic, and pluralistic than most theologies that fall into the constructive category” (McFague 1987: 37).

To describe metaphorical theology as pluralistic is an attempt to avoid the dangers of exclusivity, for metaphors which become models, for example God the Father, run the risk of being reified, petrified, and exclusive. Metaphorical theology, on the contrary, invites many models of God. It is pluralistic also in that it is tolerant of other theologies, it makes no claim to have isolated the sole truth, but rather puts forward but one theology that is necessarily partial and hypothetical. “In summary, metaphorical theology is a kind of heuristic construction that in focusing on the imaginative construal of the God-world relationship, attempts to remythologize Christian faith through metaphors and models appropriate for an ecological, nuclear age” (McFague 1987: 40).

As alternatives to the traditional models of God, McFague proposes experimenting with models of God as mother, lover, and friend, and the world as the body of God. As Johnson (1992: 233) states, “In a unique way the paradigm of panentheism opens speech about God to a fruitful use of metaphors gleaned from women’s existence, especially maternal and friendship imagery.” It is a theology that allows for a self-emptying of God-self so that the finite has space to exist. Johnson continues, “In the act of creating, therefore, divinity withdraws. God makes room for creation by constricting divine presence and power”. Into this space the creation of the world is made possible. “Thus creation ‘outside’ of God nevertheless remains ‘in’ God”, she concludes (:233).

It is this theological understanding of creation which allows for McFague’s metaphor of the world as the body of God. The God-world relationship, suggests McFague, would benefit by “an imaginative vision of the relationship between God and the world that underscores their interdependence and mutuality, empowering a sensibility of care and responsibility toward all life” (McFague 1987: 60). It is intended purely as a metaphorical image, the world as God’s body rather than as ‘the king’s realm’. It breaks the impersonal image of king, it brings into being a sense of God’s in-dwelling and saving presence in the

world and it opens the way for the more personal, yet emphatically metaphorical, images of God as mother, lover, and friend. As models, they represent the most basic human relationships (along with God the father):

One basic human relationship, that of father, has received massive attention in our tradition; the others have been, at best, neglected, and, at worst, repressed. There are traces of them in Scripture and the tradition, but they have never become, or been allowed to become, major models...In different ways all three models suggest forms of fundamental intimacy, mutuality, and relatedness that could be a rich resource for expressing how in our time life can be supported and fulfilled rather than destroyed. They are all immanent models in contrast to the radically transcendent models for God in the Western tradition. As we have seen, part of the difficulty with the dominant model is its transcendence, a transcendence under-girded by triumphalist, sovereign, patriarchal imagery that contributes to a sense of distance between God and the world. (McFague 1987: 84)

In addition, these metaphors eliminate the sense of power as control by domination or even benevolence. Power is rather seen power as a “response and responsibility – the power of love in its various forms...that operates by persuasion, care, attention, passion, and mutuality...It is a way of being with others totally different from the way of kings and lords” (McFague 1987: 85).

McFague concludes her appeal for an imagery of connectedness by envisaging the possibility of still other models inspired by our seeing the universe as:

a context for imaging the transcendence of God in a worldly way, not through political images or, like the usual alternatives to political models, in abstract terms of infinity, eternity, omniscience, omnipresence, and so forth, but in the mythology or images of our own day that inspire feelings of awe, reverence, wonder. These are the images, and many of them will be

naturalistic, springing from the ecological, revolutionary sensibility
that sees the universe, the body of God, with eyes of wonder.
(McFague 1987: 186)

In her book *She Who Is* Johnson (1992: 279.n.4) acknowledges her indebtedness to McFague's outstanding example of constructive theology as a source of inspiration and ideas. Johnson (1992: 6) likewise calls for a reversal of patriarchal structures and the creating of conditions which would be characterised by relationships of mutuality and reciprocity, of love and justice. Such a different way of thinking requires a shift both in world view and in our sense of the divine: "The present ferment about naming, imaging, and conceptualising God from perspectives of women's experience repristates the truth that the idea of God, incomprehensible mystery, implies an open-ended history of understanding that is not yet finished" (Johnson 1992: 7). Classical theology is used still to shape contemporary language about God, and though not discounting its value for women in history, it cannot be denied that it has also been used to aid their exploitation, exclusion and subordination, making retrieval of a liberatory message for women a project "fraught with complexity" (Johnson 1992: 10).

Drawing on classical theology and liberation theology, Johnson contributes metaphorical models of God which integrate experience and praxis. Fundamental to this is the critique of traditional speech about God. "Whether consciously or not, sexist God language undermines the human equality of women made in the divine image and likeness" (Johnson 1992: 18). Through the absolutising of a single metaphor for God or the obscuring of the incomprehensibility and mystery of God, so theology must face the charges of being both idolatrous and oppressive. It is unacceptable to label this as merely a 'women's issue,' for "this issue of the right way to speak about God, however, is central to the whole faith tradition, nor does its pivotal role diminish because the speakers are coming anew into their own voice" (:18).

The challenge of women's voices, so long muffled, is the leading discourse today in a critique of the masculine model for God. This traditional image of the divine, patterned on an earthly absolute monarch, is no longer conformable to those for whom a consciousness of the suffering of the poor and oppressed is crucial. A God who 'allows' such suffering and a theology which numbs the senses to the pain of others, cannot be in accord with a

personal God, concerned and actively involved with the whole community of creation. Classical theology, grounded in a false assumption of biological creation which leads to a reinforcement of androcentrism, is obsolete. "As an intellectual model it constructs the world in language, mindset, imagery, and the distribution of value in such a way as to marginalise women and justify structures that exclude them from full and equal participation" (Johnson 1992: 25).

The implications are immense. Women have been, and are still in some instances, denied sacramental ministry and leadership roles, participation in decision making and symbol making and such thinking diminishes women's self-image, the message of exclusivity of images and symbolism being internalised and abetting the sense of inferiority and inadequacy:

Women have been robbed of the power of naming, of naming themselves, the world, and ultimate holy mystery, having instead to receive the names given by those who rule over them. Since language not only expresses the world but helps to shape and create it, learning to speak a language where the female is subsumed grammatically under the male gives girl children from the beginning the experience of a world where the male is the norm from which her own self deviates. (Johnson 1992: 26)

Out of this critique women theologians have attempted reconstruction, envisaging new symbols and images which are affirming of women, empowering and emanating from their own experience. Johnson cites Ruether's critical principle of feminist theology, which is the promotion of the full humanity of women. "Whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine" (Ruether cited in Johnson 1992: 30).

With this search for psychic integration by women uppermost in mind, Johnson introduces a theology that answers the need for an inclusive model of God which incorporates experience and the hermeneutical task of interpreting the meaning of the triune doctrine within the Christian tradition and Scripture. She resources scripture and its trajectories in her search for emancipatory speech about God, exploring the history of the wisdom

tradition for an explanation for the substitution of the symbol *logos* for the feminine *sophia*. Johnson comes to the conclusion that prior to John's Gospel, Christian reflection had not found it difficult to depict Jesus Christ as Sophia and if this was the case, she concludes "Since Jesus the Christ is depicted as divine Sophia, then it is not unthinkable – it is not even unbiblical – to confess Jesus the Christ as the incarnation of God imaged in female symbol" (Johnson 1992: 99).

Johnson expands her Christology by re-interpreting the Trinity in feminine symbols using Sophia-Spirit as her controlling image. Yet always undergirding this proposition exists an essential sense of the mystery of God, active in the world and in the history of humanity, yet beyond all understanding and language. "To this movement of the living God that can be traced in and through experience of the world, Christian speech traditionally gives the name Spirit" (Johnson 1992: 124). By this is meant *all* experience, the whole world. "The breadth and depth of experience that may mediate holy mystery is genuinely inclusive" (Johnson 1992: 125). The natural world mediates the presence and absence of Spirit, as does personal and interpersonal experience, including the macro systems of society. Language about the Spirit leaps the boundaries of any particular metaphor:

whether the Spirit be pictured as the warmth and light given by the sun, the life-giving water from the spring, or the flower filled with seeds from the root, what we are actually signifying is God drawing near and passing by in vivifying, sustaining, renewing, and liberating power in the midst of historical struggle. (Johnson 1992: 127)

Johnson recalls the words of Hildegard of Bingen as she too describes the power of the Spirit: "She is life, movement, colour, radiance, restorative stillness in the din. Her power makes all withered sticks and souls green again with the juice of life. She purifies, absolves, strengthens, heals, gathers the perplexed, seeks the lost...She plays music in the soul, being herself the melody of praise and joy" (Johnson 1992: 127). This is the spirit of hope and renewal, a metaphor for transformation, instead the Spirit-Sophia has received short-thrift over the centuries, labelled "anonymous", "ghostly", and "faceless". This aspect of the triune God is seen as possessing less personal power-it is the "Cinderella" of theology. Yet in Scripture the image is *powerful*, says Johnson (1992: 130), for it is

depicted as blowing wind, flowing water, burning fire, and light. Again, in Scripture the word in Hebrew, *ruah*, is used for both divine Spirit and human spirit: the God-given life breathed into God's creatures, and that unique life- force found in every person which grounds their identity.

So far from being a metaphor of powerlessness, the feminine Spirit provides a model that evokes the images of Earth Woman, Sky Woman, Mother of us all. Rather, what is needed is to speak of the Spirit's actions, "drawing attention to the affinity of such language with feminist values, highlighting as it does freely-moving, life-giving, non-violent power that connects, renews, and blesses" (Johnson 1992: 135).

To talk of the Spirit is language about the mystery of the divine, and as such provides insights important for images of God in feminist theology: the transcendent God's immanence, divine passion for liberation, and the constitutive nature of relation (Johnson 1992: 147). Spirit-Sophia is the living God involved with creation, it is an image of an immanent God, yet distant and transcendent. "She is in the world but not bound by it; present and active, mutually engaged, but freely so, not amenable to human manipulation or exploitation" (:147). There can never be the dualism so prevalent in classical theology. This reiterates the difficulties women encounter when confronted by dualism, referred to earlier in the section on Schüssler Fiorenza.

Critical to feminist theology is its understanding of a God whose passion is holistic and for liberation, and this is illustrated in the metaphor of Spirit-Sophia. God can never be neutral in the sight of oppression, but is bound to compassion for the world, healing and reconciling. Finally, whereas an image of a monarchical God is unrelated to the world, God as Spirit is intimately involved, presenting relation and freedom:

Relationality is intrinsic to her very being as love, gift, and friend both to the world and within the holy mystery of God. At the same time that she is intrinsically related, the Spirit is essentially free, blowing like the wind where she wills, not, as feared, cramped, or diminished by relation but being distinctively Spirit precisely in or through relation. (Johnson 1992: 148)

It is essential that the model of Spirit-Sophia be liberated from the traditional,

stereotypical, patriarchal association of feminine traits, and that a creative and recreative image is presented in order that a symbol of wholeness, so crucial to women's spirituality, is released. "The Spirit's pattern of wholeness is beneficial for all human beings, women as well as men, and for language about the holy mystery of God." Its value may indeed lie from the viewing of it from a feminist perspective in that it may lead to a subversion of the patriarchal image of God, "so detrimental to the mystery of God and the well-being of human community" (Johnson 1992: 149).

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to show how traditional symbols and images of God have become a key issue in feminist scholarship, and whilst some might argue that for them Christianity cannot be redeemed for its patriarchy is too deeply entrenched, others are exploring new images which might prove less damaging and offer greater opportunities for re-formation.

By reviewing the feminist movement in general, I placed feminist spirituality within a framework of exploration, of a search for the freedom to speak and to be heard. The image of women at the loom is a powerful one as a frame is an essential implement for ensuring the picture is created unskewed, evenly stitched and steadily executed. The setting up of the frame takes time and requires patience and perseverance. So it is possible to appreciate the manner by which the articulation of women's voices is being gradually heard.

The images presented by feminist theologians in this chapter articulate the search for a liberation of the sacred. The goddess movement is one such means of expression. Whether located in historical fact or not, its followers are responding to a need to earth their spirituality within a creative and meaningful sense of the sacred.

For those who choose to remain within the traditional boundaries, yet who also seek new ways of expressing their understanding of God, the challenges continue. The route chosen is not always the easy one. Johnson writes "However diverse their views, women doing feminist theology share one major aspect of a common social location: their speech sounds from the margins of the dominant androcentric tradition. 'To be in the margin,' as Bell Hooks writes, 'is to be part of the whole but outside the main body'" (Johnson 1992: 22).

The images presented in this chapter have re-structured the mould, re-shaped the pattern, and challenged the dominant traditional concepts of God.

The challenge of traditional spirituality from a feminist perspective has created a new consciousness, and an important resource for spiritual transformation is the recognition of the importance of women's experience (Christ cited in King 1993: 57).

The next chapter reviews the search of feminist scholarship for a hermeneutics which allows tradition to exercise its authority within the context of a struggle for liberation, as women seek the freedom to articulate their experience. It argues for a hermeneutics that opens up the worlds of the marginalised, of those on the boundaries yet within the structures of church and tradition, that provides the means by which the 'ordinary' voice may be heard and her expression of experience respected.

Chapter Two

Re-weaving the Cloth: Finding a Hermeneutic that Liberates God

My heart is touched by all it cannot save
So much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those who
With no extraordinary power
Reconstitute the world.

Adrienne Rich (1998: 67)

Introduction

The previous chapter has indicated the way feminist scholarship is involved in a critique of the traditional image of God presented in Christianity. It has shown how patriarchy and androcentrism have worked, not only to distort and limit our concept of God, but contributed to the oppression of women. Much of the critical discourse is levelled at the misinterpretation of the tradition of the church as it maintains its authority, both in its religious practice and in its language.

It is the discovery that tradition and the Bible have not been liberatory for women which has motivated feminist reformist and liberation theologians to find a hermeneutics which will enable us to seek a way forward from a past entangled with contradictions. It is the intention of this chapter to find the means for interpreting the present from a past which has negated the nonperson – “those forgotten ones, living and dead, whose struggle and memory are our history” (Tracy 1994: 64). It is a history which has told the story of triumph and negated the stories and experiences of the marginalised and oppressed. Feminist theology’s critique of tradition in its display of patriarchal and androcentric interests, and in particular legitimising the domination of women, exposes the way in

which authority has been misinterpreted in the history of the church. The question arises, who determined the codes, whose voices spoke at the defining moment and spoke with authority, deciding for the community of believers? For within tradition are all aspects of religious life, from its prayers, songs, symbols and liturgy to the interpretation of the sacred Scripture into the teachings for its community (Hilkert 1993: 60). Rutledge (1996: 21) suggests that an examination into tradition must turn to the Bible, for it is the sacred scriptures of religion that carries the full weight of authority for its codes of conduct, morality and social roles. I intend to include reference to the imagery of the Bible as part of the tradition because biblical images, particularly the traditional image of God as Father, have been the source of considerable feminist discourse on language for God.

Unknotting the Web: Problems with Tradition

Fiorenza examines the various feminist hermeneutical positions that have emerged to confront the issue of a tradition that legitimates patriarchal subordination:

Feminist biblical and liberation theological scholarship has inherited both its search for an interpretive key and its “logic of identity” from the dominant discourses of historical criticism and theological hermeneutics. Just as these discourses have developed because of the relativizing results of biblical historical criticism and the modern challenge to the normative authority of the Bible, so also a feminist theological hermeneutics has originated amid controversy”. (Fiorenza 1992: 144)

Both theological hermeneutics have their roots in religious-political debates, but feminist hermeneutical discourses are situated in *different* religious-political struggles (p. 144). Always the feminist principle is foregrounded in the search for authority. One such position rejects the Bible as irredeemable; it is written by elitist males and therefore is not able to contain the authority of God. A different position concedes the roots of patriarchal culture in which the Bible is written, but maintains that at least the basic core of the Bible is liberating. Furthermore, it claims that the Bible itself stands in critique of patriarchy.

This latter position has sought a feminist canon that permits feminists to isolate a central

principle that provides biblical authority for liberation struggles. This liberation hermeneutics takes the Bible's authority seriously; "...it seeks to reclaim the empowering authority of Scripture in order to use it over and against conservative right-wing biblical anti-feminism" (Fiorenza 1992: 147).

For the purpose of this thesis, as it seeks to use rather than discard tradition and the Bible, I shall focus on this strategy of isolating the authority in tradition which upholds equal rights and liberation struggles for "such a liberation hermeneutics does not aim to dislodge the authority of the Bible" (Fiorenza 1992: 146). This chapter will include within this hermeneutical strategy, the raising of women to visibility, both through inclusive language in its broadest sense, and by drawing on the importance that feminist consciousness has placed on the experience of women. It will show how women can find a hermeneutics that permits inclusive and liberating language about God.

Christianity understands tradition as related closely to the question of authority, that the root of authority is to be found within its tradition. As pointed out, for a Christian, there can be no easy dismissal of tradition, including the Bible. Tribble (1973: 31) states, "The Women's Movement errs when it dismisses the Bible as inconsequential or condemns it as enslaving. In rejecting Scripture women ironically accept male chauvinistic interpretations and thereby capitulate to the very view they are protesting." As she points out, "the hermeneutical challenge is to translate biblical faith without sexism" (Tribble 1973: 31). Schüssler Fiorenza (1992: 7) says, "I believe that feminists must develop a critical interpretation for liberation not in order to keep women in biblical religions, but because biblical texts affect all women in Western society." In some post-colonial societies, including South Africa, that influence maintains its dominance. Dealing with tradition then, is critical in the struggle for liberating the text and language about God, but it embraces a far wider dimension of liberation, for "whenever and wherever God's reign and demand that 'we do what is right and just' are denied, God is not present" (Gutierrez 1974: 128). Wherever there is exploitation and subjugation, there is the 'poor', says Gutierrez (p. 144), and defines the 'poor' as those who are "non-persons-the *insignificant*., those who do not count in society and all too often in Christian churches as well...someone who has no way of speaking up or acting to change the situation."

Re-knotting the Past: Dealing with Tradition

So tradition exercises its authority and is lived out within a community. Much research, in particular within the study of contextual theology, has focused on the ways communities have practised tradition in popular religion. One such, outlined by Cochrane (1994: 30), describes how a group of women in a village in South Africa draws on tradition and absorbs it into their own faith practices. The researcher found that though the ceremonies, pilgrimages to local shrines for the worship of Mary, were led by the priests and catechists, a distinction could be found between the public prayers and sermons of the leaders and the personal prayers and devotions of the pilgrims as they participated in the rituals. The study showed that the women of Mpophomeni adopted the traditions from the orthodox church, yet they ‘invented’ their own interpretations in relation to their own reality of daily struggles within their own context. “They do their own theology, in other words. They draw on powerful oral traditions which may not be scripturally located” (Cochrane 1994: 30).

It is evident therefore that tradition cannot be easily discarded, that its role must be taken seriously, and it is the task of the community or individual to interpret it in a way which is meaningful and true for them. It is, as Cochrane (1994) says, a question of seeking tools for survival. Denise Ackermann (1996: 150) gives an example of how tools for survival are critical for women in South Africa and on the ways tradition has been used against women, “...there is a link between the patriarchal teachings of submission and the teaching on the sinfulness of women. Women must be silent, women may not have authority over men because a woman, and not Adam, was deceived and became a transgressor (1 Timothy 2: 11-15)” (Ackermann 1996: 150).

Tradition though poses problems when it supports an oppressive ideology, and it has been the task of feminist biblical scholars to find usable tradition and attempt a retrieval of oppressive texts and language. It is about locating ourselves in tradition despite its serious contradictions, with the gospel message of freedom and Life.

But as David Tracy (1994: 64) has said, referring to Christian theology’s need to face the Holocaust, “Every hermeneutics of retrieval for Christian theology must today include a radical hermeneutics of suspicion on the whole of Christian history.” It is the need to

retrieve, in and through these very suspicions, what Tracy calls, “the repressed moments” of negation. Tradition is the means through which our reason operates to preserve that which it sees as part of ourselves and herein lies the need for tradition.

For feminist theology needs the reminder that addressing the past does not necessitate abdicating critical reason. It serves rather to provide the power to unmask our prejudices and disclose new truth. Kathryn Tanner (1997: 189) echoes the arguments of the first chapter as she urges feminist theology to be in continuity with tradition rather than in critical disjunction, for the...

strategic importance for feminist theology of remaining traditional
... the more feminist theologians use for their own purposes the
cultural elements that have been appropriated by patriarchal
interests the greater the feminist claim on theological credibility,
and the harder it is for the feminist agenda to be dismissed by those
committed to the dominant patriarchal organisation of theological
discourse.¹

Such an understanding of the past concedes space for oppressive texts or discursive practice to become the site of struggle by feminist theologians. “Whoever controls the interpretation and designation of the past that authorises present practice gains the power to establish the boundaries of religious identity, the power to delimit what is authentically Christian, what is appropriate for a Christian to say and do” (Tanner 1997: 193).

Tradition then, despite its history of oppression for women, holds value as a springboard for discourse. An example of this can be seen as Tracy writes on the value of tradition critiquing itself. He questions the ability of the Western Christian tradition to involve itself in the whereabouts of the suffering and oppressed. “Where, in all the discussions of otherness and difference of the postmoderns as well as the moderns and the antimoderns, are the poor and oppressed?” He continues, “Is it too much to ask for our Western Christian tradition, in self-respect and self-exposure, to join that new conversation and enact that new solidarity?” (Tracy 1994: 22).

¹ “At no point in history has the Bible been regarded as fixed, changeless, and eternal-never as a unified, monolithic text” (Ostriker 1997: 169).

Again, Schneiders' hermeneutical discourse on the biblical text on John, draws on tradition to gain insight into discipleship. She writes, "I do not propose simply to discover what the text says about the Samaritan Woman in relation to Jesus in the context of the first century...in order to intrinsically 'apply' the results to feminist concerns. I am interested in the truth claims intrinsic to the text as they are addressed to believing readers in relation to their discipleship" (Schneiders 1991: 180). Yet the problem remains: how can traditional, patriarchal and exclusive language for God function creatively for women? How does one draw from tradition and relate it to the contemporary situation?

The problem arises as we realise that we are located within the very location that is being critiqued, so we must be always conscious that whatever pronouncements we make have emerged out of that situation. So how do we distance ourselves sufficiently from a tradition in which we are embedded in order to critique it?

Discerning the Pattern: The Scope of Tradition

To answer these questions I shall draw on the works of Gadamer and Ricoeur, as presented by Cady, although I am only too aware that new methodologies and theoretical models have emerged in theology, since post-structuralism, which would equally serve the purpose.¹

The question arises at this stage, on what grounds can a hermeneutics for tradition relate to the feminist hermeneutical discussion on language and metaphor, the subject of this study? For this, I shall draw on the paradigm suggested by Gadamer, and expanded by Cady, as she applies it as a way of relating theological tradition to the contemporary situation.

Linnel Cady identified the problems which were emerging out of the crisis in theology whereby the authority of Scripture and tradition were being challenged. She writes, "this multifaceted debate over the appropriate warrants for theological argumentation is the

¹ Tanner (1997: 185) understands theology in terms of political theory of culture. She critiques the use of Gadamer's theory of horizons as she promotes her theory, arguing that the past is not intrinsically authoritative and that a political theory of culture provides the potential to dislodge the currently pervasive meanings and alliances of tradition. See also Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* as she retains the traditional definition of political history as power and politics within government and state. Gender is the metaphor of power. (Scott, cited in Briggs 1997: 172). Briggs uses Scott's analysis of gender in relation to tradition to elaborate on her feminist history of theology.

status of the past” (Cady 1986: 440). To seek a solution to the difficulty of the status of the past, Cady turned to Gadamer whose appeal to jurisprudence offered the most appropriate paradigm, wherein the judge interprets the law as it applies in concrete cases, rather than in abstraction. Cady saw this as a way for tradition and text to keep pace with the historical situation, thereby relating to current events and experiences.

For Gadamer understood the text as a mediator of meaning, a dynamic medium, which takes place as event in the reader. To solve the difficulty of interpretation of classical texts in historically subsequent times, Gadamer suggests the use of legal hermeneutics, by which the judge attempts to adjudicate present cases according to ancient laws by applying the law to a new situation (Schneiders 1989: 5). He proposes that “legal hermeneutics is able to point out what the real procedure of the human sciences is. Here we have the model for the relationship between past and present that we are seeking” (Cady 1986: 442).

Gadamer sees the reclaiming of the past and fusing it with the present as a means of our understanding ourselves in the present. He sees no objective knowledge outside of history, instead there is only a historically conditioned reality from which new truths may be disclosed (West 1991: 99). Thus it is the means by which the taut, unyielding threads of the past may be stretched, discarded or selected anew, for the never-ending creating of new cloth. From such a view of reality, bearing within itself opportunities for self-criticism and liberating possibilities, we are open to new interpretations, and another way of seeing the world (Garman 1996: 24).

The positivist world, as presented by Schneiders, interprets the text in two ways. The text is seen as fixed and unmovable, the meaning established by the author. The reader therefore surrenders to the text, and interpretation becomes a means of extracting the inherent meaning of the text, thereby leaving limited options for the interpreter. This can result in literal fundamentalism. The alternative approach allows for the text to be submitted to ecclesiastical authority, allowing for the Church’s right to proclaim the final interpretation. This can result in magisterial fundamentalism. Neither of these approaches is helpful for women as they struggle with a text that is inherently misogynistic and denigrating of women. The literalising of the text limits the possibility of taking personal revelation and insights seriously. It hinders a theology transformation and an understanding of God as dynamic and working in individual histories.

As an alternative, Schneiders suggests a way to understand the text as a mediator of meaning, proposed by Gadamer (Gadamer 289-305 cited in Schneiders 1989) using Cady's outline of options that provide ways for theological interpretation. Cady distinguishes between three categories of response in Jurisprudence, as suggested by Dworkin's typology of legal hermeneutics, namely conventionalism, naturalism and instrumentalism.

Conventionalism is the category in which decisions are made on the grounds of precedent. Tradition is closely examined, and judgement is decided based on previous rulings on a similar case. If no such ruling exists, the judge exercises her authority to set a new precedent. The new law is an application of the intent of the original ruling. Underlying this approach is its determinative assumption that past events can dictate action for the present. It is evident that this position is closely linked with the positivist approach and is clearly problematic for feminists. Tradition sets the precedent and perpetuates the intrinsically oppressive nature of biblical interpretation and church rulings (Schneiders 1989). The constraints of the past cannot be helpful for women as tradition is applied despite its ideological nature. This position has endorsed the selective reading of the biblical tradition and has condoned, however unintentionally, the silencing of women.

The opposite position is the instrumentalist, whereby the past holds few constraints for the present situation. The deciding factor in this case, is whether it is useful for the purpose of social justice; if the past can be of use then the law can draw upon it, otherwise it is dispensable. The problem with this position lies in its interpretation of what constitutes helpful: while feminist theology could draw upon its claim to assist women in their demand for recognition of their full humanity, for economic and political equality, and for personal empowerment, if the decision of what is helpful lies in the hands of the dominant power, then this approach might not necessarily be helpful for feminists. However the value of this position rests in the possibility of distancing the contemporary situation from the stranglehold of a past which has been demeaning for women (Schneiders 1989).

The middle position, the naturalist, combines both the draw of tradition and the contextual situation. The past informs the contemporary situation, whereby the past sets the precedent within the constraints of interpretation of the contemporary context. This position stands in continuity with the past but is shaped by the present, and its value for the reformist/liberation feminist theologian resides in their search for liberating strands within

the Bible and the tradition of the church. It permits an articulation of personal experience and insights. Dworkin develops the illustration of authors collaborating on a combined piece of work. "In short, when deciding on how to continue the novel, one's choice would depend on how well it "fit" with the preceding chapters as a whole *and* on how well it articulated substantial insights, from one's own lights, about human experience" (Cady 1986: 445).

Cady suggests a strategic use of the past by feminists, as the history of its role in shaping theological positions is "irrational and immoral" (Cady 1986). Gerald West endorses the need for caution. He writes, "An unquestioning appropriation of the past (conventionalism) denies a critical, contextual base and leads to distortions and biases of interpretation." (West 1991: 84). He continues by citing Cady's analysis "Although not surprising, it is noteworthy that feminist theology does not reflect the conventionalist approach to the past. Even conservative evangelical feminists have concluded that a positivistic conception of revelation inevitably 'sanctifies the patriarchal distortions of the ancient Near East'" (Cady 1986 cited in West 1991: 84).

The choice for feminists says Cady, lies in the naturalist approach that affords a place from which new disclosures of truth might emerge. This fits with Reuther's (1983: 18) comment that, "It is the need to situate oneself meaningfully in history," and she makes a plea for reclaiming and extending the prophetic-liberating motif of Scripture. Naturalism resonates with the intentions of feminist theologians such as Fiorenza, Schneiders, Tribble and Reuther, whose focus is to reclaim tradition from its distortions. Yet caution must again be exercised, for although employing a hermeneutics from the stance of social justice, and in particular from a feminist perspective, nevertheless there must be a conscious awareness of the texts inherent patriarchal ideology. Otherwise, Cady warns, there is a temptation to view the text in the best possible light.

Spinning Out the Symbol: Constructing a Hermeneutic of Transformation

By adopting Cady's categories, the scope of tradition has been widened. It has allowed for feminist theologians to take tradition seriously which is important because, as Schüssler Fiorenza says, "A postbiblical stance is in danger of becoming ahistorical and apolitical because it too quickly concedes that women have no authentic history within biblical

religion and too easily relinquishes women's feminist biblical heritage" (Schüssler Fiorenza cited in West 1991: 115).

Cady's typology has provided a way for women to draw on tradition. In addition, as the scope is widened, there emerges a recovery of "genuine insight" and personal experience, yet the question remains: how are we to interpret the tradition in such a way that it frees us to recover and articulate our own experiences in order that tradition achieves relevancy and permits empowerment. First, I intend looking at Cady's investigation into symbolism and metaphor, into their construct and functioning, and show how this relates to this thesis. Secondly, I will show how it is possible for traditional symbols and personal insights to fuse and become an integrated whole, or to describe it another way, to apply a hermeneutics for transformation.

There can be little doubt that symbols are a powerful means of making sense of reality for human beings. Clifford Geertz (cited in Cady 1983: 456), an anthropologist, defines a symbolic universe as "a worldview and an ethos: a picture of the way things truly are and an emotional and moral sensitivity that corresponds to this picture." Geertz maintains that we "require a symbolic world to orient ourselves within the flux of experience." These external cultural codes present a coherent reality within which they can meaningfully live and it is the task of the theologian to extend, and to rework these products of human construction. "Theology is the discipline which contributes to the "extension" of these symbolic universes. This activity is not carried out from a detached "neutral" perspective but from a practical concern to create a more truthful, meaningful, and powerful vision."

The formulation of these conceptual frameworks "is contingent upon their being inhabited" (Cady 1983: 457). The image that the word "inhabited" presents is a useful one where religious metaphors and language are under discussion, for it reminds us of an active involved concept of a living God, which must be meaningful, powerful and true for its referent. For the theologian is not merely creating out of nothingness, but from a worldview which has emerged in a specific culture. It is by "keeping one foot within this given worldview, the theologian attempts to extend it in the most appropriate way" (Cady 1983: 458).

Again I shall refer to Geertz's perspectives, and relate it to the naturalist model of

hermeneutics. Here the past can be interpreted as disclosive of truth but there remains a refusal to uncritically capitulate to it. The religious perspective of Geertz aims to “correct and complete” daily reality. It confers value on different types of reality: “It is the sense of the “really real” upon which the religious perspective rests and which the symbolic activities of religion as a cultural system are devoted to producing, intensifying, and, so far as possible, rendering inviolable by the discordant revelations of secular experience” (Geertz 1973: 112). This discussion of the symbolic universes emphasises the uniqueness of a person’s way of seeing the world, and of the way we stamp cohesion and order on possibly discordant experiences. It is, as Cady calls it, the two-edged sword. It is theology cut free from limitations and biases, combined with a theology of suspicion.

I have been seeking validation for applying hermeneutics, a discipline related primarily to the interpretation of biblical or literary texts, to a far broader framework of expression, namely that of symbols and metaphors. Ricoeur is helpful here, for he does not limit the word text, but argues that his term ‘meaningful action’ be considered as text. Thus I will extend the notion of text beyond a written document; for though much of the Christian tradition is written, other dimensions, such as ritual, dance, music and art, play a significant part in its expression. I will therefore extend the notion of text to include oral language, mystical insights, and meaningful experience of the Divine. Cady’s understanding of ‘naturalism’, that interpretation may be more than the text, also gives space for widening the scope of tradition.¹ It is at this point that we need to explore a way that interpretation takes place, to see how we make use of symbolism and how it is integrated into the realities of life.

From Patterns to Weaving: The Validity of Hermeneutics for Religious Language

Schneiders (1989) uses Ricoeur’s definition of the concept of interpretation as he explains that symbolic language can contain many levels of meaning. “This is the work of thought, which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning”. Dealing with the deciphering of meaning, Schneiders says that there are three types of response to a critique of religious language. First there is the fundamentalist position; secondly, there is the position that is

¹ Compare with Schüssler Fiorenza’s method of widening the scope of tradition.

concerned but feel that the intention of the writers cannot be changed, nor can the text; and the third group is composed of feminist theologians who provide alternative interpretations and resources for liberation. But if, she says, the text/language is intrinsically oppressive, how can it function for women? Structuralist or linguistic analysis is not a possibility, nor is historical-critical exegesis, she says. Schneiders (1989: 4) hypothesis is that it is a hermeneutical question with theological implications.

West outlines a solution to the hermeneutical dilemma by suggesting three hermeneutical responses used by feminist and liberation theologians. These offer liberating possibilities. The solution starts, as does all critical feminist hermeneutics, with a hermeneutic of suspicion and a resolution to social change, in particular the emancipation of women from patriarchal ideology.

The first response is a reading “behind the text” in which the historical and cultural world provides the source for interpretation. Fiorenza and Meyers are examples of feminist theologians whose work attempts socio-historical reconstruction, even whilst acknowledging its limitations. A feminist reading “behind the text” places its commitment to the struggle to liberate its community from possible distortions of the text. Fiorenza (1990: 16-17) explains her methodology:

In order to unearth a “feminist coin” from the biblical tradition it critically analyses contemporary scholarly and popular interpretations, the tendencies of the biblical writers and traditioning processes themselves, and the theoretical models underlying contemporary biblical-historical and theological interpretations. ...A hermeneutics of suspicion must test not just the original biblical text but also contemporary translations for the presence of linguistic sexism.

The second type outlined by West is that of “reading the text,” a response associated particularly with the work of Tribble. The focus is on the text itself as literature, and so she interprets it in terms of itself, listening to the counter-voices within the text. Tribble’s work *Texts of Terror* highlights the “de-patriarchalizing principle at work” which she

distinguishes in the text. This is a litany of actions against women, functioning as examples of the androcentric nature of the Bible.

The third response is of reading “in front of the text,” which entails relating the text to the world that is opened up by the text. This type of reading can be seen in the work of Schneiders, which I intend to examine in depth, as it is helpful for this section.

As I look at ways in which language, and in particular language about God, can be freed of distortion and possibilities of women’s marginalisation, I need to ask, how can such readings be helpful? A reading “behind the text” helps the past throw light on the context in which the text was written. The traditional language used for God is biblically based, and it has been the task of certain feminist theologians (such as Fiorenza) to employ socio-historical hermeneutics to recover Scriptural images for God which are more life-affirming for women who struggle with the sole use of masculine, triumphalist images of God. Thus a “behind the text” reading would expose the distortions of the patriarchal influence, and the dominant use of masculine imagery for God. It would recover alternative images in Scripture and traditional documents (such as the writings of the mystics) and focus on images that are not gender-bound.

An “in the text” reading, whilst acknowledging the patriarchal nature of Scripture and even decrying the dominant use of masculine imagery, would focus on the reality of the nature of God, and recognise God as Other, beyond language. It would focus on the counter-voices within the texts, the alternative actions of God to counter the traditional, authoritarian ‘male’ image.

Lastly, an “in front of the text” reading would focus on the significance of the text for the present, how it opens up the world today, and its “transformative potential” (Schneiders 1991: 113). I consider that this particular approach to reading the text is useful for our purposes, although Schneiders suggests that the feminist theologian need not select only one type of reading. When challenging an ideology, it is possible that the feminist ideology critic “who is primarily concerned with the implications of biblical material for contemporary thought and praxis may be very concerned with the historical world behind the text because of what it contributes to understanding the present situation in the church.”

We have seen how the world in front of the text is an interaction between reader and text; that the possibility of the text, what Ricoeur calls the “world of the text” and Gadamer calls the “matter of the text,” is the real referent. The task before us is to free the text from the distance between it and the reader so that its truth can be received.

Weaving in the Threads: Distanciation is Productive

Ricoeur’s concern is not a distance of temporal time, as such, but rather the distance between oral discourse and written discourse. He argues that distance is the condition of possibility of interpretation, so rather than something to be overcome, it is to be appreciated and exploited (Schneiders 1989: 7). He therefore sees distanciation as productive and necessary if the text is to be freed for new interpretation. His theory suggests the possibility of a surplus of meaning, “the text exploding the very world out of which it came and whose prejudices and errors it ineluctably expresses” (Ricoeur 1981b: 139). Herein lies the potential for the truth claim to subvert the patriarchal world out of which it came, with all its biases and distortions. This happens as three steps are effected. First, the permanence of the discourse is protected by the fact of being written; secondly, it is cut loose from its author and retains a relative autonomy in the process. The text no longer coincides, says Ricoeur (1981b: 139), “with what the author meant, henceforth, textual meaning and psychological meaning have different destinies.” Obvious restraints are placed on the text, such as linguistic content, but it is no longer determined by the author’s intention. The third effect is that the text transcends its own psycho-sociological conditions of production. Schneiders concludes:

It can, therefore, be decontextualized and recontextualized by successive readings as long as there are readers competent to interpret it. And these recontextualizations will explore the surplus of meaning which the now autonomous texts in virtue of its emancipation from authorial intention and the particularities of the context of production. (Schneiders 1989: 7)

This opens the way for an oppressive text to be freed of the cultural situation in which it was written, instead it invites itself to create a world which it projects ahead of itself (Ricoeur 1981b: 142-144). This “world of the text” as Ricoeur calls it, allows for an

appropriation of the text by the interpreter whose understanding is grounded in the same ideological interests as the author, in this case, Christian tradition. A tradition that we have seen means a dynamic medium, a meaningful action – it is a world that is open to those who will receive it. How then does such appropriation take place, how can there be a place for a broader understanding of metaphor than that used by tradition? Furthermore, how have Christian traditional metaphors become “hardened symbols”?

De-coding the Colours: The Relevance of a Hermeneutics of Re-coding

Our search has been for a hermeneutic which situates the meaning of the text (language about God) in the worlds that it opens up for those who receive it. We have highlighted the damage inflicted by a distorted interpretation tradition and text on all who are marginalised, the poor and the voiceless. We need to recognise the contribution of language to this oppression, for the way people use language reflects the images in their lives and the patterns of their social behaviour. To effect change means changing our own linguistic models. Letty Russell (1974: 94) says:

The search for a usable past includes the search for usable language and new forms of expression. If this is to change, the Biblical, theological and ecclessial traditions must be interpreted and translated so that the liberating power of God’s love can break through in new words and actions. In a theology of liberation this search begins through the interpretation of tradition as it is recorded in the Biblical experience and an examination of the names we use to refer to God.

Fiorenza (1992: 6) says that language about God emerges from particular sociolocations and subject-positions and it cannot be assumed, “that biblical language is directly referential and descriptive of divine reality. Rather, such theological discourse positions itself within the tradition of “negative theology”, which recognises that all language about the divine is incommensurate with divine reality.” As no language can adequately describe that divine reality, the meaning of symbols and metaphors play a key role. We have seen how symbolism can become a means of understanding worldviews, or as Geertz calls it, symbolic universes. Geertz (1973: 90) goes on to point out the interdependent relation

between a religion's symbol system, with its moods and concepts, and the aura of factuality that surrounds them both. As the focal point of the religious system is the symbol of God, an entire worldview and order are involved in its character (Johnson 1992: 36). Thus our ideas about God reflect, as stated earlier, our images and language and relationships. "The symbol of God *functions*, and its content is of the highest importance for personal weal or woe" (p. 36). The function of a patriarchal God is to implement patriarchal order, the hierarchical rulers must be male to represent the divine ruler, and rule in his name. Whilst God is beyond all physical characteristics, nevertheless the male assumes the right to rule according to divine order. "Exclusive and literal imaging of the patriarchal God thus ensures the continued subordination of women to men in all significant civic and religious structures" (Johnson 1992: 37).

The symbolism of a patriarchal God also justifies the androcentric worldview. The dynamic that is established leaves women marginalized and alienated, not only from the structures and the divine, but also from a sense of selfhood. "Speech about God in the exclusive and literal terms of the patriarch is a tool of subtle conditioning that operates to debilitate women's sense of dignity, power, and self-esteem" (Johnson 1992: 38). Feminist theology critique, as shown in the first chapter, focuses on the distortion of the image of God as male, recognising its idolatrous nature and its effect on theological thinking. Shifting the stranglehold of a male concept of God is essential as long as it remains within its patriarchal, androcentric setting (Johnson 1992: 40).

Language about God is so important that it cannot be overstated, but the question remains, how does changing the metaphors effect change, and how can this best be achieved? For this we return to Ricoeur, to his notions of metaphor and imagination. Ricoeur argues that the traditional models of imagination are inadequate and posits *the theory of metaphor* or the *semantic theory of imagination*. He understands that we do not derive image from perception but from innovations in language. In metaphorical language, this means that unusual predicates are used and this results in new predicative pertinence, a new appropriateness and an extension of meaning. Just as we know the world only through the mediation of imaginative constructs, so too we have knowledge of God. Symbols open up levels of reality formerly closed, and they die as new ones rise up. The new symbols emerge from a deep level within us, and are reflective of a power which otherwise would remain untouched.

Such action, or as Ricoeur refers to it “the dynamism inherent in a true symbol,” discloses unknown depths of an experience of God. Women are discovering new images and it is their experience that is the generating force. “It is a clear instance of how great symbols of the divine always come into being not simply as a projection of the imagination, but as an awakening from the deep abyss of human existence in real encounter with divine being” (Johnson 1992: 44). As Ricoeur’s axiom states: the symbol gives rise to thought. The symbol guides our thoughts in certain directions, and so interpretation comes into play as we select or discard the reality being shown. The reality of women’s experience informs language which is carried in the symbol.

Janet Soskice (1985) defends the assumption that metaphors give us a means of speaking of God, but not all talk about God is metaphorical, she argues, for we do speak analogically of God when we refer to God as perfect or transcendent. However metaphors give us one means of expression., but always it is “saying the unsayable and knowing the unknowable” (Soskice 1985: 63). Metaphorical language is a pictorial language; Soskice describes it as “spinning out implications of a model”, for she argues that metaphors arise when we speak on the basis of models, and theology depends on models for they give form to its reflections. In religion, the models are all that we have-we are trapped in “a wheel of images” (Soskice 1985: 107).

We can see that it is of the utmost importance that our images of God are appropriate and distinct from prejudice, for they are both explanatory and descriptive. Soskice says that always we must remember that there is a distinction between referring to God and defining God: that it is this distinction which is at the heart of metaphorical speaking. However, we may justly claim to speak of God without claiming to define God, and to do so by means of metaphor (Soskice 1985: 140f).

The Act of Weaving: A Hermeneutic of Transformation

In her work on metaphor and religious language, Soskice speaks of the religious experiences of the mystics and their use of metaphor. Experience is vital to the mystic. Within a context or a community, the mystic can speak of mystic experiences, using language of his or her time, but the experience itself is where the reference is grounded. Emerging out of feminist critical consciousness is the focus on women’s experience. As

women own up to their particular experiences, and speak out, so the process of true appropriation of experience can start to happen. The final chapter will discuss the women's groups/women's churches that are being formed to allow for this expression and the appropriation to occur. For appropriation of the new symbol or image is an essential if it is to become meaningful, powerful and true for the receiver. The symbol must be integrated into the psyche. Thus Ricoeur says, as a symbol is recognised and accepted, there is a new appropriateness and an extension of meaning. One means of telling if this phenomenon has occurred involves a new self-understanding, an increase in the engagement of the ongoing effort to be as Ricoeur (1974: 21) calls it. It is about *metanoia*, a new way of being which is able to critique the old self and be open to transformation -of one's self and of the old way of thinking. It is about the creating of a new consciousness, of interpretation truly being a hermeneutics of transformation.

Conclusion

It is within this struggle for transformation that women are engaged. I presented a feminist analysis in the first chapter, highlighting how feminists struggle with language that excludes and how they see exclusive images of God as contributing towards this sense of isolation.

This chapter has considered the question of tradition and the problems that arise for such women in the margins. It has addressed the question of whether there is a hermeneutics that opens up a way for such women to locate the meaning of tradition in their worlds; women who recognise their marginalisation, and the practice of discrimination, and who are seeking transformation of the tradition. By extending the metaphors of the tradition for the purpose of inclusivity, they seek empowerment for all who search for a realisation of the promise of communion with the divine.¹ Yet the distortions of dominant ideological interests render tradition as seemingly insupportable for those who seek an inclusive vision.

Accepting Ricoeur's and Gadamer's argument that tradition cannot be ignored, I sought a way by which the past might be retrieved. In order to achieve this, it was necessary to

¹ See Gutierrez (1974: 86,89) for a more extended discussion on the saving action of God underlying all human existence.

broaden the scope of tradition so that it might include not only text as written, but Ricoeur's definition of text as 'whatever is meaningful action'. To overcome the difficulties of distorted tradition I drew on Cady, who in turn draws on Gadamer's appeal to legal hermeneutics. Based on a model of jurisprudence, Gadamer seeks to reclaim the past and fuse it with the present, so that new ways of seeing the world emerge.

It is the means by which tradition can be re-formulated by feminist theologians. For it has been their task to locate usable tradition, albeit within a theology of suspicion. We have seen how Schneiders work on biblical discourse provides an example of the way that interpretation might discard its oppressive distortions.

In the next chapter, three select groups of women describe their experience of exclusion and oppression, and in discussion describe how their experience of the divine is interpreting images that are meaningful and true for them.

Chapter Three

Surveying the Damaged Cloth

Everyone Sang
Everyone suddenly burst out singing
And I was filled with such delight
As prisoned birds must find in freedom
...O but everyone was a bird: and the song was endless:
the singing will never be done.

Siegfried Sassoon (1997: 179)

To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare
with God? An idol? A workman casts it---to whom then will
you compare me? Or who is my equal?

Isaiah 40: verse 18

Introduction

I ended the first chapter by referring to the author of *Womenspirit Rising* (a book that broke new ground for my own spiritual walk by exposing to me the broken threads, the discordant colours and the uneven stitches). I start this chapter with the following quotation from that work: "Naming women's experience thus becomes the model not only for personal liberation and growth, but for a feminist transformation of culture and religion" (Christ and Plaskow 1979: 7).

This chapter outlines the research procedure, its methodology and the process of data collecting, emerging out of a participatory research paradigm. It describes some of the difficulties encountered in a research project that involves women's experience within the

model of participatory research, and it explains the method of selection and the nature of the women's groups. It describes the methods I employed for the gathering and analysis of information.

This thesis seeks to use particular women's experience adhering to the method of liberation theology; it critiques the ideological position of patriarchy. It engages with a hermeneutics of suspicion within the hermeneutical circle by which dialogical interpretation is the governing model. It takes the advocacy position as it reclaims the hidden text, the voices of the oppressed and the poor. Here I refer briefly to Scott's proposal of hidden and public transcripts (West 1999: 48). Women's experience, and in particular women's perspective on images of God, has rarely been publicly articulated. This study attempts to unveil the ways certain women perceive God, and to tear apart the shroud of silence that has muffled their voice. It is an attempt to uncover the hidden transcripts, the oral voices that counter the public transcript, which is the voice of the dominant.

This is a phenomenological study in that my concern is with those women who are trying to achieve meaning and relationship within their own understanding of God. West asks the question: does oral history really get told when it is dangerous to the oppressed? (West 1999: 49). Yet it is important that the community speaks and herein lies the value of participatory research for it can work well in uncovering the hidden discourse.

Selecting the Threads: The Research Process

Thus the intention of this research is to allow for the hidden to become visible, for the singing to be sung in the market place, rather than unheard behind closed doors while seated at the loom. My initial interest in the subject of language about God has already been declared, but it was through listening to various women who participated in that original study (Thurlow 1989) that I began to wonder whether there were not many others who were needing an outlet for expression of their frustrations and/or alienation with traditional language for God. Graham Philpott described his intention for research into the community of Amawoti, Durban. My purpose too is, "To hear, understand, and learn from those who are usually excluded from the enterprise of the production of theological knowledge, and to allow this "invisible" knowledge and experience to challenge and

reshape traditional theological formulations which were generated from within the context of the dominant” (Philpott 1993: 17).

The framework of the research procedure for this essay is that of a qualitative research paradigm and within this paradigm is used a participatory methodology. This alternative paradigm (compared to the dominant research paradigm described below) is undertaking the task of unmasking incipient theology. When the observer is part of the research group there is always the problem of the ‘knowledgeable outsider’: the danger lies in the possibility of control so that the result may be the formulation of what the researcher is trying to construct. Therefore it is necessary to acknowledge the contribution, the interest in the subject and form an anchoring in their contribution. The question for the researcher is, how do I as a researcher initiate a process that is empowering and yet how do I as an *involved* researcher remain objective and resistant of control? What can be my contribution in the discussion process when I have acknowledged my own involvement in the subject? As I prepared for this study I became only too aware of the potential for conflict between my feminist frame of reference and the experience of certain women in the different groups who would not wish to declare themselves as part of the feminist/womanist movement.

The selection of the groups for this research was dependent on the following factors. First, the three groups were existing groups, each of which I had been a member for some time. I therefore knew each member well. Secondly, each member volunteered for this research work, thereby indicating an interest in the subject. Thirdly, I knew that the women in each group had received some form of higher education so that reasonable articulation and understanding of the issues involved could be expected. The majority of the women were involved in education in some form, ranging from theological students to university or schoolteachers or nursing tutors. Although I was aware that some women were familiar with feminist scholarship, I knew that there were others who resisted the term ‘feminist’, and that again that there were others, primarily those from Imbali, who were unaware of an emerging feminist discourse. I decided therefore not to raise feminist issues myself in the groups so as to avoid the bias of my perspective influencing the discussion. In my dealings with the women from Imbali, it was necessary for each of them to have a reasonable command of English, as my knowledge of Zulu was limited. At this point I will introduce the groups in detail, starting with the group which has been in existence the longest.

The Julian group (the name I shall call this study group) was part of a larger contemplative prayer group, named the Julian Group after Julian of Norwich, a hermit in the 15th century. This group had been meeting for a number of years. The research study group was formed in 1990 and consisted of six women, each white, middle-aged and middle-class from various denominations, four of whom attended Church worship regularly. There were two members in the Julian group who did not attend Church and who openly declared that, for them, the Julian Group is their church. All the women in the Julian group were employed outside the home, either as teachers or in social justice organisations. Each member was politically aware and active in justice issues. They were each very interested in the spiritual dimension of life, all of them had read a wide variety of books on different forms of spirituality, and all had some knowledge of feminist theology and its concern with exclusive language. This latter point I only discovered during the sessions.

The second group was part of a combined Cathedral/ Imbali Church Bible Study group in the township of Imbali, outside Pietermaritzburg. I was co-facilitator for this Bible Study Group, which met in one of the houses in Imbali, an area renowned for “party political” fighting and violence during the political struggle against apartheid. I think it is important to mention that the members of this group met during the worst period of violence and mayhem, in what is now called The Seven Day War in March 1990. The research group, which I will name the ‘Imbali group’ for the purpose of this study, was formed in 1990. It was composed of five black middle-class women, and myself. Each was employed in a nursing or teaching capacity, and was travelling daily in and out of the township which was a highly volatile area. All were actively involved in their Church. I asked for interested members for this research from the Bible Study Group and these five women volunteered. I was aware of their love of the Bible and their enthusiasm to learn further, but my knowledge of their awareness of feminist issues was limited. This group, more than the others, expressed a wish to discuss images of God in the Bible.

The third group, formed in 1992, I have called the ‘Alternative Church group’, aware that as I do so I acknowledge that being named ‘alternative’ (meaning ‘on the boundary’) carries, albeit unwittingly, implicit understandings of subversive undercurrents. However, when the name was suggested, the group made no objection to the notion of subversive leanings. This was the largest research group, consisting of ten members, from very disparate backgrounds. Four were black women and six were white. The black women

were theology students, as were two of the white members. The other women were either schoolteachers, employees of the local university or were social justice workers. One was a journalist. All the members of the Alternative church group were politically aware and conscientized in feminist concerns. This group covered a wider age-range than the other groups, seven of the members being below the age of thirty, and the eldest fifty-six years.

Procedure

The procedure of research was that each group would meet either once a week or fortnightly for a period of either two or three months. The Julian and Alternative Church groups met at my home, while the other group met in Imbali when it was safe enough to do so. When the violence escalated and the security police refused me entry into the area, then we would meet at a local church in town.

The format of discussion varied with each group, but always the emphasis was on the value of personal experience, meaning whatever was true and powerful for them. In other words the intention was not to collect objective data.

Each group proceeded in a different way, according to their own preference. The choice of image or issue to be discussed was flexible, although the women knew the subject of the study. I allowed each group to generate their own questions at each session, and as far as was possible, I did little to direct the conversation. Very infrequently did I guide the subject back to the research topic. The sessions were recorded as unobtrusively as possible, hand-written notes, which I expanded after each session.

The Julian Group

This group met once a week for two months. Each session of two hours would start with a brief resumé of the previous meeting's discussion in order to share any further thoughts on the subject which had arisen during the week. The evening's topic was decided upon by the group, although I had topics available if necessary. The subjects covered included:

- Childhood image of God, and whether this had changed
- Current image of God

- Relationship between image of God and image of oneself
- Feminine image of God
- God of Justice and Love
- The Church's image of God – God as Father
- Changes in one's conception of God according to circumstances
- Language in the Church – inclusive liturgy etc.
- Women's Church, women as priests

I interviewed two women from this group (who volunteered) and four women responded to the questionnaires. The interview questions related to the questionnaires, allowing for greater depth of discussion.

The Imbali Group

This group met once a week for two months. Each session was one and a half hours long, with the topics decided by the group, although of the three groups, this one requested greater guidance from me and showed a preference for discussing biblical images. I always had biblical references available. Again the recording was unobtrusive, and was written up in greater detail later. The subjects covered included:

- Childhood image of God and whether this had changed
- Image of God and oneself
- Feminine images in the bible
- God as judge
- God as all-powerful- in our daily lives
- Women in the bible
- Feminine images of God – Sophia, woman and the lost coin
- Images in the church – God as Father
- Women in the Church

I interviewed two women who volunteered from this group. Five women responded to the questionnaires. Again the questions at the interview related to the questionnaire.

The Alternative Church Group

This group met fortnightly over a period of three months. Each session was scheduled to last for two hours, but on four occasions the group chose to stay on longer rather than end the discussion. The women determined their own topics, mostly within the framework of the church and imagery for God. The recording was unobtrusive and expanded later. Of the three groups, this one chose not to look at biblical images *per se*; the topics discussed were broader and there was stronger feeling expressed on the subject of the Church. The topics discussed included:

- Childhood images of God, whether this had changed
- God as Father
- Feminine images of God
- Language in the church
- Changing images according to circumstances
- God as Love, God as justice
- Patriarchy in the Church – the struggle for women
- God in nature

I interviewed three women who volunteered from this group, while six women responded to the questionnaires. The interview used the questionnaire as a guideline for discussion.

The Qualitative – Quantitative Distinction

At this point I wish to provide an overview of the rationale and methodology behind participatory observation. Traditionally, research has been based on the need for ‘hard’ objective, rigorous approaches within the broader philosophical context of positivism. Modelling its research on the natural sciences, an ‘objective’ position is adopted by the researcher, “who collects ‘facts’ about the social world and then builds up an explanation of social life by arranging such facts in a chain of causality, in the hope that this will uncover general laws about how the society works” (Finch cited in Oakley 1981). I understand this as an important factor for this study, as we extend our knowledge of how society works; that incipient theology is exploring one way by which voices in society,

previously unheard or silenced may resound in the aisles of power. I would suggest that one of the fundamental arguments for qualitative research for this study is that it provides opportunities for the voice of the oppressed and marginalised to be heard.

For the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research can be seen both philosophically and technically. First qualitative research involves methods that are not statistically based and which consider small-scale analysis. It also attempts to understand the meaning behind behaviour or thinking rather than its 'causes'. The procedures used are inductive in that they serve to generate rather than to test ideas and generalisations. Qualitative research is therefore founded on an "interpretivistic epistemology" and seeks to understand behaviour from the point of view of the respondent.

Participatory Observation

Observation is an indispensable part of the method by which social scientists are able to gain an overall understanding of human behaviour and of social processes. It frequently involves fieldwork whereby the researcher aims to understand the perspective of those being observed. Within the setting I needed to decide on the degree of structure which I would impose on the observational environment. I needed to decide whether to simply observe and record, with the least degree of structuring, so that, as observer, I would act as a covert researcher. It is not possible for the researcher to always ensure that no structuring is imposed that might manipulate or interfere with the antecedent conditions being studied. Yet always I had to bear in mind my earlier question: how do I as the researcher initiate the research yet remain resistant of control? Yet the positive features of participatory observation are numerous.

The most obvious feature of participatory observation is that it enables a researcher to get to know a particular individual's conceptions without being constrained to the aggregate. As observer I may take part in the activities of the group in an attempt to experience its processes for myself. As a result of this experience it is hoped that I will be better able to interpret, understand, and relate the reasons and symbolic meanings of the behaviours that are perhaps unique to the social world being observed. Participant observers seek to maximise their ability to grasp the motives, values, beliefs, concerns, troubles, and interests that underlie the actions of their subjects. It is a method widely used in sociology

and by psychologists whose perspective is phenomenological – those who advocate the need to focus on immediate experiences and examine how those experiences are perceived by individuals. Participatory observation involves intimate and sensitive interaction in a context that is naturally flexible and dynamic, yet maintains some sort of framework, however broad. There can therefore be no standardised operating procedures if the research is to retain its flexible approach.

Before conducting the participant observation study I needed to begin with some general propositions, which were simply questions, guesses and hunches relating to the primary goal of understanding and describing the context to be observed. The group of subjects I selected depended on the questions I would be asking. It is evident that the choice of a context for investigation is rarely made without some kind of prior expectations and assumptions. These assumptions must also be made explicit so that through observation, they may be put to the test and rejected if proved irrelevant or invalid.

Two more matters are of vital importance. First, gaining access to the group, establishing a role and establishing rapport, and secondly the conducting of the study and recording field notes. The final stage consists of formulating an analysis and the writing up of the research. The effect of subjectivity in my interpretation is unavoidable, especially as the data is viewed from a feminist perspective. I have previously acknowledged my interest in feminist scholarship and here, at this point, extend the discussion to include particular feminist sociological research.

Feminist Participatory Research

Recent studies have critiqued conventional methodological research, in particular when projects are dealing with methodological, ethical and practical issues where the researcher has adopted, or become aware of a feminist perspective (Roberts 1981). This section describes some of the problems confronting feminist research as it relates to this study. Exploring women's experience in research requires relating women's specific experience to general human experience, which highlights the resounding silence of women's voices of the past. Women's experience, although abundant and diverse, distinctive and incredibly rich, has been subsumed by male descriptions of general human experience: "Women's experience must be fully explored, known and described; politically, culturally and

religiously it must become an integral part of our total human experience, a rich storehouse to draw upon for all, both women and men” (King 1993: 76).

The second difficulty emerges when considering the hazards involved in the universalising and absolutising of women’s experience. It is not sufficient to narrow it down to female bodily existence, for that denies the validity of other experiences of women, such as creativity and work, and places undue emphasis on the biological dimension. The increased awareness of the diversity of women’s lives presents problems as one dares to claim women’s experience as ground for discourse.

Fulkerson, as mentioned earlier, challenges the feminist theologian’s appeal to women’s experience, arguing that it has failed to offer adequate theories allowing for a respect for difference. The danger lies in assuming that the experience of one speaks for the other; that the subject of theological discourse invokes universality and discounts the voices of those women whose concerns may not be those, for instance, of the feminist movement or whose experience is vastly different to that of the speaker. The unacceptability of a claim of commonality in oppression calls for a broadening of the subject which allows for an analysis of context and social location of the subject’s experience:

My proposal to “change the subject” is based on the view that the liberation criticism of the category “woman” mandates an approach that takes seriously the location where “woman” is “produced”. We must not lose the subject “woman.” We must simply become more adept at changing the subject, that is, at respecting its multiple identities”. (Fulkerson 1994: 11)

It is necessary for the researcher to be located within the study of the context. Ann Oakley highlights the methodological problems for interviewing and discerns the problems this presents for participatory observation. Traditional criteria, she states, is a one-way process in which the interviewer elicits and receives, but does not give information. Again the traditional method of interviewing is seen as denying any form of interaction, the attitude being one of narrow and objectified subject as data. Thirdly, the interviews are seen as a means confined to collecting statistical comparability with other interviews and the data collected from them. These paradigms create problems for feminist interviewers whose

concern and objective is to illustrate the difficulties that arise from a critique of patriarchal structures.

There is much that is not disclosed about interviewing, states Oakley, despite the claim of sociologists. Very few describe in detail the process of the interview itself:

The conventions of research reporting require them to offer such information as how many interviews were done and how many not done; the length of time the interviews lasted; whether the questions were asked following some standardized format or not; and how the information was recorded. Some issues on which research reports do not usually comment are: social/personal characteristics of those doing the interviewing; interviewees' feelings about being interviewed and about the interview; interviewers' feelings about interviewees; and quality of interviewer-interviewee interaction; hospitality offered by interviewees to attempts by interviewees to use interviewers as sources of information; and the extension of interviewer-interviewee encounters into more broadly-based social relationship (Oakley, cited in Roberts 1981: 31)

It is the difference between theory and practice that is important. The quality of interview stemming from personal involvement, so prevalent in feminist theology, reflects the entrenchment of research protocol. Herein lies the difficulty for it is the acquiring of a detachment that objectivity requires. Oakley says that this difficulty is particularly evident when a feminist interviewer is interviewing women. It is difficult to remain detached and to retain the necessary distance.

Yet she presents a way forward: Oakley maintains that a distancing is legitimised on the grounds that the model critiqued is predominately a masculine model of sociology and society:

The relative under-valuation of women's models has led to an unreal theoretical characterisation of the interview as a means of

gathering socio-logical data which cannot and does not work in practice. This lack of fit between the theory and practice of interviewing is especially likely to come to the fore when a feminist interviewer is interviewing women (who may or may not be feminists). (Oakley 1981: 30)

I would argue, too, that uniqueness should counter the traditional universal generalisation, and that the objective of participatory research is in its quest for transformation of power structures and relationships, and of empowerment of oppressed peoples, as in this thesis, the uncovering of incipient theology. The contribution of participatory research and feminism provides a framework for a research methodology as partnership, as described by Oakley. "Participatory research taught me the necessity of being explicit about personal choices and values in the research process. Feminism taught me to recognise that the personal is political" (Oakley 1984: 5).

Interviews and Questionnaires

As part of the methodology of the research, interviews provide an opportunity for in-depth study. The form of interview was unstructured. The interview contained some focus and provided a degree of regulation by following the questionnaire, yet at the same time was unstructured in that it gave flexibility and increased the opportunity to explore essentially personal and non-standardised responses.¹

A guiding hypothesis outlined the area of investigation on the questionnaire; that the questionnaire be for the purpose of clarification and elaboration of the opinions already voiced during the group meetings. The questionnaire therefore was limited in its exploration and focused primarily on the subject of language for God and language in the church. The voluntary nature of the interview suggested a greater degree of valid and freely given information. As in the group situation, the emphasis was on the rapport that existed between the respondent and myself that developed into what Oakley calls, a "pseudo-conversation", although she warns of the dangers of "over-rapport". It presents, yet again, the problem of involvement and distancing, bias and unbiased interpretation,

¹ For an outline of the questionnaire consult the appendix.

something which Oakely (1981: 57) claims cannot be controlled as “A feminist interviewing women is by definition both ‘inside’ the culture and participating in that which she is observing.”

Analysis of Data

Surveying the issues requires an analysis of the phenomenon which attempts to avoid the traps of over-identification and distorted interpretation. The suspending or bracketing of the researcher’s presuppositions is required if s/he is to enter into the world-view of the individual who was interviewed. I achieved this by avoiding leading questions and allowing the individual to direct the ‘conversation’, by recording in detail and writing up the conversation immediately following the session. The next stage requires listening/reading for a sense of the whole, permitting the themes and meanings to emerge, before embarking on the exacting task of noting significant words, phrases, sentences and non-verbal communication. It is only when this rigorous process is completed, does the researcher enter the critical stage of relating the data to the research question. A process of eliminating redundancies follows, as the researcher identifies clustering units of relevant meaning. Hycner (1988) concludes:

At the core of phenomenology is the very deep respect for the uniqueness of human experience and that this ever present uniqueness will always make the attempt to develop a totally comprehensiveness theory of human experience an ultimately futile one. It is the uniqueness of the human being that constantly instills novelty and unpredictability into any attempt to totally and comprehensively “capture” the phenomenon of human experience.

The data for this study was collated and analysed according to the topic of discussion as noted earlier. It is the ‘capturing’ of women’s experience which has motivated this study, and it seems fitting to close this chapter with further details of how these particular women came together to speak on their personal images of God.

Searching for the Sacred: Women's Experience

As stated earlier, each women's group came into being in a particular manner, none of which was formed for the express purpose of this project. One is a contemplative prayer group and the other a Bible Study group. Being a member of each group, I was granted access with a role and rapport already established. The Alternative Church group was formed by myself as a women's support group, connected with my theological studies as part of my role as the Theology Department's facilitator for women students. When this thesis was under consideration I requested any interested members of the groups to participate in the research project.

What was very clear was that amongst all the women was a strong sense of the spiritual dimension of life, be it grounded in formal religion or otherwise. They were all searching for the sacred, transcendental or within themselves, and were willing to make the commitment to meet regularly in order to unearth and allow to unfold, or to deepen, the spiritual self together. When I realised this, I recalled words I had read long before from another book that has affected my own spiritual life, *The Feminine Face of God*. The two authors were discussing how research at that time reflected only the standards and values set down by men. They came to a disquieting realisation: "Despite our many years of spiritual practice and extensive reading in various traditions, we knew almost nothing about how women develop spiritually...it became clear to us that women on spiritual paths today must look beyond models of the past for inspirations" (Anderson and Hopkins 1991: 7).

As we explored the images of God within the different groups, always I was aware of other subjects for such a study: Is it important that people are prised loose of their concepts? Is it acceptable for me to be the judge whether certain images liberate or confine? Have I the right to consider the possibility of oppression by the symbols and images that are used, and what right have I to consider that people need empowering?

As these questions emerged in my own thinking, and occasionally during the sessions, so I decided that for the purpose of group discussion, the women would determine their own needs, and that the framework would not adopt a structure laid down by myself. The motivation of the research would be supplemented by the needs of the particular groups,

with the purpose of engendering awareness of the possibility of limitations of traditional images of God, accepting that though the tension of these questions could not be ignored, feminist scholarship would not intentionally arise as part of the data-collecting.

As the individual groups determined their own 'conversations' around the subject, I took the role of recorder and observer, as part of the group yet not necessarily the facilitator. Although initially the intention was to hold Bible study groups, because of the initiative from the women themselves, the format became less formal, with the exception of the Imbali group, who opted for a more structured framework. I therefore agreed to provide this group with selected texts from the Bible in order to initiate discussion, but at no time did I control the form of discussion. Each time the women chose a Scriptural text out of a selection I provided.

Conclusion

The women in the groups valued their sessions together. Of the groups, the Julian group and the Imbali Study Group are still meeting. The Alternative Church group has disbanded because of death, illness or the women have moved away. The women in all three groups expressed their delight in being granted the opportunity to speak of their own images, which as we shall see in the next chapter, often differed from the traditional images presented in the Church. In addition, the discussion groups gave the women a secure space to express their frustrations and, for some, to explore their anger and sense of alienation stemming from the patriarchy of the church structures. They valued the informal approach to the collecting of data; indeed for some of the women the sessions were, they said, more spiritual and insightful of God working in their lives than the formal worship they attended. As one woman said, "When these groups stop meeting for this research, I shall feel as if I've broken away from the church for a second time. I feel they meet my experience and my image of God just where I am."

The methodology of participatory observation displayed significant benefits for the purpose of this research. It achieved its intention of unmasking incipient theology in a nonthreatening and noncontrolling manner. It permitted the expression of women's experience to be heard in conversations initiated by themselves. As an additional benefit, I was able to relinquish my role as 'data-collector' to some degree and so participate on a

relative level of equality, thus encouraging a relaxed, informal interaction. The assurance of confidentiality was crucial and ensured some intimate and sensitive sharing of experience. The methodology of participatory observation engenders flexible and dynamic interaction and yet allows the 'less-vocal' members the space to make a contribution.

It is accepted that the experience of these group members cannot be assumed to be representative of any particular group of women. Yet there was a strong sense of identification and even solidarity as the women talked of their images of God, particularly when the images were at variance with the images presented by the church. The next chapter explores the various images of the women within a framework of issues which arose during the discussions. This is not an attempt to limit the analysis but rather provide an opportunity to explore the critical issues in feminist theology.

Chapter Four

Spinning and Weaving: Re-claiming the Making of Tapestry

Introduction

This chapter draws the threads together and attempts a viewing of the whole tapestry. As we take a step backward from the craftwork, we can survey the scene in its entirety. Yet we dare not lose sight of the varied stitches, the creative additions that makes the whole unique. Always there is the need to be open to different interpretations and insights stemming from the observer. For so much arises from the symbol, be it thinking, feelings, collective memories and so on, that for each of us, coming as we do from different locales and with our particular experiences, the image will impinge on the mind and senses with a unique peculiarity.

For each person is an expression of that uniqueness, born as a life-force of the Divine creation, situated at an historical moment for a particular purpose which only that person can fulfil.¹ And the fulfilling of that purpose can never be achieved outside of the social sphere, it must always be within and for a community.² This is beyond mere consciousness of the other, but it is the contextualization of the inner reality.³ Thus I suggest that we surrender, albeit temporarily, but with sincerity, the declaration of a sole claim to truth, in order to be able to hear of the other's symbolic universe; thrusting aside that kyriarchical form of thinking that says, if we forego our stance and listen, then we will be undermined and in danger of losing the battle.⁴

For without question, the history of Christianity contains sad stories of battles for power, and its misuse of power. The need for a sole claim of truth is surely opposed to our

¹ I have called you by name (Isaiah 43: 1-4).

² The image of relationship: "God-as-loving-movement-between-people" (Maitland 1983: 17).

³ Love for the other and discovery of the self (McIntosh 1998: 210).

⁴ 'Kyriarchical' is Fiorenza's term meaning the power displayed by the master or lord (WCC Publication 1997: 2).

commission to build the Kingdom of God. If the Divine Power is for the liberation of all, then what can be in opposition? I speculate that it lies in the mind-set which fears transformation. Its agenda is maintenance rather than mission, preservation rather than progression, and it works powerfully against that transformative hope which enlightens the reformist and liberationist position in feminist theology, which undergirds the recovery of incipient theology, which ratifies the conviction of inclusivity. This hope of transformation is evident in the feminist argument for a holistic and participative approach to spirituality and in its eagerness to reconstitute theological discourse. This is the reconstructive theology that feminists are seeking.

Uncovering the hidden discourse or incipient theology is but one means of encouraging conversation, both within and outside the church. There is a sense of urgency for already too many have been thrust aside and disregarded, crushed and discarded with a contempt that can only leave us weeping like the women of Jerusalem. It is at such times that we journey in faith just as Jesus stumbled towards the enactment of his rejection. Then we receive reassurance from his words, "Do not weep for me, rather weep for yourselves" (Luke 23: 28).

Where does that leave us now as we survey this study and look for a way into tomorrow? I would suggest that each of us must honestly acknowledge our own position, and be willing to be open to the dynamic of change, the dynamic of a living God, always ready to receive new understandings for transformation, both in ourselves and in the church. For the terror of today which threatens humankind is the dogma that our worldview today must be forced uncritically into the morrow. Karen Armstrong (1993: 432) cites Peter Berger: "The American scholar notes that we often have a double standard when we compare the past with our own time. Where the past is analysed and made relative, the present is rendered immune to this process and our current position becomes an absolute."

Erhard Gerstenberger (1996: xiv) picks up this point when he writes:

Our question goes far beyond merely paying attention to theological tracts about an appropriate conception of God for our time. The whole contemporary relation between men and women is at issue, the broad effects of patriarchal ideas of God on social and

ecclesiastical life. It is a question of the intimate relationship between unjust social orders and false understandings of God, of the liberation of all people who have suffered under patriarchal claims to dominion.

This study has set out to show how three select groups of women see God. It shows how that imaging can at times differ from the traditional image and yet maintain an integrity and truth that is meaningful and powerful for the recipient. This final chapter will draw the various aspects together. Within a framework of feminist theology I will locate the particular contemporary situation, and suggest direction for finding liberating images of God. I have identified five categories which have emerged from the group discussions, and will use these to explore the issues which have arisen. The categories are: patriarchy, women's experience of spirituality, images of God, authority in the traditional church, and woman-church. They have been categorised as such for the intention of this study whilst acknowledging that a certain overlapping of issues is inevitable. I will place the experiential within a hermeneutical circle which allows dialogue with the witness of the past and contends with issues of the present. I will attempt to situate the findings of this thesis within other scholarship.

Women's Experience of Patriarchy: God as Father

Erhard Gerstenberger in his book *Yahweh: The Patriarch* enters the dialogue and argues for the very openness that I am promoting:

Theology dare not hide behind our ancestors; it must relate to the situation of the present world and the contemporary search for God. Just as surely as the living God of the biblical witness is still at work today, the images of God that we sketch in response to that work must differ from those of the Bible. Seen in that perspective, the variety of theological traditions in the Bible itself does not hinder but rather provides a license for our search for a proper contemporary confession of God. (Gerstenberger 1996: 82)

This means that we cannot fail to take tradition seriously. As our worldview changes, as

the paradigms shift, we have a need to draw on tradition or else we are in danger of floundering in the shoals of relativism and losing our footing in shifting sands. To extend the metaphor, we need to be grounded, but the tradition from which we draw must be critically surveyed, employing a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion if we are not to be enmeshed in historical ideologies which have distorted ideas of freedom and justice and served to promote the interests of the dominant.

The concern with power and patriarchy arose in all three groups as the discussion turned to the use of the dominant image for God: God as Father. It became evident that in the Alternative Women's group and with three members in the Julian group, that patriarchy was a significant problem. However it did not appear to be an issue for the group from Imbali. This group explained to me that in Zulu, the pronouns are not gender defined, so that reference to a male God is not so emphatic in the biblical text. They also had few problems with the image of God as a father. On the contrary, for four of them, they said that as single mothers raising children on their own, they needed the notion of a male presence sharing parental duties. One woman said, "I can turn to God as a Father and he is there to give me the strength and support which I need when I'm struggling to feed them. I know he will provide." The image of God as the male provider is a dominant one in this group. When asked to unpack what they understood by the word 'father', they used words such as "strong, in charge, in control, the provider, the authority figure." Yet some of the women had been abandoned by the fathers of their children leaving them to do the caring and raising. For the women who were married, they too saw the role of the male as 'head of the house', the main provider.

This concept of God prevailed, despite the fact that all of them were professional women, in positions of authority, and earning adequate salaries. They explained that this is Zulu culture and that though things were changing, the roles still remain within their stereotypes.¹ The women were pleased with the idea of change, but were resigned to the ways things are at present. "We work very hard to keep our children fed and with clothes, and the men come and demand money to spend, but there is nothing we can do. It is very

¹ Brigalia Bam (cited in *Women Hold up Half the Sky* 1991: 367) writes of African culture and warns of the danger of placing the blame for sexism on the culture, whereas the problem is about male attitudes. Also Emma Mashinini (cited in Ackermann 1991: 350) writes that "if people want to practice sexism, they should not damage their own people by saying that it is their black culture."

difficult for some women who have very little.” I asked them whether they had problems with women being priests, a role traditionally reserved for men, and they said ‘no’. They could see that women could be of value in the leadership of the church, but they were unsure how it would be for Zulu women as priests. In theory, they said, there are no difficulties, but the male Zulu priests might not like it.¹

The ambivalence between the life-experience of the women and their image of God is an intriguing one. It is a challenge to the suggestion that our image of the divine responds directly to our image of others and ourselves. This imaging of God as the essential male provider despite their own capabilities as financially independent, highlights the possible internalisation that patriarchy can engender, and the desire for an external locus of authority. However James Scott (cited in West 1999: 45) suggests that it is the conspiracy of ‘the hidden transcript’ which remains veiled: “Discretion in the face of power requires that a part of the ‘self’ that would reply or strike back must lie low. It is this self that finds expression in the safer realm of the hidden transcript.” The experience of the Imbali group also serves to remind us that many women do not want to shed an image of God as Father. Johnson (1993: 63) writes “the ambiguity of the Christian tradition lies precisely in this fact, that despite its sexism it has served as a strong source for countless women throughout the centuries and continues to do so today.” Indeed, one woman from the Alternative Church group said, “I am fully equipped with the patriarchal baggage. My image is very patriarchal: Father God. That is my personal image, then I talk to him.” At a later stage she said, “I cannot picture him. I just talk to him.” Out of her need to find a father figure she added, “I find I need a male God. That is my reality, my own experience.”

The earlier chapters have shown that the issue of patriarchy and its subsequent connection with male language for God is paramount in feminist discourse. Feminist theologians have pointed out that historical accounts indicate that Israel worshipped both god and goddess, that the worship of a monolithic god, Yahweh, began only in the era of the exilic period in Babylon. Gerstenberger is admirably honest as he recounts how arrogant and sexist decisions and judgements have been made at the expense of women, carried out in the

¹ I must add my own experience to this comment. As a white woman who is a priest, I presided at the altar many times over four years in the parish of Ngcwayi, Natal, and also at Izingolweni, Umzimkulwana, and I never encountered a single instance of antagonism or rejection from any Zulu-speaking person (priest or lay). In fact, I received great warmth and appreciation.

name of God who was viewed as male:

This fact is indisputable, and thus should not be suppressed, glossed over, or endlessly debated. From the prohibition of “mixed marriages” in late Old Testament texts to the degradation of women by many of the church fathers, to the persecution of witches at the beginning of the modern era, and to the exclusion of women from the priestly office and other areas of church leadership, there has been a straight line of male admiration of self and contempt for women in the Judeo-Christian tradition. (Gerstenberger 1996: 82)

I have argued for the use of a hermeneutics of suspicion if we are to unearth the potential for liberation from within a patriarchal tradition. It is only through such a hermeneutics that the emergence of a monolithic, masculine God can be challenged and liberated. Paul Johnson (1996: 48) states the obvious. “When first the Ancient Egyptians, then the Ancient Hebrews, started to worship a single god, it did not occur to them that this god could be anything but masculine. When gods became God, they acquired an umbrella masculinity in this single *persona*, who absorbed the female attributes of the old goddess. Johnson continues to say that he foresees no problem, therefore, with women who would refer to God as She, “if they find it more helpful, and think of God as womanly...They do not really believe God has male or female characteristics any more than they believe that statues are divine.” (:48). Unfortunately he continues, “At the same time, it is wrong for feminists to press for changes in the liturgy to make references to God non-gender specific, and still more wrong for the ecclesiastical authorities to give way to them.” Johnson emphasises that he is all for tolerance and latitude. Sadly, it seems that those attitudes must only come from those who struggle with exclusive language, and not apparently from the dominant group.

Our conclusion must be, that however commendable it is to hear from those others, such as Gerstenberger, who admit to a history of sexism, patriarchal thinking remains firmly fixed, with few indications of transformation, especially in the church and liturgy. Attitudes appear to have changed little despite the feminist critique merely becoming more overt in

its resistance, and attempts to change the language encountering increased opposition.¹ I would hazard the opinion that very little will change in this area until alternative thinkers form part of the official liturgical commissions, and this would involve an undertaking that the liturgy belongs to the people and not the leadership.

Meanwhile for those other women in the study groups who are struggling with sexist language and male imagery, their response is either resignation or abdication. Considering the possibility of the church's image of God becoming more inclusive, a member of the Julian group said resignedly, "I don't think the church could present God as a wise, loving old granny sitting in her kitchen. I think the church's God supports the status quo and holds everything together, meaning tradition, and is not too concerned about liberation. It prefers the rich and powerful to the poor and weak." Another woman from the Julian group, who attends church regularly, said, "More and more I feel isolated by the church, because I strongly resist making allowances for the use of exclusive language, after a lifetime of doing so. People in leadership need to be more attuned to the current cry for inclusive language." But a woman from the Alternative Church group, explaining her abdication, wrote, "Look, I do believe that the church needs to be more inclusive but quite honestly I have stepped out, so to speak. I find that going to church too often creates an irritation in me." Later in the interview she expanded on this, "I actually think we talk very little about God in church – it's a wafty sort of concept. It's much easier to form a concept of Jesus. I don't think I've discussed or really heard much about God in a way that I can really understand from a church." As can be heard, the urge to change the language of the church is no trivial matter for these women. Elizabeth Johnson (1992: 46) says, "Images of God are not peripheral or dispensable to theological speech, nor as we have seen, to ecclesial and social praxis. They are crucially important among the many coloured veils through which divine mystery is mediated and by means of which we express relationship in return."

Delving into tradition to unearth liberating texts and images for God is a powerful and meaningful way of extending this relationship, but more is demanded of us if we are to seriously challenge oppressive structures and world views. For the subject matter is about power, and women must choose to become agents in their own history in order to claim

¹ The power of Naming refers to the 'backlash' in the States (Fiorenza 1996: xvi).

power for themselves. “We are seeking for our identity, for ourselves as made in the image of God. We are claiming the full humanity of woman” insisted one woman from the Alternative Church group.

This struggle for liberating power is rooted in the context of poverty as defined by Gutierrez (1996: 105),¹ and we cannot deny that for many women there is a triple oppression: the material poverty of the black woman. I do not care, or dare, to speak for black women; their voices are emerging in ways that are articulate and powerful. In this study I have sought to find a hermeneutic that is liberating for all, one that divines a path through oppressive texts. Contending with patriarchy as a form of oppression undergirds feminist critical consciousness, and this is manifested in the reconstructive work of feminist scholarship and in the experience of the women in this study. These women are recognising how language can be used as a means of control.

Brian Wren makes the link between language and control, and asks, “What power and privilege does God- talk help to justify, legitimise and perpetuate?” (Wren 1989: 81). Language and action cannot be separated, it informs our lives. Feminists are seeking to rectify the semi-sighted vision by claiming the power of naming. They point out that whoever names the world owns the world. It is a given that the exercise of power and privilege in language has the capacity to promote and perpetuate sexism, as in racism, homophobia and xenophobia. The maleness of God cannot and must not be shrugged off as ‘only a metaphor,’ (McFague 1983: 29), for as the women in the groups are showing, exclusive images and concepts can provoke feelings ranging from irritation to alienation, be perceived as spiritually damaging, which can erupt into anger and eventual abdication.

Rather than using the word ‘metaphor’ we need a way of speaking of God that neither literalises nor idolises, says McFague (1983: 29). There must be ways found that gives licence to speak about God as well as indicate the limits of such speech. We must investigate possibilities for transformative, revolutionary models. The model of God the Father is, in itself, powerful and profound, but it has established hegemony over the Western religious consciousness that only new metaphorical language can break.

¹ Gutierrez’s definition of the ‘poor’ is inclusive: “concrete poor people, the dispossessed, and the oppressed, wherever there is an element of conflict” (Gutierrez 1996: 105).

Thus the shifting of the power of a patriarchal divine demands a new consciousness and the courage to risk new language for God. Ricoeur said, "The symbol gives rise to thought." Ludwig Wittgenstein said, "The limits of one's language are the limits of one's world," and Martin Heidegger, "Language is the house of being." We cannot afford to claim that the symbol of a male God does not have important repercussions. As one of the women in the Alternative Church group said:

I have moved beyond that stage. I cannot picture God as Father because all my experiences of men have been bad, very disempowering for me to have a male image of God. I put a conscious stop to the Father image. Then it became automatic. So I have replaced it with other images. I was a fundamental Christian five years ago. Now I am no longer a Christian. I am not rooted in that message any longer. I cannot use the word God, for then I see a man with a long white beard. If I refer to god, then I think of the Goddess when I pray. I can't go to church any more, the language is so alienating.

But is a break with traditional images of God really the best way out for women? Johnson advocates the use of feminine imaging to counter the dominant masculine concept, though she advises that this would be temporary and certainly not intended as a strategy of reversal. By a return to the Goddess though, as experienced by this woman in the study, we must ask whether there is not the risk of imposing the same sex-role stereotypes that we need to overcome (as discussed in the first Chapter of this study). We may ask such questions as women move onward in their search, but, "Fundamentally, however, the prevailing image of God is largely determined by the reality of experience, not by logic or theory" (Gerstenberger 1996: 110).

Women's Experience and Women's Spirituality

It has been said that the discounting of women's experience, and the means to express it, has caused an anger which has brought about the largest shift in consciousness the world has known. So also it has been said, that women's anger has created the greatest bloodless revolution the world has ever seen. Elizabeth Johnson writes, "The prophet Hosea, as we

have seen, portrays God, angered at injustice, like an angry mother bear who will go to any length to get back her cubs, even to tearing apart the predators (Hosea 13:7-8). In these and other images reflective of women's experience of anger over injustice, the female symbol of the suffering God who cares for the oppressed is strengthened by a feminist retrieval of the wrath of God" (Johnson 1992: 259). I would suggest then, that whether acknowledged or not, the cry for recognition of women's experience is grounded in the *loci* of women's anger at unjust exclusion over the centuries. For it is as if women's experience of God rarely existed.

Women, it must be assumed, have never *not* discerned God, it is that only rarely in the past were they provided with the chance to speak publicly of their experience. Even rarer were the opportunities to acquire an education and the means to participate in the written tradition. Today we women are fortunate that we can draw on the mystical experiences of Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avilla and a few others to illumine our spiritual lives. Although largely unrecorded, historians are confirming the presence of 'desert mothers' existing in spiritual communion alongside the better known 'desert fathers.' Furthermore, historians have noted that women took advantage of the monastic life to acquire self-autonomy and education as well as a spiritual home. For though both women and men may discern God in the struggle of life, women's experience has not been regarded as normative.

One of the tasks of feminist theologians has been to recover and reconstruct the accounts of women experiencing the presence of God within the biblical texts. This is not the place to expound on such texts; we know that Tribble has highlighted only too graphically the texts of terror in which women were treated shamefully and abusively in the name of God. We can no longer delude ourselves that everything in the Bible is helpful for women. There are texts however, which we can approach with new interpretations, not with the intention to reform but to reconstruct (Russell 1985: 28). These passages, be they the witness of Jesus or of women disciples or stories from the Hebrew bible, each provides scope for reconstruction and thereby hope of transformation. Using the experience of women as the source for theology, we need to be open to the possibility of drawing on wider-ranging material than orthodox Christianity, be they images, language, or concepts. "There may well be marginal Christian sources or pre- or extra-Christian sources that prove important to new understandings of Christian theology" (Young 1990: 60). As these

sources are recovered, so women draw on them to discover experiences which enrich their truth claims, exhibiting a determination to add their experience to the tradition.

Some of the biblical references to women came as a surprise to the group from Imbali. Although familiar with Scripture, the women had never consciously noted the infrequency of the names of women. They were eager to reconstruct the experiences of women as role models, of instances in the Bible when God was impacting on their lives, and inspiring them. One of the women from Imbali said that she wanted to know how these women listened to God and how they reacted in difficult situations. "When my son was killed I dreamed of mud in a playground. It was God's plan that he was shot, so I've never wondered why it happened. It makes it orderly. Many bad things have happened to the women in the Bible too, and they got on with living."

A woman in the Julian group said that for her the Bible helped give a sense of God's existence in her life. "Having God's power motivates me to live differently. It makes me order my life. I am afraid not to believe, but the church has captured God and made God puny, not authentic anymore." She went on, "It encourages me to find women in the Bible speaking with Jesus and hearing God's voice. God can be so elusive at times." She added that her experience of God is strongest, closest to her and most authentic when she is meditating in silence while reading a passage in the Bible. "I find I can extract what I need from the Bible," said someone from the Alternative church group, "but I prefer to meditate on the works of Julian of Norwich or modern writers like Henri Nouwen. The Old Testament is like a history book, outside of my context, with experiences of women so far removed from my own." Someone else added, "It must be easier for Jewish women to read the Old Testament, it's closer to their experience I should think."

Whilst it is true that feminist thinking begins with a reflection on women's experience, the focus has shifted to a critical awareness of the multi-vocal of that experience. The emergence of black womanist consciousness has challenged the notion of an essential universal structure of woman as subject.¹ Jones and others have argued for the need for particularity and difference of the subject prior to any discussion of women's experience.

¹ The term was first used in Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983: xi-xii). She writes that womanist is a black feminist or feminist of colour: "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender."

In *Women's Experience Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, Jones analyses the two categories which exist in feminist theology. There are feminist theologians occupying a rock who argue for an essentialist structure of women's experience; they make universalist claims. Those others, in a hard place, employ a form of post-structuralism, thereby arguing for descriptions of historically localised and culturally specific groups of women. Jones (1997: 33-53) argues that the way forward is between the two, a place not yet explored but which gives space for historical methods providing a credible view of reality and providing normative claims.

Certainly what is emerging is the concept of a multiple identity, across culture and class, its subjectivity emerging out of post-modern pluralism, and resistant to the concept of unity of sisterhood. Other writers, whilst in agreement in its opposition to the notion of a universal structure of woman, question why such assertions have emerged at this time. The difficulty lies in the reconciling of human agency and social construction. "How do we both recognise the social construction of subject and still respect the agency of the subject." Rebecca Chopp (1997: 220) cites Hartsock, who asks why at the time when women begin to assert themselves we question the notion of subject.

It is a recognition of this need for women to assert themselves, while not denying the ineradicable differential of race and class, that urges certain feminist theologians to enter the 'hard place,' and still claim a commonality of women's experience.¹ Indeed, some go further and accept the notion of 'sisterhood' as a foundation to their feminist theology. Johnson (1992: 63) argues for a 'solidarity of sisters,' and suggests that a strong element of solidarity emerges out of the common struggle of women's experience of marginalisation within the patriarchal structures. She likens women's experience to a conversion experience, as women turn from defamation and derision to a self-naming and re-birth of the self. Johnson (1992: 62f) suggests that by "forming communities of discourse, by engaging together in resistance to oppression and the creative praxis of liberation for all that they cherish, women come to an awareness that they are not non-persons or half-persons or deficient persons, but genuine subjects of history." Hassam and Walker (1993 cited in Haddad 1996: 204), while refuting the usefulness of the concept of sisterhood, suggest that solidarity lies in the political commitment of common goals.

¹ Russell (1996: 20) posits that the struggle against violence is a core element which cuts across difference.

The comments from each of the groups support this notion of shared spiritual experience. One woman from the Alternative Church group said, "I have waited so long for a group like this. It helps me to realise that I am not odd, that I'm not alone in the way I struggle with the church and the liturgy." Another woman from the Imbali group said, "This is the first time I have been able to speak out and know people are really listening to me and understanding me. Do you know how good that makes me feel?" One of the Julian Group members said, "I was afraid that a group like this was going to be very radical; very feminist. In fact, I've realised that I must be those things without knowing it. Because I find I need to be able to talk in a group like this. To really share some of the hurts that the church has inflicted on me." Later the same woman added, "The really special thing is knowing you are listening and understanding what I'm saying. I've told a priest about my feelings before now and he's just looked at me as if I am peculiar. After all, he said, other women don't have problems with the language. Now I wonder if they do, but daren't say so." Others in the group, at this point, agreed that there seemed to be considerable denial on the part of the women in church, although one woman disagreed saying that perhaps it was about coping rather than denial. "How do we get this shift from male dominance? I cope by imaging God as female, even though the language is so different." The group regretted that the church could not hear their pleas for more inclusive language, and felt that people's spiritual lives were at stake here. "We lead dislocated lives, so I don't see the need for a dislocated image of God."

The women in the groups possessed highly nuanced understandings of the mystery of the unknown God. Some declared their inadequacy when articulating about God, nevertheless, like numerous theologians before them, they were prepared to say what God was not. They had arrived at this understanding by discarding the images of childhood, acquired through attending Sunday school and church. "It was all visual, the Catholic church, all bleeding hearts, sense and incense, essences and colour. I've gone the bath story- now its all vapour, I breathe it in – very physical. I breathe in the essence of God, but things like rosaries, symbols, the ritual, and a sense of the immanent, are vitally important to me though." Another woman from the Julian group said, "The Father was judgmental, stern. I got new thoughts as I grew older, that image changed. Now I describe God as a relationship, a part of myself, my own creativity and inner resources – but more than that, it is God. I have a strong sense of God the Creator-like a sunset, outside of myself but I'm part of it, because I can see it, it's my world." Many of the women in the Alternative Church group described

their early image of God as a judge, distant, very controlling. “When my daughter was very ill, I was told by a friend that I was being punished because I no longer went to church. It was that old image of God, that primal sense of a punitive God. I believe that the image of God the Father is a very powerful creation, keeping us in bondage.” Another said that she considered that the problem was not with the image of God as male, but the problem was the church. “It’s a problem church, God isn’t even there half the time.”

The Imbali group tended to hold more concrete, pictorial images of God than the other women. One of them said, “In the Transkei with my grandfather and grandmother was when I used to pray, early in the morning. *Thixo* [Xhosa for God] was used like a swear word. I could never do that, we would be in big trouble if we did.” She described her early image of God. “My image of God has not changed. He is in control – a wonderful man. I call him *Baba*, he is my Father. He is patient and kind, a provider, very loving. He is a protector and very personal.” They found few difficulties with the idea of God as all-powerful, never changing. “My image has not changed, but I’m trying,” said one. When asked by one of the other women what she was trying, she said, “To erase the image of God as a white man. I know God is everywhere, he is presence. He is *Nakelela* – it means to take care of. It is a word used just for God.” “Yes, it’s in the Zulu song, it means God is *apiella*, God never changes. We do, but God never does,” interspersed another woman. She explained how her image of God was strongly influenced by pictures she had seen as a child. “He was an old man, with a big eye, sitting up there watching for bad things. When I did things that were bad, I pretended I was hidden, then he couldn’t see. God was always looking for bad things.” Another woman added, “Yes, I was afraid of him. That came from my mother- she was always saying he would find me out. Even though my image has changed, I still think God is watching for people doing bad things.” One of the others said, “He is watching us with a large book, like a register. All my sins are written down. It makes me frightened.” She added, “I think though that they’re erased when you repent, but I’m still frightened when I think of the register.”

For those whose image had changed to one more metaphysical, there was sense of connectedness between justice and creation. A member of the Julian group said, “I think certain truths are important. Urban violence presents problems, we’re either armed or barricaded. Its useless trying to protect yourself, so I use God as a reference point, a sense of Presence for protection. I suppose it’s a kind of arrogance to think we are safer than

others. But I have to hold onto this- like the story of the Zimbabwe missionaries.¹ I cover my children with a strong visual aura to keep them safe.” For these women their spirituality and their struggle with life are interconnected, inseparable. They questioned the possibility of people talking of spirituality apart from the concrete, historical life; they themselves provided scant evidence of any attempt to escape from the world by moving into some inner reality. I refer to this possibility in the next section.

In conclusion of this section which has surveyed various aspects of women’s experience and women’s spirituality, I refer to Fulkerson (1997). “Feminist theologians must develop stories of a God of justice in light of post-structuralist destabilisations²...The work of Reuther’s principle should be that “men are not” *imago dei* because the need to affirm *women* is constructed out of a pernicious system of signification which constitutes *men*. This is not to say that woman is the real image of God; it is not even to say that both are” (Fulkerson 1997: 114). This study is showing how women are discovering ways of expressing new forms of spirituality created out of their own experience. For they are taking seriously the task of finding new ways of discovering theological meaning and bringing them to the foreground. This will be explored further in the following sections.

Women’s Experience: Images of God: Finding the Feminine Face of God

However it is the focus on personal experience which has earned the critique by Mark McIntosh, that modern trends engender a spirituality which is self-referential and of a consumerist mentality. Warning against the separation of theology and spirituality, McIntosh (1998: 4) argues that an anthropological approach to spirituality may perpetuate the division. “In identifying the human search for wholeness as the true subject matter of spirituality (as academic discipline), the anthropological approach would seem to render God peripheral.” He continues, “Furthermore, who is this wonderfully transcending self who happens to have an Ultimate Value of some kind as the reference for the self’s higher integration? The existence of such a self seems at least as much in doubt today as the existence of its mirror image: the autonomous, self-referential god of eighteenth-century

¹ Zimbabwe story: attackers came to a Christian Mission during the height of the Zimbabwe War and ‘saw’ an army of soldiers in uniform. The attackers ran away. After the war, when the attackers described the soldiers they had seen, they learnt that there had been only missionaries present, who believed that the ‘soldiers’ had been angels sent to protect the mission. The would-be attackers were converted as a result.

² Referred to in the first chapter: Reuther posits that the feminist principle is “the full humanity of women”.

deism” (McIntosh 1998: 21). Here is a timely warning to the feminist emphasis on women’s experience. By no means disclaiming its validity, he questions why language about God so often comes to be interpreted as language about the self and its ‘experiences.’ McIntosh is arguing for spiritual experiences to remain focused on the encounter with God, and not on the experience itself.

Though I would question whether it is possible to separate an encounter with God from experience, it would certainly be a distortion for feminist theology to elevate the experiential to a form of ‘positivism.’ As feminist scholars critique the myth of objective consciousness, it would be ironic to replace it with an objectivity of women’s experiences. It is essential that as feminists demand that women’s experience become normative, that we avoid any suggestion of ‘private devotion’ and the separation of theory and praxis. “Feminist theology has provided a new context for theological reflection in which the community’s lived experience is granted a voice. These deeply contextualised construals of reality are helping to shape theology as a more supple and inclusive discipline, able to hear the multiple spiritualities of people not as raw data to be abstracted from, but as having theological substance and import in themselves.” (McIntosh 1998: 25).

Women’s Experience: Image of God as Wholeness

It is post-modernity, with its challenge to reason and objectivity, and its questioning of a universal truth, that is conceived as the harbinger of the contemporary interest in spirituality and its emphasis on self-fulfilment, and alongside the death of the old certainties has emerged the critique of the traditional separations of spirit and the body, secular and spiritual, and theory and practice. This separation of body and spirit has been a site of contestation for feminist scholarship and included in its critique of patriarchy has been the challenge that women have become the victims of self-purification practices in religion. Hence women are reinterpreting the rendering of women’s bodies as unclean from distorted and destructive interpretation of religious texts and tradition.

The women in the Alternative Church and Julian groups articulated their feelings at the condemnation of women’s bodily experiences by the early church fathers and the Bible. “Did you know,” said someone from the Alternative Church group, “that we were labelled the devil’s gateway? It shows how these men with hormonal problems never really

believed that we women were made by God, or else how could they have spoken about God's creative work in such a way?" A woman in the Julian group said, "I have a strong connection with the environment. I could never talk about anything that has been created by God as evil or unclean. What people do may be evil, but not who they are, so I do find it difficult to see how we women were seen in such a terrible light. And they called themselves Christians." One of the women from the Alternative Church group explained that this was the reason that she could no longer call herself Christian. "It is difficult enough with a male God, but I feel quite angry how women have been defined over the centuries by the Christian church. How can they have let the law impinge so drastically on people's lives, so much so that we became ashamed of our own bodies. I find it unforgivable. This is why I find the idea of a female God/Goddess more helpful."

The women in all the groups were concerned that menstruation should still be considered unclean, that the fear of cultic impurity should still impact on the church. One woman admitted to a sense of "unholy glee" when she was assisting at the altar and was menstruating. "To think that this was given as a reason to keep us from ordination. If it wasn't so wrong it would be laughable. Whatever will our grand-daughters think of it all?" The women from Imbali discussed the Zulu practice of women being refused Holy Communion during their period of menstruation. I suggested that they just kept silent but they said that it was not so simple. "We're in communities where everyone knows about everyone else. Someone would report us. Then we would be in trouble with the church community. The women watch each other."¹

In the book *Through The Devil's Gateway*, Reuther writes on the taboos surrounding women that most religions, from tribal to world religions, have practised. "Female blood shed in menstruation and childbirth has been the particular focus on this definition of woman as polluted, over against male sanctity" (Reuther 1990: 7). She compares the cultic practices in the Old Testament with the emergence of Christianity, how Gnostic teaching on the dualistic nature of creation influenced Christianity, which led to Christianity exalting the celibate, male and female.² However, the emergence of a patriarchal family-oriented Christianity counteracted and began to repress the egalitarian, celibate

¹ See research on women in the Amawoti Community, Durban (Sibeko and Haddad 1996). It highlights how menstruation can become a tool of oppression by church leadership.

² I referred earlier in the thesis to the autonomy and opportunities which religious life offered women.

Christianity. By the eleventh century, celibacy became a requirement for ordination and a means of avoiding contact with women, who in turn became seen, by their very female nature, as unclean and less holy. The bar to ordination was in place. Referring to the Anglican Church's debate in England on the ordination of women, Alison Joseph writes that the language in opposition contained remnants of the purity taboos. "In Synod, it was declared that to admit women to the priesthood would be like admitting a virus to the bloodstream," and that the language invoked "a sense of the impending 'pollution' should women be ordained" (Joseph 1990: 2).

Extending the feminist concern with taboos on women, exegesis and historical study has revealed many reasons for a close association between women and evil in certain biblical traditions, writes Gerstenberger. However he argues against monotheism being the root cause for discrimination against women. An examination of ancient polytheistic cultures and religions reveals that there was a more or less tolerable balance in the areas of responsibility and role assignments given to the sexes. He continues, and I quote at length for these are important points as women struggle with a tradition that has nullified their full humanity:

Things got worse for women in the postexilic period under the direct influence of a consolidating monotheistic faith that was primarily male. Under the aegis of a single deity, who spoke only through male mouths, male prejudice developed with impunity and without inhibition or external control. Nevertheless, I find untenable an attempt to reconstruct a direct monocausal relationship between the rise of monotheism in Israel and the denigration of women. Ideas or images of God are never the sole causes of social change. If they were, then the history of slavery, for example, would have taken quite a different course. Still, the connection made in the Bible between women and sin shows how a particular theology under particular social and religious conditions can encourage discrimination against one group of human beings (Gerstenberger 1996: 94).

Responding to the church's interpretation of woman as unclean, women have responded in

a variety of ways, from forming women's spirituality groups to 'reclaim the body,' to rituals and liturgy celebrating the rites of passage of woman, to the ultimacy of a return to the worship of a female deity.

The Imbali group spoke of the groups in the Zulu church formed expressly for women, and said how important they are for women. Although contained within church structures, these groups possess a certain autonomy in their own communities.¹ Following this discussion, the women from Imbali were struck by the way that such sweeping generalisations about the behaviour of women could be expressed in the Bible. We had been referring to some of the passages in Proverbs. Said one woman, "I don't see how it can say that all women are irritable, or how we women are always the ones nagging and scolding. It makes the men out to be so good and we women so evil." Another woman explained that the Bible was written by men after all, what else would they say. At this, one of the women appeared shocked and said that that could not be right because it was written by God. "It is the Word of God, so how can God have allowed such things to be in His Bible?" One of the women explained that the Bible was inspired by God, that though it is called God's Book, it had to be written by people, and men at that, because the women were not allowed to be educated then. Nevertheless it was clear that the woman was dismayed that ordinary people could have just added their own thoughts and prejudices into the Bible. "Maybe we women should write our own Bible then and put things straight. I'm sure God would not want such unkind things written in His Bible." There followed a discussion on *The Women's Bible* written by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, which I mentioned as I explained that one woman a long time before had also been distressed by the misogyny of the Bible.

The group expressed a wish to explore passages that were helpful for women and it was decided to search out positive images of God for women in the Bible. I explained that part of the task of redefining a liberating God for women has involved the recovery of feminine images of God, in both biblical texts and alternative sources. Numerous such images are to be found: from the book of Numbers (11: 12); to Hosea (11: 1,4), to Deuteronomy (32: 18), to Isaiah (46: 3,4). As she heard of the feminine images in the Bible, one woman from Imbali expressed her surprise. "Why do we only hear of a male God?" The Julian group

¹ For example, in the Anglican Church the Mother's Union tends to be the mainstay of parish-life.

were not so surprised that the alternative image was kept hidden. "It's all about power," said one woman, "we know that it's the women who are in the churches, can you imagine how male clergy would feel worshipping a female God? Yet it would be so empowering for women to realise that they are like God." The discussion continued, "I wonder what it must be like to go to church and worship a God who is like oneself. No wonder people claimed that God was black – that must be very empowering for black people."¹

The women in all three groups said that the Christian church would be very different had it contained a sense of the female attributes in its deity. However the Imbali group, possessing a powerful and meaningful concept of Father God, found the notion of a feminine God difficult to grasp. Study of the above passages produced the comments: "It seems like a different God. Where's the power? I need to have God as all-powerful and a protector and I don't find that here. Women are powerful in the home and in the community, but the men are the ones with words in public." Again the contrast with the actual lives of these particular women struck me. Each admirably articulate in a second language, holding posts of authority in their professions, nevertheless they sought an external referent for power and decision-making. I am aware that I tread on dangerous ground here. As a white and privileged feminist, be it from South Africa, I have previously stated my intention not to speak for the 'other,' particularly for black women. Beverley Haddad writes on the implications for black women in South Africa of the feminist post-modern critique of feminist universalism. "Firstly, there is no composite and singular image of the "powerless" and "vulnerable" black South African woman. Secondly, exploring the meaning of the powerless and vulnerability of black women must not be done within parameters prescribed by white feminists, but rather from within the boundaries of the lived survival experience of black women" (Haddad 1996: 202-203). This awareness of the importance of not speaking for the 'other' has been in the foreground of this study. I raise the point of the external focus of authority because I am also aware that for many women, including some of the women in this study, that all reference to a god as 'other than self' can be construed as the same external referent.² I am also aware that I sit as an open target to those who would shoot me down as a relativist and

¹ See Simon Maimela (1990) *Modern Trends in Theology*. "Black people in South Africa have also suffered oppression and racial domination and this continues to this day. Black theology has therefore also appeared in South Africa in protest against a dehumanizing system."

² Garman (1996) in her unpublished Master's thesis on the search for alternative symbolic universes.

distanciated from the subject-the very opposite of the foundational claim of women's experience as individual yet normative, as particular yet claiming a commonality, and as valid a truth as any other. This is indeed the place between the rock and the hard place, as Jones anticipates.

God in Suffering

There was little ambivalence when the discussion centred on the presence of God at times of violation. For some it was indeed the rock-face as they encountered biblical passages describing incidences of acts of violence against women. For emerging out of the quest to reclaim the female body from its subjugated and demeaning dualism, as secondary to the (male) spirit, has been an attempt at reconstitution, decrying the social definitions of femininity and demanding a global resistance to violence against women.

Reinheld Traiter-Espiritu (1996: 66) refers to the violence against women as a profound global health problem, the perpetration being supported by cultural customs and religious beliefs which conceive women as the dependants and the property of a male protector. She says that "any effort at reconstructing women's bodies must at the same time be a step towards redefining power relations between men and women...It means that the family of states and the different religious communities should rethink their ambiguous position on the question of sanctity of life of all human beings that are born into this world."

Denise Ackermann, writing on the violence in South Africa, says that Christian theories and Christian praxis themselves have contributed to the problem of rape. She cites Fiorenza's points on four key theological discourses. First, scripture mediates the socio-cultural politics of subordination, stemming from Greek philosophy and Roman law. Patriarchal patterns of subordination of women, children and slaves are doctrinally legitimated in the practices of the Christian church. Second, the teachings of submission of women and the teachings on the sinfulness of women are closely linked. Third, the link between the sufferings of Jesus, and victimisation and suffering, mediated through scripture, and developed into theological and christological discourses, maintain the oppression of those under patriarchal domination. The silence of the church on violence against women raises questions about the nature of the church, says Ackermann. "Violated women are not primarily finding healing in their religious institutions." (Ackermann 1996:

149). Crises of faith are emerging as a pattern for women as they cry out against inadequate theological and pastoral responses.

The groups looked at stories of women in Scripture at their most anguished times, when they were suffering from expulsion, rape, torture and murder. The scriptural passages used for reference were those selected by Tribble in *Texts of Terror*, in addition to the stories of Ruth, and the mothers of the slaughtered innocents by King Herod. The questions posed were, Who was God for these women in their suffering at the hands of men? Tribble writes powerfully of the Bethlehem woman:

Of all the characters in scripture, she is the least. Appearing at the beginning and the end of a story that rapes her, she is alone in a world of men. Neither the other characters nor the narrator recognises her humanity...Without name, speech or power, she has no friends to aid her in life or mourn her in death. Passing her back and forth among themselves, the men of Israel have obliterated her totally. Captured, betrayed, raped, tortured, murdered, dismembered, and scattered- this woman is the most sinned against. (Tribble 1984: 80-81).

As a continuation of the discussion on the critique of biblical stories which are horrific for women, one member from the Alternative Church group told me in her interview of her experience of male domination and how this has influenced her image of God. "My father raped me over a long period. I cannot accept a male God. God must be a woman for me to relate to God." She talked of this period as a scarring time. She recounted her experience of how, as a fourteen-year-old, one night a woman entered her bedroom as she waited for the inevitable footsteps of her father. "She was darkish- skinned, with a star on her forehead and a blue cloth over her head. She touched my forehead. It happened three times, and she became the power for me to pray to, to keep him away." She continued, "In time Mary has become very important to me. She has become more powerful than God; she holds God for me as she is the mother of God, Jesus. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?" she asked me. I did, and I didn't. The horror of the abuse was beyond my experience, and the terror of the night beyond my imagining, but I admired her courage greatly in speaking of it, and her power of celebrating in the transformative joy of life.

Her image of Mary as a life-force is echoed in the research carried out by Megan Walker (1990). Walker's thesis explores the ceremony of a group of women in Mphumalanga, Natal. In the ritualistic ceremony, the women venerate Mary. Walker sought the significance of the ceremony for these particular women and her findings were of a Mary unrestrained by the image presented by the church. For these women of Mpumalanga, Mary was a liberating and powerful image for the poor black woman of Africa.

When interviewing the woman mentioned earlier, I asked if the dominant image of a masculine God in the liturgy hindered her spirituality. "I get used to saying them, they are only words. I was a Methodist, now I am Anglican. At the time of separation, it was like a miscarriage. I dreamt that a woman came to me, naked, huge stomach and breasts, and she said, you will give birth. I feel I have. Christianity is a sub-culture, and I worry, will I ever step over when I come to the edge. I live teetering on the edge. But my spiritual director reassured me. She said that true Christianity has no boundaries, so I can never fall off." Again she asked whether I understood what she meant. This time I knew, and have been there.

God as Sophia

As it transpired, so have a number of the women from the Julian and Alternative church groups, for they found the image of God as Sophia powerful as an offering of a liberating picture of God. "I like the idea of God as wisdom," said one. "The wise woman, the witch who knows herbal remedies and is the healer in her community? Yes, I can relate to that image." Another woman from the alternative group remarked on a picture in my home.¹ "That picture of God as Creatura, I like the joy and the life, the circle which is so symbolic of women and the way they relate." Someone picked up the theme. "It's all about interconnectedness, relating to the other person and letting them be who they are. And then they can let me be who I am. That's how we find God, in each other."

Elizabeth Johnson (1992: 232) writes, "The accent on divine relatedness to the world overcomes the isolation of the patriarchal God of classical theism. At the same time positing relation as the principle of self-distinction thwarts the tendency towards

¹ *God the Creatura* by Dina Cormick, Durban, South Africa.

absorption that marks the stereotypical feminine of pantheism.” Johnson tenders the metaphor of God as Sophia as one that offers women a retrieval of long-denied knowledge, a deeply inspirational, intuitive knowing. It is the restoration of the wise woman, the crone.

The Alternative Church group responded to this image with affirmation, “Oh yes, that’s my image of the God within,” said one. “I receive a sense of God’s restorative power just by imagining it. I really like the idea of the woman being restored into the community, without having to justify herself but just because she is acknowledged as a spiritual woman.” Another woman added, “Like the sangoma, the witch doctor whom people connect with, ask help from. Yes. She would be seen as the instrument being used by God.” The women from Imbali also related to this image yet showed reservations. When asked why, they explained that it was difficult for them. There was the difficulty of enculturation, they explained. “Talking of sangomas is difficult, because that’s the old thinking, like ancestor worship.” Another said, “Ancestor worship is difficult for we Africans who are Christians. I think many people who are Christian still call on the ancestors when in trouble. It’s part of who we are.” “It’s in our history, buried deep within us. I suppose you could say it’s almost superstition, this praying to our ancestors.” There was a significant silence. Then another spoke. “I think people who call themselves Christian go secretly to sangomas when they need help. It’s like a last resort, when nothing else can be done.” The women looked at each other, then at me. “Do you think you can be Christian and still believe that you can go to sangomas for help?” I was in troubled waters out of my depth, and unwilling to influence the discussion. I temporised. “What do you think?” I asked. There was, in the end, the decision that if you were Christian then you prayed to Jesus for healing, that though we as Christians call on the communion of saints and believe they intercede for us, we should not worship them. The group seemed content with their decision, but one woman added, “It happens anyway, whatever anyone says.”¹ We returned to the image of God as Sophia. “Yes, I like that picture, of the woman in the church as wise. After all, we are mostly women in the church,” one woman said. “But I don’t imagine God as a woman, she hasn’t the power, or the authority.”

¹ See Simon Maimela’s (1996: 80f) essay on ethnic and cultural diversity in South Africa. Maimela looks at culture as a resource for resistance.

Women's Experience of Authority in the Church : God as Church

The churches in South Africa are rich and powerful, owning land and investments. This undermines its willingness to pressure for change. Women must recognise that the church will not necessarily take their side. The church is as much a site of struggle as society. (Mncube 1991: 361)

It cannot be denied that certain churches have a commendable history as a site of struggle against the laws of apartheid in South Africa. The government since the democratic elections has also made immense in-roads into legislating against the discrimination of women, and yet too often certain churches have found it difficult to carry its conviction of a just and inclusive society past its own doorstep, into its own house. The question must be asked, why is it that we can never put our own house in order, yet we can judge, even condemn, others in society? For the church remains a site of struggle for many women. This study is looking at particular women who have remained in the church, and at those who are unable to do so. The purpose of this part of the study is not to research sociological reasons for women relinquishing church worship *per se*, but only as it pertains to these women's image of God. Yet we have seen how our image of God is closely related to how we perceive ourselves within the sphere of our relationship in society. This study has shown how women are struggling in a patriarchal society, some in a church which is a monolithic, patriarchal institution. Archbishop Tutu writes on the human values shared by all religious traditions and upholds the Christian claim to social justice as its essence. "To be concerned for justice and human dignity as well as for peace are not optional extras which we may take up or abandon as the whim strikes us. It is integral to being a religious person, for the consummation to which most of our faiths look, is a condition of unalloyed bliss, fellowship, unity and true joy" (Tutu 1986 cited in Lubbe 1996: 225).

The question must be asked whether fellowship and unity, let alone true bliss, are available for all. The struggle for women's ordination continues in some churches. Churches still withhold leadership positions from women, and the language of the liturgy remains unquestioned, unacceptably sexist. What price unity? What price God's church? As one woman in the Alternative church group put it, "Is it God's church or has there been a take-over? One of these multi-amalgamations so that its all the body-corporate making the

decisions and the productive work-force, we women, scurrying around like drones. And so grateful if we're asked to do the flowers or run the Sunday-school." She added, "I don't know why I still get so angry, because I've left it all anyway. I think its because I feel the church, the church of Jesus, has been taken away from me. I wanted to belong."

Belonging is what many of the women felt it was all about. There was anger expressed at the deprivation. "No wonder women are belonging to women's groups," said another from the alternative group, "I'd love that. I want to belong and worship the same God, but I feel my God isn't there, not in the traditional church with its sexist language and this male God represented by these male priests. It's like cult worship. All these men, adulated by these adoring women, sucked into the system. God help us."

Not all the women struggled to the same extent. Some remained in the church. "I continue because if I opt out, then nothing will ever be challenged, nothing changed. I stay in because I believe that God is greater than the men running it. I believe the impossible can become possible, with the transformative power of God." A second person from the Julian group said, "I think women priests will change things, that it will become more pastoral, more authentic. Women are in touch with their feelings and so able to allow people to be more honest with themselves. Hopefully they haven't got that hunger for power which has put the church where it is today." A woman from the alternative group said, "Women priests might change the language and understanding of God, but it depends on how much women are prepared to risk." In an interview, one woman said, "It seems we lose any of the women priests who are willing to stand up to authority. They're driven out by the sexism of the church, and of course it's all so subtle, so hypocritical. It's a lonely business, being an agent for change."

The women questioned where God is in this search for transformation of the church. Who is God that permits this subtle oppression of God's people and the rejection of women unless they comply with the dominant? If, as the Bible says, God is the church, as Jesus claimed, "I am the vine, and you are the branches," and Paul likened the church to Jesus as the head, and the people as the body, then the church is an image of God. "Not one and the same," said one woman, "just as God isn't a man or a woman. But if God is an image of the church, then the church must surely be like Jesus – run on Jesus' principles – which means I suppose, everyone regarded as equal, loved and cared for equally. And we know

that doesn't happen for it's always the powerful who get the positions of power in the church. It's the way the church is run – favouritism and a lack of honesty. God and the church – the two just aren't synonymous, not as they should be.” Someone wrote, “God as the church? No way. Unless we're saying God is unjust, uncaring and power-hungry.”

This study is unmasking the face of incipient theology, allowing women to hear their own voice and accord it the respect it commands as the *laos* of the church. For history has shown how people can be silenced through the misuse of power, the means being physical or mental manipulation, or both. At this point we need to look at liberation theology and its underlying principle for issuing its challenge to the church.

Liberation theology emerged out of people's experience of oppression. It can be construed as a form of political protest, but its roots lie in both the history of the church and society. It directs its critique at a body whose history condoned classism, racism, and sexism. The church had become a reflection of society. “The church and its theology tended to legitimise the social, political, and economic interests of the powerful few at the expense of the oppressed majority...Western Christianity allowed itself to be dominated by a European cultural self-understanding, so that by the time the churches of Western Europe came into contact with people in other parts of the world the interests of the church were identified with the interests of the ruling classes of the Western world, and these ruling classes were male and white.” (Maimela 1990: 172)

Liberation theology was a reaction to the subsequent neglect of the poor and oppressed, and was an attempt “to liberate the gospel from its captivity to the ideology of the ruling class, an ideology which distorts the gospel by turning it into a justification for oppression” (Maimela 1990: 174). Theology cannot be isolated from its social setting for “it is impossible for the word of God to be a general theory unrelated to people's experience of God” (Maimela 1990: 178). Liberation theology therefore centred on particularity, yet by applying the notion of historical consciousness, laid the broader claim that theology is not beyond its cultural and historical milieu. “Liberation theology is a world-wide phenomenon because it reflects the real, rather than the imaginary, human situation...Liberation theologians see that the oppressive structures of society which entrench class, race and cultural domination are the destructive consequences of sin which

must be struggled against and overcome in order to build up a just society.” (Maimela 1990: 180)

Out of liberation theology emerged feminist theology as women reflected on their experience of domination and oppression. Within the liberation theological framework, feminist theology has attempted to liberate tradition and the text from distorted and oppressive interpretation. It centres its argument on women’s experience and it claims to work against oppressive structures in the church which, sinfully, denied women recognition of their full humanity. Feminist theology is participating in the struggle to build a just society. Women are on their knees, not begging, but cleaning the church’s doorstep.

By their very act of continuing in the church, some women are attempting doorstep operations. A key issue for both the Julian Group, and those in the Alternative Church group who attend church occasionally, was the coping mechanism which they employed in order to remain within the structures; how they handled the sense of alienation and rejection that they regularly felt. The question remains, why do conscientised, non-co-opted women stay in a church that resents their admittance, that rejects their suggestions, and demands their silent submission? “I stay because I believe I can make a difference,” said a Julian member. Another member said:

I just hang onto its potential, to be a place of true community, not a powerhouse of struggle. I don’t find the exclusion particularly Christian, in the sense that I can’t imagine Jesus approving of it, and I do hate the pomposity and hierarchical- power focus – you know, all those mentions of ‘Father this’ and ‘Canon that,’ but I do hang in there. By a thread sometimes, but I think I’m stubborn. It’s the people’s church and I’m determined not to let it go without a struggle.

When questioned about language, both the Julian and Alternative Church groups agreed that this is a major stumbling block. “It’s almost as if it’s deliberate, these males just saying to us, see, we’ll do as we like. They preach the gospel of inclusion and then don’t practice it. I feel the most alienation because of the language.” “I never feel that the

church is including me, I feel I don't belong, but I stay because I believe that it will have to change. The church doesn't know about being politically correct yet, but it will one day. One day...I sound like Martin Luther King, 'I have a dream...'"

Women's experience of Women's Church: God as *ekklessia*

For some, the task of cleaning the doorstep has been too hazardous for their health, and their dream could not wait for the church to be transformed. Unappreciated, many of them women before their time, prophets crying in the wilderness, they have abandoned membership of the traditional, established church and joined groups that help them feel that they belong. These alternative church groups have become a means for many women to strengthen the spiritual dimension of themselves, and keep in community with others. There can be no charge of privatised religion, or self-seeking, egoistical spirituality for these particular women in Natal. McIntosh's definition of spirituality as transformation and discovery is fully realised, for each are called "out of one's self into the truth of one's mission in life" (McIntosh 1998: 6). They are actively involved in social justice issues, such as AIDS campaigns, NGO's, Child Welfare and Street Children. They are, in their own way, cleaning the doorstep of society.

There is considerable diversity in the form that Women's Church takes. Fiorenza (1984: 6) describes one form: "Those of us who do not consider ourselves members of biblical communities but are committed to the religious quest of women in different cultures and religions tend to formulate our own questions and theological perspectives more in terms of a religious studies approach within the academy." She proposes a critical approach to biblical studies, foremost a hermeneutics of suspicion, which questions underlying propositions, androcentric models, and interests which might remain unspoken. A critical translation of the Bible is an essential, arguing that feminist linguists have provided guidelines for the recognition of sexist language.

"Sexist language creates the linguistic invisibility or marginality of women; it describes women as dependent and as derived from men; it characterises women in stereotypical roles; it ridicules women and trivialises their contributions; it mentions women only when they are exceptions or present a problem; and it singles them out from other groups when it refers to "blacks, Jews, or Third World peoples, and women" as if women did not belong

to each of these groups” (Fiorenza 1984: 17). This is the language women struggle with, and the alternative is what women are finding in women’s church. In other words, women are the subject not the marginalised group. The text is a proclamation of the power of the community of faith, and this is balanced by a critical hermeneutics of remembrance. “Rather than abandoning the memory of our foresisters’ sufferings and hopes in our patriarchal Christian past, a hermeneutics of remembrance *reclaims* their sufferings and struggles through subversive power of the “remembered past” (Fiorenza 1984: 19).

Women-church offers the freedom to reclaim the ritual of liturgy, the rediscovery of biblical stories, and the re-writing and re-rendering of prayers. Fiorenza (1984: 21) explains how a hermeneutics of creative actualisation can free women-church to claim their imagination and their creativity:

In ever new images and symbols we seek to rename the God of the Bible and the significance of Jesus. We not only spin tales about the voyages of Prisca, the missionary, or about Junia, the apostle, but also dance Sarah’s circle and experience prophetic enthusiasm. We sing litanies of praise to our foresisters and mourn the lost stories of our foremothers. Only by reclaiming our religious imagination and our sacred powers of naming can women-church “dream new dreams and see new visions.

The composition of the women-church (attended by one of the interviewees) is predominantly white and middle class, but is not exclusive in its membership. One woman told me that she belongs to a women-church because that is where she finds her God. “It has nothing to do with colour, it’s to do with women and how they are thinking. In my group most of us are struggling with language in the church, we have problems with the hierarchical structures of the church and so on. I have to find somewhere without feeling marginalised or guilty. This is it.” She described the group:

It’s true that we could be labelled radicals by the church leadership, but then I think they see us as rivals, drawing women away from the mainstream. In a way they could be right. We meet once a month. We discuss the latest feminist theology books, we hold a

form of worship, very inclusive both in language and theological position. Nobody is told what to believe. I like the ritual and candle-lighting ceremonies. It's all quite gentle, non-threatening and often we have silent meditation.

One woman said, "The Julian group is my church. It is in this company that I feel I belong. The women are wonderfully accepting of me, I enjoy the sense of community and I find God in the contemplative prayer time." A woman from the Imbali group said, "I love the Bible study groups and I love this group. I like being able to talk about God, and I like the laughs we have. God is very, very important to me. I could never manage without God. In fact, I can't imagine life without a Christian family."

Some women are still searching for that community and sense of belonging. As one woman from the Alternative group writes:

I had thought I was lost. There was no salvation for me, no place in this Christian Symbolic Universe for me. I thought I had lost this world, that I had willfully let go of it. But then I realised: I would never lose something precious. The inner core of me knows how to affirm life and guard it. Something sacred was stolen from me, denied me. So I had to go journeying. Through rivers, up mountains and down valleys of fear.

Conclusion

This chapter has heard the voice of women, no longer the few in an isolated place, a hollow, sorrowing echo which never enters the public arena, instead jubilant voices in some new place on the boundaries, resounding and celebrating life. None of these women are despairing of themselves or their understanding of the Divine. Whatever the symbol or image, it is a coherent formulation of reality for them, powerful, meaningful and true. It is also a blueprint for action.

Women, feminist or not, are relishing a new freedom. These particular women have relinquished concepts of God which are skewed and damaging for them, instead they have

unleashed different ways of viewing the Divine, themselves, and others. New rituals are being created, new interpretations uncovered and a new impetus for self-actualisation authenticated. They are grasping the chaos, not with the intention of controlling it, but seeking acceptance of it as new territory to be lived in.

For they have not succumbed or been swamped by theories or false realities as to how they should relate to God, instead they have surged forward, not without struggle in some cases, so that whatever is true for them becomes the 'really real.' Some of the women retain a sense of a personal God. In need of a power stronger than they themselves, the model of God as Father encapsulates the transcendent, the omnipotent, the omnipresence of a being who can control an uncertain and changing world. Some of the women from Imbali need this father to be protector, provider and a presence of authority.¹ The ingredients of the image works powerfully for them. For others from Imbali, probing the image has brought about a shift in consciousness. God is now a force within themselves as they actualise their own power to control their world. They have relinquished the father image for a sense of a force, a strong spirit who guides, yet encourages self-reliance and self-determination.

Those in the Julian group who choose to remain within structures which are not always helpful for them, have made a deliberate decision for they feel strongly enough about the church to want to see its continuation, not its decline into an anachronism which has preserved tradition at the expense of their inclusion. The challenge for the church lies in its ability to be transformed into a dynamic, inclusive church of the people. In this democratic, post-modern age, the church must hear the voice of women as they cry out for new language and a new sensitivity.

For there are times when choosing to situate oneself within the structure, albeit on the edge, affords opportunities for re-shaping the boundary. Fiorenza describes herself as "a resident alien," an ambiguous identity which can initiate change. "I propose that the metaphor of resident alien is an apt figure also for a feminist movement and politics of liberation within the academy and church. Like the Syro-Phoenecian, feminists enter the house of biblical scholarship or ministry as theological, cultural, and religious aliens.

Those of us who have made biblical scholarship and ministry our place of resistance must

¹ There is reason to recall that Imbali at this time was in a state of violent unrest, and this environment may well have contributed to their need for a strong, protecting image of God.

not forget that we are strangers in a land whose language, constitution, history, religion, and culture we did not create” (Fiorenza 1992: 185).

For those outside the church, the Alternative Church group and two members of the Julian group, the denial of their cry for authenticity proved too destructive. They too are making deliberate choices. They have “voted with their feet,” and relinquished the traditional church, but are retrieving from the tradition itself new ways of worship, new ways of viewing community. Their quest is not embodied in isolated self-advancement, instead it is in the search for new ways to find “a more just and peaceful order among human beings, and the truth, however darkly glimpsed, of the holy mystery of God” (Johnson 1992: 18).

It is this increased awareness of the mystery of God, which is the major contribution of feminist theology. As one member of a group said, “Women have brought God back into the church.” By their challenge of the traditional concept of God, of the language and image presented in the church, women have indeed struck a hard place in the rock. Images which have become hardened, which have been resistant to removal, can become the instigators of a creative division. We have seen how women are moving out to the boundaries. But they are not peripheral and discarded flotsam. Instead being on the margins is integral to the structures; the women are opening up new fissures in the rock-place. They have the power to influence and to change the shape of the structure.

Conscientised women who remain within the church are compelled to seek a strategy to avoid the subsumation of their spiritual selves. Women are finding images of God which work for them, that are providing a means of empowerment and reconstruction. In their search for wholeness as they struggle to be the sun, they are discerning the presence and action of the Divine reality, finding God in the midst of a new sense of community, one that is enriching and reverberating on the margins.¹ The Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, at a seminar for Anglican clergy in Durban (March 1999) stated his belief that the renewal of the church will be coming from groups on the boundaries. The challenge of liberation theology also comes from those on the edge. “Communities that are disturbingly possessed of and are dynamatised by the messianic hope have as one of their charismatic

¹ See Chung Hyun Kyung (1990). This Korean theologian’s book “Struggle to be the Sun Again” takes its title from a Japanese poem which claims that woman was originally the sun, but is now relegated to be the moon – merely a reflection of the sun.

functions the uncomfortable and always necessary task of “subverting” the arrangements and status quo in society and the church” (Barreiro 1982: 68).

The church needs to hear the challenge of these voices. For women who have stood in the sun once are unlikely to retreat to the shadows again. The wallflowers are dancing and the makers of tapestry are singing at the loom.

Conclusion

Voices Singing at the Loom

It is time to step back from the tapestry, to view the picture in its entirety. It is a moment to examine the stitch-work for its imperfections, and yet be willing to accept these as a part of the whole, each a contribution to the final work. For, as a feminist theologian, I yearn for the shadow side of (my)self to be integrated within a framework of the whole self – that no stitch or part be considered so unworthy or imperfect that it cannot be integrated into the whole. I wish no part of (my)self to be discarded. As a Christian and a follower of an inclusive Gospel, I hold true that no person should be made to feel unacceptable for the purpose of the liberation of community. Yet whilst we make allowance, so the intention to attain a true expression of the divine-within should remain – just as we yearn for the stitch to be more even, for it to be neater and always valued as a contribution to the final tapestry.

This study has set out to critique the exclusive images for God presented by the church in its language and liturgy. In doing so, I have maintained that, in an emerging democracy such as South Africa, the metaphors and language used are increasingly restrictive – that they are disempowering for women and deny enrichment for men. My research has thereby raised certain questions and provided new insights in two areas which I consider in this final section. First, delving deep into the field of traditional material to find a hermeneutics which is helpful for women within that tradition, I have highlighted the distortions and patriarchal nature of the Bible. Secondly, in presenting the experience recounted by the three select groups of women and their perceptions of God, has confirmed that, for some women, language for the divine can be alienating.

In the first chapter I started by looking at feminist scholarship and how it reveals women's struggle with exclusivity and their failure to relate with an androcentric language and with hierarchical images that fail to reflect humankind in terms of equality and inclusivity. I then viewed the work of those who have struggled with patriarchal images and found them irredeemable. I have examined the work of certain, key feminist theologians who are intent on presenting alternative interpretations of the nature of the divine through the retrieval of traditional symbols in ways which are meaningful and true for women. Each presents

imagery which reflects an interpretation of the equality of the Christian gospel message: the feminist urge for inclusivity, the emphasis on mutuality within relationships and a symbolism which discards the old patterns of patriarchal and hierarchical structures.

Extending this analysis, I also looked at the work of Ruether and her presentation of the church as a concept of God/ess. Importantly, Ruether sees the church as a place for, and of, transformation and that it offers a valuable model for liberation of community with a God/ess as the Initiator of that transformation. For her part, Schüssler Fiorenza argues that biblical tradition should not be abandoned too easily by women who struggle with its language and ideology. She identifies a liberating principle as the authoritative norm of the Bible: by engaging with the image of God as Sophia-wisdom within the *ekklesia gynaiikon* she suggests a hermeneutics that is transformative. McFague too endorses the interpretation of God within a liberation theology. By deconstructing traditional imagery, she constructs a new mythology of God's relationship with the world. Understanding theology in terms of metaphor, McFague uses this as a basis for language about God. Johnson offers the Triune God in feminine symbols, making accessible an understanding of God which reflects the divine as inclusive in its creativity, inclusive in its relationships and inclusive as Sophia-spirit, the power of an all-inclusive God. The scholarship of these women has made a remarkable and valuable contribution to theology as a whole. They have turned theology in a new direction and recovered much in Scripture that has been oppressive and seemingly irretrievable.

My second chapter explores that search for the apparently irretrievable. To this end, I have sought to find an hermeneutics which liberates God from a tradition that has not been liberatory for women; a tradition with a history of patriarchal structures, androcentric language and an appropriation of scripture which has legitimatised the denial of women in leadership roles. In particular, by using the work of Gadamer and Ricoeur, I sought an hermeneutics which might overcome the problem, for it has been seen that tradition cannot be easily discarded.

Applying this tradition to feminist concerns, I drew specifically on Cady's work on Gadamer. Gadamer understands tradition in terms of jurisprudence, whereby decisions are made either on the grounds of precedent, a total disregard of precedent or the combining of the past with the contemporary situation. It is this middle ground which permits an

articulation of personal experience. The scope of tradition therefore has been widened allowing new truths to emerge.

Usefully, Ricoeur's writing extends the meaning of text beyond written documentation; rather than limit it to the interpretation of biblical texts, it extends text to include oral language, symbols and metaphors. The depth of meaning which is revealed requires three responses, according to West. It is the freeing of distortion which occupies the feminist theologian, and by interpreting "in front of the text" light is thrown on the text, whilst acknowledging the present context. Ricoeur's concern with the distance between oral discourse and written discourse is overcome by his theory of distanciation. By cutting loose the text from its author, a relative autonomy is retained. Decontextualization and recontextualization invites the interpreter to understand the text in terms of her/his own world.

According to Geertz, this worldview, or, in his terms, 'symbolic universes', is expressed in our religious symbols. The symbolism of a patriarchal God reflects and justifies the androcentric worldview and leaves women alienated and marginalized. To challenge and to effect change, therefore, Ricoeur posits the theory of metaphor. Experience, and the voicing of that experience, enables the appropriation of new metaphors; this creates a new consciousness of interpretation, and a hermeneutics of transformation can take place.

I am only too aware that, in the time which has elapsed between first proposing this thesis and its completion, much work has been done in the field of hermeneutics. Indeed, it seems that biblical studies has come to be regarded as a clear instance of larger interpretive issues concerning the ways in which one's 'location' – social, cultural, ethnic and gender – affects one's reading of the text. For example, Segovia and Tolbert (1995) have sought to measure the impact of social location on the theory and practice of biblical interpretation in their book, *Reading From this Place*. In the light of more recent research such as this, I must therefore acknowledge that more recent textual and discursive theories offer insights that are as valid as the ones I have used. Yet I would suggest that the work of Ricoeur and Gadamer continues to speak to contemporary academic concerns, and have been useful for the purpose of this research in dealing with the problem of tradition. Their analysis permits a reclaimed tradition as a means of disclosing new truths, and widens the scope of tradition to include metaphor, symbolism and personal experience. Furthermore, it allows for a

hermeneutics with an “in front of the text” reading which opens up the text of the past so the future becomes accessible, opening a world which makes way for women’s experience to be heard.

In order for women’s experience to be heard, the research method of participatory observation was chosen. To this end, in Chapter Three, I start by describing the method used for the gathering and analysis of information. The participants in the research groups were volunteers. Each was a member of a previous group, of which the researcher was also a member. The Imbali Bible Study group (named in this paper, the Imbali Group), originated as a Bible Study group consisting of members of the Cathedral Parish and members of the Parish of Imbali. When this research was mooted, six women volunteered to participate. The Julian Group, an ecumenical reflective prayer group, had been meeting for eleven years. Seven members offered to participate. The Alternative Church group consisted of ten women who were interested in feminist theology; all but two were members of a University of Natal Womens’ Theology group.

The method of participatory observation proved satisfactory in that it elicited honest and clearly articulated responses from the groups. The members of the groups appeared comfortable with my presence and the procedure. I was constantly aware, however, that my method was not abiding by some of the hallmarks of traditional interviewing practices: first, that there must exist a distinct informer/interviewer relationship; second, that data-collecting be objective and focused; and third, that the interviewer adopt an impersonal attitude toward the data and information collected (Oakley 1981: 30). In rejecting such positivistic claims to objectivity and impersonal or ‘uncontaminated’ data, however, my relationship with the groups was personal, mutual and intimate.

It was perhaps for this very reason that certain questions always arose in my mind during the sessions: On what grounds do I raise doubts in women’s minds that their image of God may be inadequate? Have I the right to challenge their image of God at all? Is it not presumptuous to assume that the possession of a liberating image of God (whatever that might be) implies that a person’s image of self is liberated – on what basis do we/I make this correlation?

These questions arose, both in my thoughts and within the Alternative Church group, as the groups met and reflected deeply on the issues raised by the discussions. I became acutely aware that those in the Imbali group were dealing with issues that were profound, that one member, for example, had seen a son killed as a result of apartheid, and that they, more perhaps than the rest of us, were living with violence on a daily basis. As such, I felt obliged to ask myself whether the 'issue' of their image of God was really a priority in their lives.

And yet, these women were also wrestling with God, in that God was needed in this terrible time of injustice. More than ever, perhaps, did they need to find God, their God that existed in the violence and mayhem. Perhaps here lay the value of participatory observation as a research method. The formation of such personal groups in itself initiated reflection; I needed only to listen, to be part of the group, as the women spoke of their anguish and their alienation, their withdrawal and subsequent sense of freedom and, above all, their need for their God. It was my task to strive to be faithful in recording that experience.

Chapter Four records the voices of that experience of God. My hypothesis was that exclusive images of God were increasingly restrictive in an emerging democracy. I expected this concern to emerge in the Alternative Church group, it being the group most informed on feminist issues. But the dissatisfaction with exclusive images was reflected across the three groups and was not limited to any particular group. However, though aware of feminist issues (with members in leadership roles in their careers), the Imbali group were more comfortable with traditional images of God, such as God the Father, than the other groups. I discerned that feminist issues were considered to be separate from church/religious matters, and that questioning the image of God was outside their experience, maybe not even seen as related. Once again, I reflected on my right to question that held image. Their God was generally seen as a protector in difficult times, although two women from the Imbali group did express their concern that the church had limited itself primarily to a male metaphor.

In fact, it was the focus in the first category of Chapter Four, centering around the issue of patriarchal power as the groups discussed the image of God as Father. There was clearly diversity in the thinking of each group. Those women who had discarded the image of God

the Father were adamant in their argument that it was a distorted and damaging image. For others, particularly those in the Imbali group, there was a sense that an external provider/protector was a necessary symbol in their particular situation. Without question, the image of God as Protector was powerful and true in their experience. Again, however, one is obliged to question whether it is a feasible task to attempt to cross such cultural boundaries; perhaps differences of language, experience and 'location' are too great to be bridged – if indeed there is a commonality at all. At times, I certainly felt these difference of experience and culture acutely.

The second category covered in Chapter Four dealt with women's spirituality and their experience. For a number of the women, the outlet for their spirituality lay outside the church and its traditional images of God. The Julian group was seen by one member as an alternative Church. Crushed by her experience of the dominating and oppressive nature of the church, she had abdicated and now found a sense of community within the Julian Group. Most of the women in the Alternative Church, some in the Julian group and one in the Imbali group, spoke of having found alternative resources for their spiritual enrichment and growth. Because of the interconnectedness of church and spirituality, I shall examine the responses of these two categories together. The question of belonging was a key factor for all the women as the discussions focused on the church, and for many there were strong feelings of alienation – that, as women, they were not fully included in the structures, and that the language failed to reflect the inclusive Christian message.

It is fair to say that South Africa has struggled for decades with liberation issues, and that liberation theology (in the sense of people being conscientized those ideologies in the church which contradict God's bias toward the poor and oppressed) has been an integral part of the teachings of a number of the churches in South Africa (with notable exceptions such as the Dutch Reform Church). This meant that all of the women in my research groups were generally conscientized in terms of political, economic and social injustice issues. It remained an interesting phenomenon, however, that gender issues (and particularly within the church) continued to be divorced from issues of racism and the broader political power struggles. As I have just suggested, this dualism appeared especially evident in the Imbali group. For these women, the church was an important part of their lives, the hierarchal structure was not an issue, and their sense of community was strong. Living in the Imbali township, in a time of considerable political unrest and with

the number of deaths escalating between 1990 and 1993, their need to belong to the church was paramount. The women's spirituality was vibrant, 'powerful, meaningful and true' and, as one woman described it, "The church sustained [them] through the violence".

On the other hand, for the Alternative Church group, the church remained a site of struggle. Some members had left the church and found a sense of belonging in woman-church or *ekklesia gynaiikon*. Indeed, this is precisely the way many women have been moving forward. I was myself, for example, a member of a spirituality group in Durban which appeared to fulfill the need to belong for many of the women present. There are, in fact, many such groups in Durban alone. For example, 'Miriam's Circle' is an ecumenical group which finds the image of a circle, a revolving moving circle, a powerful image of God. This is an image which members believe reflects the interconnectedness of creation, the earth and life, which feminists argue has been denied in the patriarchal church. The liturgy explains the symbolism: "As a circle we women can be a transforming strength and blessing for each other." The symbolism also includes dance and song, meeting on the night of the full moon, and prayer. Another spirituality group in Durban which also leads workshops called 'Finding the Feminine Face of God', allows women (and men) to seek for the images of God so long denied. This group explores and pushes back the boundaries, permitting the explorer to find the unusual as acceptable and giving courage to those who have struggled with the exclusive images found in church. As one man said to me after a Julian Group meeting, "It's very difficult to find our own image of God for ourselves. Who else has the advantage of going into a cell and finding God for themselves? We are bombarded by the image the church presents.". Certainly, the churches on the boundary are growing in number; women are finding their image of the divine elsewhere. The hope is that one day they may not need to call themselves 'Alternative Church,' but for this to happen the church must open up its world to allow other symbols to enter its thinking, its liturgy and its practice.

In review, my research exposes some of the pain and frustration that some women evidently feel as they worship daily in a church which ignores or denies their perspective of God. Some of these women, remarkably, remain in the church, despite the marginalization and refusal to recognise the validity of their experience. I question whether the pain of their suffering is ever allowed utterance, if there is a listening heart in the church to walk alongside them without judgment and condemnation. For the women in this

research it seems unlikely. Nevertheless women are also claiming the right to belong, and, emerging from this claim, has come a recognition of the power of naming. Women are seeing how the act of naming has been denied them and that, by focusing on the male naming of God to the exclusion of other images, their churches have denied women the expression of being a female created in the divine image. Such a denial is fundamentally embodied in traditional dualistic thinking – where the ‘male’ spirit is regarded as superior to the ‘female’ body – and this has led to a justification for the silencing and abuse of women. Women are struggling with this dualism and its resulting male domination of language and imagery in the Church.

The implications of this struggle are critical for the Church. Unless the promise of transformation materializes, many more women will leave in search of fulfilment in alternative groups on the periphery. These groups on the margins are providing conscientized women with a community that makes them feel that they belong. However, despite this movement towards a more feminine understanding of God, the ultimate separation of male and female images is not the solution. Rather what is needed is a greater sensitivity towards others’ experiences and images of God, and perhaps most importantly, a willingness to allow others their voice.

Appendix

Questionnaire

Have there been critical times in your life and have these impacted on your faith and/or image of God?

Do you have a clear image of God?

Use five or more words to describe your image of God.

What has contributed to that image?

What is the relation between your image of God and your image of yourself?

Has your image of God changed since you have grown older? If so, how?

What is your image not? What conceptions of God have you shed or feel uncomfortable with?

What image of God does the Church present?

Is your image of God different to that presented by the Church? How do you feel about that?

What do you feel when only male (or dominantly male) language is used in Church? When speaking about God? In the Bible? In hymns and/or in sermons?

Do you think that it is possible to change the view of God as presented by the Church?
Would this be a good thing?

In your experience, is the Church inclusive in its image/language of God?

If not, do you think the Church should be more inclusive?

If so, in respect of what issues, and how?

Do you consider that having female priests/pastors/ministers will change the language and understanding of God? In what way?

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