

WOMAN IN PERSONA CHRISTI:
THE REDEMPTIVE POWER OF FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS
IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

By

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ABSTRACT

In mainstream Christian tradition, women have been systematically disadvantaged, being denied the same rights, privileges and opportunities as men based solely on biological sex. The goal of this paper is to re-examine Christian tradition to see if anything redemptive or empowering for women can be found. Through close reading and analysis of biblical texts and Christian feminist theology, I have come to find that interpreting Christian tradition through a feminist hermeneutical lens can offer redemption to Christianity's patriarchal foundations, and can be useful and empowering to women in Christianity. The broader implication that I make plain is that Christianity can either be affirming or non-affirming for women depending on the type of hermeneutical lens that is used to interpret the Bible and other Christian texts.

INTRODUCTION

A global religion, Christianity boasts a worldwide membership of approximately 2.2 billion. Among Christians, including those that have long since passed, at least half of them are, and have been, female. Since Christianity has been historically patriarchal—patriarchy being defined as any social structure in which males are the supreme authority—why then would any woman adhere to it? Generally speaking, in mainstream patriarchal Christianity women are not permitted to be ordained as ministers, they are not permitted to serve major leadership functions within the church, and they are denied equal status with men. Despite the patriarchy that has been historically tied to the Christian tradition, women throughout the ages have discovered ways in which Christianity can be reconciled with women's liberation. The feminist movement, in particular, has lent much to the development of feminist theologies that not only liberate women, but also equalize them with their male counterparts. Unfortunately, traditional Christian theology is what is often used in the mainstream, effectively maintaining women's disadvantaged position in religion and civil society in predominantly Christian cultures such as the United States. This is why the women's movement emerged, to challenge and attempt to change the patriarchy that has been built into our religious faiths, laws, and ultimately our behaviors. If the goal of feminism, then, is to liberate women from patriarchy, feminist theologians and religious adherents must challenge the misogynistic doctrines and teachings that have long plagued the Christian faith, as well as reinterpret these in a way that would emphasize Christianity's core message of liberation and love.

Feminist theology reassesses religious traditions, scriptures, theologies, and practices from a feminist perspective. The goal of this essay is to reveal the extent to which feminist

theologians have re-envisioned Christianity as compatible with women's empowerment. As a result of my research, I have come to find that a feminist hermeneutical approach to the Bible liberates the Christian faith from the institutionalized patriarchy that has been attached to it since the first century CE. Even though the doctrine, practices, and performance of the Christian faith has been dominated by a patriarchal frame of reference, if one applies a new lens with which to read and interpret the Holy Scripture, different messages and ideals make themselves apparent. For many years, feminists have been debating the relative compatibility of Christianity with the goals and values of the feminist movement. In the United States, the emergence of the feminist movement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries began with women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton exploring Christianity from a new perspective, from that of what Simone de Beauvoir called "the second sex." This tradition continued into the second and third waves of the feminist movement, where women theologians re-read and interpreted the Bible in a different light. Consequently, this means that the debate among feminist theologians has been and still is actively in dialogue concerning women in Christianity. Among those who have actively engaged this debate are scholars such as Mary Daly, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Phyllis Trible, and Bonnie Thurston, who have, like Stanton, reevaluated Christianity in an attempt to find out if women's liberation is compatible with biblical Christianity. Although feminist scholars agree that mainstream Christianity is and has been a patriarchal religion, they disagree on the notion that Christianity's core is inherently patriarchal. On one end of the theoretical spectrum are the rejectionists, who believe that Christianity is inherently patriarchal and that there exists no redemptive value in it for women. Mary Daly, for instance, is a feminist theologian who holds this view. She

argues that, while Christianity may have had redemptive elements for women at one point in time, it has been spoiled for too long by institutionalized patriarchy, and therefore cannot be beneficial to women's liberation. At the opposite end are the loyalists, who acknowledge and accept the patriarchy characteristics of Christianity, arguing that women were created to be subordinate and subservient. Those with this viewpoint will only be discussed in passing as their philosophical viewpoints on the acceptance of patriarchal Christianity are not relevant to the scope of this paper. Furthermore, there have been numerous feminist theologians who have found redemptive value in biblical Christianity and argue that an inherent patriarchy does not exist in the faith itself, but rather has been incorporated into it for human—and not divine—purposes. Feminist theologians who have argued in favor of the revisionist position, such as Fiorenza, Ruether, Tribble, and Thurston, have found Christianity to be a faith of liberation and egalitarian values rather than one completely characterized by patriarchy and oppression. Through a close and in-depth hermeneutical approach, these feminist theologians have found much to lend to the alignment of Christianity and feminism rather than Christianity and oppression.

MARY DALY: Feminist Rejectionist

Daly's Socio-Historical Context and Its Influence on Her Theology

Prior to my discussion of Daly's position on Christianity, it must be noted that, because Daly lived and wrote under conditions of extreme sexual inequality in 1960s America, her perspective is heavily influenced by radical second wave feminism. Radical feminism itself, which emerged during feminism's second wave in the 1960s, was characterized by the notion that patriarchy was the root of all other forms of oppression due

to its pervasiveness and dominance throughout history. Although radical feminism is representative of a more polarized view within the realm of feminist philosophy, its role in the feminist movement has been paramount. It effectively forced people to start thinking in a new way, causing them to question the dominant paradigm and seek an alternative one.

According to radical feminists, men have used social systems and other oppressive mechanisms to maintain the suppression of females, non-dominant males, and other sexual minorities. In addition to her advocacy of radical feminism in general, Daly also held separatist feminist views, a distinctive form of radical feminism. According to the tenets of separatist feminism, opposing patriarchy is best done through focusing exclusively on females and creating positive, all-female spaces. Generally, separatist feminists do not believe that men, even well-meaning ones, can make any positive contributions to the feminist movement. This means that, for separatist feminists, anything that is characterized as male-influenced or for the benefit of males is harmful for women and must be rejected. As a member of the second wave of feminists, Daly embraced radical feminist ideals such as these. In addition, the sexual revolution of the 1960s also had an influence on Daly's work. Specifically, political lesbianism, another phenomenon originating out of second wave feminism, had a large impact on Daly's politics and, consequently, her theology. The term, which was not coined until the late 1970s by Sheila Jeffreys, coauthor of a pamphlet entitled, *Love Your Enemy? The Debate Between Heterosexual Feminism and Political Lesbianism* (1979), represents a radical faction in the feminist movement that embraces the theory that sexual orientation is a choice, advocating that lesbianism itself is a preferable alternative to heterosexuality for women (Jeffreys). Daly's focus on female exclusivity is likely what contributed to her objection to having male students in her classes. Daly, as a professor,

argued that male students would only hinder discussion because their presence would discourage female students from speaking openly in class. Because Daly's work is highly influenced by radical second wave feminism and a clear frustration with the male sex, one must evaluate her viewpoints on Christianity within this context. In this author's opinion, it is absolutely fair to say that Daly's evaluation of Christianity's compatibility with feminist egalitarianism may not be as meaningful to women in less patriarchal contexts today due to the reality of her contemporary influences. However, despite this fact, Daly's work has greatly contributed to the field of feminist theology because she was the one who initiated the late twentieth century discussion concerning women's disadvantaged position in the Church and possibilities for their liberation and empowerment, effectively reinitiating what Stanton had done almost a century prior. Therefore, in exploring Christianity from a feminist perspective, one must remember that Daly's view is one of many different perspectives on the value of Christian theology in the lives of women.

The Evolution of Daly's Theology

In the evolution of her theology, feminist philosopher and theologian Mary Daly moves from attempting to reconcile Christianity with feminism to completely rejecting the possibility. In her first book, called *The Church and the Second Sex* (1968), Daly makes several references to the historical, social, and text-based aspects of Christianity, specifically through a Roman Catholic reference frame, to find some redemptive value in it for women. However, in her second book, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (1973), it is clear that her hope for Christianity is extinguished, Daly taking on a more radical denunciation of the faith. Her reexamination and eventual rejection of Christianity is reflective in part of her frustration with the results of the Second Vatican

Council, which created positive changes within the Catholic Church in several areas, excluding improving the rights of women in the Church. The Catholic Church's fervent antifeminism is discussed and critiqued by Daly. Effectively, she transitions from having some sort of identification with Christianity to a standpoint of staunch rejection. This transition to a full rejection of the notion of compatibility all together points to some of Daly's influences, namely second wave feminism, separatist feminism, political lesbianism, and the increasingly vocal antifeminism of the Catholic Church. Daly discusses Christianity as a religion of patriarchy that limits women's progress and, ultimately, human progress in general. Overall, Daly recommends that women reject all forms of patriarchy, including patriarchy in the form of Christianity, and create a new creed of their own that is liberating and empowering.

In *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (1973), Daly found Christianity to have no redemptive value for women. As a staunch rejectionist, Daly made the case that, because Christianity has been deeply intertwined with patriarchy since its inception, the mechanism that was used to oppress and the religion itself became one in the same, making them inseparable and therefore useless in the liberation and empowerment of females. However, prior to writing *Beyond God the Father*, Daly acknowledged that certain aspects of Christianity might be compatible with feminism. This critical, yet hopeful perspective can be observed in her previous book when she says that, "There are, clearly, promising elements already present in Christian thought which can be sources of further development toward a more personalist conception of the man-woman relationship on all levels" (Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* 73). While she still maintained that Christianity has taken on an oppressive patriarchal form, she does concede

that there were, at one time, visible glimpses of the universally liberating and non-oppressive message. However, although recognizing and accepting this notion, the situation is still one where patriarchy is being used as an oppressive instrument. This reality has manifested itself through the Church's continuing use of androcentric theology and socio-historical advantage, because the patriarchy in civil society and the patriarchy in religion came to reinforce each other. Therefore, in Daly's view, this has made Christianity and patriarchy one in the same. This being her main argument in *Beyond God the Father*, Daly, nevertheless, acknowledges that Christianity's intrinsic message is one of universal liberation, but that that message was distorted and became spoiled as a result of societal pressure throughout history. For Daly, this means that the faith is beyond repair, in that patriarchy has been historically and socially tied to it for so long that it can no longer be possible to separate them.

Although Daly eventually comes to fully reject Christianity after the publishing of *The Church and the Second Sex*, she does, however, acknowledge in her first book that the intrinsic message of the faith is not an oppressive one, but a liberating one. While the Old Testament is riddled with sexism and is highly oppressive towards women, "The New Testament, still partly immersed in the old order, nevertheless points beyond it: just as there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, so there is neither male nor female in Christ. That is to say, the old oppressive form of relationships is to be transcended" (Daly 213, *The Church and the Second Sex*). Here, Daly argues that the true nature of Christianity calls upon us to reject oppressive relationships in favor of those that are equitable and harmonious for everyone. Translated to fit the present, Daly's notion creates an existence where gender-based hierarchies would not exist, where men and women would be free to

pursue their goals without being institutionally barred from doing so based on their sex. The intrinsic message of Christianity can be found within the breadth of Jesus' ministry in the Gospels. According to the Gospels, Jesus taught and behaved in a way that advocated egalitarianism. As said by Daly, "In the passages describing the relationship of Jesus with various women, one characteristic stands out starkly: they emerge as persons, for they are treated as persons, often in such contrast with prevailing custom as to astonish onlookers" (Daly 79-80, *The Church and the Second Sex*). Even Daly agrees with the significance of the fact that the statements in the New Testament that reflect the antifeminist views of the time are never those of Jesus, himself, but rather others who came after him.

After a close examination of the Gospels, it is apparent that Jesus had positive relationships with women, where he treated them in the same way as he did his male adherents and disciples. The interesting thing about this phenomenon is not only the fact that Jesus went against social norms, but also demonstrated that fact in public venues much to the dismay and astonishment of onlookers, as noted by Daly. He is also never recorded as referring to women as women or men as men (Daly 79-80, *The Church and the Second Sex*). Rather, he seemed to have held the view of universal personhood, in which men and women are merely two parts of a whole human species. Even Daly admits that, "In the Gospel narratives the close friendship of Jesus with certain women is manifested in the context of the crucifixion and resurrection. What stands out is the fact that these, his friends, he saw as persons, to whom he gave the supreme yet simple gift of his brotherhood" (Daly 80, *The Church and the Second Sex*). This, in itself, is indicative of Jesus' views concerning sexual difference, that it is irrelevant to someone's capabilities, whether they be physical, mental, or spiritual. If this idea were embraced in the mainstream, there would be no case

against women in the priesthood. However, while Daly does accept these thoughts and ideas, she argues that Christianity as it is currently practiced does not represent this fundamental teaching of equality; rather, it does the opposite, and is therefore merely an institution used to maintain an oppressive power structure.

Although Daly admits that the Christian message originally had elements of egalitarianism, she fervently argues that, because traditional Christian theology has been formed through a patriarchal reference frame and has been shaped to serve socio-political purposes, it can, in no way, be beneficial for women's liberation in its present form. According to Daly's *The Church and the Second Sex*, "The fact that the Church serves a patriarchal society is said to be at the root of its moral attitudes toward women, for 'oppression of women has its cause in the will to perpetuate the family and to keep the patrimony intact'" (63). Because traditional Christian theology has been influenced by patriarchal institutions and socio-historical motivations, Christianity has become reflective of patriarchal civilization rather than being reflective of the message it originally intended to impart to the world. Consequently, Daly claims that the patriarchal nature of traditional Christian theology teaches men and women to live a half life, in which they are to deny their feminine characteristics as males and masculine characteristics as females in order to cleanse themselves of behaviors deemed unacceptable for men as men and women as women in order to satisfy established gender roles (Daly 193-194, *The Church and the Second Sex*). This is true due to the social pressure felt by first century Christian leaders and the Church Fathers. For instance, when Christianity emerged as a new religion, "Paul was concerned with protecting the new Church against scandal. Thus he repeatedly insisted upon 'correct' sexual behavior" (Daly 80, *The Church and the Second Sex*). Because the

Christian religion emerged during the dominance of the Greco-Roman culture, its intrinsic meaning was damaged, and thus it was taught in a way that maintained already-established social norms, including those that were oppressive. The idea that males were superior (associated with the higher, spiritual self) put them in a position of higher social worth than females (associated with the lower, physical self) who, on the other hand, were deemed inferior and were treated as a mere means to an end.

Following her writing of *The Church and the Second Sex*, Daly came to abandon her hopeful inquiry regarding Christianity's compatibility with feminism. In favor of a staunch rejectionist position, Daly argues that, while the intrinsic message of Christianity is a positive one, that message has been irrevocably tainted because the cultural situation that gave rise to Christianity and supported it (i.e. patrimony) is still very much at large today (Daly 15, *Beyond God the Father*). According to Daly, it is only when this cultural situation ends that the patriarchal interpretation of Christianity will cease to be plausible (Daly 15, *Beyond God the Father*). This means that Christianity will be an oppressive mechanism as long as patriarchy still exists.

Now in favor of a vehement rejectionist stance, Daly comes to argue that even the Jesus story has gendered implications that do not align with feminist ideals. According to Daly, "Women, though encouraged to imitate the sacrificial love of Jesus, and thus willingly accept the victim's role, remain essentially identified with Eve and evil" (Daly 77, *Beyond God the Father*). Here, Daly proclaims that the contradictory roles of woman as a victim-Christ figure and woman as an evil Eve further creates problems for women in Christianity in that they must be good, although their intrinsic association is with evil. According to Daly, not only have the negative qualities of Eve ("the propensity for being

temptresses, the evil and matter-bound 'nature' of the female, the alleged shallowness of mind, weakness of will, and hyper-emotionality") been projected onto women, but also the positive ones that identify women with the victimized Christ figure ("sacrificial love, passive acceptance of suffering, humility, meekness, etc.") (Daly 76-77, *Beyond God the Father*). Because women are encouraged to take on the victim-Christ role in this way, they are reinforcing their own victimization because they are, on one hand, considered to be inherently evil in nature while, on the other hand, being encouraged to emulate the qualities of Christ that reinforce their subordination (Daly 77, *Beyond God the Father*). Moreover, these expectations leave women in a state of perpetual inferiority because they are striving to emulate Jesus, while they "are by sexual definition alien from the male savior" (Daly 77, *Beyond God the Father*). This contradictory position puts women in a difficult place in the Church, because, according to traditional theology, they are to strive for what is inherently against their nature. Men, in contrast, do not live in this state of contradiction, therefore sealing men's and women's state of inequality in mainstream Christianity and western civilization, in general.

Ultimately, though Jesus displays arguably feminine characteristics (his kind and caring nature, his patience, his sacrificial nature, etc.), the simple fact that he is male implies, for Daly, that "salvation comes only through the male" (Daly 77, *Beyond God the Father*). She even illustrates this idea in her previous book, by stating that, "the subtle conditioning effected by the widespread opinion that God is masculine, whatever that may mean, is unlikely to engender much self-esteem in women, or much self-esteem for women" (Daly 181, *The Church and the Second Sex*). In both texts, Daly argues that, because the Divine is believed to be a masculine figure, and even though they are encouraged to emulate

a masculine Christ, and thus willingly accepting the victim's role, they remain intrinsically tied with evil. Therefore, no matter how saintly or Jesus-like a woman may become, she can never fully ascertain saintly status due to her inherently evil nature that was caused by her biological sex.

Overall, Daly argues in favor of a rejectionist stance towards the Christian religion due to its oppressive theology against women as a result of its inherent patriarchy. For Daly, Christianity's core message of liberation and love has been misconstrued and twisted in order to create institutionalized oppression. This is why she chose to reject Christianity as a religion redeemable for women, because the androcentric images and doctrines have proved to be too overwhelming and, at this point, cannot be changed in greater society to include women's equality (Daly 18, *Beyond God the Father*). Here, Daly is arguing that, because the male imagery has been so deeply engrained in our imaginations, it cannot now be altered in order to equalize women. In its place, Daly recommends that women start anew and discover or create a faith for themselves that is empowering.

ELISABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA AND ROSEMARY RADFORD RUETHER: Revisionist Theologians

After Daly's debut discussion on Christianity and feminism, there have been numerous other feminist theologians after her who have advocated, instead, for the redemptive potential of the Christian religion. Other feminist scholars have rejected the traditional hermeneutical approach characterized by the standard patriarchal vantage point. Among them are renowned revisionist scholars Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether, both of whom reevaluated the Bible and Christianity in general within its historical context while applying alternative hermeneutical approaches to expose and

reshape what had skewed Christianity's intended message. The application of alternative hermeneutical approaches, as opposed to using the standard patriarchal one, leads to an unveiling of a more complete history that involves women beyond the vision laid out for them by patriarchal society.

Both Fiorenza and Ruether agree that the Bible is representative of competing viewpoints, namely those of the Christian doctrinal messages and those of the Greco-Roman society in which Christianity emerged and developed. Instead of accepting and using the patrimonial standard with which Christianity has been shaped and interpreted, Fiorenza and Ruether both opt for a more progressive approach to biblical hermeneutics. For Fiorenza, this involves using a "hermeneutics of suspicion," which entails using a discerning eye when reading and evaluating the Bible in order to effectively identify inconsistencies in the text and isolate Christianity's intended message from the cultural baggage incorporated into it. Similarly, for Ruether, this involves finding the "canon within the canon," which is the divine canon of liberation contained within a patriarchal canon of oppression. Instead, Ruether contends that we must shape Christianity according to the divine canon that emphasizes the full human potential of both man and woman together as intended by the Divine. Consequently, both of these feminist theologians emphasize the characteristics of the Divine (i.e. being a God of liberation) in evaluating what can be taken as the genuine Christian message from the cultural ones incorporated later.

In reexamining the Bible, Fiorenza argues that the entire text is not inherently patriarchal and that historical and cultural norms influenced the way people currently think about Christianity and gender equality. She wrote that, "...if we claim that oppressive patriarchal texts are the Word of God then we proclaim God as a God of oppression and

dehumanization” (Fiorenza xiii, *Bread Not Stone*). Here, Fiorenza contends that the mainstream interpretation of the Bible is likely incorrect because it characterizes God as “oppressive and dehumanizing” which, according to Jesus’ ministry, does not accurately represent the true God. Her argument stems from the fact that the biblical message itself is not inherently sexist, but has been culturally formulated to be presented as such. The idea that anything that is oppressive and dehumanizing cannot be truly characteristic of the Divine is Fiorenza’s core hermeneutical device, using the stories of Jesus to personify the true image of the Divine as a standard of measure in determining the divine authenticity of all aspects of the Bible.

Fiorenza also acknowledges the importance of crafting a more complete history. She argues that, because history was recorded and interpreted with a patriarchal frame of reference, the full human experience is not accounted for. This is because women’s experience, as fellow human beings, is excluded. According to Fiorenza, we must “reject heuristic concepts such as ‘biological caste’ or ‘women’s experience’ as essentially different from that of men because these categories render women passive objects because of biological differences or of male dominance” (Fiorenza 109, *Bread Not Stone*). Here, Fiorenza contends that women’s experience is not essentially different from that of men’s experience and is, therefore, just as central to the Christian story in that only with the accounted for experiences of both men and women together fully qualify as an accurate representation of the human experience in general. Only when this history becomes complete can Christianity truly be interpreted and evaluated for what it is in the absence of patriarchy. Furthermore, the tradition of patriarchy within Christianity has also undermined the accomplishments made by biblical women. According to Fiorenza, “The history and

theology of women's oppression perpetuated by patriarchal biblical texts and by a clerical patriarchy must not be allowed to cancel out the history and theology of the struggle, life, and leadership of Christian women who spoke and acted in the power of the Spirit" (Fiorenza 36, *In Memory of Her*). Here, she further advocates for the study of these influential biblical women in order to fully grasp the extent to which women were involved in Christian history and the strides they made in order to continue the faith. Overall, Fiorenza argues that we must study Christianity in a way that includes the social reality surrounding the text (Fiorenza 59, *In Memory of Her*). Because men were the "winners of history," they were the ones in power, the ones defining cultural norms, and the ones who were considered more valuable in society. Consequently, this is why history has been recorded and religion has been interpreted in such a way that reinforced the dominant patriarchal paradigm.

In addition to Fiorenza, another renowned feminist theologian advocating the revisionist position is Rosemary Radford Ruether. Like Fiorenza, Ruether states that, "...whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption" (Ruether 19). This means that, because God is a god of liberation, anything that subjugates women cannot be representative of the true nature and intention of the Divine. Like other feminist theologians, Ruether agrees that Christianity is patriarchal and that the current state of patriarchy that is intertwined with Christianity is a result of cultural and social conditioning throughout history; therefore, in order to create more of a balanced, inclusive history, Ruether discusses the importance of the non-mainstream Christian groups

deemed as “heretical,” because it was typically these that advocated women in church leadership and valued them outside of the roles determined for them by Greco-Roman culture. In reference to mainstream Christian theology, Ruether states that:

Women, although equivalent in the image of God, nevertheless symbolize the lower self, representing this in their physical, sexual nature. This notion that woman, in her physical, sexual nature, not only symbolizes but incarnates lower human nature and tendency to sin seldom fails to revert to the theological definition of woman’s equivalence in the image of God. Woman in her essential nature is seen as having less of the higher spiritual nature and more of the lower physical nature. She is an ‘inferior mix’ and, as such, is by nature non-normative and under subjugation (Ruether 94).

Here, Ruether points out that even patriarchal Christianity acknowledges the fact that women, in theory, were created in the image of God, therefore making them equal with their male counterparts who were also created in the same image. However, patriarchal Christianity blurred this fact by proclaiming that the difference between men and women lay in their “inherent natures.” As Ruether notes, in patriarchal Christianity, females are representations of the lower, physical self while males are manifestations of the higher, spiritual self. These essentialist associations have made women into pariahs in the Christian community, especially if they did not choose to adhere to the established norms for those of their sex. Unlike Daly, Ruether, however, believes that Christianity does have redemptive qualities that lie within a new interpretation of the Scriptures as well as the entirety of Christian literature, including non-canonical texts. Instead of focusing on the specific roles outlined for men and women that were culturally informed, Ruether advocates that, “Feminist theology needs to affirm the God of Exodus, of liberation and new being, but as rooted in the foundations of being rather than as its antithesis” (Ruether 70). Here, Ruether is alluding to the message of Jesus’ ministry, in which all human beings, male or female, are

equivalently formed in the image of God and are, therefore, equally derivative of the Divine.

Since she does not view orthodox Christianity as fully representative of the authentic divine message, Ruether also examines the theologies of the entire Christian tradition, including the early Christian groups deemed as heretical by mainstream Christianity. These “heretical” groups were suppressed as a result of great efforts on the part of Proto-Orthodox Christianity in order to conceal their egalitarian doctrines. Early Christian groups, such as the Gnostics and the Montanists, who embraced texts outside of the traditional New Testament canon, held more egalitarian views, valuing women beyond their roles as wives and mothers. This, in sharp contrast to the orthodox standard, provides a new historical background for women’s liberation within the Christian movement. However, Ruether notes that, “Neither orthodox nor heretical Christianity brings together the wholeness of vision that feminist theology seeks. Only by correcting the defects of each with the other do we begin to glimpse another alternative Christianity” (Ruether 37). While she praises the more female-friendly stance taken by the heretical Christian groups, Ruether acknowledges that both the heretical theologies and the orthodox ones are both incomplete. Instead, she proposes a more open-ended Christianity in which the texts and ideologies are reinterpreted to include women’s experience as part of the human experience in general and reveal the patriarchal lens with which the Christian tradition has been tainted.

Through her work, Ruether shows how patriarchal cultural paradigms, such as the one perpetuated by the Greco-Roman world, had to work hard to distort and misrepresent Christianity’s intended message of liberation and love in favor of one that maintained the dominant social paradigm that had been in place for generations. Therefore, it can be

inferred from Reuther's examination that, because Christianity was not compatible with patriarchy, church leadership following the ministry of Jesus took on the arduous task of attempting to re-shape the Christian message in order to keep women subordinated and disenfranchised. This can be observed throughout the history of Christianity as manifested in events such as the Council of Nicaea, the life and work of St. Augustine of Hippo, and the current state of Christianity as has been carried out by patriarchal societies from generation to generation.

CASE STUDY: Mary Magdalene, an Influential Woman in the Jesus Movement

An example of a prominent woman in both orthodox and "heretical" Christian traditions is Mary Magdalene due to her repeated presence in both orthodox and Gnostic literature, the latter being effectively undermined by the former. In the orthodox tradition, Mary was made into a reformed prostitute while, in the heretical tradition, she is revered as a disciple, apostle, and close confidant of Jesus. A case study of Mary is relevant to the issue of feminist biblical hermeneutics because she is a prime example of a prominent woman in the Bible whose significance in the Jesus Movement was undermined due to a patriarchal reading of the orthodox canon and the suppression of "heretical" texts. However, through examining the "canon within the canon" of the Bible along with a "hermeneutics of suspicion," Christian texts deemed as "heretical," which were banned during the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, one is able to fairly evaluate the importance of women in the Jesus Movement and in Christianity in general.

In the Gospel of John, there are examples of exemplary women who helped further Jesus' ministry through their faithfulness and service. According to Thurston, "they are

noted for their individual initiative and decisive action” (Thurston 80). In fact, “John’s women played unconventional roles of which Jesus appears to have approved, sometimes overruling the men who objected” (Thurston 92). If Jesus deemed a woman as fit to witness to his own twelve regarding his resurrection, then it would seem logical to assume that Jesus was an advocate of women’s direct involvement in the Church as receivers and purveyors of truth. This charge, in itself, implies a need for feminine leadership, especially since the men have proved to be inconsistent and, at times, unreliable. In addition, it is in the Gospel of John where Mary Magdalene discovers the tomb in which Jesus’s body was placed as empty, she being the one who informs the disciples of his resurrection (John 20:1-2). Furthermore, she is also the first person to whom the risen Christ appears, this being another indication of her status within the Jesus Movement (John 20:11-18). Like in Mark’s Gospel, the Gospel of John is a clear indicator of women’s equality and importance in the opinion of Jesus.

According to Karen King, author of *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*, “The historical Mary of Magdala was a prominent Jewish follower of Jesus, a visionary, and a leading apostle,” and that the image painted of Mary as “repentant prostitute” has no claim to historical truth (King 154). Conversely, this idea about Mary was made part of the Christian tradition by orthodox church leaders much later in history in order to undermine her prominence in the Gospels. In fact, texts central to a proper study of Mary and her role in the Jesus Movement were banned during the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE due to their prominence in the so-called “heretical” Christian groups, one of these texts being the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, which came out of the Gnostic gospels.

The Gospel of Mary is a work whose use is mainly attributed to the Gnostics. The Gnostics were categorized under the list of heretical Christian groups and was severely persecuted as a result. However, it should be noted that what scholars refer to as “Gnostics” may include other heretical non-mainstream Christian sects. Many Christian groups that were lumped in under the label “Gnostic” were known for their approval of women’s leadership in the Church. This approval stems from teachings originating from the Gospel of Mary. According to King, “The Gospel of Mary takes two very strong positions concerning the basis of authority: that spiritual maturity, demonstrated by prophetic experience and steadfastness of mind, is more reliable than mere apostolic lineage in interpreting apostolic tradition, and that the basis for leadership should be spiritual maturity not a person’s sex” (King 89-90). Because the main teachings of the Gospel of Mary base authority in spiritual maturity independent of sex, it is clear why the Gnostics approved of and, possibly, encouraged female leadership in their churches. The Gospel of Mary clearly illustrates this in the following passage:

When Mary had said this, she fell silent, since it was to this point that the Savior had spoken with her. ...Peter answered and spoke concerning these same things. He questioned them about the Savior: “Did He really speak privately with a woman and not openly to us? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did He prefer her to us?” ...Levi answered and said to Peter, “Peter you have always been hot tempered. Now I see you contending against the woman like the adversaries. But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Savior knows her very well. That is why He loved her more than us... (Mary 9:1-9).

In this passage, there is an admission that Mary was favored by Jesus among the disciples and that he imparted upon her certain knowledge and teachings that he did not divulge to the others. According to Barbara J. MacHaffie, author of *Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition*, “... the patriarchal trend of the early church, which would become dominant, is represented in the words of Peter, who rebukes Mary for her brashness and doubts the

legitimacy of her message” (MacHaffie 21). The nature of Mary here is significant because the role of a woman is embraced in that Mary received supplementary teachings here from Jesus that the male disciples did not. It is apparent that the existence of a prominent woman actually exists within Christian tradition, but unfortunately, the images of her have been obscured due to a perceived threat by the already long-established paradigm of male superiority that existed during Christianity’s inception and development. However, these texts emphasize the role of Mary Magdalene in particular as a key disciple and apostle in the Jesus Movement as well as a favorite of Jesus himself. The Gnostic Christians who accepted these descriptions of Mary, of her as apostle to the apostles, model disciple, and active promoter of the Jesus Movement, were heavily persecuted and eventually eradicated, thus leaving history the version of Mary created for us by the Proto-Orthodox.

Although the orthodox canon also documents Mary Magdalene’s significance to the Jesus Movement, mainstream Christianity, in practice, bars women from the same rights and privileges that are available to men. Like the Gnostic texts, the orthodox canon presents Mary Magdalene and women in general favorably, documenting their dedicated service and contributions to the Jesus Movement. The image of Mary Magdalene in the orthodox canon is generally quite positive; in John she is the “apostle to the apostles” (with the exception of the last chapter of this Gospel, which was added later by a pseudo-John). However, while she had a significant role in the Jesus Movement and shared responsibilities similar to those of the twelve male disciples, she is still remembered as a mere prostitute, a fabrication that was developed much later in the Christian tradition. In John, she is a prime example of a woman who was charged with the mission of spreading the message of Jesus, which is that Christians are brothers and sisters in God. Thurston explains that, since this teaching was

first entrusted to a female, “it is, in fact, on the ‘testimony’ of a woman that the whole Christian faith depends” (Thurston 91). Because the testimony of a woman was critical to the propagation of the Jesus message, it can be inferred that women’s discipleship, apostleship, and general leadership is not only condoned, but valued, by the Divine. This reality, however, is often not taken for what it is worth in orthodox Christianity. On the contrary, orthodox Christianity effectively undermines its own tradition about Mary Magdalene through its systematic rejection of women’s leadership in the Church.

FEMINIST BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS:
The Liberation of Christianity from Patriarchy

Interpretations of the Bible by men and women alike have resulted in different perspectives dealing with gender roles and authority. A close examination of the Bible reveals that the stories upon which Christian theologies are based are highly ambiguous. In this section, I will present a new way of looking at the Bible as a text that liberates and empowers women. Ultimately, the message that one gets out of the text is determined by what hermeneutical approach is being applied.

Genesis: Chapters 1-3

Even though Genesis 1-3 consists of two different creation stories, one of which tells the story of the earth and all living things while the other tells the story of God’s creation in relation to humanity’s fall from grace. Traditional Christianity emphasizes chapters 2 and 3 to justify women’s subordination due to an explicitly patriarchal interpretation and understanding of the text. However, if a feminist lens is applied, a completely different message can be deduced from the Genesis. The first chapter of the Christian genesis outlines God’s creation of the heavens and the earth within the broader expanse of the universe,

which, before His creation, was a dark, empty void. After His creation of the heavens, the earth, the sky, the water, and plant and animal life, man and woman were created simultaneously, specifically in God's own image (NSRV, Genesis 1:27).

In chapter two, the Garden of Eden is introduced and the story goes into some detail regarding Adam's relationship with God. According to MacHaffie, "the second and third chapters of Genesis have had the most impact on women in the Christian community" (MacHaffie 316). Prior to the creation of woman, God instructed Adam not to eat from the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, warning that if he did, he would surely die (NSRV, Genesis 2:17). Then, the story goes on to discuss the creation of woman, Adam naming her "Eve." According to Genesis chapter two, God found that it was not good for man to be alone, and that he required companionship, a helper, more specifically (NSRV, Genesis 2:18). Consequently, God created woman out of man's rib, and Adam thus came to see her as "bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh" (NSRV, Genesis 2:23).

Chapter three of Genesis confers Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden, thus explaining the wretched incident that was the Fall of Man, according to Christian theology. The beginning of chapter three introduces the serpent character, who was the "slyest amongst the animals" (NSRV, Genesis 3:1). The serpent tempted Eve, enticing her to eat of the forbidden tree. She decided to take the fruit, and she ate it and gave some to her husband to eat, who was with her (NSRV, Genesis 3:6). At that moment, the two realized that they were naked and sowed fig leaves together to cover themselves. Later, God confronted the two and then, upon their confession of eating the forbidden fruit, cursed the serpent, and then punished the man and the woman by introducing the existence of conflict,

strife, pain, and inequality. In addition, God made garments for the man and woman, and then banished them from the Garden for eternity.

In traditional Christian theology, Eve's decision to eat of the forbidden fruit marked the emergence of sin in human history. Unfortunately, this incident also became one of the main justifications for the oppression of women in the Church and, ultimately, in society as well. It was in the Garden where woman, as such, was introduced into humanity, and where the incident in which unholy transgression was said to have entered the world unfolded. The fact that it was woman who initially took the forbidden fruit, therefore making her the guilty party in the introduction of sin, is what mainstream Christianity, past and present, has used to validate female subordination and inferiority and male dominance and superiority in both church and society. This particular interpretation of the Genesis story, specifically of Genesis 2-3, has been one of the most dominant sources of patriarchy in the Christian religion.

Fortunately, feminist theologians have offered new interpretations of Genesis that have been helpful in gaining a new understanding of the story and how it relates to both men *and* women. Now that feminist theologians have re-examined the Bible, it has been revealed that there is much within it that lends itself to the ideals of feminism, even the Genesis story of Christianity. Due to the highly ambiguous nature of the story, as well as the androcentric lenses with which it has been interpreted until recent years, the Judeo-Christian creation story and the incident involving the expulsion from the Garden can absolutely be reinterpreted to coincide with feminism.

Although there has been much debate over whether or not equality existed between man and woman prior to the Fall, revisionist theologians argue that equality did exist

between them and that patriarchy was the result of their disobedience. In *God and The Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Phyllis Tribble provides an analysis to show that, prior to the creation of woman as such, the first human person was not, in fact, male, but was instead sexually undifferentiated, which is referenced at the end of Genesis 1 where Adam, at that point, was devoid of gender (Tribble 98). This life form, created from the dust of the earth, was called Adam, which, in the original text, could be translated as “earth creature” or “human” (Tribble 80). According to Tribble’s linguistic examination, the language used to refer to man in the original text was ambiguous, implying sexual neutrality. This can be observed not only in the story itself, but also in the language that it was written in. Specifically, the first human created by God was called *ha-adam*, which was the “basic word for humanity before sexual differentiation,” as seen in Genesis 1 (Tribble 98). However, when sexuality was introduced, the term *ha-adam* became a sexual reference frequently, but not exclusively, used to signify a male. Furthermore, it is in Genesis 3, when God decides this neutral creature will require companionship, that sexuality is introduced in the creation of sexually differentiated humans, in other words, male and female. This interpretation counters the argument that woman, as a derivative of man, is inherently inferior. On the other hand, because man was sexually ambiguous, Tribble asserts that, in Genesis 2, man and woman were created simultaneously (as in Genesis 1), not sequentially, where the differentiated female, Eve, is introduced, and Adam becomes sexually differentiated as a male (Tribble 98). In addition, the fact that man and woman were derived from the same sexless creature implies their oneness, unity, and equality as the most intricate of God’s creations.

Furthermore, God also speaks directly to man’s and woman’s equality when he first says that man will require companionship in a helping partner, rather than a subordinate,

subservient “helper.” The term “helper,” as used in the Bible, prior to translation, was often used as a term to describe God as the “helper” of Israel. In reference to the term, Tribble states that, “in the Hebrew scriptures this word often describes God as the superior who creates and saves Israel” (Tribble 90). In the original language in which the Bible was written, it is apparent that the term “helper” was not used in a way that signified subservience or subordination, but that mutual companionship, rather than a hierarchical order, was intended for the couple. This implies that God intended for man and woman to live together in mutuality. This can be seen in God’s emphasis on man’s companion-to-be as a partner. The word “partner” can be derived from the word “partnership,” which implies equality of position between parties for their mutual benefit. In fact, when man recognizes woman as bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh, he is acknowledging that she is as much a part of him as he is of her, symbolizing that they are, together, a single unit, “for woman is the culmination of creation, fulfilling humanity in sexuality” (Tribble 102). Even Daly originally conceded in her first book that the Genesis account is meant to teach that, “man and woman are of the same nature and dignity and that they have a common mission to rule the earth” (Daly 78, *The Church and the Second Sex*). However, the mainstream interpretation of the creation insists that, because man was supposedly created first, that man is inherently superior and that, since woman was created out of man, that she is subordinate to him by nature.

Feminist scholars have also reinterpreted the incident involving the temptation in Genesis in order to further argue equal fault shared between man and woman as a result of their collective disobedience. The conventional interpretation of the temptation of Eve determined that woman, because she gave in to the temptation of the serpent, was therefore

morally inferior, justifying women's subordination. On the other hand, feminist interpretations of the story have found Eve's actions in this case to illustrate women's agency as well as to show man and woman's equal fault in humanity's fall from grace. Because the serpent uses plural pronouns (Trible 113) in his communications with the woman, it is implied that the man and the woman were being addressed as a unit. In addition, the fact that Genesis 3:6 confers the presence of the man during this conversation also supports the notion of their mutual fault.

The actual conversation between the serpent and the woman also reveals woman as an independent agent. Not only is she the spokesperson for the couple, she also presents counterarguments against the serpent and articulately discusses the meaning and intent of God's commandment. Trible and others have noted that, throughout this scene, the male figure remains silent. This is significant because it shows the man as "passive and bland" due to the fact that he does not "speak for obedience" to God (Trible 113). Man's failure to speak up in this matter, although he was fully aware of God's commandment, has been argued by feminist as evidence of man's imperfection and equal contribution to the Fall. Although common culture glorifies the first man, justifying the institution of patriarchy based on his example, he actually proves to be quite passive and subordinate in this situation because he freely takes of the fruit that his wife gave him to eat while being fully aware of its origins. Clearly, from the interactions that took place in the Garden story, female subordination was not originally a part of the utopian Garden of Eden. According to Trible, it is their collective disobedience that "upsets the orderly development of life" (Trible 106). Man and woman's joint disobedience of God's commandment is what feminists argue

to be the basis upon which hierarchy, suffering, and dissonance were introduced into the world.

Finally, man and woman's encounter with God following the temptation has also been reinterpreted by feminist scholars. The hierarchy, suffering, and dissonance that were introduced as a result of man and woman's combined disobedience have been argued to be the unfortunate side effects of the fall. This is illustrated through the specific punishments God imposed upon both man and woman. In addition to the introduction of hostility between animal and humanity, punishment included woman's increased pain in childbearing as well as desiring her husband while being simultaneously subordinate to him; while man became destined to working hard and toiling against the earth in order to survive. In addition, man and woman's common expulsion from Paradise signifies their imminent suffering and eventual death. Therefore, it is a result of their disobedience that patriarchy came to exist. According to Tribble, it is the joint disobedience of man and woman that robs them of their divine innocence along with their chance at immortality because helpless creatures, "their lives shattered by strife, discord, and enmity, are hardly candidates for divinity" (Tribble 136). Therefore, the entirety of the Genesis story, with its new feminist reinterpretation, brings to light the non-patriarchal possibilities in the story and the message that it is attempting to impart. This is why, with a feminist perspective of the Genesis, it can be seen that humankind's fall from grace was a team effort, and that both male and female, as humans, are to blame for the evil present in the world, while the ideal state that was meant for them was one of male-female equality.

The Gospels

During Jesus' lifetime, women were viewed negatively due to the longstanding tradition of patriarchy within Greco-Roman society that had existed for generations prior to his birth. At the time of his ministry, Jesus was confronted with the state of current social norms concerning gender roles. Though the historical accuracy of the words attributed to him can be contested, they exude an attitude of egalitarianism. In the canonical gospels, Jesus expresses egalitarian views concerning men and women. Since Jesus left no written works, it must be noted that the Gospels are the earliest indicators of what his views may have been. However, it must be noted that the Gospels also reflect the interpretation of anonymous Christian writers after Jesus' time. According to MacHaffie, the Gospels indicate that women had a prominent role in Jesus' ministry, and that their presence was so pervasive that it must be based intractable fact (MacHaffie 4). Though Jesus had numerous male disciples, there were women in his company who served as providers, disciples, and even apostles, suggesting that they were deemed as useful and as capable as men. In fact, "In all of the Gospels, most women are portrayed as effective disciples. They are models of spirit-filled life in Luke and they are 'good seed' that bear fruit in Mark" (MacHaffie 5). In fact, during Jesus' crucifixion, the female disciples proved to be the more loyal. This is made apparent in the Gospel of Matthew. According to this gospel, "all the disciples deserted him and fled. [...] Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. ...Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and provided for him" (NRSV, Matthew 26:56; 27:50, 55). Through their care and watchful vigilance in this passage, it can be seen that the women possessed a strong sense of loyalty to Jesus and were deeply dedicated to the continuity of his message. The fact that Jesus

worked side-by-side with women and gave them roles equivalent to his male disciples indicates his egalitarian viewpoint and overall acceptance of females.

Bonnie Thurston, author of *Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary*, argues in favor of the compatibility of feminist theology within the Bible, specifically in the Gospels and the Pauline Letters. Although she does acknowledge that women are sometimes portrayed unfavorably in the Bible, Thurston has shown that many of the important female characters are portrayed very favorably, sometimes even more favorably than the prominent male figures. Because of this, she contends that women were central to Jesus' ministry and that Jesus himself was an advocate for women's equality. Even though evidence of patriarchy can be found all over the Bible, as argued by Fiorenza and Ruether, it can be considered as merely reflective of the time in which Christianity developed and flourished. All in all, women definitely played an integral part in Jesus' ministry, and the New Testament is evidence of that very fact. Jesus' ministry, which is in stark contrast to the patriarchal culture and texts of the Bible itself, truly speak to women's prominence and importance to the Christian tradition.

Thurston argues that the women involved in Jesus' ministry, both individually and collectively, were essential to the success of his overall mission of peace and love. This can be seen with a close examination of the Gospels, most notably in Mark and John. Mark highlights the contributions of women collectively, while John places emphasis on the role of a single woman, Mary Magdalene, in the Jesus Movement. According to Thurston, the disciples in Mark were "a sorry lot," because they "misunderstand Jesus' person, mission, and teaching; are personally sharp with him; and disobey his commands" (Thurston 69). Furthermore, actions against Jesus by the male disciples are also well-known in the

Christian community, such as the denial of Peter and the betrayal of Judas Iscariot. In sharp contrast, however, Thurston, like MacHaffie, points out that the women in Mark “are, by and large, models of discipleship” (Thurston 69). Thurston makes this fact explicit by evidencing the extent of the women’s devotion to Jesus. Due to the portrayals of women’s service in Mark, she contends that it is “the faithful women disciples who witness the crucifixion, follow along to see where Jesus’ body is buried, and set out early the first day of the week to anoint the body, thereby becoming the first witnesses to the resurrection and those charged with proclaiming it” (Thurston 70). Like in MacHaffie’s explanation of Mark, Thurston, too, in hers, shines a spotlight on the outstanding women who helped serve in Jesus’ ministry and who, no doubt, greatly contributed to its success.

Since biblical women are presented as having positive value throughout the course of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, it would be difficult to justify women’s lack of authority in the Church. However, due to the patriarchal nature of the Greco-Roman world, Christianity would continue the tradition of male dominance and female subordination. In the Jewish and Greco-Roman worldviews, women are treated as inferior to men and are not permitted to hold important leadership positions or act independently of a man. The teachings of Jesus, however, which are paramount to the Christian religion, called for women’s equality. In fact, Jesus “says nothing theologically about women as women or men as men” (Thurston 76). This implies that Jesus’ teachings were meant to be taken universally and that the physical sex of a person is spiritually irrelevant. In the big scheme of things, this would imply that women should also be treated as equal in the physical world. However, since many different types of power and authority were justified through male spiritual superiority in the ancient world (e.g. the spiritual authority ascribed to Roman

emperors), women were systematically denied roles of leadership in both the spiritual and secular worlds. Fortunately though, the example of exceptional biblical women as presented here are indicative of the importance of women's involvement in the Church. This is the very reason why feminist theologies are so important, because they emphasize the true nature, value, and significance of women while revealing the misrepresentations provided by patriarchal culture.

The Truth about Saint Paul and the Women

The writings of the Apostle Paul are frequently cited in discourse concerning women in Christianity. Paul has always been a controversial figure in Christian history because he has been both, "condemned as the eternal enemy of women and has been celebrated as the only consistent spokesperson for the liberation of women in the New Testament" (MacHaffie 6). Effectively, this has been the case due to common misconceptions about the authenticity of some of the letters attributed to Paul. Although Paul appears to be inconsistent concerning his views on women in the Church, as reflected in the New Testament, the reality is that many of the texts credited to him were not actually written by him, and biblical scholars have found the ones that have been determined authentically Pauline to be somewhat unclear regarding the status of women. Because many of the Epistles, or letters, attributed to Paul were not actually written by him, but rather were written by later Christian writers in his name, the views expressed about women in these instances cannot be taken as Paul's actual views. In the second and third centuries, Proto-Orthodox Christianity was beginning to develop as a branch of Pauline Christianity that condemned female activity in the church. Their stance on women in the church can be seen in the Deutero-Pauline and Pastoral epistles. Rather than actually being written by Paul

himself, scholars believe that these scriptures reveal the opinions of Proto-Orthodox leaders in the second century, rather than the views of Paul and those involved in Jesus' ministry (Seat "The Pauline Epistles").

In order to determine the true nature of Paul's views on women, we will examine his undisputed letters and thereby determine his actual stance on women. What is noteworthy about Paul is that he, "must always be understood as a man of three worlds and consequently three interrelated worldviews: Jewish, Greco-Roman, and Christian" (Thurston 31). This means that Paul's views were informed by three different ideological backgrounds, all three effectively informing his overall worldview and opinions about women. The clash of ideological influences in Paul's life can be observed in his Christian teachings and practice.

In his undisputed epistles (Romans, 1st & 2nd Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon), "Paul mentions work with women ministers and church leaders" (Seat "The Pauline Epistles"). In his letter to the Galatians, he expresses an opinion reflecting gender equality, writing that, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (NSRV, Galatians 3:28). Here he implies that men and women are equal and that all Christians are one with Jesus regardless of sex and other differences. However, there is also evidence to show that, in certain situations, Paul was less of an egalitarian champion and more of a good Roman citizen. For instance, in 1st Corinthians, he writes that, "...Every man who prays or prophesies with something on his head dishonors his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since that is one and the same as having her head shaved..." (1st Corinthians 11:4-5). In this passage,

while Paul states that both men and women can pray and prophesy, he clearly reintroduces the societal “honor/shame conventions” of his time (MacHaffie 8). Also, the mention of head coverings here is, to MacHaffie, meant to be representative of the subordination of women to men (MacHaffie 8). Thurston, however, disagrees with this interpretation, arguing that 1st Corinthians 11:2-16 is a convincing interpolation (Thurston 43). Thurston cites the separations in the flow of the argument in chapters 10 and 11 as well as the fact that the passage already “*assumes* that women pray and prophesy publicly in the Christian community” (Thurston 43). It is, therefore, *not* women’s rights and privileges to perform these rites that are in question, but rather their “propriety in dress at public prayer is the issue” at hand (Thurston 43). Although Paul appears to have worked with women and advocated their involvement in the Church, it is hard to say for sure what his actual position may have been. Was he that strongly influenced by his Greco-Roman and Jewish upbringing; was he conflicted concerning his opinions on women; or were these contradictory statements merely additions from anonymous sources? Since there is no consensus among biblical scholars, the determination regarding Paul’s stance is left to the individual.

As stated earlier, in his Letter to the Galatians, Paul says “what most scholars think to be Paul’s primary theological statement on women’s position in the church, Gal. 3:28: ‘There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus’” (Thurston 36). Paul’s words imply that there is an equalizer in Jesus, and that man and woman are spiritually one in the same. Again, because worldly authority was tied to spiritual authority in the ancient world, it would have made sense theologically speaking to allow women churchly authority as well as authority

within the state. Consequently, Paul worked with a number of women in the church, women who he viewed as his equals in churchly authority. Paul's female colleagues, namely Phoebe, Junia, and Priscilla, are among the women leaders who are referenced as having worked in the Pauline Churches. The second and third centuries produced a variety of other Christian groups who, unlike the Proto-Orthodox, had more radical views on women, among them the Gnostics and the Pauline Christians who embraced the Acts of Paul and Thecla.

Evidence of the amalgamation of the Christian message with Greco-Roman cultural normativity can be observed in the letters of Paul, reinforcing Thurston's argument that, "on the theological level, Paul has a vision of equality, but on the practical level he often practices a status quo ethic" (Thurston 60). In the genuine Pauline Epistles, namely 1st Corinthians, Philippians, Galatians, and Romans, Paul neither condemns nor discourages women from serving in the Church. Contrarily, these letters suggest that, "Paul did not censor women who held leadership positions in the churches that existed before he began his missionary work, and that he did work side by side with and appreciate the ministry of women in the churches he founded" (Thurston 60). However, in no way was Paul a radical egalitarian, nor was he a misogynist. It is apparent that he was merely human, influenced by both his spiritual and cultural educations. Thurston, I believe, uncovers an accurate profile of the Apostle Paul and his views on women, asserting that, while he "does envision new possibilities for women and for slaves...he does not challenge the social structures that perpetuated their domination...He feared social disorder and attempted to limit it by means of instructions he gave to his churches" (Thurston 60). Ultimately, because Paul was a good Roman citizen *and* a man of God, he found it necessary not only to teach and practice the

Gospel message, but to also maintain the long-established secular cultural codes that had been in place for generations prior to his existence.

Later, the patriarchal texts attributed to Paul became what would be used in the mainstream, effectively undermining his authentic egalitarian letters. In the second and third centuries, Proto-Orthodox Christianity was beginning to develop as a branch of Pauline Christianity that condemned female activity in the church. Their stance on women in the church stems from the Deutero-Pauline and Pastoral epistles. Although these letters claim to be written by the Apostle Paul, biblical scholars have presented evidence suggesting that these are likely forgeries by later Christian writers (Ehrman 261-262). Instead, scholars believe that these scriptures reveal the opinions of Proto-Orthodox leaders in the second century, rather than the views of Paul and those involved in Jesus' ministry ("The Pauline Epistles"). In the Deutero-Pauline epistle of Ephesians, "Deutero-Paul" writes:

Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22-24).

In this passage, there is an overwhelming sense of female subordination that is advocated by the writer. Unlike Paul's undisputed epistles, there is no indication of ambivalence in the writer's perspective. Furthermore, in the Pastoral epistle of 1st Timothy, a Proto-Orthodox writer conveys his contempt for women by proclaiming that:

"... no woman [should] teach or [possess] authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty" (1 Timothy 2:11-15).

Here, the author's viewpoint concerning women appears of be one of disdain, condemning them as being prone to sin, and having a single redemptive quality in childbearing. Because Roman legal theory regarding women depended upon *infirmitas sexus*, the weakness of the sex, Greco-Roman social and cultural norms "mandated that women be under the custody and/or control of males" (Thurston 21). Consequently, this meant that women, despite their socioeconomic situations, were praised mainly for family responsibility, industry, and for being married only once (Thurston 24). Perhaps these Proto-Orthodox authors found Paul's original writings too ambiguous, thus requiring them to establish more rigid guidelines for behavior based on already established societal norms. Because Christianity became integrated with Greco-Roman cultural norms, the religion was institutionally refashioned to exclude women from areas of prominence in the Church as well, adding insult to injury by denying them this along with the patriarchy already present in civic society.

THE LASTING EFFECTS OF HISTORY: The Church Fathers and Their Influence on Traditional Christian Theology

Following the writing of the New Testament, Christianity developed and became a mainstream religion in Greco-Roman society. This meant that several theologians were coming out of this tradition, being influenced by their pre-formulated cultural ideas about women and gender roles. Consequently, the Church Fathers struggled with their attitudes toward women, not being able to commit to a fully consistent viewpoint. Though these early Christians, namely the authors of the Deutero-Pauline letters, Tertullian and Augustine, were aware of Jesus' teachings concerning women, they were severely conflicted in their views due to the tension that existed between the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Epistles. Consequently, these writers produced surviving works that reveal their sense of

ambivalence, which has resulted in the multiplicity of views concerning women in contemporary Christianity.

After the triumph of the Proto-Orthodox in the fourth century, the status of women continued to be a matter of ambivalence due to the widespread acceptance of St. Augustine of Hippo. With the conversion of Emperor Constantine in 313, Proto-Orthodoxy, the branch that he chose to accept, was on the rise and was not only made legal, but was also made the official religion of the Roman Empire (Seat “Constantine”). As the only acceptable form of Christianity, Proto-Orthodoxy triumphed and evolved into contemporary mainstream Christianity. Augustine, a subject of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, was well aware of the established religion of his day. Though he did not adhere to Christianity in his youth, he became one of the most renowned Christian figures. In his attitudes concerning women, Augustine was deeply affected by his personal experiences with sexuality. According to Karen Jo Torjesen, author of *When Women Were Priests*, “The conflict within which Augustine was locked was the conflict with his own sexuality – reason against passion. For Augustine to convert to Christianity meant to renounce his sexual desire, but his will was not strong enough to achieve his resolve...” (Torjesen 215-216). In his *Confessions*, Augustine openly admits struggling with his sexual desires and, as a result, focusing a lot of his theology on matters concerning sexuality, passion, and women. Furthermore, Augustine’s viewpoint on women was also heavily influenced by his education in that, “He, like the Greek philosophers, related to women primarily in their roles as concubines, wives, and slaves. When Augustine pondered the purpose of woman in his commentary in Genesis, he could not see beyond her role in procreation” (Torjesen 220). His education combined with his personal struggles inevitably

shaped Augustine's negative opinions of women, which was then transferred to his writings. Eventually Augustine's theology gained widespread acceptance because "so many people found his theological insights helpful in articulating their own experience – the clerics who practiced celibacy, the monks who struggled to control their sexual desires, and even the bishops who tried to govern troublesome congregations" (Torjesen 223). Augustine's extensive popularity eventually carried on into future generations, shaping the mainstream contemporary church's stance on women.

Tertullian, another of the early Christian writers, perpetuated the sentiments of the authors of the Deutero-Pauline and Pastoral Epistles. Tertullian believed that the Deutero-Pauline and Pastoral epistles truly reflected Paul's opinions about women (Torjesen 159). According to Torjesen, "Tertullian represents the attitude of the conservative Roman aristocracy that the only proper roles for women lay within the private sphere" (Torjesen 160). Since the church, like government, existed in the public sphere, Tertullian came to the conclusion that women had no place in church activity, particularly in areas of leadership. However, Tertullian, too, was not fully committed to a single view of women due to the conflicted nature of Paul's own writings. Torjesen claims that, "Tertullian did, paradoxically, accept women prophesying in church and managed to reconcile this with his condemnation of women teaching, discussing, or asking questions by his interpretation of Paul's insistence on women's silence" (Torjesen 159). In this passage, Tertullian appears to be referencing ideas characteristic of the Pastoral Epistles in that he puts emphasis on women's silence. However, the inconsistency in his views mentioned by Torjesen suggests that Tertullian was likely confused by the contradictory nature of the letters attributed to Paul. Consequently, he put special emphasis on those passages which aligned with his own

thinking. As Torjesen goes further, she concludes that, “Tertullian’s rejection of women’s leadership in the church was therefore determined by Roman society’s relegation of women’s activities to the private domestic sphere and its insistence that the public woman was a promiscuous woman” (Torjesen 160). Apparently, Tertullian was heavily influenced by not only his Christian education, but his social secular education as well in terms of his attitudes towards women.

AUTHOR’S CONCLUSIONS:

Although the Christian tradition has been used to justify an oppressive patriarchal institution, it is a religious creed that is, at its core, an egalitarian movement. It can be observed that the interpretation one gets out of the Bible depends upon the lens with which it is being interpreted. Therefore, if a patriarchal lens is applied, a patriarchal interpretation will come from it, the same applying to a feminist lens. What one must remember when reading and evaluating the text is that it was written by people, therefore not making the text itself divine. However, much of the contemporary Christian community has come to worship the Bible, perceiving it as wholly inerrant. This, to me, seems counterintuitive because the text was written by imperfect and flawed human beings. While the Bible itself may have been inspired by the divine, it is not truly derivative of the divine. This implies that every word and phrase from it should not be taken literally and that, because it was produced by humans, the text was undeniably influenced by the cultural baggage of the time.

Furthermore, the insistence that “salvation only comes through the male,” as Daly claimed, is unfortunate. Although it is clear that Daly was deeply frustrated with the

Catholic Church and its insistence on the *persona Christi* of its deacons, ministers, and priests (i.e. that only males can qualify as being leaders in the Church because Jesus was male), Daly fails to consider what would have happened if Jesus were female instead of male. Hypothetically speaking, if Jesus were born female, the Christian faith would not have likely been picked up in the mainstream because Jesus as a woman would have been deemed as inferior and probably would have been, according to Greco-Roman custom, executed for the reason of blasphemy (the punishment for which would have been especially harsh since the hypothetical Jesus would have been a female). This is why Jesus had to be male, because, if he would have been female, he would have been killed early on in his ministry, therefore making him unable to neither preach nor perform his destined task of bringing salvation. This, therefore, shows the irrelevance of Jesus' biological sex because, although he was physically manifested as male, he conducted in himself in a way that was arguably feminine. This balance of male-female in Jesus himself suggests the value of both masculine and feminine as part of God's creation in humankind.

Although Jesus Christ, Christianity's central figure, held an egalitarian view towards men and women as did the Apostle Paul, the successors in the faith, namely Tertullian and Augustine, important figures in shaping the future of Christianity after its emergence, held patriarchal attitudes toward women. Although Paul, Augustine, and Tertullian, at times, would express disdain for women, they, at the same time, would admit some amount of equality. It is clear that these men were not divine, but were confused, constantly standing at a crossroads between their faith and their experience. Furthermore, these men wished to propagate a conservative form of Christianity that aligned with their experiential beliefs and, in order to do so, needed to fervently reject any doctrine or heretical Christian groups that

contradicted their theologies. It can be said that these men were deeply conflicted concerning their views on women due to their constant teetering between a positive and negative outlook. In the end, it seems as if those entrusted to carry on the Christian message were merely products of their time, unable to compromise their Christian education with their cultural heritage. Therefore, because Christianity emerged and developed within a patriarchal context, it, unfortunately, was greatly influenced and led by people who were products of this patriarchal culture. However, if the cultural situation in which Christianity developed were different, Christianity as a worldwide religion would have been interpreted and performed very differently.

Now that we are living in a new paradigm in which women have risen up and proclaimed themselves as equal, thanks given to the feminist movement, it is now the time for the original message of Christianity to reemerge. As has been demonstrated by this essay, the role of women in the Bible has been crucial to the development and success of Christianity. Although these biblical women were operating under conditions of extreme patriarchy, they, with Jesus' support and confidence, rose to the challenge and contradicted social and cultural norms in the name of universal salvation and liberation. It was through their strength and perseverance that Christian women today have evidence in support of their legitimate authority and direct connection to the Divine, as well as the confidence to proclaim these facts to those still stuck in the old paradigm. Consequently, only through an application of feminist hermeneutics can this reality be made known, where women and men are shown to be equivalent and united, of the same bones and of the same flesh. It is through this message, Christianity's intended message, that *persona Christi* as woman can be unveiled, practiced, and embraced.

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