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**“Spiritual Inspiration for Women of Faith: Scripture and the
Struggle for Hope.”**

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Spiritual Inspiration for Women of Faith: Scripture and the Struggle for Hope.

Religion has always traditionally been a male dominated area and it is one of the few places where women are still excluded from full participation across the board. The belief systems we have today come from texts and scriptures written by a collection of different people thousands of years ago. The problem with this, for women anyway, is that the large majority of the people who wrote these texts were men. Therefore, the religions built on these texts have ended up favouring one gender over another.

Understandably this has led to women questioning the relevance, of these stories told from a male point of view, to their lives. Alicia Suskin Ostriker questions:

“What is the relation of the female writer to the male text, the male story?..And how, where, do I locate myself with respect to the looming male tradition of religion, myth, philosophy and literature.”¹

Where can women find their own narrative within this male dominated story, and where can they find spiritual inspiration in scripture, the majority of which is male dominated?

In the last forty years it has become more and more apparent that women want their voices to be heard more in many areas of society. Women have fought for and gained the vote and have obtained jobs of status in politics, as well as in everyday employment. They have shown that they can bring up and sustain a family as well as hold down a career. However, it is not good news for women across the whole spectrum of life. They still remain the silent partners in the Church. It was a long hard fight for women in the Church of England to reach ordination and even now it has been achieved, it is still surrounded by a great deal of controversy. However, within the Catholic Church the fight continues. Women in the Catholic Church have been handed small opportunities throughout the last few decades since Vatican II; women can become altar servers and Eucharistic ministers, are allowed to read and lead groups within the Church community. These are all positive steps towards full participation within the Church, but it is easy to see that this could simply be seen as a way to pacify women. Within a large section of the

¹ Alicia Suskin Ostriker, “Out of my sight: the buried women in biblical narrative” pg 27.

Church, women are still forced to live out their faith journeys within communities lead by men. This problem is not just apparent in Christianity, it occurs in the religions across the world. Religion has always been perceived as a patriarchal institution dictated by men at the top of a man made hierarchy. It is these men who make decisions as to how women, as well as men should live out their own personal faith. How can men possibly understand what a woman's lived experience is within a Church community? So many women steer clear of religion because they feel threatened or overlooked and this in turn leads to the demise of their personal faith and spirituality.

This clearly is not a new point to be making and many women have written about, and fought a cause for equality in the Church. What I find significant and have always been intrigued by is the inspiration which women can take from the women in the Bible. Women like Mary and Elizabeth should be praised for the vital and significant roles which they played in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the foundation of Christianity, rather than be bypassed and seen as unimportant. Why have the majority of women from the Bible held such background positions in Christianity? Women of faith today should not be discouraged by Scripture; they should seek inspiration and spiritual guidance from the Bible to inspire future generations of women. Women over the last couple of hundred years have written a great deal about feminist theology, women's place within the Church, women in the life of Jesus and women's relationship with God. Women should be encouraged to go out and search for inspiration from those who have gone before and written a great deal about the subject. We have a great deal to learn from the work of many great theologians, philosophers, anthropologists, psychoanalysts and feminists, both male and female, such as Matilda Joselyn Gage, Mary Daly, John Stuart Mill, Simone de Beauvoir, Rosemary Radford Reuther, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Ann Loades, Susan Frank Parsons, George Carey and many more. All these people have written about the situation of women in the world and often focus on the fact that women's voices are too often overlooked within religion and question why women do not have the same positions as men within the Church. Some theologians have looked into what inspiration women can take from Scripture and encourage them to look deeper into what they read and see in the relationships Jesus had with women, and the way in which he taught.

I personally feel that there is so much inspiration to be taken from Women like Mary and Elizabeth and all the other women Jesus taught, who often understood what Jesus was trying to say long before the men, his 'disciples', did. From reading the gospels and growing up as a Catholic I have always questioned where women can find their place within religion and how they can fully participate in a religious community. Within a subject like this it is very easy to generalise, and also to go a long way down the feminist route, which I do not intend to do. I will be looking at feminist theology and what I feel it has to offer women but focussing on a more biblical background for my arguments. What I wish to present is where women can find inspiration in the Bible, which for a long time was used to diminish the position of women. I intend to look at what life was like for women in Jesus' time and how he responded to their spiritual needs. I wish to look at the position of women in different faiths and how culture has affected the way in which women can live their religious lives. I will be looking at the work of various theologians, feminists and other scholars to see what inspiration can be taken from their work and analyse how relevant it is for religious women today. I am interested to apply the methodology of 'narrative', or 'post liberal' theology to the research I have carried out as I feel it is the most fitting for my work. I wish to look at scripture and how it can relate to women's lives and where they can find their own personal religious truth.

Post liberal theology has often been seen as a 'third way' in theology, between conservatism and liberalism. It began as a Yale- centered phenomenon; founded by the Yale theologians Hans Frei and George Lindbeck in the mid 70's. Both wrote a great deal on the subject and trained many of its key advocates. Frei believed that modern conservative and liberal approaches to the Bible undermine the authority of scripture. They wanted to get back to the true meaning of scripture, rather than putting a certain worldview on the meaning of scripture. Frei felt that during the Enlightenment, the sense of scripture being a realistic narrative was lost. The Enlightenment was a time of change and thought and was a massive melting pot of ideas and theories: sociological, anthropological, theological, scientific and political. It was a new age of thinking for everyone, including women. Women like Mary Wollstonecraft and Barbara Taylor were extremely critical about the Enlightenment and the focus on the rights of men and ideas of male gallantry. John Stuart Mill was also one to quickly dismiss the Enlightenment ideas of chivalry and gallantry as patronising and unnecessary. Many feminists believed

that the Enlightenment was totally male focussed and did not apply to everyone. In their book “Women, Gender and Enlightenment”, Barbara Taylor and Sarah Knott question whether women ever had enlightenment. Frei observed that before the Enlightenment, Christians read the Bible as a realistic narrative which they used to make sense of their lives. The Enlightenment led Christians and Jews alike to question the rationality of scripture, and led eighteenth and nineteenth century theologians to overlook the narrative character of scripture. Frei argued that both liberals and conservatives were overturning the priority of scriptural narrative. Because of these changes in the Church, the Bible became more and more alien and doctrine and human judgement took over. So it seemed that both women and the significance of scripture were overlooked during the Enlightenment.

George Lindbeck continued with his colleagues work and highlighted the importance of language and internal religious grammar to prove the rationality and relevance of religion. Through their work, they emphasised the significance of the text of scripture absorbing the world, rather than the world absorbing the text. They both wanted Christians to let the stories in the Bible become their own stories and not put their own world views or life experience onto them. Narrative theology shows the importance of really knowing Jesus through scripture. Narratives and lyrical expressions in scripture create a new way of understanding the world. They can form ethics and conscience and more and more catholic biblical scholars and moralists are coming around to this idea. Jesus used parables to teach moral guidelines and showed examples of people doing certain things the right way and the wrong way. Narrative theologians believe these are the perfect examples of where morals and doctrines came directly from. I feel that narrative theology is relevant when looking for spiritual inspiration for women of faith, because it looks at the way Jesus lived, and what he taught. I believe that by looking at scripture a person can build a personal relationship with God through Jesus’ words and actions. William C Spohn² comments that:

“As concrete universals, biblical images and narratives have an impact on moral life, since they shape the self- understanding of moral agents, fix distinctive angles of vision on the world, and indicate conduct that fits their meaning.”

² William C Spohn, “Parable and narrative in Christian ethics”, theological studies, 51:1 Mar 1990. Pg 100.

He goes on to explain John Donahue's view on parables being extremely powerful for the listener and he feels that their power comes from the parables interpreting us, rather than the other way around. Narrative theologians appreciate the power of scripture and do not try to put their human understanding on it to dampen it down and make it easier to understand. They realise the complicity of what Jesus taught and how he did it, and this is what they feel is so significant. From a female point of view, narrative theology is very useful. It shows poignantly that Jesus taught to outcasts and 'lost sheep' like women, tax collectors, sinners and lepers. For example, in John 4 we read of Jesus on his journey from Judaea to Galilee, stopping in a town called Sychar and says to a Samaritan Woman "Give me a drink". She, understandably for the time replies "What? You are a Jew and you ask me, a Samaritan, for a drink?" The readers, like the woman would have been shocked to hear this. There is insurmountable significance for those reading from a narrative point of view, in the fact that Jesus purposefully brings a woman into the situation and gives her the opportunity to recognise his significance, which she does. Again in the parable of the Good Samaritan and the story of Martha and Mary, Jesus uses outsiders to shock the listeners, and allow them to see discipleship in a new light. As we will see, there are many examples in the gospels where Jesus attends to the needs of women, and uses them to show the significance of the lowly and outcast in his ministry. Jesus uses his narratives to guide people's imagination and emotion and test their moral strength. Spohn comments that:

"Jesus meets the demands of both mercy and justice in his treatment of the woman caught in adultery in John 8: 1-11." ³

This is a perfect example of Jesus showing the importance of virtues, and using a woman to show this. Like a good storyteller, he wanted to grab people's attention and make them want to listen.

Personally, I feel that there can be no better place to start, for women seeking spiritual inspiration and empowerment, than the words and deeds of Jesus. Many may feel that this is a simplistic way to gain spiritual enlightenment but many people have lost the significance of scripture and have got so mixed up in different 'theologies' that they have forgotten where it all started. Spohn feels that:

³ William C Spohn, "Parable and narrative in Christian ethics", theological studies, 51:1 Mar 1990. Pg110.

“Narrative theology operates closer to the fabric of Christian moral experience than most speculative theologies.”⁴

There is a huge variety of moral lessons to learn in the gospels, and I have a feeling that the Church of today is moving further and further away from these and getting too caught up in their own doctrines. Women, as well as many social outcasts are finding their faith right back in the heart of Christianity- in the Bible, where they find that comfort, love and forgiveness is for all. However, the Bible is used too often as a vehicle to discriminate against women in the Church. The Biblical concept of women is anchored in the creation stories in Genesis. In the first of these we read:

“God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female, he created them. God blessed them, saying to them ‘Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it. Be masters of the fish and of the sea, the birds of heaven and all living animals on the earth.”⁵

God does not just set this task for man, He speaks to both men and women and gives them both the earth to roam upon and look after. However, it has unfortunately been the second account of the creation story which has been held by the Church:

“Yahweh God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone. I will make him a helpmate.’”⁶

It is only after creating birds and cattle that God realised that man needed a more suitable ‘helpmate’ so he sent the man into a deep sleep and “took one of his ribs and enclosed it in flesh. Yahweh God built the rib he had taken from the man into a woman and brought her to the man.”⁷

This account is totally disheartening to women as they are made to feel that they were created purely for mans pleasure and was only considered after man felt that birds and cattle were not suitable company! Because of the male dominated nature of culture and the Church, the image of women being man’s ‘helpmate’ has been the on which has carried through to the Church. For obvious reasons, this version of the creation story does not sit comfortably with feminists who are outraged that the leaders of the Church would choose to focus on the second creation account. Unfortunately for women, this account is

⁴ William C Spohn, “Parable and narrative in Christian ethics”, theological studies, 51:1 Mar 1990. Pg 113

⁵ Genesis 1: 27-29.

⁶ Genesis 2:18.

⁷ Genesis 2:21-23.

used time and time again to justify the subjection of women, as if it were almost willed by God. However, Jesus came to show a new covenant and a new way of thinking about God and His relationship with His creation and it should be this, which the authorities should focus on when dealing with possible divisions and schisms in the Church, and this which should give women hope.

Women in the gospel of Luke

The Gospel of Luke is often used as a starting place when looking at women's place in the Bible. Luke includes more passages dealing with women than the other gospel writers. Leonard Swindler comments that:

“Where John has 8 passages dealing with women, Mark 20, Matthew 36, Luke has 42.”⁸ This should signify that there is a theological point to including so many passages dealing with women. Mary and Elizabeth especially hold great importance for Luke and are mentioned right at the beginning of the gospel. This is significant to the reader that women should hold such theological significance right at the beginning of the gospel and is a positive impression from the start. Mary holds great significance for Luke as she is the vehicle of revelation, as she is the bearer of Christ. Without Mary, there would be no opportunity for salvation. However, feminists such as Mary Daly and Simone de Beauvoir feel that Mary, rather than being an autonomous goddess figure is portrayed as a subordinate handmaid of the Lord figure. Over the last forty to fifty years, feminist theologians have regarded the image of Mary as wholly submissive to God and having no autonomy of her own. In her 1978 book *Gyn/Ecology* Mary Daly explains her viewpoint that the Immaculate Conception was no more than a rape. She feels that this act of being a servant in the Incarnation of God is subordination to God, which she views as negative. Following on from work by Mary Daly and Simone de Beauvoir, many feminist theologians have continued to critique Mariology and feel that the image of Mary needs to be released from relation and ‘submission’ to Christ. Feminist theologians such as Christina Mulack also feels that Mary is placed on a pedestal which is out of reach for real women and therefore cannot serve to be a genuine model. In contrast to this, Mary

⁸ Leonard Swindler, “Biblical Affirmations of Women”

Magdalen is portrayed as Jesus' friend and companion and not tied to any notions of order. Therefore, feminist theologians feel that it is this Mary Magdalen who serves better as a role model for modern women. However, I feel that it is humans who have placed Mary in a subordinate role as we have put our own interpretation into her story rather than seeing what she did as an extremely autonomous and fearless act through her love of God. Mary's Magnificat portrays an image of a powerful but merciful God who is a friend to the meek and lowly and a special friend to Israel. Rather than viewing this act as subordinate or weak, women should see this as a positive image of Mary praising God freely for choosing her for such a special miracle. This should empower women, as far from being passive, Mary holds a very significant theological role in standing up and being counted. She proclaims God's love and greatness and is thanking Him for the blessings He has placed upon Elizabeth and herself. Elizabeth too becomes a vehicle of revelation, even in her old age. The pregnancy of Elizabeth is often paralleled by theologians with the ancient Israelite motif of the barren, sometimes older woman who conceives through divine intervention and in turn bears a son who holds great significance in the history of Israel. Women like Mary and Elizabeth portray perfectly to Christians that "nothing is impossible with God" and should give hope and inspire women rather than push them away. Unfortunately both examples of conception are too often portrayed as subordinate, demeaning acts, rather than special, theological moments in the history of Christianity. Luke clearly sees the significance in both these moments as he puts a great deal of emphasis on them. The Lord also speaks through Elizabeth when Mary goes to visit her when she exclaims that Mary's babe is blessed and the babe jumps for joy. Elizabeth says:

"Of all women, you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord?"⁹

Elizabeth recognises the divinity of Jesus even before he is born or has the chance to preach. I will return to the significance of Mary and Elizabeth later on but it is interesting to look at the other women Luke mentioned in his gospel and what significance they have.

⁹ Luke 1:42.

Unknown anywhere else in Christian tradition, in Luke we meet Anna the prophetess. She is an elderly woman who “never left the Temple, serving God night and day with fasting and prayer” and as she praised God she spoke of the child “to all who looked forward to the deliverance of Jerusalem.”¹⁰ This may not seem a very important passage to many who read the Gospel, as she is just an old woman who spends a lot of time in the Temple. However, she seems to prophesise the birth of Christ, and what significance this will have. This is very early on in the gospel, and again Luke mentions a woman seeing the importance of Jesus, even before he was born. Even after years of following Jesus around, some disciples’ still didn’t understand what Jesus was about. Luke obviously sees that this seemingly mad old woman is making an important point. Anna gives thanks to the Lord for Jesus’ future redemption of Jerusalem. In Luke 4:38 we read the story of the cure of Simon’s mother in law. She becomes the first woman in the synoptic gospels to benefit from Jesus’ ministry. Jesus heals her and raises her up. The use of the word ‘Ανίστημί’ ‘to raise up, rouse or stir’ signifies a kind of resurrection, which is significant in the ministry and work of Jesus. The next woman to benefit from Jesus’ ministry in the gospel of Luke is the widow at Nain whose son has died. “When the Lord saw her he felt sorry for her and said to her, ‘don’t cry.’ And he said ‘Young man, I tell you: get up’ and the dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him to his mother.”¹¹ This action leads the people around them to praise the Lord and say “A great prophet has risen up among us; God has visited his people.” The crowd are ‘raised up’ along with the man and they proclaim God’s glory all over Judea and all over the countryside. Jesus raises this woman’s son from the dead because he has compassion for her because she will be alone without him. He raises the man, not for his benefit but for his mothers. In Luke 7:36-50 we see one of the most significant women in all the gospels and she is described as a woman who had a ‘bad name’ in the town. She recognises the divinity of Jesus and anoints him with ointment. She then washes his feet with her tears and then dries them with her hair and kisses and anoints them. Jesus recognises the great love, which this woman has for him, and he also senses the doubt from the Pharisee. Jesus tells the Pharisee that the woman has shown great love by her actions and compares it to the fact that the Pharisee did not give Jesus the same kind of welcome. Jesus says to

¹⁰ Luke 2: 36-38.

¹¹ Luke 7: 13-15.

the Pharisee that it is “for this reason (I tell you) that her sins, many as they are, have been forgiven her, because she has shown such great love.”¹²

These words lead his companions at the table to question what kind of a man he was to be able to forgive sins. She receives spiritual salvation from Jesus when he says to her “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” This is another example of it being the women who are first to recognise the significance of Jesus in the gospels. They understand his mission and wish to praise and worship him because unlike many of the men, Jesus inspires women, rather than threatens them. Another example of a woman being saved through her powerful faith in Christ, is at the end of Luke 8; the woman with the haemorrhage. This story is sandwiched within the story of Jesus healing Jairus’ daughter. The woman with the haemorrhage is a social outcast because of her condition and she wouldn’t have been allowed out in public. Hearers at the time would have been shocked to hear this story because of the importance of the Levitical purity laws in Judaism:

“If a woman has a prolonged discharge of blood outside the period, or if the period is prolonged, during the time this discharge lasts she will be in the same state of uncleanness as during her monthly period.”¹³

Therefore, for any man at the time of Jesus, to be touched by a bleeding woman would have been expected to humiliate and discipline the woman in question. Jesus did the opposite to what was expected. The woman would know the law too, and this showed just how much faith she has to go up to Jesus in a crowd, understanding his significance, and touching his coat. Once she has done this she is healed and comes forward to Jesus to admit that it was she who touched him, expecting to be reprimanded. Instead, Jesus says to her:

“My daughter, your faith has saved you; go in peace.”¹⁴

She, like so many other women in this gospel were driven, and saved by their deep faith. Jesus is always compassionate towards these women and his love and sympathy for them always overrules everything, including the laws and customs of the time. In Luke 13:10 we see an example of Jesus overruling the laws of the Sabbath and healing a woman in the Synagogue who “had been possessed by a spirit that left her enfeebled; she was bent

¹² Luke 7:47.

¹³ Lev 15: 25-27.

¹⁴ Luke 8:48.

double and quite unable to stand upright.”¹⁵ Not only is this an example of Jesus acting out of compassion rather than through the law, feminist theologians often see it as an example of Jesus enabling women to stand ‘upright’ within the church. Once Jesus frees her of her disability she begins to glorify God. Again we see parallels with the response of the synagogue president and men within the Church today: that faith, love and compassion do not excuse breaking the law. Jesus is angry with these men and says to them:

“Hypocrites! Is there one of you who does not untie his ox or his donkey from the manger on the Sabbath and take it out for watering? And this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan has held bound these eighteen years- was it not right to untie this bond on the Sabbath day?”¹⁶

As we have seen so far, there are very significant parables which include women, but there are not many women included in the parables as a whole. Whereas the male characters in the parables cover a wide range from farmers, builders, servants, thieves, fools and merchants, to kings, judges, priests, grooms, rich men and many more the women in the parables seems to be limited to the domestic sphere. These are situations which are intimately familiar to Palestinian women, and ones which future generations of women would empathise with. For example we see women baking bread, in the parable of the yeast (Luke 13:20-21), and sweeping, in the parable of the lost drachma (Luke 15: 8-10). Of course it is a generalisation to presume that this relates to all women but the domestic sphere was controlled by the women in Palestine and it was significant that Jesus related his parables to them also. As we will see again in other parts of the Gospels, the preparation and serving of food was an important ritual for women and the parables including celebrations and feasts show the significance which women held in the home. Sue Mosteller in an essay from the federation of L’arche communities comments that: “the meals themselves are a time of utmost importance, for the bodily nourishment and all it signifies...the stories, the bantering, the remarks about the cooking, the serving and passing of the food, the arguments, the broken diets and the sharing of the last piece of

¹⁵ Luke 13:11-12.

¹⁶ Luke 13:15-17.

cake all give the same message to my hungry heart: the message that I belong to this people and I am acceptable, as I am here: that this is my home.”¹⁷

The sense of belonging and being part of a group was very significant at the time of Jesus, and mealtimes were at the centre of this. These parables which include celebrations and banquets bring to life the importance of family gathering and sharing.

As for female disciples Luke gives his readers many more examples of the women who followed Jesus than any other of the gospel writers. Luke 8:1-3 is a uniquely Luken passage, which lets the readers know that women travelled with Jesus on his missionary journeys, and served Jesus. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and many other women are mentioned as being followers of Jesus. These women were not part of Jesus’ family and so their following him would have been scandalous to the people around him. He stayed in their home and they were there at the foot of the cross and were the first to receive the good news of the resurrection. Jesus also taught women and valued them. E.J Via comments that:

“Diakoneo, the service and preparation of the meal, which, with the exemption of the last supper, involves only the women, is a model for discipleship in the Gospel of Luke.”¹⁸

However, there is certain ambiguity surrounding how Luke uses the word ‘apostle’. In Luke 10:1-6, 72 disciples are mentioned. It would seem that Luke sees three distinct groups of Jesus’ followers: his ‘disciples’, who constituted the largest group, the ‘apostles’ to which there would seem to be at least 84 (72+12) and ‘the Twelve’, who were apostles and disciples but were a special distinctive group. Acts 1:21-22 is often used by scholars as an example of what constitutes discipleship:

“Out of the men who have been with us the whole time that the Lord Jesus was living with us, from the time when John was baptising until the day when he was taken up from us- one must be appointed to serve with us as a witness to his resurrection.”¹⁹

In the requirements for discipleship, it is men who are mentioned, not women. However, it is not just Luke who seems ambiguous about his use of the word ‘apostle’. Throughout the New Testament theology, the word has been questioned by scholars regarding its translation and what it actually meant. This, of course has huge consequences for women

¹⁷ Biblical Tradition and Interpretation, Nicola Slee. Feminist Theology a reader.

¹⁸ “Women, the discipleship of service, and the early Christian Ritual meal in the Gospel of Luke.”

¹⁹ Acts 1:21-22

as they want to know if this term is gender inclusive and whether, when Jesus used this term he meant it to include both men and women. Scholars tend to agree that the New Testament word ‘apostolos’ covers anyone who is an ‘authorised agent’ or ‘a commissioned person’ and is related to the Rabbinical legal term ‘shaliah’.²⁰ It is Jesus who commissions certain people with this title during his mission. No one can really know why Jesus chose this term for his followers and whether it was inclusive of all his followers or just those which he named. As we will see, there are other points in the New Testament where the word ‘apostle’ presents problems.

In Luke 15: 8-10, Luke includes a parable of Jesus, which represents the deity as female- as a woman searching for her lost drachma. She goes to her neighbours and says; “Rejoice with me, I have found the drachma I lost” and Jesus uses this image in response to his listener and says; “In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing among the angels of God over one repentant sinner.” Jesus’ imagery in the parables reflects the imagery of the time. He wanted his listeners to understand the point of his parables. Many people would question the point in making all that effort to find one coin? But the woman was determined to find her coin and not forget about it, just as God would never stop searching, until he found his repentant sinner. This parable continues Luke’s emphasis on Jesus’ mission to always seek and take in those who are “lost”. When Jesus speaks of his vision of the fate of Jerusalem he speaks of Jerusalem as feminine, describing himself in relation to Jerusalem as a mother hen gathering in her ‘lost’ brood under her wings. Jesus has a longing to protect Jerusalem like a mother does to protect her children; He does not want his children to be lost. In Luke 21:1-4 we see a living example of the kind of generosity and love that God expects from his followers. The rich people in the congregation put in some of their spare change, whereas the poor widow puts in her last two coins. Jesus says to the rich people:

“I tell you truly, this poor widow has put in more than any of them; for these have all put in money they could spare, but she in her poverty has put in all she had to live on.”²¹

Here again we see an example of a woman who is righteous in the eyes of God and is a perfect example of a true disciple. Luke highlights the significance of women participating in the preparation of food with Jesus and thus showing more examples of

²⁰ Dictionary of the Bible.

²¹ Luke 21:1-4

Jesus stepping outside of the social boundaries of the time. Meals and the preparation of food held a great deal of significance in Jewish life and that is why there were so many rules surrounding them. Jesus breaks social etiquette when he eats with social outcasts and contradicts Jewish food laws. It doesn't just happen by accident; Jesus makes a point of eating with people outcast by Jewish law. There are obvious links between the meals eaten in the New Testament, and the Eucharist, and the conditions surrounding both. As we have seen, food is very important in Jewish life and this continues with the significance of communion within the Church. In Leviticus 21:16-24 we read of Yahweh speaking to Moses about conditions of entering the priesthood, and the "food of God" is central to this:

"None of your descendents, in any generation, must come forward to offer the food of his God if he has any infirmity- no man must come near if he has an infirmity such as blindness or lameness, if he is disfigured or deformed, disease of the eyes or of the skin, if he has a running sore, or if he is a eunuch." ²²

The Jews were so afraid of uncleanness connecting with God that they had such strict laws surrounding what could and couldn't happen with 'holy things'. However, Jesus saw beyond this fear and showed people that God's love and community included everyone. He ate with outcasts, sick people, and women and was constantly judged and mocked because of it. Luke, more than any other of the Gospel writers, highlights Jesus' relationship with women, but in all the Gospels we see Jesus' relationship with outcasts and his radical behaviour in including everyone in his life and mission.

The reason may not be clear, but Luke obviously views women as important vehicles of revelation within the mission of Jesus. He more than the other evangelists praises the importance of the role of women and promotes their theological significance. Luke portrays women as being Jesus' disciples, participating fully in early Christian ritual meal: in the preparation and service of food. Women appear at the side of Christ the whole way through his journey, listening, learning and serving and were even there at his death and resurrection. E.J Via sees comments that:

²² Leviticus 21:17-18.

“A church that ignores ministry to women and does not acknowledge the ministry of women has betrayed Luke’s Jesus and the salvation he sought to bring.”²³

Out of all the gospels, Luke highlights the significance of women within a Christian community, and is not afraid to show Jesus’ closeness to women. This gospel is an inspiration for women and encourages their relationship with Jesus, but unfortunately is too often overlooked as significant by the Church. It is writers such as Paul who stand out more in the debate of women in early Christianity and the development of women in the Church today.

Paul and Women

Paul’s gospel is often central to discussions about the place of women at the time of Jesus and in the Bible because of the controversy surrounding many of things which Paul said and did. It is difficult to decide whether or not he is on the side of women or not. We are left to make up our own minds through trying to discover what Paul’s opinion was on the subject of women. Feminist theologians hold strong opinions that Paul’s writing was wholly insulting to the development of women’s spirituality. Rosemary Radford Ruether comments on the feminist criticism of 1 Timothy 2:

“In the last three decades, (however), a Christian feminist movement began to criticize these passages in the New Testament. They drew a picture of St Paul as an unmitigated misogynist.”²⁴

She, like many other feminists felt that Paul’s teaching that “A woman ought not to speak, because Adam was formed first and Eve afterwards, and it was not Adam who was led astray but the woman who was led astray and fell into sin”²⁵ was outrageous. This, along with many other sections of Paul’s teaching; seem to give out a confusing message to women. The problem seems to arise from the fact that Paul is clearly a follower of Jesus and wants to preach the Good News to everyone, which would include equality in the eyes of God; but he is also a man living in a society, which finds the radical teaching of Jesus very challenging and difficult. Paul often doesn’t hold much credibility with feminists. He is a big patriarchal figure in Christianity who holds a great deal of

²³ E.J Via “Women in the Gospel of Luke.”

²⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “St. Paul, Friend or Enemy of Women?”

²⁵ 1 Tim 2:13-15

authority. Before his encounter on the road to Damascus, Paul was an avid persecutor of Christians because he believed they were subverting the Torah. He discriminated against Christians and women up until the point where he was inspired by Christ. He then began to preach that there was “neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female.”²⁶ After this, he began to teach that salvation- the final achievement for any Christian is for everyone and that all people belong to the body of Christ. He taught that for God there are no barriers to salvation and that Jesus died because of his love for us. Jesus was crucified because of how radical and difficult his ideas were because the society at the time didn’t want to be challenged or changed. As we will see, Paul is clearly a good teacher but isn’t willing to take the radical steps, which Jesus did, and this is why his work often seems to contradict itself, depending on whom he is addressing. Although Paul doesn’t seem to focus on gender a great deal, he is very concerned with the Jew/ Gentile relationship and this was very controversial within the early Church. It is clear that Paul is very central to the struggle for freedom from legal and ethnic restrictions within the family of Christ. Galatians is concerned with this. So it is difficult to see why he didn’t apply the same passion towards sexual restrictions within Christianity. He is clearly against legal and ethnical boundaries and preaches that God’s authority is above mans.

As Christians, we believe that we are given gifts from God and that we show our love and thanks to God by using these gifts. It is through these gifts that we also build a relationship with God. Paul feels that gifts of grace are significant within a relationship with God, and that they should not be overlooked or squandered. Gifts from God have a responsibility attached, and that responsibility lies with us to make the most of these gifts. We read in Romans 12: 3-8:

“...if it is a gift of prophecy, we should prophesy as much as our faith tells us; if it is the gift of practical service, let us devote ourselves to serving; if it is teaching, to teaching; if it is encouraging, to encouraging.”²⁷

This is not directed at anyone specific, Paul does not say that he is only speaking to men and doesn’t imply that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are solely for men. So what can this show women about what Paul intended for them in terms of their place within the

²⁶ Gal 3:28

²⁷ Romans 12: 3-8

Church? Presumably from this we can see that women have the possibility to be given the gift of prophecy, so why can they not prophesise? If a woman feels she has been given the gift to prophesise, preach and spread the word of God, she then has a responsibility within a relationship with the divine to carry out this gift to the full. But clearly, the Church does not encourage this and a woman is left with a gift she cannot nourish. This point has been observed by many theologians in the past and is not a new observation but it never seems to be acknowledged by the authorities of the Church. Women, we are led to believe are given the same gifts as men and God does not discriminate. The discrimination then comes from the institution of the Church; which does not let women live out their gifts in the same capacity as men. In this letter to the Romans, Paul does not mention specifically women, but he does not exclude them. As we know Paul told the Galatians in Gal 3:28;

“There is not any Jew nor Greek, not any slave nor free, not any male and female- for you all one in Christ.”

And the passage in Romans 12:3-8 seems to affirm this message. Ann Brown makes a significant point when she says;

“Paul did not share the same ideological concerns as his twentieth century readers. The parts of Paul’s letter which deal with women are notoriously difficult to interpret...we cannot always be certain whether Paul’s teaching applies only to that particular local church situation or whether it is to be applied universally.”

This could very usefully be applied to the confusion surrounding the section about women’s behaviour in the Church (1 Cor 11.) Ann Brown says about this;

“We cannot imitate the Corinthian women because we do not know exactly what they were doing.”²⁸

Paul’s description of why women should cover their heads shows a great deal of ambiguity and it seems to come down to respect for men; because man is above woman and God is above man. Paul then says;

“However, in the Lord, though woman is nothing without man, man is nothing without woman; and though woman came from man, so does every man come from a woman, and everything comes from God.”²⁹

²⁸ ‘Apology to Women, Christian images of the female sex’

This clearly seems to be a contradiction of what he has just said. But is it the translation which has confused what Paul means or was Paul confused about what he was trying to say? In 1 Cor 11:10 Paul mentions ‘Angels’ in the context of women covering their heads. What have angels got to do with this situation? This again could be a problem with translation. But where does this leave woman?

One person who has puzzled and divided scholars is the one Paul mentions to the Romans in his greetings and good wishes:

“To those outstanding apostles Andronicus and Junias, my compatriots and fellow prisoners who became Christians before me.”³⁰

Many scholars and Church fathers (up until the 1200’s) believed that this was definitely the feminine form of the name. Biblical commentators have been torn over this one person for centuries; trying to decipher whether ‘Junias’ was male or female. It may not seem important to many people that so much focus has been put on this one figure in Paul’s gospel but to many scholars of feminist theology it is extremely significant. If Junias was a woman it says a great deal about the opinion Paul had of women, which has been questioned a great deal in scholarship. Paul clearly has a great deal of praise for this person and if they are female, it shows that Paul viewed her in an equal position to men as an apostle. Therefore, giving feminists a great deal of ammunition towards the Church, concerning women priests. James G.D Dunn comments that:

“We may firmly conclude (however) that one of the foundation apostles of Christianity was a woman and wife.”³¹

And why shouldn’t this be considered a possibility? There should be no reason why a woman could not have been as wholly part of the foundation of Christianity as a man. Again, this gives a glimmer of hope to women that there is the possibility that women were there at the start of Christianity and therefore should have equal opportunities to men within the Church. However, I feel that there is a long way to go until certain male authority figures will accept that a woman could have had equal importance in the founding of a religion, and were even Christians before Paul.

²⁹ 1 Corinthians 11: 11.

³⁰ Rom 16:7

³¹ World Biblical Commentary.

It is clear that Paul never seems to suggest that women are excluded from the word of God or the work of the Holy Spirit but he never seems to stand up against the discrimination against women, like Jesus did. When Paul goes to Philippi with his disciples, the first people to listen to them were women and they go to stay with women. At the end of the letter in his final advice and thanks, he mentions that “these women have struggled hard for the gospel with me.” This shows that he obviously respects the women that have worked so hard in the work of God. Paul acknowledges that being a Christian is a struggle and is not meant to be easy. He appreciated that both men and women suffered greatly in the work of Jesus Christ. Jesus’ teaching was radical, Christianity was very radical, and women becoming an active part of the community were all part of this. We have moved on from the Jewish male patriarchal view of the Church through Jesus showing us that everyone can be a member of the Church and male and female are equal in salvation. Paul’s purpose was to teach the early Christian communities and encourage their faith. He was trying to show them how Christ wanted the life of the Church to be. This is why he explicitly points out how men and women should behave while worshipping, as well as in the home and community. Clearly, there is a practical as well as spiritual side to becoming a Christian, and Paul wanted to teach his communities about this. Equal salvation and access to the Holy Spirit for both men and women doesn’t seem to be an issue for Paul, but what about the more practical points?

Maybe the problem is not on where and when women can reach salvation but how they can preach and teach the gospel and inspire future generations. Paul again gives us mixed messages about this. Two very problematic passages seem obvious places to start because of the seemed blatancy of the statements are 1 Timothy 2:12-15;

“I give no permission for a woman to teach or to have any authority over a man.”

And 1 Cor 14: 34-35;

“As in all the Churches of God’s holy people, women are to remain quiet in the assemblies, since they have no permission to speak: theirs is a subordinate part, as the law itself says. If there is anything they want to know, they should ask their husbands at home: it is shameful for a woman to speak in the assembly.”

This was written within a specific section Paul wrote about how women should conduct themselves in Church. This section and this statement were traditionally read as absolute

statements, and early Christian thinkers would have believed there was nothing to read into and it should be applied universally as it is. This clearly had a great effect on early Christian women because it meant that they were completely forbidden to teach and preach to men. Women were pushed into submission to learn and not to teach. Paul uses the example of Adam and Eve and the fall to justify his statement. Paul says that women cannot teach men because Adam was created first and Eve was created for him and eventually led him into sin. The problem then comes because Paul seems to be suggesting that God created and willed this situation to happen, therefore, the meaning cannot change, and if women try to change it, they are defying God and the order of creation. For a twenty-first century audience and especially for feminist theologians, this justification by Paul produces massive problems and is simply not a good enough explanation for centuries of down trodden women within the Church. Cutting off half of the population of a Christian community from the opportunity to teach others based on a combination of the two creation stories appears totally unfair. In 1 Corinthians 14:35 Paul makes an extremely patronising comment which was used to fuel the silencing women in the early Church:

“As in all the Churches of the saints, women are to remain quiet at meetings since they have no permission to speak; they must keep in the background as the Law itself lays down. If they have any questions to ask, they should ask their husbands at home: it does not seem right for a woman to raise her voice at meetings.”³²

It is comments like these, which have done so much damage to the development of women within the Church, and have left women with such a battle to fight.

Paul also explains how the elders should behave mentioning that they should only be the “Husband of one wife”- showing clearly that the elders were all men and that there was not a chance that women could be involved. This again comes back to the problem so many feminist theologians have with the male dominated language used in the Bible. Language is a central theme for interpreters and scholars of Paul’s work. For example, the term ‘deaconess’ is one, which presents many problems for Paul’s interpreters. As we have seen in Luke, the term ‘diakoneo’ is the preparation and service of food which was carried out by the women and Paul describes women, like Phoebe, to be ‘diakonos’

³² 1 Cor 14:34-36.

which has been interpreted as deacon. Does this show then, that women were appointed deacons, with a level of responsibility for teaching, or that is simply another extension of the word 'diakoneo' and that it was a word for domestic work? This has never properly been understood, just as what Paul really thought of a woman's role within the Church will never really be understood. So, where does this leave women who do not wish to be excluded from a full role within the Church? For some Charismatic Christians with whom I spoke, Paul's word on women is final: they should not be able to preach to men. Some men within this Evangelical faction of Christianity have a big problem with women priests or lay preachers and take the teaching of Paul so literally that everyone just accepts that women are not able to preach to men within their community. However, within many more traditional Anglican churches, women preachers and ministers are welcomed with open arms. There were clearly problems for some people when the Anglican Church allowed women priests to enter the Church, but for most, it was an exciting new time. However, even when women are allowed to preach and even become vicars, they are still working within a male dominated church and are at the bottom of the ladder. Many people converted to Catholicism when the addition of women to the priesthood came about because they felt so strongly against it. This is a constant battle for women in religious communities that even when they are given some authority they are either not taken seriously or totally ignored. I personally know of many Anglicans who will either refuse to go to the Sunday service if a female vicar is preaching or go to another parish. This is how strong peoples feelings are. Religion is an immense subject filled with taboos; which need to change if women are ever going to be fully integrated into their faith communities.

The situation for women in Ancient Israel and the early Church.

Before the Babylonian exile in 587/586 BC women and men had equal freedom and they were seen as being created equal by God, and therefore had equal faith. The prophet Malachi writes about how God hates divorce and sees it as breaking faith: "Be careful for your own life, therefore, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. For I hate divorce, says Yahweh the Lord of Israel." This shows the equality between men and women in marriage and that it wasn't simply the privilege of men. Women are also found as prophets in Exodus 15:20: "Miriam, the prophetess, Aaron's

sister.” Also in 2 Kings 11-20 we see “Huldah” the prophetess being consulted, and she speaks straight from God. In Judges 4: 4, we read about “Deborah, the Judge in Israel, a prophetess.” The Israelites would come to her to sort out their disputes and she would tell them what God suggested. In 2 Kings 4: 8-37 we see the prophet Elisha give a Shunammite woman a son because of her kindness and faith and when this son dies, Elisha brings him back to life. Elisha shows this woman great love and compassion because of the good deeds she did for him. Another example of a woman who is barren and bears a child because of her great faith, is Hannah in 1 Samuel. When the Lord gives her a son she speaks to him in praise and thanks:

“As you live, my Lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you, praying to Yahweh. This is the child I prayed for, and Yahweh granted me what I asked him. Now I make him over to Yahweh for the whole of his life.”³³

She then sings a prayer of thanks and praise to God. She is a woman of great passion and love for God and although she loves her son, she wishes to leave him to minister to the Lord in return for what he did for her. In Deuteronomy it is clear that women are not excluded from worshiping God:

“You must celebrate the feast of Tabernacles for seven days, at the time when you gather in the produce of your threshing-floor and winepress. You must rejoice at your feast, you and your son and daughter, your serving men and women, the Levite, the stranger, the orphan and the widow who live in your towns.”³⁴

Even within the Ten Commandments, the Lord asks that we “Honour our Father and Mother.”³⁵ In a time when the Father was the head of the household and the women within it, this would have been quite a radical statement to make, but a good and honest one. However, one of the most powerful passages in the Old Testament concerning women is in Proverbs 31:10-31; “Poem on the perfect wife”:

“A perfect wife- who can find her? She is far beyond the price of pearls...she puts her back into her work and shows how strong her arms can be...she holds out her hand to the poor, she opens her arms to the needy...she is clothed in strength and dignity, she can laugh at the days to come...charm is deceitful, and beauty empty; the woman who is wise

³³ 1 Samuel 1:9- 2:11.

³⁴ Deut 16: 13-14.

³⁵ Exodus 20:12, Deut 5:16

is the one to praise. Give her a share in what her hands have worked for, and let her works tell her praises at the city gates.”³⁶

This passage shows the importance and capabilities of women and that she is a valued member of God’s community because of all she has to give. Beautiful words and phrases are used to describe what a beautiful capable creature woman is.

However, once Israel was carried into Babylonian exile, things began to change for the worst for women. Emphasis was put on circumcision and cleanliness as a sign of the covenant. This led to women being regarded as unclean at times of menstruation and childbirth. This in turn led to women being increasingly segregated in worship and society. A woman’s court was added to the Temple to distance them from the Sanctuary. Things continued to get worse for women- their vows to God were no longer as valid as men’s. They became silenced and veiled and were no longer educated. Jewish women became second class citizens excluded from the word of God, even in their own homes. They had a status which was barely above a slave. This is why the acts of kindness and love which Jesus showed to women when he arrived were totally revolutionary and people just didn’t understand them. In John 4: 27 we read:

“At this point his disciples returned, and were surprised to find him speaking with a woman.”

Then they were even more shocked when they found out she was a Samaritan. Jesus cared about women as much as he cared about men and even wanted to educate them. In Luke 10: 38-40 Jesus was pleased that Mary wanted to sit with him and listen, rather than run around after him and serve him. Martha says to Jesus:

“Lord, do you not care that my sister is leaving me to do the serving all by myself? Please tell her to help me.”

But Jesus replies:

“Martha, Martha, you worry and fret about so many things, and yet few are needed, indeed only one. It is Mary who has chosen the better part; it is not to be taken from her.”³⁷

The fact that Jesus was in a house speaking with two women would have been shocking at the time, but praising a woman for sitting and listening, rather than carrying out

³⁶ Proverbs 31:10-31

³⁷ Luke 10: 38-42.

domestic duties would have been seriously frowned upon. A woman was expected to wait upon a male visitor when they came to the house. However, Jesus appreciated that Mary wished to listen to his words rather than do domestic jobs.

Unfortunately, Jesus' teaching to and about woman was greatly overlooked in the early Church and within canon law. Men gained a great deal of power, and the subordination of women was maintained by both civil and common law. Early canon law stated that:

"No woman may approach the altar, a woman may not baptise without extreme necessity. Women may not receive the Eucharist under a black veil. Women may not receive the Eucharist in morbo suo menstruale."

And at the Council of Elvira 305 or 306, several restrictive canons were devised concerning women, including not being able to write under her own name- only under the name of her husband. Women- it seemed were allowed no independence at all.³⁸

On top of this, the Church placed wealth in the hands of men: sons were to receive inheritance before daughters. Under great poverty and general lack of education, people easily put their faith in the Church and went along with their laws without question. Early canon law made marriage a sacrament to be carried out at the church door. They felt that marriage was innately sinful and therefore should not take place in God's holy place. In addition, women were not allowed to enter the church at certain periods of their life because they were considered unclean. Therefore, the church held complete control over marriage. Entering marriage meant a woman had to give up her name, property, her body, personality and had to be obedient to her husband always. Once the church began to sell indulgences, they gained even greater power. What was deemed unholy could be paid for, and then became totally acceptable. If a husband were convicted of a crime, the wife could not divorce him but was punished along with him; the church would take her children and reduce them to complete poverty. The powerful ruled over the powerless and whereas men's punishment for a crime was a branding, a woman would be burned alive. Matilda Joslyn Gage³⁹ comments that "if history did not have proof that such total injustice was rife, it would be hard to believe that it continued to be part of English law down to the end of the eighteenth century." Throughout many centuries, women were

³⁸ Council of Elvira 306.

³⁹ "Women, Church and State" Matilda Joslyn Gage. (1893)

deprived of education in Christian countries purely because of their ineligibility to the priesthood. Something, which they had no control over. Education was in the hands of the priests and therefore being able to read was synonymous with the right of becoming a priest. Education meant power and women had none. The Church totally deprived half of the population of what we would see now as a basic human right. In not allowing women into the priesthood, the men were upholding themselves as the superior and holy sex. Under clerical rule, rape was no longer considered a crime and women were held in such low esteem that they were not allowed to attest a will. Canon law began to gain greater power over wills, the guardianship of orphans, marriage and divorce. The fourth and fifth centuries were greatly ruled by priests. It was within this period when celibacy was established and priest's marriages became null and void, their wives were branded impure and their children illegitimate. Alicia Suskin Ostriker comments that:

"I would argue that the canonizing process throughout our history has rested, not accidentally but essentially on the silencing of women."⁴⁰

Canon law began to take hold of everyone and control all aspects of Christian life and women suffered the most because of this. Many historians date the entire subordination of the common law to the Church during the reign of Stephen (1135), the fourth Anglo-Norman king. It became a woman's duty to bear children and nothing else. The Church wanted a larger 'congregation' so women had to keep producing children. Those who were infertile or who couldn't conceive because of their husbands' infertility were deemed unholy and useless. Even Magna Charta strengthened Canon law, confirming many liberties of the Church, and injuring women by prohibiting appeal to them unless their husbands died. Even though the Church was generally against marriage, an unmarried woman, unless dedicating their life to the Church, was regarded with more contempt than those who were married. Women could not win; it was either subordination to one man and the Church, or total humiliation and subordination to the Church's laws and discriminations. Choice had been totally taken away from women. The power of the Church and the control which the priests held was very tempting to young men. They were seen to hold the key to heaven and hell and were at the top of the hierarchy. The laity respected them because they saw them as the voice of God and didn't

⁴⁰ "Out of my sight: the buried women in biblical narrative", pg 27.

want to be disobedient. There was a strong sense of ruling through fear. An early council of Carthage ordained:

“Let not a woman, however learned or holy presume to teach a man in a public assembly.”⁴¹

Therefore, no matter how pious or intelligent a woman may be, she could not teach a man; it is as if it would be a pointless, laughable activity. They feel that there was nothing a woman could teach a man that he didn't already know. It is the humble, the ignorant, the helpless and the powerless who have been overlooked by the Church, but these were the ones who Jesus came to save. The Church became increasingly greedy and was taking up to one third of a man's property when he died, often leaving the widow and children in poverty. The Church supposedly looked after the man's best interests while he was alive and then bankrupted his family when he died. Women were dependent on men, and men were dependent on the Church. If a husband was cruel or abusive to his wife and she ran away, she would have to return under his demand. If she did not come back to her husband, she was considered an outlaw. She was branded a runaway who was disobedient to her master. People were forbidden to shelter her if she asked. She was then either excommunicated or labelled a witch. Either way, she was going to Hell. Anyone who helped her would be liable to a fine or other punishment for stealing a wife (slave) from a husband (master). Husbands would often recover thousands in damages if people sheltered his wife while she was a runaway, even up until the mid 1800's. Canon and Church laws were there to protect the rights of men alone. It was property rather than person that was important. Even after the American Revolution, the Church was powerful because it was so rich. Out of a religion which is meant to be loving, all embracing and non-judgemental came an oppressive Church which ruled people based on their gender and wealth. Matilda Joslyn Gage comments that:

“Under no other system of religion has there been such absolute denial of women's rights to directly approach the divinity: under no other religious system has her debasement been greater.”⁴²

⁴¹ “Women, Church and State” Matilda Joslyn Gage. (1893)

⁴² “Women, Church and State” Matilda Joslyn Gage. (1893)

Women and family in the Bible

Family and family ties determined the status of women as well as men in ancient Israel. An Israelite man or woman's formal name customarily included the name of the father. Children were subject to their father until they were married. A childless widow was powerless and was supposed to return to her father's house.⁴³ Widows with sons, divorced women and prostitutes were probably less dependent on male authority. A poor woman's life was precarious; they needed a man because they couldn't help but depend on someone. In Deuteronomy 22:13-21 we see the double standards in the Bible concerning sexuality. Virginity was a requirement for women but not for men. If a man thinks that his wife was not a virgin when they married he can go to her mother and father and ask for evidence of her virginity, and then take it to the elders of the town. If it cannot be proved that she is a virgin, she is taken out and stoned to death for her misconduct. Yet, if it is the husband who is lying, he just gets put in prison and she has to remain married to him. However in Babylon before the sixth century, virginity was not a requirement of marriage. In Israel, adultery with a married woman meant death for both parties, but if a man raped an un-betrothed virgin, he was just compelled to marry her. In Deuteronomy 24:1-4 we are shown that it is only men who are allowed to initiate divorce, and on pretty unsubstantial grounds:

“Suppose a man has taken a wife and consummated the marriage; but she has not pleased him and he has found some impropriety of which to accuse her; he has therefore made out a writ of divorce for her and handed it to her and then dismissed her from his house; she leaves his house and becomes the wife of another man.”⁴⁴

Thus she is unclean, and he is not. Women were just used and thrown away like objects if a man did not want them any more. Within the family, it was the 'father's household' and it was the paternal family name and line, which took providence. This is why when a woman is suspected of infidelity it was not her reputation which was questioned, but the identity of her children was no longer securely tied to the husband or his lineage. When there were no sons, daughters could play a role in preserving the integrity of the family property. In some cases, for example, at Nuzi in Eastern Assyria and the Emar in Syria, a father without sons could declare his daughter legally an heir.

⁴³ Leviticus 22:13

⁴⁴ Deuteronomy 24:1-4

In Proverbs 6:20-22 we read a beautiful verse about the importance of the combination of the mother and father, and the mothers teaching:

“Keep your father’s principle, my son,

Do not spurn your mother’s teaching.

Bind them ever to your heart; Tie them round your neck.

When you walk, these will guide you, when you lie down, watch over you, when you wake, talk with you.”

However male dominated society was at this time, a mother’s wisdom was always of value for her children. Of course, the most significant mother in the Bible is Mary, who was undoubtedly close to her son and loved him unconditionally even though she was only a child herself. She had so much love for God that she let her reputation become tarred and gave up her life to bring the son of God into the world. The theme reappears in the gospel account of Elizabeth, who, like Mary was not at the right stage in life to be having children, put her faith in God and let Him employ her to bring John the Baptist into the world. Many scholars are combing ethnography and archaeology to look back at the pre-monarchic Israelite community (1200- 1000 BC) and look at women’s roles at this time. Looking back at households in early Israel’s agrarian environment, it is clear that everyone had their own defined roles, which gave women more scope for some kind of authority. For example, in Genesis 27 Isaac’s wife Rebekah holds a great deal of authority in her household over her son Jacob so he can obtain the blessing of Isaac. However, it is done through deception and she has to protect him by sending him away. She tries to keep the peace within her family. These are examples of women who put all their faith and trust into God because of their great love for Him. Women in the Bible always seem to be the more wiling to trust God and also the more perceptive to what Jesus was teaching. However, ‘religion’ is not built to accommodate the spiritual needs of women and this is why such a huge gap between Jesus’ teachings and what actually goes on in the Church. Women in religious institutions are left hanging onto the hope which Jesus brought into the world for them as it feels like very few men are willing to encourage their faith. Women in religions across the whole world suffer from this division between scripture and practical worship and continue to feel excluded in their religious communities.

Women in 'Religion'

In several religious traditions, the position of women was higher during the earlier periods of their history than in later years. In addition, the leaders of the main four religions of the world encouraged both men and women to be part of their community. Buddha allowed the creation of a nun's order, which offered women an alternative to domesticity. Jesus had women followers and welcomed them into his teaching and ministry. Muhammad enhanced the status of women in Arabia and made sure they had access to a share of inheritance, banning infanticide and even appointed a woman to lead the prayers in a household of men and women. Guru Nanak proclaimed the equality of men and women and he and the other Guru's who came after him, allowed women to take a full time role in all activities of Sikh worship and practice. However, the major world religions have remained male- dominated and there is still a massive divide between the classical religious teachings about the equality of men and women, and the actual lived experiences of women. Many men within religious institutions would dispute the assertion that women are treated as second- class citizens. They would claim rather that women are equal but different- a claim that if it were true; women would be quite happy about. However, the problem is that there is little or no equality, and a great deal of difference. For many religions, so many cultural factors have been absorbed into them that their 'rules' and 'religious customs' are tied more into man made culture than divine intervention. As is often raised in feminist philosophy and theology, female sexuality, menstruation and childbirth are seen as obstacles to women's faith. In many religious traditions women are forbidden to enter holy places, and have to stay out of the kitchen and away from the preparation of food. Muslim women are not allowed to touch the Qur'an during menstruation, pray or enter a mosque. Only when women are post-menopausal are they allowed to make the pilgrimage to Sabari in Kerala. In Buddhism the belief in sunyata (emptiness), femaleness and maleness are both recognised equally as an illusion. 'Wŏn Buddhism' was developed in the east and came about through Pak Chung-bin who attained great enlightenment in 1916 and had a precognition that humans would become enslaved to materialism. The word 'Wŏnbulgyo' (won Buddhism) is a compound of the Korean 'wŏn' (circle) and 'pulgyo' (Buddhism). The central doctrine lies within four graces: heaven and earth, parents, fellow beings, and laws. To these, all of us owe our life. Within this form of Buddhism, men and women are equal, including

ordination and within administration. By 1993 it had 850 nuns and 150 monks. It is now spreading from Korea and has nearly 90 branches in Taiwan and eight in the USA. Many feminist movements in religion have moved from western Christian and Jewish groups, towards the Middle East and Asia. Asian Christian women theologians are showing their need to find their own distinctive voices within feminist theology and started to develop their own groups. In 1983 the 'Women's Commission in Asia of the Ecumenical Association of the Third World Theologians' was set up. In addition to this in Hong Kong in 1988, 'The Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology' was established. They vocalised their experience in the introduction to "We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women":

"Christian women have become aware that without their distinctive voices as Asians and as women, the emerging theologies in Asia cannot be liberating or relevant, not for themselves or for the Church or society at large."⁴⁵

Within religious women's movements women are divided over the approach they should take. Some feel that a confrontational approach should be taken, which rejects sexist culture and institutions, and others wish to value their own traditions but maybe redefine them slightly- especially in relation to religious symbols. Can the masculine symbolism of religion be reclaimed or do they need to be rejected? Wŏn Buddhists, for example, felt very strongly about this and replaced the image of the male Buddha with the symbol of a circle.

Women within all religions across the world feel passionate about their fight for equality in such a male dominated world and have written a great deal about it. So often, this work is overlooked by men who think it is fanciful, no matter how academically or theologically sound it is. Feminist theologians have fought for years for their subject to be taken seriously and regarded as extremely significant in the development of religion, but are too often brushed aside as being too radical or difficult. As we see through the life of Christ and other religious leaders, radical is what they were. The whole reason they came into being was to change things for the better. This is why over the last century or so, more and more theologians are coming forward to deconstruct what they have been taught, and study it under many different lights. We can also look at women in our

⁴⁵ Fabella, Virginia and Park, Sun Ai Lee (1989). Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology and the EATWOT Women's Commission in Asia, p vii.

history who have been courageous and intellectual figures who inspired generations of feminist and non-feminist women in their own personal faith.

Julian of Norwich was born in Norwich on November 8 1342 and lived until 1416 and is considered to be one of the greatest English mystics. She is commemorated by the Catholic Church on May 13 and by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the USA and the Anglican Church on May 8. She has a great number of followers and 'The Order of Julian of Norwich' is a religious order of contemplative monks and nuns of the Episcopal Church set up in her honour. They aim to be a living extension of Julian of Norwich and bring her Revelation of Divine Love into the world today. Julian's story started when she was thirty and began to suffer from a great illness and thought she was on her death bed. It was then, when she began to have a series of intense visions. These ended on May 13 1373 when she overcame her illness. These visions became the source of her major work "Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love" (c. 1393). This is commonly believed as being the first book written by a woman in English. Julian lived at a time of great turmoil and her theology was very optimistic and filled with hope. She spoke about God's great love and compassion and she felt that suffering was not punishment. This was very rare at a time when people felt afflictions like the plague were divine punishment. Her views were quite extreme for her time and not typical of how other people felt, yet she wasn't a threat to the hierarchy of the Church. When she writes about her visions, she speaks of God comparing Him to a mother who is loving, wise and merciful. In "The Motherhood of God" Julian writes:

"Our Lady is our mother in whom we are all enclosed and out of her we are born in Christ (for she who is mother of our saviour is mother of all who shall be saved within our Saviour). And our saviour is our true mother in whom we are endlessly born and never shall come to birth out of Him...As truly as God is our father, so truly God is our mother...the mother can give her child such from her milk, but our precious mother Jesus can feed us with Himself; and He does it most graciously and most tenderly with the Blessed sacrament which is the precious food of true life. And with all the sweet Sacraments He supports us most mercifully and graciously."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love. The Motherhood of God.

Julian describes God as sweet and kind and precious, which is not something which Christian communities at the time would have been used to hearing. This would have been an alien concept for them. They viewed God as their almighty and powerful father who would punish those who were unrighteous or sinful, whereas, Julian shows a God who is loving, generous and compassionate to all His people. The mother- child analogies which Julian used are easy for people to relate to and the best way of her showing the kind of God which she encountered in her visions. In “The Joy of God in Us” Julian speaks of the Trinity:

“For the Trinity is God, God is the Trinity; the Trinity is our maker, the Trinity is our keeper, the Trinity is our everlasting lover, the Trinity is our endless Joy and Bliss, by our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁴⁷

Julian goes on to describe wisdom in feminine terms and talks about the importance of motherhood and fatherhood in the trinity. Julian was obviously greatly comforted by the visions which she had and her beautifully written work shows a very profound insight into the deep mysteries of Christianity. She shows the importance of an intimate relationship with God and seeing Him as compassionate and caring deity rather than a vengeful one. Julian’s work has inspired people for generations and her powerful knowledge of theology inspires many religious women who share her passion.

Divisions in the Church of England

Throughout history, women have had a fight on their hands with those in power, and it is women like Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila and Joan of Arc who are examples to all women who face adversity. In the history of the Church many women have suffered for what they believe and decisions about women eventually tore the Church in two. During the 1960’s there became an acceptance to give women a more equal opportunity in the Church as a moral imperative. By 1974 the first female priests were ordained in the USA. It was clear that the growing feminist movement was beginning to have an impact on the Anglican Church. The authorities were feeling the pressure from British feminists to follow in the footsteps of American Anglicans. Even after 1992 when the General Synod

⁴⁷ Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love. The Joy of God in Us.

passed a vote allowing female ordination, priests and bishops continued to fight against the decision. In September 1991, George Austin, Archdeacon of York in a pulpit in York Minster repeated his call for the formal division of the Church of England into liberal and traditionalist wings. He felt that the divide in the Church had become so large that they could no longer continue to all worship together, and rather than unite the two sides under one Christian family, they should go their separate ways. One of the most dividing issues within this was the issue of women priests. This separation and division in the Church lead to half of the Church hiding from the reality of the demand of the community. The traditionalists were starting to feel that their world was slipping away. So many people felt so convinced that by ordaining women, the Church was rejecting God and the way He created the world. There was a great deal of fear in the Church of England when the idea of women's ordination became a serious issue. Traditionalists felt that the ordination of women would be the beginning of the demise of the Church. It was a time of great unrest and an exciting time for women who felt that their demands were finally being listened to and taken seriously.

At the November 1991 General Synod, Dr George Carey's first as Archbishop of Canterbury, he warned that the Church was in danger of total division over the ordination of women, and he called his colleagues to be sensitive and courteous about the subject. Many found this difficult to take. Traditionalists felt that because the Church of England had no authority to ordain women, it meant that they were the true Church of England. 'The Church in Danger' was an anti-ordination group set up at the time and they wrote an open letter calling for a halt on the issue of women priests and was signed by 36 peers and MPs, including two ministers. In 1992 the 'Ripon Report' was produced as a pro-ordination paper, lead by the Bishop of Ripon, David Young. This put a great deal of pressure on the House of Bishops to postpone any decisions on the legislation until it could be properly amended. Meanwhile, there were 1,200 women deacons who were desperately waiting to be ordained. The tension grew between liberals and traditionalists and the women were stuck in the middle of a tangle of arguments and legislation. The House of Bishops sub committee began to meet secretly to work out what damage limitation could be done. Carey felt that whatever way the vote went, a pastoral job would need to be done. In March 1992 Peter Carnley, the liberal Archbishop of Perth ordained ten women as priests- Australia's first- in St Georges Cathedral, Perth. This

meant that campaigners could now claim that nearly half the world's Anglican provinces- 13 out of 30- now ordained women priests. There were now 1, 342 ordained women worldwide. This began to appal traditionalists. Many people began to feel that the Church had lost its purpose. In the summer of 1992, the pro and anti- ordination lobbies went into overdrive. On 13 June, the traditionalist staged an almighty all day rally at Wembley Arena. John Grummer- the main speaker, preached about the importance of traditional Christian teachings, and believed that the Church of England would disintegrate into a 'muddled sect' if women became priests. At the same time, the pro-ordination supporters held a smaller, but equally significant gathering in Southwark cathedral to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the ordination of England's first women deacons. Even after 1992 when the General Synod passed a vote allowing female ordination, priests and bishops continued to fight against the decision. In 1993 the General Synod passed the Act of Synod which set up an official structure for parish priests to refuse women's ministry. For many, the 1992 decision was the best thing to happen in the Anglican Church but there were still those who rejected the authority of women priests and simply dismissed them. It led to the Anglican Church saying that if a priest wanted to leave the Church on the grounds that they didn't agree with women priests, they would financially support them until they were settled. The Catholic Church also began to accept married priests converting from the Anglican Church because of the move. It was a massive upheaval for everyone involved but something which desperately needed to happen. Now the numbers of women priests has grown in the Anglican Church, the pressure has grown to allow women to become Bishops. These arguments in turn have led to pressure from homosexual individuals and communities to allow them into the priesthood. This is another debate which has caused great rifts in the Church and the fight from the minorities in the Church has begun again. It may be controversial but unfortunately it is a fact that there will always be debates and arguments within the Church and I don't think there will come a point when everyone is content.

As we have seen, both men and women were involved in the fight on both sides. There were women who felt strongly that women should not become priests, as well as men who felt strongly that they should. John Stoltenberg comments in his book "Refusing to be a man" that:

“I’m thinking of those men whose feminist convictions spring from a loyalty to a particular woman in their lives- a mother, a lover, a cherished friend- someone who has brought them into an intimate, almost insiders view of what life for women is like under male supremacy. These men have made a vow to stand beside her and not to abandon her, to wholeheartedly be her ally. For such men, loyalty to a woman’s life is experienced as a profound form of intimacy (not a threat to selfhood, as it might be for other men).”⁴⁸

Men like these were very important in the struggle towards the ordination of women in the Church of England. Both male and female feminists in the last century have been big voices crying out for all the women who have been silenced through the Church.

Feminist Theology

Feminism is a movement, which seeks to change situations for the better for women. It is often seen as radical because of the extreme views many feminists hold, and the action they take to get these views across. Feminists require radical reconstructions of our culture and society to recognise that both sexes should be equally represented. In relation to theology and religion, feminists have seen the problem with the fact that ‘man’ is seen to represent the whole of humanity without a second thought for women. Feminist theology emerged in the late 60’s when women gained a voice, and access to theological education, teaching and ministry. Ann Loades comments that:

“Only half the story has been told. The half that now needs to be given prominence concerns women: their contribution to and share in the world and its work, and their centrality in making society and building civilization.”⁴⁹

There is also half a story left to be told in the history of religion. Feminist theologians seek to tell the other side of this story and discover the significance, which women have in religion. Feminist theologians seek to reconstruct theological symbols of God, creation, salvation, redemption and the church, and make them gender inclusive. They wish to be theologians, not critics of dominant theology. They aim to reclaim the positive female themes within the Christian tradition and develop them. The Wisdom tradition portrays female symbols of God, in Genesis 1:27 we see man and woman being created

⁴⁸ Essays on sex and justice, C.A Suffolk: Fontana/ Collins. 1990.

⁴⁹ Feminist Theology- A reader, edited by Ann Loades.)

equally in the image of God. In Galatians 3:28 Paul shows us that male and female are equal in redemption, and in Acts 2:17 we are shown that both men and women are called to prophecy. Feminist theologians call people to recognise that symbols are socially constructed rather than divinely disclosed and unchangeable. These symbols have been man made by those in authority to overpower women and empower men. Because these symbols are man made, they are changeable. Despite these problems, there were spiritual female writers in the Middle Ages who were very powerful, positive female symbols. Women like Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich were accepted as theologians by men and women, drawing on the wisdom imagery for God and spiritual equality. Many women like these and others, throughout the Renaissance and Reformation wrote a great deal on the subjugation of women and the need for education and agency, but they remained marginalised because women were still excluded by the Church.

Within the first wave of feminism between 1840's- 1920's women gained a small amount of emancipation because they were allowed access to higher education, property rights, and the vote in the U.S. Women in Christian Churches from the late nineteenth century began to gradually acquire access to theological education. This was followed by a number of mainline Protestant denominations approving women's ordination- Mainline Methodists and Northern Presbyterians in 1956, the Lutherans in 1965, and Episcopalians in 1975. By the late 70's, the possibility for women's ordination led a great number of women to enrol in theological schools. This in turn led to feminist theology gaining an institutional basis in Christian education. Many Catholic American women like Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza began their theological work in the late 60's- mid 70's. Others closely followed these women such as Margaret Farley, Mary Jo Weaver, Elizabeth Johnson and Susan Ross. As well as these women, many progressive Catholic nuns adopted a feminist critique of the Church and applied it to the renewal of their religious communities. Between 1970 and 2000, Protestant women became forty to sixty per cent of the students in theological schools; however they were often placed in pastoral roles, which left little time for theological reflection or research. However, many American Catholic women had become disenchanted with the prospect of being ordained into such a patriarchal system, and so they formed the 'women- church' movement. These were free liturgical communities, which celebrated and nurtured feminist spirituality and worship. Women like Rosemary

Reuther and Mary Hunt developed radical feminist theology and liturgy in these communities. This movement eventually moved into the protestant Church and some feminist protestant theologians and pastors began to create feminist liturgical communities of their own.

Often, the great feminist theologians emerged through different histories and contexts and their theological or philosophical lives became entangled with their feminist lives. Mary Daly moved to Europe to gain her theological and philosophical education and was greatly influenced by the feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir. When she returned to the U.S.A she rejected Christianity because of its patriarchal nature and moved more towards looking at feminist spirituality. Rosemary Ruether and Letty Russell (a Presbyterian minister) developed through liberation theology, relating to class and race discrimination, towards feminist theology in the early 70's. Because of women like these and many more, feminist theology became an established part of American theological schools. By the 1990's, liberal theological schools had five to ten women scholars working within them. Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty were evangelical feminists, Judith Plaskow pioneered Jewish feminism, Rita Gross wrote a great deal about Buddhist feminism and links between Civil rights and feminist movements led African American, Hispanic and Asian women began to gain their distinctive theological voices. Women were first ordained in Germany in the 1960's and feminist theology began to spread among women theological students however, women like Elizabeth Grossman went to teach in Japan because she couldn't gain professorship in Germany. Towards the end of the 1980's, more opportunities for feminist study and teaching became available in England. This gave women such as Ursula King and Mary Grey, Elaine Graham, Grace Jantzen, Christine Trevett, Lisa Isherwood, Janet Martin and Daphne Hampson the chance to explore theology. Irish women too bred a distinctive theological voice with women like Mary Condren, Katherine Zappone and Ann Marie Gilligan. Feminist networks in England and Ireland have continued to grow and grow through the years. This presents more opportunities for women to study and develop opportunities for women to study and develop in theology. Also through this growth came journals, societies, and conferences where feminist theologians were able to share experiences, problems, beliefs and their work. Most surprisingly was the representation of Roman Catholic women in European feminist theology. Grey, King, Isherwood,

Condren, Zappone and Gilligan are all Catholics. Their feminist work emerged in a primarily ecumenical context, whereas women in the Dutch Catholic Church took a more academic feminist approach. In 1976, twenty- two representatives from Latin American, Africa, Asia, and one black theologian from the USA met to create the Ecumenical Association of the Third world (EATWOT)⁵⁰. They looked at economic exploitation, class analysis and religious issues and then moved towards gender issues and working with liberation theologians to support third world women. Third World Christians felt that the theology of the developed world overlooked their poverty and exploitation, and therefore had to be reformed to become more relevant to their needs. EATWOT is composed of men and women who wish to reinterpret the Gospels in a more meaningful way and look at theology from the point of view of those who are oppressed and seeking liberation. Many western women have become involved with the work of EATWOT because they feel they too are seeking liberation from the westernised, exclusive way Christianity is run. Through EATWOT, the third world theologians have gained a different voice, which promotes cultural, racial, sexual and economical equality. In 1986 an intercontinental meeting took place that brought women theologians together from these regions. Many grassroots feminist networks organise women's ministries, conferences and publications. Catholic women's religious orders especially the Mary knoll Sisters and lay missionaries provide support for these initiatives. Rosemary Radford Ruether comments that:

“African women theologians have claimed their distinctive voice by bringing together the themes of incarnation and liberation... African women evaluate traditional practices such as polygamy and menstrual taboos the women's work roles, sexuality, reproduction and family life.”⁵¹

As well as this, women in Africa find areas of empowerment for women in traditional culture as cult leaders and healers, as farmers and craftswomen, as liberators in myth and folk story. They are empowered by this as well as looking at how Jesus sees everyone as equal and that he always sided with the poor and oppressed. These women are filled with the spirit of hope for the future focussing on the positives from Jesus, rather than the negatives from man made institutionalised religion. African women theologians belong to

⁵⁰ www.eatwot.org

⁵¹ The emergence of Christian Feminist theology, pg 12.

the small-educated professional classes of their societies. Many got their doctorates in Belgium, Britain and the U.S.A.

In 1982 Sun Ai Park was an ordained Korean woman who created the Asian women's theological journal, 'In God's Image'. In 1988 she founded the Asian Women's Resource Centre for culture and theology. Both have continued long after her death and continue to inspire Asian women. Women in the Philippines see themselves developing a reading of feminism within a context of a 'theology of struggle' that emerged within the struggle against dictatorship and economic oppression. They are empowered by pre-colonial Filipino myth. Christians are the majority population in the Philippines and in South Korea; they are about a third of the population, mostly protestant. There was the liberation theology movement, 'Minjung' (people's) theology in the 1960s. Korean Christian women have taken up several issues specific to their history- reunification of North and South Korea, abuse of women in sex trade and Korean slaves in Japan who were survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Korean feminist theologian Chung Hyun Khung focuses greatly on the suffering of women who have been exploited for so long. A small amount of Christians and feminist theologians in India have also worked hard to liberate women, and open minds. They have done a great deal of work on issues of oppression of women in society. Rosemary Radford Ruether comments that: "Christian women theologians across the globe are concerned with common themes of critique of sexist symbols in Christianity and the reconstruction of the symbolism for God, Christ, humanity and nature, sin, and salvation, to affirm women's full and equivalent humanity." ⁵²

In a Christian context feminist theologians have looked deeper into scripture to discover where women can find spiritual liberation and inspiration. Unfortunately we are dealing with material that has always been a one-way conversation and has such a patriarchal, canonical tradition. For so long women's voices were silenced. Oppression destroys people and feminist theologians have been fighting against this oppression and wish to unite men and women in biblical interpretation. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza among other feminist theologians has named this a 'hermeneutic of suspicion'. This is a view that holds suspicion over a patriarchal system of thinking, which degrades women

⁵² The emergence of Christian Feminist Theology pg 18

to the role of victim and excludes them from the symbolic, public and social forms of communication. This view acknowledges that the collection and transmission of historical literary artefacts is often in the hands of educated males. Therefore they have control over what is put together and ultimately what the message will be. Women have good reason to be suspicious of this. They have been excluded from the pulling together of scripture, which is meant to affect their lives. Bridget Gilfillen Upton comments that: "Feminist analyses have been produced using all methods current in biblical criticism: historical critical method, literacy methods, social, sociological and anthropological methods and various combinations of the above."⁵³

Within feminist criticism, many critical methods are used and feminists don't generalise what it means to be 'female'. Many feminist critics have used a range of methods from text criticism to reader response methodology, from sociological readings to postmodernist strategies. Many feminist critics are from privileged, middle class, educated backgrounds in Europe or N. America but more and more women from Asia, Latin America or Africa are developing as feminist critics reading from their points of view. There are multiple variables of gender, race, culture, class and sexual orientation, which all affect the readings of scripture and feminist theologians take all these variables into consideration. Feminist readings in the late twentieth century have focussed on narrative reading methods. Narrative methods allow feminist readers to look closely at the text as a communication event from the writer to the reader- an intimate relationship. Feminist theologians call for a new reading of scripture which can encompass all areas and members of the Church.

Confusion and inconsistency in the work of Aquinas.

A Scholar who has been criticised a great deal by feminist theologians is St Thomas Aquinas who writes openly about his feelings of opposition to the ordination of women. Aquinas, like many other men throughout history are totally convinced that women cannot possibly teach to men or lead them in any kind of worship. Also- Aquinas, like other men felt that woman could not possible represent a male deity because men are

⁵³ Feminist theology as biblical hermeneutics, pg 102

superior to women. These arguments for the denial of women to the priesthood do not sit well for a lot of women and the fact that it was accepted for so long is even more infuriating. It is quite clear from his writing, that Aquinas did not understand the differences between men and women, and couldn't see that women are human beings in their own right, created by God in His image. For Aquinas, it seems, woman was just a watered down version of man.

Aquinas seems to take his guide on women's inferiority from passages such as 1 Corinthians 11:10 that "man was not created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man" and Genesis 2: 18, 19 that "it is not right that the man should be alone. I shall make him a helper." It would seem that from this, Aquinas was inspired to teach that woman was created for man and was therefore inferior to man. Aquinas was also greatly inspired and influenced by Aristotle's view of women and their biological inferiority. In "Generation of Animals" Aristotle describes their inferiority thus: "Form, is better and more divine in its nature than the matter, it is better also that the superior one should be separate from the inferior one. That is why, wherever possible and so far as possible the male is separate from the female, since it is something better and more divine in that it is the principle of movement for generated things, while the female serves as their matter. The male, however, comes together with the female and mingles with it for the business of generation, because this is something that concerns both of them."⁵⁴

Aquinas moves this on slightly, focussing more on the fact that God desires both male and female to be part of the universe and that women are not necessarily inferior, just less intelligent! In his eyes, this is often seen as an advantage in a spiritual way. He sees that devoutness is often seen in women and uneducated simpler men because their lack of learning makes them less likely to question and more likely to trust in God! Aquinas uses his image of women being less intellectual when he speaks about his idea of perfection too. He argues that women are imperfect but that this doesn't matter because imperfection is needed for diversity in God's world to show God in His best possible light. However, when he comes to speak about the women in the Bible and in Jesus' life,

⁵⁴ Generation of Animals, II, pg 133.

death and resurrection, he seems to get a little confused about what it all means. In Summa Theologia, Question 55, “The Manifestation of the resurrection” Aquinas says: “Furthermore, those to whom the resurrection was made manifest were witness to it: *God however raised him from the dead, and to that fact we are witness* (Acts 3:15). It is preaching which makes this witness public and preaching is not a woman’s function: *Women are to remain quiet at meetings* (1 Cor 14:34), and, *I do not give permission for a woman to teach* (1 Tim 2:12). It seems therefore, that there was certain unfitness in the fact that Christ appeared after his resurrection first to women and then to the others. On the other hand, it is written, *yet three days afterwards God raised him to life and allowed him to be seen, not by the whole people but only by certain witnesses God had chosen beforehand* (Acts 10:40-41).”

Aquinas seems to contradict himself and even question why God may have chosen women to be the first to witness Christ’s resurrection. He seems confused as to why, even though women can not teach, they are chosen by God for such a significant event. In Aquinas’s holy hierarchy he teaches that generally it will be men who achieve greater glory than women because of their inferiority, he also teaches that just as some human beings will gain greater glory than angels, some women may attain greater glory than men in heaven. For example, when it comes to Mary the mother of God, Aquinas clearly feels she is filled with God’s grace and excels in glory over all men and angels. Aquinas says:

“She had enough grace to fill the position for which she had been chosen by God, that of being the mother of his only begotten Son.”⁵⁵

Then later on he states that:

“The blessed Virgin Mary received such full intensity that it brought her right next to the author of grace in order to receive him, who had full intensity of grace, into herself. And by giving birth to him she brought in a certain way, grace to all.”⁵⁶

This is praise indeed and Aquinas clearly sees the divine significance of Our Lady and her grace and majesty. Even though in many commentaries of Aquinas’s work women are seen as being portrayed as inferior species, Aquinas does seem to give a great deal of credit to the women of the gospels who showed the Lord so much love and devotion.

⁵⁵ Summa Theologia 3a. 7, 10.

⁵⁶ Summa Theologia 3a 27, 5

Aristotle's views however did hold back a great deal of teaching in early Christianity and did not do a lot for the cause of women within the Christian Church. He believed that there were certain classes of human beings who were excluded from the full exercise of human reason; women and slaves. His reason in believing this was that for him, the fully rational part of the soul, the 'deliberative faculty' was not present in slaves and was ineffective in women. Jean Grimshaw makes an interesting observation that: "The whole of Aristotle's political philosophy is based on the assumption that one class of human beings- namely free males- should lead a life that he sees as self-justifying or as lived for its own sake, and that others should lead a life that is merely a means to this."⁵⁷ It was as if he believed that women were there simply to serve men and he backed this up with his philosophy that women were the 'matter' and therefore inferior.

It is clear that along with so many other areas of religion, the authorities pick and chose what they want their communities to hear, and for so long this has excluded or demeaned women. Aquinas also tends to make a great deal of generalizations and assumptions when it comes to the roles of men and women within the family. He assumes that a mother gives more of herself to the children than the father does and that men are more able to confront children than their mothers because he is physically stronger. He assumes that women are less intelligent than men, just through their nature of being women. Moreover, that even when women are seen to be intelligent, it isn't the same level of intelligence as men because he feels that women are too easily swayed by their emotions. The generalisations which both Aristotle and Aquinas made have damaged the development of women in the Church a great deal and encouraged the negative feelings which so many men already had.

It is easy to see how so many generations of women have felt downtrodden and ignored by the Church with such strong feelings and opinions coming from the men in authoritative positions. However, looking back through the history of religion it is important to focus on the positive, inspiring aspects of the struggle, which are so often overlooked. All of those women who devoted their lives to fight for equality in the Church for the generations which would come after them are beacons of hope for women

⁵⁷ 'The maleness of philosophy', "feminist philosophers"

today. Women should also look back to scripture and the female figures in the Bible which Jesus thought so highly of and keep trying to influence their communities in the best ways possible to show their love and commitment to God.

A woman who I have previously focussed on and who is often central to any talk of women in religion is Mary, Mother of Jesus. She is the perfect example to all those who follow Christ, of what loving God is all about. God calls to her, and she answers. She is not filled with suspicion and doubt, but with love and praise. She is a central figure in the Catholic Church, but can be an inspiration to any woman in any religion. Feminist and Marian theologians alike have praised her significance and upheld her important role within the Church. However, there is a problem with the interpretation of Mary and how she should be viewed. Some feel that she is a perfect maternal figure who represents the feminine in the Church and the feminine, maternal side of God. However, this traditionalist view of Mary strips her of her political and social significance as a woman who had a strong sense of justice. I, however do not see why we cannot view her, and praise her as being both. She represents what every woman of faith can be and achieve. Her relationship with the divine has got to be one of the most significant and beautiful in the Bible. In this relationship with God, Mary destroys any boundaries which have been put in place by man, denying women access to a full relationship with God. Tina Beattie in “Mary as every woman”⁵⁸ highlights the importance of Mary in a theology which can be ‘lived’ and not just theorised about. She wants people to see a Mary who is not passive and powerless but a Mary who was part of her son’s mission, and gathered people together to have a relationship with Jesus and listen to what he taught. Mary can empower any woman who is feeling left out in the cold by religion and this is why she has been focussed upon so much by feminist theologians. Anne E. Carr remarks: “Mary has taken on new importance in the context of feminist thought since she represents the one real woman and one female figure of central symbolic importance who is named in the Christian story.”⁵⁹

Christian women turn to Mary as their mother and an inspiration for them in their relationship with her son. This is all women want; a relationship with Christ that they can express openly within their communities, at an equal level to the men. Too often are

⁵⁸ The Tablet, 07/10/2000

⁵⁹ The Salvation of Women: Christ, Mary, and the Church.” Pg 180.

women patronised and looked down upon purely because of their gender. For years, feminist theologians were dismissed and their views not taken seriously. As I have mentioned before, how are women, as mothers able to encourage their children in the faith if they feel so rejected themselves? The justifications by men, about the exclusion of women to a full participation in the church should no longer be valid. We live in a world where finally women are accepted as equals in every other area of life, but a woman walks into a Church and she is deemed a second class citizen and unable to preach to men. Something which I feel is overlooked far too often is the fact that God is at the centre of Christianity and we should therefore look towards His nature for guidance on questions of Christian life. Christianity is about God not about man, and in the eyes of God one gender does not stand out as superior to the other. People seem to get so caught up in the roles which men and women should play in the Church, rather than just letting a community work together in their faith, despite gender, or any other differences. Surely one example we can take from Jesus is that he did not focus on difference, he embraced it and went to those who needed him most. God and Jesus were equally dependent on each other, and this should be the case for men and women. Men and women have different qualities, which they can bring to a community and with these qualities combined can create a 'God like' community which can fully nourish both sexes in their faith, and future generations to come. How can a Christian community be totally fulfilled if male and female cannot both use their gifts? As we have seen, there are many examples in scripture of faithful, devout women who are close to God and Jesus and who embody the Christian message, all those women who followed Jesus and were there at the foot of the cross when he died. While all his male companions fled through fear, the women stayed and showed their love for him. However, the problem is not within scripture or with what Jesus taught, it is what the authorities have chosen to do with his teachings in the development of Christianity. Men in power have manipulated the gospels and the teachings of Paul to increase their supremacy and widen the gender gap within the Church. Still, this did not succeed in dampening many women's spirits as they fought hard to show that they had equal rights to a full relationship with God. As knowledge has grown and people have begun to travel, the Christian Church has been able to see how people live their religious lives in other parts of the world. People in the west have become more and more influenced by eastern religions, and many women especially have

moved towards these religions as an alternative to the western patriarchal Christianity. But I personally don't feel I don't want to convert my beliefs because I believe in what Jesus came to teach and the way he lived his life. The only problem is that what Jesus came to teach seems to have been massively distorted by sexism and politics within the Church.

Women clearly do have a narrative in Christianity and Jesus showed this. Women in the Church today can be inspired by the strong women in the Bible and the relationships they had with the Lord. They can be proud of the women at the foot of the cross and the fact that Mary, like her son, sacrificed herself for the Lord. Women as well as men are part of the wonder of the Christian story and should continue to fight to not be overlooked. Stanley J. Grenz comments that:

“Consequently the call for full participation of men and women in the Church is in keeping with God's intention from the beginning as indicated in the creation narratives.”⁶⁰

God placed man and woman on the earth to work together in harmony and called them both to be His children. Looking at scripture can give us hope as it shows us the close relationship Jesus had with women and what an important role they played in his life. Women should feel a strong sense of belonging when they are baptised into Christ's community and should take away a positive hopeful view of Paul's letter to the Galatians when he says:

“All baptised in Christ, you have all clothed yourselves in Christ, and there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”⁶¹

The Church needs to move towards a more inclusive community which makes full use of the benefits which both men and women bring, and encourage them to be one in Jesus, rather than being divided over politics and doctrine. The Bible shows us a great deal about the history which led up to the founding of Christianity and teaches us a great deal about God. It is our duty to continue the work of Jesus and develop a Church which is built on what he came to teach. The authorities of the Church today need to realise that there are powerful and spiritual voices crying out from the mouths of women who want to

⁶⁰ “Anticipating God's New Community: Theological Foundations for Women in Ministry”

⁶¹ Gal 3:28.

be accepted and want to use their God given gifts to teach and develop their faith in a loving and accepting community. Women have struggled a great deal over the years to have their voices heard and have constantly come across barriers which have held back their spiritual development. The Church need to go back to the Bible, and the heart of Christianity to carry out Jesus' teaching and ministry, and live like he did. We live in a world which has broken down barriers between genders but it seems as though the Church still fears such a radical change. Unfortunately people's opinions cannot be changed and neither can centuries of theology but for women today, scripture can be used to shine a glimmer of hope on the Church for women. We can be inspired and empowered by the women in Jesus' life, and see how much he loved and trusted them. This can drive women on to continue to fight for an equal status to men in the Church and the opportunity for their story to finally be told.

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