

Acknowledgments

When I was awarded tenure and submitted this manuscript to the publishers, my husband, who was even more relieved than I, commissioned a painting from artist Elizabeth DeBraber. The painting depicts a woman walking out of a forest, carrying a book. Embroidered into the folds of her dress are the names of the women in my family, several of the feminist theologians who have most influenced me, and several of my friends. It is a stunning work, and it reminds me of the ways our lives are woven together. The painting celebrates strong women, friendship, family, and scholarship.

The feminist theologians represented in this book, and many others who are not explicitly named, have demonstrated creativity and courage. Their work and ideas are only briefly summarized in this book, but their influence upon my thinking and upon the academic study of religion is extensive and profound.

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Feminism and Christianity: An Essential Guide

Zuidema, Deirdre Johnston, Jane Dickie, Jane Bach, Robert Baird, Robert Klouw, and Dennis TeBeest offered encouragement and laughter. My parents and in-laws, Roger and Wilma Winkels, and Norm and Shirley Japinga, frequently cared for our children and did numerous other tasks that made my life easier.

Hope College provided several summer grants and reduced teaching loads. My colleagues in the Department of Religion set high standards for scholarship and teaching, and it is a privilege to work with them. Karen Michmerhuizen patiently solved computer problems, made corrections, and managed footnotes. Donald Luidens and Roger Nemeth graciously allowed me to postpone work on a joint project so that I could finish this book.

My family, Jeff, Mark, and Annie, has been good-humored about the time I have spent at my desk. They also offered many interesting interruptions. To them I offer my deep gratitude for the joy they bring to my life.

Holland, Michigan
September 1999

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Introduction

On the facade of a church in Rome is a statue of a woman lying on the ground with a man standing above her, his foot placed firmly on her neck. A photograph of the statue hangs in the study of a friend of mine, next to a letter she received from the governing body of her home church. The letter informed her that although they recognized her abilities, they would not recommend her for a college religion department scholarship because women should not be ministers.

It is an experience many women have had. In 1837, for example, Sarah Grimke gave a series of lectures encouraging the abolition of slavery. The lectures caused quite a stir, not only for their content, but because conventional wisdom claimed that a woman who expressed her opinion before a group of men and women endangered both herself and the audience. The Congregationalist clergy of Massachusetts issued a pastoral letter condemning Grimke for entering public life and abandoning the rightful sphere to which she had been assigned by God. Sarah Grimke responded with a series of letters, including one that reads:

Woman I am aware stands charged to the present day with having brought sin into the world. I shall not repel the charge by any counter assertions, although, as was before hinted, Adam's ready acquiescence with his wife's proposal, does not savor much of that superiority in strength of mind, which is arrogated by man. Even admitting that Eve was the greater sinner, it seems to me man might be satisfied with the dominion he has claimed and exercised for nearly six thousand years, and that more true nobility would be manifested by endeavoring to raise the fallen and invigorate the weak, than by keeping woman in subjection. But I ask no favors for my sex. I surrender not our claim to equality. All I ask of our

brethren is that they will take their feet from off our necks and permit us to stand upright on that ground which God designed us to occupy.¹

For centuries some women have had an ambivalent relationship with religion, particularly with Christianity. They wonder how a tradition values and affirms women when its central figures, God the Father, Jesus the Son, the twelve apostles, and a host of other prophets, priests, and kings, are all male. They wonder where the good news is in biblical texts about women who are raped, murdered, ignored, or valued primarily for their wombs. They point to quotations from the church "fathers" that blame women for human sin or claim that a woman is a misbegotten or defective male. They note that some contemporary churches do not permit women to serve as priests or pastors; and if women are ordained to the ministry, they are often denied positions of power and influence. Many feminists have dismissed Christianity as hopelessly male centered and biased against women. Those who have not dismissed Christianity suspect that it has helped to create a society that does not consider women and men to be equally gifted and valuable.

Christians have been no less skeptical of feminists. Some Christians have accused feminists of being selfish, trying to take over the world, and reversing all roles so that women will be able to dominate men. Feminists want to deny all differences between men and women, critics say; they want to destroy the traditional family and force all women to work outside the home and all children to attend day care. Feminists do not believe in the Bible or God, and they want to undermine the influence of Christianity.

As you read these critiques you may be protesting, "But that isn't what Christianity is all about," or "Feminists don't believe that!" And that is exactly the problem. Both Christians and feminists have often dealt with each other on the basis of stereotypes, half-truths, and caricatures. The popular media has encouraged this misunderstanding. More Americans have heard the term "femi-nazi" than have heard a thoughtful definition of feminism.

I teach in a private, church-related liberal arts college; and I am always a bit taken aback by the number of students, especially women, who refuse to identify themselves as feminists because the term has negative connotations. Feminists, they tell me, are angry, they do not wear makeup, they are always complaining about something, and they hate men. Female students assume that they have the right to an education, the right to a job or to a slot in graduate school, the right to enter a male-dominated profession, and the right to equal wages. They have reaped

the benefits of the feminist movement, but know little of its history and do not want to be identified with it. They do not fully realize that forty years ago women were not considered viable candidates for graduate schools or the professions because their primary role was to bear and rear children. Women have more choices now because of the efforts of women who have gone before us.

Feminism, as it arose in the nineteenth century and in its more recent manifestations, emphasizes power, rights, and freedom from oppression. How, then, does Christianity, with its emphasis on self-sacrifice and turning the other cheek, fit into this discussion? Many of the students in my Christian Feminism course wonder how Christianity and feminism can be compatible. Isn't Christian feminism an oxymoron?

Feminism and Christianity

Although the feminist movement that arose in the last half of the twentieth century did not begin in a church, as did the feminist movement of the mid-nineteenth century, Christianity and feminism began to intersect fairly quickly during this period. In 1968 Mary Daly, professor of theology and philosophy at Boston College, published a book entitled *The Church and the Second Sex*, in which she described the Roman Catholic Church's failure to treat women as equal human beings. More damaging than the Catholic Church's restriction of the priesthood to males, she argued, is the belief that women are more at fault for sin and that their God-given nature requires them to be secondary—the supportive, nurturing, submissive partner in marriage and church. Five years later Daly published *Beyond God the Father*, charging that most Christian doctrines are hopelessly male centered and misogynistic.

Even if they did not read Daly or belong to the Roman Catholic Church, some Christian women began to question their roles in ecclesiastical structures and their place within Christian theology. The Bible, they said, presents at best an ambiguous picture of women. In the Old Testament, women were valued primarily for their reproductive capacity. Their menstrual cycles made women ritually unclean for two weeks each month. Women often resorted to deception or manipulation to exert influence over their husbands or children. Yet the Old Testament also speaks of strong women who were instrumental in the well-being of the nation. Shiphrah and Puah, Miriam, Deborah, Ruth, and Rahab are examples of positive female role models in the Old Testament.

The New Testament was equally ambivalent. The apostle Paul told women to keep silent in church, but earlier in the same letter he told women to cover their heads appropriately when they spoke in church.

Jesus never ordained women to church office,² but he treated them with respect and care, and he broke many religious rules to do so.

Biblical scholars, such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Phyllis Trible, began writing powerful and profound treatments of various biblical texts. Schüssler Fiorenza argued that the scattered biblical references to women in the early church were only the tip of the iceberg and that women led and influenced the early church in many ways.

Women who began to study the history of Christianity found a similar mixture of bad news and good news. The church fathers had much to say about women, and most of it was negative or critical. In the fourth century Augustine argued that women were not created in the image of God, but only in relationship to their husbands. Men, on the other hand, fully represented the image of God by themselves. Women were useful for childbearing, Augustine wrote, but otherwise a man made the better friend and companion. The thirteenth-century theologian Thomas Aquinas claimed that women were misbegotten males, the result of a defective process of conception.

While the fathers wondered whether women were fully human, they knew for certain that women were fully sinful. Late in the second century the theologian Tertullian wrote: "Woman, you are the devil's doorway. It is your fault that the Son of Man has to die." Could women be fully redeemed from the effects of their sin? The fathers were not sure. Eve's sin in eating the fruit in the garden meant that women could not be entrusted with leadership. Women were considered dangerous temptresses who needed to be controlled.

Again, in the midst of all this bad news, there were stories of women who contributed to the well-being of the church: Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Phoebe, and Priscilla in the New Testament; Perpetua, Macrina, Julian of Norwich, and Catherine of Siena in the years that followed the New Testament period. Some wielded a great deal of influence upon church and society.

Finally, Christian feminists began reexamining traditional Christian doctrines, particularly the belief that God is most clearly represented through male language and imagery. Mary Daly's pithy phrase, "If God is male, then the male is God," offered a stinging critique of father language. But in addition to such critiques, feminist theologians have explored a variety of biblical images and metaphors that say something true about God.

Christian feminists, like feminists of other faiths or nonreligious feminists, represent a range of positions. Evangelical feminists tend to be more conservative in their attempts to preserve traditional Christian doctrines. They affirm the authority of the Bible and its continuing rele-

vance to human lives. At the other end of the spectrum, some feminists no longer identify themselves as Christian because they believe Christianity degrades women and encourages their subordination. There are many positions in the middle of this spectrum. Many Christian feminists are affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church or with Protestant denominations such as the Episcopal, United Methodist, and Presbyterian churches. A number of influential Christian feminist voices have come from womanist (African American), *mujerista* (Hispanic), and Asian American theologians.

These Christian feminists do not have identical opinions about the Bible, the church, or even Christianity; but most would agree on a basic definition of feminism as a commitment to the humanity, dignity, and equality of all persons. They seek equal rights for women, but their ultimate goal is a social order in which women and men of all races and classes can live together in justice and harmony. Most Christian feminists agree that two tasks or strategies are necessary to achieve this goal.

The first task is resistance to everything that oppresses human beings. This means saying no to sexism, domination, unequal treatment, and injustice. Resistance includes a diagnosis and critique of patriarchal social structures and ideologies. Although this task often prompts the criticism that feminists are angry or hostile, resistance stems from a desire to create a positive, supportive environment for women and men by clearing away what has been hurtful and restrictive in their lives. In Sarah Grimke's words, resistance is asking the brothers to take their feet off women's necks.

The second task of feminism is to empower and encourage women by helping them to find inner strength, a clear sense of identity, and freedom from stereotypes. Feminism recognizes the importance of women's stories and the need to find examples of strength and courage in both the past and the present. Feminism affirms the many and varied gifts of women, both the traditional ones of bearing and rearing children, teaching, nurturing, and the like, but also the more recently recognized gifts of women in administration, leadership, ministry, and the professions. Although their stories are seldom told, women of all races and classes have been a force in history, and their contributions deserve recognition.

Many feminists, whether Christian or not, might agree on the preceding definition and strategies. A particularly Christian approach to feminism might add that the source for these beliefs about dignity and equality is the theological assertion that all people are created in God's image and therefore are valuable, gifted, free, and responsible. Human relationships have been marred by sin; but the sexism, racism, and classism present in our world are not God's will, but signs of brokenness

Feminism and Christianity: An Essential Guide

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Christian feminist theology is a rapidly expanding field of study; and many creative, thoughtful, and challenging books are being written by feminist theologians. The intention of this book is not to offer new ideas about feminism so much as to interpret the existing feminist proposals for people who may be new to feminism or theology. This book introduces students to the central themes of Christian feminism and its critiques of traditional Christian doctrines. It is representative and suggestive rather than comprehensive, but I hope it will whet the reader's appetite for more reading, study, and learning.

A simple, but powerful, song from the civil rights movement repeated these words: "We who believe in freedom cannot rest, we who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes." That is what Christian feminism is about. Freedom for all persons, not just for middle-class white women, but for all women and men. Freedom to do God's work. Freedom to live without destructive stereotypes. Freedom to value women's stories as much as we value men's. Freedom to "stand upright on that ground which God designed us to occupy."

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CHAPTER 1

An Introduction to Feminist Theology

How many theologians can you name who wrote before 1950? Even if you are not very familiar with the history of Christianity, you have probably encountered Augustine in a world literature class, Aquinas in a history class, and Jonathan Edwards in American literature. Now, how many *women* theologians can you name? Even those students who have attended Sunday school all their lives or attended a religious private school may have difficulty generating a short list of women theologians. Perhaps “women theologians” is an oxymoron like “Christian feminism.” Perhaps there were no women who wrote theology. Or perhaps there were many such women, but we do not know about them.

Mary Magdalene was a faithful disciple who went to the tomb of Jesus on Easter morning and found it empty. In three of the four gospels she is named as one of the first to see and speak to Jesus. The early church recognized her as a person of insight and influence, but Paul did not include her in his list of witnesses to the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:5-8). She became identified as a prostitute, although there is no biblical evidence for that reputation. Today we know her not as a theologian and a witness to the resurrection, but as a sinful woman redeemed by the compassion of Jesus.

Martha of Bethany, in the midst of grief over the death of her brother Lazarus, recognized the power of Jesus to heal and to bring new life and named him as the Messiah, the Son of God (John 11:17-27). Later the disciple Peter made a similar confession (Matt 16:16; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20) and was rewarded with a particular place of leadership. Martha, however, is remembered almost exclusively as a fussy homemaker who

scolded her sister Mary for listening to Jesus while Martha did all of the work (Luke 10:38-42).

Perpetua was a young woman killed because of her faith during a time of persecution at the end of the second century. For a number of years her theological reflections were read in public worship, but eventually they were replaced by the statements of important men who had died as martyrs. Only recently have her powerful words been recovered.

Paula was a wealthy woman and the mother of five children. After her husband died late in the fourth century, she felt called to study Scripture and to devote herself to the things of God. She excelled in Hebrew and founded monastic communities along with her friend and fellow scholar, Jerome. Paula was respected for her deep piety, strict asceticism, and obvious intellectual and administrative abilities; but she could not be considered a teacher of the church, as Jerome was. Despite the extent of her influence and the depth of her wisdom, her writings were not considered important enough to preserve.

Julian of Norwich (1342–1416) spent much of her life in a small cell attached to a church in Norwich, England. During an illness when she was thirty years old, she had a series of visions in which she encountered God in profound ways; and she spent much of the remainder of her life meditating on these visions. Like other mystics of her time, she used feminine imagery to describe God and Jesus. She wrote, "As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother. Our Father wills, our Mother works, our good Lord the Holy Spirit confirms. And therefore it is our part to love our God in whom we have our being, reverently thanking and praising him for our creation, mightily praying to our Mother for mercy and pity, and to our Lord the Holy Spirit for help and grace."¹ Julian's work was preserved, but the church has only recently begun to grapple with the implications of her theological insights.

Anne Hutchinson was a gifted teacher and theologian in Boston in the 1630s. As a leader of Bible studies for women, she explained the sermon delivered the previous Sunday. Soon dozens of men attended as well. The Puritan leaders feared her influence and disapproved of her ideas, especially the heretical notion that God might presume to speak directly to a woman. As a result of her independence, influence and insight, Anne was banished from Massachusetts.

Sojourner Truth (1795–1883) was born into slavery but was freed in 1827. She spent much of her life fighting for the rights of women and African Americans. She could not read or write, but she learned Scripture by having children read the Bible to her. In 1851 she attended a women's rights convention in Akron, Ohio, where some clergymen claimed that women should not have equal rights because they lacked

sufficient intellect, because Eve caused sin, and because Christ was a man. She refuted the last argument by asking, "Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with him." She displayed extraordinary courage both in refuting the arguments of the clergy despite her minimal education and by speaking up when many of the women present did not want a black woman to speak and possibly endanger their cause. Her speech had an electrifying effect on the crowd, and today students who read it still find it deeply moving.

How much truth and insight has been lost over two thousand years of Christian history because the theological wisdom of women has not been recognized, appreciated, or recorded? For centuries only celibate women had full freedom to study, write, and devote themselves to God and the church. What contributions might wives and mothers have made? Would theology be different today if the church had recognized women's gifts throughout its history? What has the church lost by refusing to hear the voices of women?

One of the most important tasks of feminist theology is first to recover and listen to the voices of women who have spoken in the past, but have been silenced or forgotten or dismissed as heretical; and second, to encourage and attend to contemporary women's voices. Feminist theology asks how the Christian tradition might be different if it listened to women's voices. This chapter will explore theoretical questions about the definitions of theology and feminist theology; the methods feminist theologians use to do their work; and some of their assumptions, emphases, and goals.

What is Theology?

The most basic definition of theology is thinking about God, which comes from the Greek words *theos* (God) and *logos* (words or thought). Theology is usually understood more broadly as reflection about God, humanity, and the world, including the topics of anthropology (human nature), christology (Jesus Christ), and ecclesiology (the church). Another helpful definition of theology is faith seeking understanding, or the attempt to make sense of, interpret and articulate what it is we believe.

Traditional definitions of theology stress its rational, objective character. Theological works like John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* or Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* present the content of the Bible and the Christian tradition in an organized, systematic form. These authors attempt to explain, simply and systematically, the truth of the Christian faith, or as it is sometimes phrased, they are "thinking God's

thoughts after him." The assumption that such theological reflection springs forth complete and inerrant from the mind of God through the pen of a particular theologian like Calvin or Aquinas gives theologians enormous power. If Aquinas was simply setting forth the truth of the Christian faith, then it is difficult to disagree. If Calvin is an objective and unbiased interpreter of Christianity, a lesser mind should not presume to criticize. Certainly Calvin and Aquinas were skilled theologians, but they were also human.

Many Christians have never fully recognized that even the most abstract theology develops out of the experience of the theologian. John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* are often regarded as a model of disengaged, pure theology, but they arose out of Calvin's passionate desire to articulate the Protestant faith in a hostile context. His personality, legal training and ecclesiastical agenda are evident on every page.

In recent years some Christians have questioned the assumption that theology is rational, objective, and free of bias. Thinking and writing about God cannot be separated from the life of the theologian. A person who has experienced God as angry and judgmental will write differently than a person who has found God to be gracious and loving. A middle-class, tenured professor will have a different sense of God's provision than a poor coffee bean picker in Central America. A man who is certain he is created in God's image will have a different sense of God than a woman who has been taught that she is one step removed from the image of God.

Theology can be shaped by the economic status, job security, childhood, gender, race, and life story of the author. Martin Luther, whose theological and biblical reflections shape the identity of the Lutheran churches nearly five centuries later, agonized as a young man over his relationship to God and to the church. He lamented his failure to be good enough or do enough to earn God's approval. Out of this pain and his joyful experience of God's forgiveness, he seized upon the biblical concept of justification by grace through faith. The encounter with divine grace freed him from compulsively seeking to please God, but also made him critical of anything he felt corrupted the heart of the gospel. Luther wrote passionate treatises against the church's attempt to sell forgiveness in the form of indulgences or to dole out grace through the sacraments. Theology for Luther was not objective, but an effort to protect the grace of God from human manipulation. His energy and insight came not from dispassionate academic study, but from wrestling with the questions that were most significant to his life and faith.

When theologians speak honestly about their own experience, it need not compromise the integrity of their work. The greater danger arises

when theologians assume that their work simply reflects the truth and will of God. In the nineteenth century a catechism for slaves asked the question, "Why was I created?" and answered, "To serve my master." To a white Southerner, this theology expressed the will of God; but to an abolitionist, it denied God's intention for the dignity of all humanity; and to a slave, it represented oppression wearing pious clothes. Simply labeling one's ideas "theology" does not guarantee that they represent the mind of God.

Theology does not finally represent the mind of God so much as it illustrates the efforts of human beings to gain a deeper understanding of God, themselves, and the world. Theology is not abstract and objective, but arises out of human lives, conflicts, doubts and dreams.

Why Feminist Theology?

When theology is understood as faith seeking understanding, it becomes clear that people's approach to theology will differ depending on the questions they ask and the areas in which they seek clarity. Martin Luther asked how people became acceptable to God. John Calvin wondered how God cared for and guided the world. The most pressing question for many feminist theologians is whether the Christian faith can be a positive force in women's lives when it says so much that is negative about women.

Having recognized the unfair treatment of women and been angered by it, many feminists began to see the world differently. Perhaps they noticed the sexist language in a hymn or in liturgy and realized that they did not feel included. Perhaps they were denied the opportunity to do something because of gender. Perhaps they heard someone talk about sexism and had a flash of insight that they were not alone in their discomfort with the church or with society.

For some women the experience of inclusion helps them to realize how much they have missed. Carter Heyward received a letter from a woman who participated in a communion service Heyward led soon after her ordination. The woman wrote:

I did not expect to be so personally affected by your presence here. I was unaware of the ways that I have felt excluded from God's inner circle of love until I experienced being included—both by the obvious fact of your inclusion and by you, as God's representative, including me. *Somehow I feel I've spent my life trying to be God's son, only to realize at last that I am God's daughter.*²

Once women recognize and begin to resist exclusion, they find that they see the world quite differently. Regina Coll described her experience:

After my own conversion to feminism, when I read scripture I often said, "That's new; it wasn't there the last time. Someone must have sneaked it in when I wasn't looking." Of course, it was always there. I had been unseeing. I had read the words from the perspective of the culture in which I lived and understood them from that perspective. But when my world-view changed, so did my ability to vision and revision scripture (and incidentally to revise and revision *The New York Times*, television shows, and the theater). I was left with questions, surprises, and disappointments. The new view was not always comforting.³

Once changed, most women find that they cannot go back to the way they were. They cannot eliminate feminist consciousness once it has developed. Mary Daly wrote of this experience: "Seeing means that everything changes: the old identifications and the old securities are gone."⁴ Once women (and men) notice the presence of exclusive language in a worship service, it is almost impossible to return to blissful oblivion. Once women ask if they are included in the hymn "Rise Up, O Men of God," they can never sing it without wondering. The development of feminist consciousness produces a paradigm shift for many women. They begin to look at the world in a different way, and all aspects of their lives are affected.⁵

Women who ask these questions about exclusion and equality find that the traditional theological answers do not always satisfy them. The insistence on the fatherhood of God, the claim that women brought sin into the world, and the exclusion of women from the church and the priesthood make it difficult for women to accept the Christian tradition uncritically. Some feminists reject Christianity at this point as hopelessly patriarchal and unredeemable. Others choose to stay in the Christian tradition, but continue to struggle with its pervasive sexism. Feminist theologians seek to understand and make sense of this ambiguous Christian faith, which both affirms women as God's people and excludes them from the life of the church. Many feminist theologians believe that ultimately the Christian faith does offer good news to women, but not without some hard work at sorting through the meaning of the tradition for them.

Feminist theology begins with the assumption that women are fully human, made in God's image, and loved and valued by God. Rosemary

Radford Ruether described three tasks of feminist theology arising out of this starting point. First, feminist theology provides a critique of the tradition, pointing out the ways the Christian tradition has been limiting or destructive for women. Second, it tries to recover women's stories from the past and the present in order to demonstrate the gifts and insights of women throughout history. It explores the ways women have done theology. Third, feminist theology revises and reshapes traditional Christian doctrines and practices in order to help the tradition and the church to be more responsive to the needs and experiences of all its members.⁶

Feminist theologians also challenge some of the common beliefs about how theology ought to be done and by whom. Theology is not a top-down enterprise in which brilliant scholars tell ordinary Christians the truth about God. Theology is not the exclusive property of persons with academic degrees and clergy credentials, but the task of all Christians who wonder about God, themselves, and the world. Theology arises more out of curiosity than certainty. It is not so much a setting forth of absolute truth as a setting forth of the ways in which God is present in human lives. Theology is not confined to rational exposition in textbooks or sermons, but can be found in novels, poetry, art, and music. Theological insight can be found in all forms of expression that help people encounter God.

Feminist theologians also insist that theology is not meant to be a dry, abstract debate about irrelevant and esoteric topics. Critics sometimes charge that feminist theologians make too great a fuss about theological issues because, after all, it does not matter what we call God or how we define sin. Feminist theologians reply that these issues matter a great deal because they are speaking of the holy and of human lives. Roberta Bondi wrote that theology is important because it is about saving lives.

First, [theology] involves learning to see the ways in which false images of God, ourselves, and the world have bound us and taken away the life God intends for us. Second, it involves learning to know God as God is, as a healing God, and learning to know ourselves, individually and communally, as people who correspond with that God in whose image we are made. Third, it involves imagining a future that is consistent with the God we come to know.⁷

Theology at its best is a life-giving enterprise. One of the significant insights of feminist psychologists is the need for girls and women to

develop their own voice, to be comfortable speaking, even disagreeing, without feeling that they must keep quiet in order to preserve their relationships and their security. Certain aspects of the Christian tradition have discouraged women from this task of finding their voices, by commanding their silence or by saying that "good Christian women" are not disagreeable. Feminist theology attempts to give women both life and voice.

Giving Voice to Women Through Critique of the Tradition

The chapters that follow will identify some of the pronouncements and practices in the Christian tradition that have been especially harmful or restrictive for women. More subtle, but no less damaging, are the ways women have been excluded, ignored, or dismissed. Chung Hyun Kyung called this "the violence of silence."⁸ Traditional theology has been written by men, for men, about men. Women always have to ask how they are included, if at all. Women's experience has been ignored or neglected in the doing of theology, as if they do not exist or are an afterthought. The Christian tradition has valued women as wives, mother or virgins, but rarely for their intellect, vocation, or contribution to society. Women have had neither the freedom to choose nor the choices men have assumed were a part of being human.

The reasons often given to justify these attitudes is that they are taught by the Bible and the Christian tradition and that the church's past thought, speech, and action ought to determine contemporary expressions of faith. Change defies God's will and threatens the essence of the gospel. If the Nicene Creed, written in the fourth century, said that "Jesus became man for us men and our salvation," the church must use that language without complaint. If the church has never ordained women to the priesthood, it should not start now.

This interpretation of tradition has made the Christian faith very difficult for women. The content of the tradition is difficult enough, but the tradition itself has become cloaked in an aura of sanctity and unchangeability. Feminist theologians have refused to accept the tradition, simply because it is tradition, as the absolute will of God for the present.

Skepticism about tradition does not mean that feminist theologians discard all tradition as worthless or throw out the entire history and faith of the church and create a new religion. Their approach is not unlike that of stripping furniture, removing the layers of old paint to find what kind of wood lies underneath. Most feminist theologians ask hard questions of the tradition in order to assess the author's assump-

tions, the attitudes of his culture about the nature of women, and the personal experiences that shaped his theological beliefs.

Thomas Aquinas, a thirteenth-century theologian, wrote that women were defective beings, born female because an environmental factor had determined their sex in the womb. He learned biology from Aristotle, a philosopher from the fourth century before Christ who believed that a male sperm contained within it a tiny person that would grow into another male if all went well and if there was no humid wind from the south. Aristotle and Aquinas believed that the mother simply provided the proper environment. They did not know then that a sperm and an egg are required for conception or that an individual's sex depends on chromosomes, not on the weather. Unfortunately, Aquinas concluded from this that women were defective, inferior, and unfit for the intellectual and administrative demands of the priesthood. His ideas shaped the Roman Catholic Church's understanding of men and women. Although modern biology has provided more accurate knowledge of procreation, the theological conclusions based on this ancient model have not changed. Aquinas's argument is still used to deny the priesthood to women.

Augustine was a theologian in the fourth century who struggled with the sin of lust both before and after his conversion to Christianity. In his writings he argued that sexual activity before the Fall was a matter of the will, not of passion. He advised Christians to be cautious about their sexuality and spoke at length about its dangers. His opinions have also had a significant impact on theology and practice in the Christian tradition, even though his view was more negative than that of the Bible.

Jerome was an ascetic and a scholar in the fourth century and a friend and advisor to Paula. He wrote a treatise on the virtue of virginity, dedicated to one of Paula's daughters, in which he described the disgusting nature of sexuality and childbirth and concluded that the only good thing about marriage was that a couple could produce children to raise as virgins for the service of the church. He wrote in a time when asceticism or self-denial were seen as the most valuable ways to prove one's commitment to God.

Some feminists have concluded that this Christian tradition is patriarchal to the core. Daphne Hampson claimed that when God, Christ, priests, saints, and symbols are all male, the Christian faith cannot function positively for women. Mary Daly arrived at a similar conclusion when she moved "beyond God the Father" and labeled herself post-Christian. She maintained that the tradition was developed by men in part as a way to preserve their power. The church fathers invoke tradition as an absolute, which eliminates the possibility of dialogue. Daly

argued that women are not bound to obey such a harmful tradition, and she encouraged women to decide for themselves what is true and not seek justification in the past for their beliefs.⁹

Other feminist theologians believe that although the church fathers had a significant impact on the church's view of women and sexuality, their ideas do not represent the mind of God for all time. The tradition helps contemporary Christians understand and learn from the ways the church has dealt with theological issues, but the answers of the past do not determine how Christians should think and act today.¹⁰ The tradition can be adapted as necessary to make it relevant to contemporary theology. Ivone Gebara wrote that tradition need not be repeated for perpetuity without change or challenge. "If we do repeat, it is because that is what today's situation demands, because it does touch the roots of our existence, because to some extent it responds to the problems that ongoing history sets before us. In this sense, what is normative is primarily the present, what calls out today; tradition is viewed in terms of the present."¹¹ Christians need not be bound to the tradition.

Some feminist theologians remain within the tradition by identifying particular aspects that represent the essence or core of the gospel, such as the words of the prophets, the teachings of Jesus, or a principle implicit in Scripture, although not stated explicitly. Rosemary Radford Ruether outlined her criteria for evaluating the Christian tradition:

The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women. Whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore, appraised as not redemptive. Theologically speaking, whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption. This negative principle also implies the positive principle: what does promote the full humanity of women is of the Holy, it does reflect true relation to the divine, it is the true nature of things, the authentic message of redemption and the mission of redemptive community.¹²

This means that texts that tell women to be submissive and silent and theological treatises and papal statements that insist that women cannot be priests are not authentic messages of redemption because they do not promote the full humanity of women. A text in which Jesus encouraged the Samaritan woman to preach to her neighbors (John 4) or the insights of the mystics who experience God and Christ in feminine images are

authentic messages of redemption because they promote the full humanity of women.

Critics have argued that these criteria are too narrow because they enable feminist theologians to disregard a large portion of the Christian tradition simply because it does not help women to flourish. These critics charge that feminists impose the secular agenda of equality upon the tradition and do not take seriously enough the timeless truths of the Christian faith. Rather than simply accepting and obeying the teachings of Jesus, these critics contend, feminist theologians presume to use their own values as a test for the validity of Scripture and tradition instead of allowing their values and commitments to be shaped by the Christian faith.

Feminists respond that the culture as a whole has not consistently advocated equal treatment for all people. Equality has not been the dominant theme in a culture where racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of discrimination are present in all social institutions. When certain groups of people or institutions oppress other groups, they presume to decide the value and worth of other human beings simply on the basis of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation, without considering individual gifts and interests. People who are oppressed in these ways often internalize these judgments and agree that they are capable of performing only the particular roles in life that have been assigned to them. The resistance to oppression that feminists advocate is not simply a way to improve their own social location or to achieve a few more rights for themselves; it is, rather, a way to enable all of God's people to live in the freedom and justice God intends for them. Feminist theologians believe that the tradition needs to be called to account when it denies God's people the dignity, compassion, and justice Jesus and the prophets mandated.

Finally, the feminist critique of tradition emphasizes that theology is a partial, fallible attempt to say something true and meaningful about the God who transcends all human understanding. Human knowledge is incomplete and at times distorted, which means that human efforts at theology are never complete, but always in process. Aurelia Fule, a Presbyterian minister and theologian, observed: "If we believe we have arrived and are no longer traveling toward the truth, we have become unformable in God's hands and unteachable in our hearts."¹³ Feminist theologians assert that all theologians, including themselves, need to be humble about the theological enterprise. This means that beliefs are stated with a caution that recognizes that no human being can be absolutely right when making statements about God. Humility is an awareness that God might choose to act in ways that defy the best theories, the recogni-

tion that the surprising work of God is not yet finished and that at the end of life human beings may be stunned by the grace of God. Neither the tradition nor contemporary theologians fully understand God, and neither should be viewed as infallible, but always open to deeper understanding and insight.

Giving Voice to Women by Telling Their Stories

When my students first encounter the stories of women in the history of Christianity or American religion, the most common response is, "I've never heard that before." They are amazed at the existence of these strong and courageous women and wonder why they were never mentioned in history books or Sunday school.

A quick overview of the history of the church shows mostly men serving as priests, church leaders, theologians, reformers, social activists, and mystics. The index to a typical history of Christianity includes only a few women's names, but the fact that women rarely appear in the history books does not mean they had no role in the church. There are women in many of these categories; there is even a story about a woman pope. Why has so little been recorded about women?

Historians have often assumed that women did not do anything. They were wives and mothers who did not contribute to the theological task because they were not educated and therefore did not write or think deep thoughts. If they did have opinions they probably agreed with their husbands and therefore provided nothing new to write about.

It is often true that the winners write history and decide how to tell the story of the disagreement and how to present the other side. Mary Magdalene's reputation as a prostitute may have arisen from those who felt she was becoming too influential and wanted to limit her power by giving her a bad reputation. In the second century two women, Priscilla and Maximilla, held leadership responsibilities among a group of people known as Montanists, who emphasized the second coming of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit. The group was eventually declared heretical, and the women were dismissed as fanatical. This permitted the "orthodox" parts of the church to continue the claim that women never led religious movements.

Theologian Sandra Schneiders has pointed out that history is not the objective and complete rendering of past events that we often assume it to be, but is, rather, the selection of events the historian considers important. "Church history is not the history of the church but of what men have preserved of male experience for male purposes."¹⁴ Since men wrote history, men determined the topics worthy of preservation or

inclusion, usually wars, politics, and intellectual debates, in which women were permitted little if any role. British author Virginia Woolf recalled some research she had undertaken for a lecture titled "Women and Fiction." She went to the library of the British Museum, looked up "women" in the catalogue, and was astonished at what she found. "Have you any notion how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many are written by men? Are you aware that you are, perhaps, the most discussed animal in the universe?"¹⁵ Men had much to say about women, most of it critical, but women seldom wrote about men. Women seldom wrote about any topic, in Woolf's day, partly because they lacked the financial resources and the room of their own that would enable their scholarship.

Throughout much of Christian history women were rarely educated and held few public positions in church, academic, or political life. They worked as craftspersons, brewed beer, made wine, and did all the tasks required to keep a family in food and clothing, which left precious little time for reading and theological reflection. When women did write, their work received scant attention. For centuries women repeated the same arguments and wrestled with the same biblical texts. They did not build on the work of women who came before them because they did not know such work existed; therefore, they did not make as much progress as they might have if they had been able to stand on the shoulders of those who went before them and to build on their arguments.¹⁶

Given these barriers, it is amazing that any women made significant contributions to the church. An essential task of Christian feminism during the past twenty-five years has been the recovery of women's stories in books such as *Her Story* by Barbara McHaffie, *Daughters of the Church* by Ruth Tucker and Walter Liefeld, *Women of Spirit* edited by Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller, and a host of others. These historians noted that women have usually constituted half the church membership and sometimes as much as two-thirds. The story of the church is not accurate without considering the role of women. Anne Carr observed, "Less than half the story has been told. To begin to tell the other part is to acknowledge that women have always been involved (even when excluded or ignored) in everything human, in everything religious."¹⁷

Giving Voice to Women by Valuing Their Experience

Why is it important to tell these stories? Feminist theologians claim that theology and history are incomplete without the experience of women. But if men and women are basically the same, as many femi-

nists claim, what does feminist theology offer that traditional theology does not? Feminist theology claims to be rooted in women's experience, but the meaning of this is often vague. Are women's lives so different from men's lives that they produce a completely different theology? Do women have a distinctive nature that leads them to a feminine version of theology?

Ivone Gebara illustrated some of this ambiguity when she wrote, "There is something quite special in the way that women do theology. The elements of everyday life are very intertwined with their speaking about God. . . . Given their own history, women are bolder in questioning concepts, and they have a creative curiosity that opens new paths and allows new understandings."¹⁸ When feminist theologians refer to women's experience, they are usually thinking of bodily experience, socialized experience, and the experience of oppression or suffering.

First, women's lives are different because their bodies are different. Regular menstrual cycles, pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding are all unique to women. The fact that the body is so prominently involved in much of women's lives has been used to denigrate women, as if these bodily functions limit the development of their brains and souls. One argument against a women president, for example, is that raging hormones would leave her periodically irrational and out of control. Some people believe that women who bear and rear children have little interest or ability in intellectual and cultural issues. Contemporary culture frequently portrays women as attractive objects, valued for their sexuality and beauty, but not for their personalities and minds.

Some feminists assert that women's close connection with the body, particularly the experience of childbirth, makes women less violent, competitive, and judgmental and more compassionate and gracious. Their regular cycles make them more conscious of their bodies, more at home in them, better able to make connections between the mind and the body, and therefore less prone to making war or plundering nature. Because women have often integrated body and soul, they are not trapped by the dualism that divides reality into two opposing categories and elevates one above the other so that the soul and the mind are seen as higher and more important than the body.

How might this bodily experience shape the way women do theology? Feminist theologians insist that sexuality and the body do not need to be transcended by the mind and the spirit or controlled by the will, but may instead provide ways to encounter God. The experiences of pregnancy and childbirth, labeled dirty and disgusting by some theologians, provide several metaphors for thinking about the God in whom we live and move and have our being. Scripture portrays God as a

mother laboring to give birth (Isa 42:14) and God as midwife, guiding and encouraging the mother through the birth process (Ps 71:6). Jesus compared his suffering on the cross to the pains of childbirth, which lead to the joy of new life (John 16:21-22).

More broadly, feminist theologians argue that because body and soul are more integrated for women, they are less inclined to see God as a distant Spirit ruling over them. God is not solely concerned with human minds and souls, but with bodies as well. God cares that people have enough to eat, a safe place to sleep, and people with whom they can be in relationship. God cares about all the messy bodily aspects of life.

A second form of women's experience is their socialization. From birth, women have been taught that they are less rational, intelligent, and mathematically gifted than men are. They have been taught, as Henry Higgins sings in *My Fair Lady*, that "Women are irrational, that's all there is to that. Their heads are full of cotton, hay, and rags." Women are good at nurturing and serving others and cleaning up after them, but they are not meant to be leaders or administrators. Women have been told, implicitly and explicitly throughout their lives, that women's work is not as important as men's work, and that girls are not as valuable as boys.

Readers might protest that things have changed and that American society has moved beyond this, but consider these examples. My husband told our daughter that her scribbles looked like a doctor's writing. She announced that women can't be doctors. When I mentioned this to our new woman pediatrician, she said that her daughter had announced that women could be doctors, but only men could be surgeons like her father. Early in their lives children develop clear ideas about what men and women can do, most often through the influence of books, television, and other children; and these ideas persist in adults. When a church that considers itself quite progressive recently called a woman to be the preaching pastor, several parishioners wondered whether a woman would be able to handle the preaching and administrative responsibilities. Feminist theologians suggest that women's experience of inferiority makes them particularly sensitive to the ways inferiority is reinforced in Scripture and in tradition.

A third distinctive characteristic of women's experience is that they are statistically more likely than men to live with suffering, oppression, and poverty. Women earn less money than men and often lose more after a divorce. Women from minority groups and from the Third World may lack adequate food and housing, a basic sense of security, and access to resources. Women often have less power to determine the course of their lives. They are more likely to experience rape, incest, and domestic violence.

Feminist theologians suggest that if theology took the experiences of women into account, it would contain less abstract intellectual debate and more wrestling with concrete issues of survival. In womanist theology, for example, Hagar has become a symbol of suffering. Hagar was a slave owned by Abraham and Sarah. When Sarah did not become pregnant, she gave Hagar to Abraham so that he might conceive a child through her. When Hagar conceived, however, Sarah treated her harshly, and Hagar ran away. Wandering in the wilderness, Hagar encountered God, and the text says that she named God, something no other human did in Scripture. Several years after Ishmael's birth, Sarah sent them away, and Hagar again encountered God when Ishmael nearly died in the wilderness. Womanist theologian Delores Williams has emphasized Hagar's struggle to survive racism and sexism and to ensure her son's well-being.¹⁸ Contrast this, however, to Edith Deen's lengthy comments about Sarah's beauty, faith in God, and deep love for her son Isaac in her book *All the Women of the Bible*. Deen said almost nothing about Hagar's experience, except to criticize her pride. Deen assumed that Sarah's harsh treatment of Hagar was justified because it arose out of Sarah's love for her son.²⁰

Giving Voice to Women and Their Diversity

Considering all the emphasis in feminist theology on attending to women's experience, it is painfully ironic that the feminist theology done by white, middle-class, educated women has excluded or at least not paid attention to women who are not white and middle class. In the mid-nineteenth century some white feminists did not want African Americans like Sojourner Truth to be too closely associated with the women's movement, both because of their own racism and because they feared their movement would lose credibility if black women were included. During the suffrage movement some women argued that white middle-class women needed the right to vote in order to balance poorer immigrant men who might not vote the "right" way. In the past few decades the women's movement has worked to obtain opportunities for women in education and the workplace, but has often failed to give much attention to the life and experience of women in minority groups or to the needs of women working in factories, providing day care, or staying at home to care for their own children.

White feminist theology has at times been guilty of overt racism, but most often its racism is more subtle. It has assumed that women are basically the same and that it speaks for all women. At times a feminist theology course might add a single minority woman to its reading list,

or a panel discussion might add one woman from a minority group; but such tokenism implies that only one such voice is necessary. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, in her book *Mujerista Theology*, pointed out that white feminism did not share power, did not allow Latinas and other minorities to participate in shaping definitions and values, did not deal with issues of race and class, and did not articulate a goal of liberation for all people.²¹ When feminist theology does deal with different voices, it is sometimes in a minimal way, at the end of a class or in an optional reading, which implies that these voices are not very important; or it assumes that reading one essay by a minority woman gives adequate insight into the experience of all nonwhite women. In reality, there is no single minority experience; women of all races, classes, and ethnic groups have very diverse stories that cannot be expressed by a single voice.

This criticism of white feminist theology is valid, but it is also true that white feminist theologians have tried to be more inclusive. Rosemary Radford Ruether explored the connections between racism, classism, sexism, and anti-Semitism. Carter Heyward, a white woman, and Katie Geneva Cannon, a black woman, openly explored the dynamics of race in their lives and relationships. Susan Thistlethwaite criticized white feminists for ignoring the insights of nonwhite women. White feminist theologians have begun to encourage their students and readers to attend to more diverse voices.²²

The attention to diversity can seem a bit overwhelming at times. It is not unusual at an academic conference to have a panel discussion composed of five women of different ethnic groups. Feminist theology is often subdivided into *mujerista*, womanist, and Asian emphases. It is impossible to make generalizations about women in a particular ethnic group, let alone say anything true about all women. This has been a positive dynamic in feminist theology, but it does pose the question of whether women have any experiences in common. There seems to be little or nothing that unites women from different ages, classes, races, countries, and sexual orientations.

Feminist theologians have encouraged a genuine respect for and engagement with the voices of a wide variety of women. Elizabeth Johnson described the "lens of women's flourishing," as the criterion by which she evaluated theological claims and social structures to determine whether they contribute to the well-being of all women, not just white middle-class women. Feminism will not achieve its goals, she wrote, until the poorest black woman in South Africa is able to live in peace and dignity.²³

Feminist theologians also encourage greater awareness of diversity. Difference is frightening, and people quickly conclude that different is

bad and that someone who looks or thinks differently is inferior. American society has taught that there are limited resources and that if someone else gains, then we must inevitably lose. Feminist theologians propose instead that we will all be enhanced as human beings if we have more exposure to the lives and ideas of those who are different from us.

Giving Voice to Women by Empowering Them

Feminist theologians engage in these tasks of critique, recovery, and revisioning because they hope to empower women and men to live as whole people with thoughts and feelings, bodies and minds, autonomy and relationships, and the confidence that they are valuable human beings. If individuals are to thrive in this way, society must also be transformed. Feminist theologians recognize how enormous the task of social transformation is. They usually are quite realistic about the persistence of sin, but they continue to work so that the world can increasingly become a place that seeks justice and equity and demonstrates respect and care for all its people.

Feminist consciousness tends to be critical or suspicious of the tradition and the status quo. Men have made the rules, and men dominate most of the structures, such as religion, politics, higher education, business, medicine, and law. Even though women are making inroads, men still occupy far more of the tenured faculty, senior staff, bureaucratic, and CEO positions. Men hold a great deal of power and privilege; and women who are allowed into the men's game are expected to play by their rules, work long hours, and publish the same number of articles.

Some people react to such an analysis with concern. "Well, that isn't true," a woman might say. "My husband/father/boyfriend/boss is really wonderful, and he shares the child care or gets his own coffee or helps with the housework." Feminists agree that there are many wonderful men in the world, but individual exceptions do not alter the reality that most structures in our society remain strongly patriarchal and very resistant to change. Consider an institution you are part of—your business, university, or church. Who occupies the top positions? Who holds the power? Who makes the decisions? While there may be a few token women at the top, more than likely it is the men running the show. Other men, while they may not share all of these values and may profess to disagree with a patriarchal system, may still benefit from this "old-boy network."

If transformation and empowerment are to occur, oppression and sexism must first be named and analyzed. Such naming has led to the stereotype that feminists whine and complain about being victimized by

sexism. In reality, there is very little self-pity or victim language among feminist theologians. They name the problem and suggest solutions, but they emphasize the strength and abilities of women rather than their weakness and passivity. Naomi Wolf called this "power feminism" as opposed to "victim feminism." Women have abundant wisdom, insight, and intellect. Women should be encouraged to develop identity, courage, and audacity. This emphasis on women's power is often clearest in the writings of Third World feminists, even though they may suffer far more economic and racial exploitation. Ivone Gebara wrote, "Woman is not marked for an unchangeable fate, nor is she the object of alien wills that shape her existence."²⁴ Despite the difficulties women have experienced over their long history, change is possible.

Change does not come easily, however, so feminist theologians encourage resistance or opposition to what oppresses. It has done little good to hope that structures would change purely out of goodwill because sexism is a power struggle, and those who have power will not easily let go of it. A group of women theologians from the Third World wrote, "Rather than see ourselves solely as victims of male domination, we have formed a sisterhood of resistance to all forms of oppression, seeking creative partnership with men of the Association."²⁵ Sexism and oppression are deeply embedded in church and society and are very difficult to eradicate. Resistance is more effective if women do it together because they find courage and stamina in their relationships with one another. Feminist theologians find models for resistance in biblical stories in which a woman reached out for healing (Mark 5), a non-Jewish woman had the courage to talk back to Jesus (Mark 7), and two Jewish midwives refused to obey orders to kill the male children of their people (Exodus 1).

Resistance is not easy and it is not popular. As a result of their passion and commitment to change, feminists are accused of being angry. They want to change a system that does not work well for many of its members, but the system resists change. Feminist theologians care deeply about the welfare of women and men and the larger society in which they live. They want to see the world become a more whole and healthy place, not for selfish reasons or personal gain, but because they believe that the heart of the gospel is justice and peace for all God's people.