

INTRODUCTION

Are women redeemed by Christ? Central to Christianity is the claim that “in Christ there is no more male and female,” but what does this mean in the Christian tradition? An equal opportunity for happiness with God in life after death? Liberation from sexist oppression in society? If women are equally redeemed by Christ, why has the Christian church continually reinforced sexism in society and in the church? These are some of the questions this study seeks to answer.

Answers to these questions have changed in Christian history. These changes are relative

to the way women are defined in creation or “original nature” and in the “fall” or the consequences of sin. Were women created equal or subordinate in God’s original intention for creation? Are women more, less, or equally culpable for sin? Are women the primary sinners or the primary ones who have been sinned against? Changing answers to these questions alter how redemption is defined in relation to women.

In this study of women and redemption, I trace historically these changing paradigms of gender, male and female, in relation to the

Christian claim of a universal and inclusive redemption in Christ. The story necessarily begins with Jesus, because “something happened” in his ministry that suggested to some early Christians that gender relations had been changed by redemption. This does not mean that there was some pristine moment when all women and men were equal and exercised an equal ministry in the earliest Christian church. But some women exercised leadership and prophetic teaching in some early Christian churches, and this was supported by some men in these Christian communities as an expression of their faith in a “new humanity” that overcomes gender hierarchy.

But these practices and ideas sparked controversy and opposition. Some early Christians formulated fuller theological justifications of these changes, while others sought to refute these theories and repress such practices to shore up continued patriarchal relations as normative for the Christian church and family. The New Testament literature, as well as early noncanonical gospels, reflects this struggle in early Christianity over the significance of redemption in Christ for gender relations in the church and in society.

The canonical envelope of the New Testament¹ obscures the conflict by seeking to impose the decisive answer that women were created second, sinned first, and are to keep silence in church, to be saved by subordination and childbearing; but alternative views and practices on women’s roles continued. Successive generations of Christian

theologians have addressed this question anew. This process continues in conflicting views of gender in the church, family, and society between feminist and patriarchal Christians today. This book seeks to provide a historical framework for evaluating this conflict over the fundamental meaning of the Christian gospel for gender relations.

The first paradigm by which some early Christians sought to justify the dissolution of gender hierarchy in redemption drew on Hellenistic Jewish speculations about the original creation of the human by God in pregendered spiritual unity. The Gen. 1:27b text that defined humanity as created “male and female” was thus seen as a second stage of creation, one that expressed a fall into sin and death, necessitating sexual dimorphism, sex, and reproduction. Redemption reversed this later fallen stage of creation, returning to the original unity in which there is “no more male and female.” Some early Christians defined a theology of baptism in which this restoration to pregendered unity happens when the baptized are incorporated into a redeemed humanity “in Christ.”

Other early Christian leaders, however, notably Saint Paul, rejected this theology of “baptismal realized eschatology” and insisted that marriage and traditional gender relations are to continue in the Christian community even after baptism. Although the new humanity in Christ has been assumed spiritually, physically, and morally, we are still “in sin.” Some expressions of women’s leadership were accepted by Paul but in a framework that muted any challenge to traditional

relations in the family. The full realization of redemption in Christ, in which gender hierarchy will be dissolved and there will be “no more marrying and giving in marriage,” was reserved by Paul for an eschatological completion of redemption that is imminent but still future.

Paul’s argument against a theology of baptismal realized eschatology in which gender hierarchy is dissolved here and now was reinforced in the post-Pauline tradition recorded in the New Testament. Here traditional patriarchal relations, which mandated that wives are to obey their husbands, slaves their masters, and children their parents, were shored up. This early Christian argument for continued patriarchy in the church culminated in the theology of creation and fall in 1 Timothy, which claims that women’s original subordination in creation has been redoubled as punishment for their primacy in sin. Only by strict adherence to this double subordination of creation and fall can women be saved.

But this argument in Timothy was itself posed over against communities of radical Christians who continued an alternative early Christian view that gender hierarchy is already dissolved in redemption. Christian conversion means entering into a new status of spiritual equality, expressed in renunciation of marriage and sexuality for the virginal state. The spiritual state restored in Christ not only anticipates the heavenly redeemed state in which there will be no more marrying and giving in marriage; it also is expressed here and now in the empowering of women to leave subordination in the family, to travel as

itinerant preachers, to prophecy and heal as charismatic leaders of the church.

The repression of several variant theories and practices of eschatological equality in Christ by those churchmen who emerged as definers of Christian orthodoxy was expressed in two major versions in the Greek and Latin Christian worlds. The Eastern or Greek Orthodox view is found in the theology of spirituality of the fourth-century church father, Gregory of Nyssa. This is based on a theory of pre-fallen spiritual unity of humanity before the fall into gender dimorphism. The fall brought the mortal body, sin, and death, and so necessitated sexual dimorphism, sex, and reproduction as the remedy for mortality. But with Christ this era of the fallen mortal body is coming to a close and humanity can return through celibacy to its original pregendered virginal state. Women too can participate as equals in this ascent to spiritual unity and communion with God, but as women they can exercise no external social authority in society or the church.

Saint Augustine in the late fourth and early fifth centuries enunciated the version of orthodox theology that would remain normative for the Latin West through the Reformation. Augustine accepted the development that had taken place in some Eastern church fathers whereby the human soul in women as well as in men was made in the image of God in a nongendered spiritual form. Thus woman’s soul possesses the same potential for redemption as that of man. But, for Augustine, male and female bodies, sex, and reproduction did not come about through

the fall but were part of God's original design for creation. Qua female, woman was created subordinate to man for the purposes of sex and procreation.

This subordination of women to men as husband and wife in marriage and reproduction was intended by God from the beginning. Although sexual dimorphism, sex, reproduction, and female subordination were part of the original order of creation, these things have been worsened through sin. In the fall humanity lost its original spiritual union with God, which brought a fall into mortality, a corruption of sex into lust, and the bondage of the will by which humans are unable to obey God of their own free will.

Due to the fall, women's subordination has been worsened into coercive servitude, which women must accept as their special punishment for sin. This continues even for Christian virginal women in the church, although, when the created order is dissolved in a future heavenly world beyond sin and death, this subordination in creation, worsened as punishment for sin, will be overcome. Then women will be spiritually equal with men according to their inner virtues.

This Augustinian view was accepted with slight variations by the Latin theological tradition found in Thomas Aquinas and was continued in the Reformation theologies of Martin Luther and John Calvin. Some medieval woman theologians and mystics, however, began to change the symbolic meaning of female gender in relation to God and Christ. For the classical Christian tradition found in Augustine and Aquinas, maleness and

spirituality are equated. Women as women cannot be made in the image of God or represent Christ because God and Christ are male, and maleness represents rationality, spirituality, and the divine. So women can be included in the image of God restored in Christ only in a sex-neutered form.

Some medieval women mystics began to shift gender symbolism for God and Christ to include femaleness, thereby changing the assumptions that femaleness as such cannot be theomorphic or christomorphic. They drew on metaphors for God from the Wisdom tradition, which personified God as female, particularly in divine roles of self-manifestation as the "second person" of God through which the world is created, sustained, and redeemed.² As creator and redeemer God can be imaged as sophiological and so as female-like. Also Christ in his incarnation takes on the vulnerable body. Women as representatives of the vulnerable body thus can be seen as Christlike in relation to Christ's incarnation and suffering.

This inclusion of female metaphors for God and Christ began to shift the assumptions that women as women are not God-like and Christlike. But these developments, which culminated in the thought of the fourteenth-century English mystic Julian of Norwich, did not change gender relations of office in church or society. Their spirituality continued to be linked with celibacy and spiritual ascent by which women or men may anticipate the heavenly state in which there is no more marrying or giving in marriage.

The next major paradigm shift was begun by a feminist humanist in the sixteenth century

and developed by the Quakers in the seventeenth century, although it would not become a movement for social transformation until modern feminist theology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Agrippa von Nettesheim, in his treatise on *Female Preeminence* (1509), enunciated several major components of an incipient feminist paradigm. He argued that women were created equally in the image of God with men in regard to their spiritual souls. But he drew on the Wisdom tradition of medieval mysticism and rediscovered Jewish Kabbalism³ to argue that, as female, women were superior to men, reflecting the Wisdom nature of God and so more attuned to life and virtue.

Agrippa argued further that the domination of men over women is neither God's original design for creation nor punishment for female priority in sin, but rather reflects the propensity of men to injustice and tyranny. Christ restored women to equality and gave them equal leadership in the church, but men refused to accept this and have distorted the message of Christ to justify the continued subordination of women in the church and in society. For Agrippa women's full equality in public life, including political leadership, simply reflects what is due women according to their nature. This has been reaffirmed by Christ but prevented by tyrannical men who have denied women education and participation in cultural and political life and socialized women to accept this situation by training them from childhood to be submissive.

Nothing as strong as Agrippa's view would be published, as far as I know, until the advent of modern feminism with writers such as Mary

Wollstonecraft at the end of the eighteenth century.⁴ But Quakers and some English feminist humanists in the seventeenth century picked up some aspects of his view. The Quakers particularly took over the idea that an original equality of men and women in creation was, through sin, turned into usurpation of power of some over others. Male domination thus is a manifestation of sin. Equality of men and women has been restored in Christ, who mandated that women as much as men should be prophetic evangelists of the gospel. Those who would silence women in church are the "seed of Satan" who continue the fallen state of humanity that has not yet received the "inner light" of the redemptive Spirit.

The Quakers translated their theology of original and restored gender equality into a participation of women in missionary work, preaching, and ministry in Quaker meetings. But they did not inaugurate a struggle for women's equality in public society, because their sectarian view of the non-Quaker realm as an expression of the fallen world disposed them to withdraw from, rather than participate in, public political life.

This sectarian stance was challenged, however, in nineteenth-century America by several abolitionist feminists, particularly Sarah and Angelina Grimké and Lucretia Mott, who united the Quaker theology of creation restored in the Spirit with American democratic thought. These foremothers of American feminism not only inaugurated the struggle for women's civil rights in American society that would be carried on by their younger colleagues, Susan B. Anthony and

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, to the beginning of the twentieth century, but they also did so on biblical and theological grounds.

For the Grimké sisters and Lucretia Mott, humans—male and female—were created to stand side by side as equals in all respects—mentally, morally, and socially. The domination of men over women is in no way God's original plan for creation or the fruit of female sin but rather reflects the propensity to domination that was and continues to be the primary expression of sin. All forms of human injustice and violence—subordination of women, the enslavement of blacks to whites, and war—flow from this basic sinful tendency to domination of some over others. This has been expressed primarily by powerful white males, although white women have too often collaborated with this sin by acquiescing in their own oppression or in that of others, such as enslaved blacks, and by cheering on the drums of war.

Redemption for these nineteenth-century American feminists meant not only the restoration of women to interpersonal equality with men but also the transformation of social and legal systems that have denied women's rights, perpetuated slavery, and waged war. Redemption is realized, not primarily in an otherworldly escape from the body and the finite world, but by transforming the world and society into personal and social relations of justice and peace between all humans. This is the true message of Christ and the gospel. The churches have betrayed Christ by preaching a theology of female silencing and subordination.

The understanding of creation, sin, and redemption begun by these nineteenth-century feminists was reinvented and developed by the new wave of feminist theology that began in Western Europe and in North America in the 1960s after more than half a century of eclipse. Contemporary Christian feminist theology builds on certain basic assumptions. One of these is rejection of any theological or sociobiological justifications of women's subordination as due to some combination of (1) natural inferiority, (2) a divine mandate that women be subordinate in the order of creation, and (3) punishment for their priority in sin. Women's full and equal humanity with men and their right to equal access to education, professions, and political participation in society are assumed.

The classical justifications of women's subordination as due to natural inferiority, subordination in the order of creation, and punishment for sin are assumed to be false ideologies constructed to justify injustice. The domination of men over women is sinful, and patriarchy is a sinful social system. Far from reflecting the true will of God and the nature of women, such theological constructions subvert God's creation and distort human nature. Feminist theology is about the deconstruction of these ideological justifications of male domination and the vindication of women's equality as the true will of God, human nature, and Christ's redemptive intention.

Redemption in modern feminism follows a modern Western cultural shift from otherworldly to this-worldly hope. Redemption

is not primarily about being reconciled with a God from whom our human nature has become totally severed due to sin, rejecting our bodies and finitude, and ascending to communion with a spiritual world that will be our heavenly home after death. Rather, redemption is about reclaiming an original goodness that is still available as our true selves, although obscured by false ideologies and social structures that have justified domination of some and subordination of others.

Redemption puts us back in touch with a full biophilic relationality of humans with their bodies and one another and rebuilds social relations that can incarnate love and justice. Thus redemption is about the transformation of self and society into good, life-giving relations, rather than an escape from the body and the world into eternal life. Otherworldly eschatology is usually not explicitly denied, but it is put aside.⁵

Modern feminist theologies in North America and Western Europe are engaged in an in-depth exploration of the many aspects of this reenvisioned understanding of nature, sin, and redemption. This involves detailed critique of how the false ideologies that sacralized patriarchy have been constructed in different historical branches of Christian theology. It involves dismantling these theological justifications of patriarchy and the enunciation of alternative views of God, humanity's—male and female—relations to the body, nature, and society that envision egalitarian mutuality as the true meaning of original and redeemed creation and reconciliation with God.

These explorations leave open many disputed questions. One of these is the relation of human nature to maleness and femaleness. Feminist theology and feminist theory have struggled with how to reconcile a one-nature and a two-nature anthropology of gender.⁶ A one-nature anthropology, rooted in the Christian theology of an original asexual image of God given to all humans in creation, assumes one generic human “nature” possessed by all humans equally. This has been an important theory for vindicating women's essential equality with men. But the problem with the one-nature anthropology is that it is implicitly androcentric. Essential human nature is identified with qualities, such as reason and moral will, linked with males. Women are included in this “essential human nature” only by negation of their femaleness.

Two-nature anthropology is based on male and female difference as essential. Modern secular complementarity is also rooted in sophiological and mariological notions of good femininity. It assumed an equal value and even superiority of the “feminine” qualities of altruistic love and service in a way that enforces women's passive receptivity to male agency. Maleness continued to be identified with reason and moral will, complemented by female intuitive and altruistic qualities. While exalting women as more virtuous than men, this anthropological model also excludes women from being active agents in society.

In the twentieth century this anthropology has been adopted by the Catholic hierarchy to argue for women's exclusion from voting and political office and then from ordained

ministry. Once women won the vote in most Western societies, Catholic leaders conceded participation in public life to women in secular society as an expression of their equality in the creational image of God, although still preferring to divide male and female roles between public and domestic life. But they denied women's capacity to image and represent Christ in the redemptive and sacramental order. Christlikeness and Marylikeness are split to exalt women's spiritual receptivity but to deny them sacramental agency as representatives of Christ.⁷

Feminism has sought to transcend this conflict between an androcentric one-nature anthropology and a complementary two-nature anthropology. Feminists have sought to define an enlarged understanding of the human that unites all human qualities in a transformed whole and to define journeys of growth into wholeness for women and men by which each can reclaim those lost parts of themselves that have been assigned to the other sex. But questions of how women are different from (better than?) men, while at the same time being *equal* and possessing the *same* humanness as a basis for equal rights in society, continue to plague feminist anthropology.

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, however, this feminist discussion of what a holistic humanness in mutual relation would mean for transformed women and men in a good society has been challenged by postmodernist thought and by the rise of new voices of women from nonwhite and non-Christian cultures. Postmodernist thought has

rejected the whole concept of universals, not only of different profiles of essential maleness and essential femaleness but even the idea of an essential humanness. All such notions of an essential self and universal human values are declared to be social constructions that veil the universalizing of dominant cultural groups of men and women. We have to recognize infinite particularity. There is no generic "woman's experience" that can be used as a basis of feminist critique of patriarchy or sisterhood of women.⁸

The emergence of new voices of women in religion from African American, Hispanic American, Asian American communities, as well as from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, has also challenged the tendencies of some earlier feminist theology done by white women to ignore their ethnic and class contexts. These women of "color" in America and from the "Third World" have been engaged in defining feminist theology from their own historical cultural contexts. But by and large these women are not interested in an endless emphasis on *difference* that ends in impenetrable particularity, but rather in establishing their own distinct contexts in order to construct new and more authentic ways of reaching across these differences toward solidarity in struggle against systems of oppression that are global.

In the last three chapters of this book, I will chart the emergence of feminist theologies of the twentieth century in Western Europe, North America, and the Third World. As feminist theologies begin to emerge from Hispanic and African American women in

the United States and from women in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, there is increasing emphasis on the plurality of cultural and social contexts for doing women's theological reflection. I will show the new emphases in theology that emerge from this plurality of contextualizations. I will ask how Latin

American, African, and Asian feminists are defining their distinctive approaches in order to envision a more authentic basis for solidarity among women, and between men and women, to rebuild more life-sustaining societies in their own lands and between nations on a threatened Earth.