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## Feminist Practical Theology and the Future of the Church

Most women who are feminist or womanist, or otherwise self-naming, live with ambiguous emotions toward their religious communities. Many Christian women have left the church or Christianity altogether. Those who remain within the church often see themselves as people on the margins or as reformers in some sense of that word, although the forms of reform are understood quite differently in diverse cultural contexts.<sup>1</sup> Wherever they stand, however, women frequently question whether they are compromising too much or whether their pain is more than they can bear. And they ask what kinds of reform are needed for the good of women and for the food of the whole human family and for the good of the earth.

This dilemma makes the future of the church a problem at best, for many women carry such hurt that they hope the church will not have a future, while others pray and work toward a thoroughgoing transformation. Many of the church's problems that call out for transformation are problems grounded in the way that goodness is understood or misunderstood — the way that human existence is described and future action is envisioned. This address is a journey through some of the concrete and theoretical problems; my hope is that the future of the church will be illumined as we engage in the praxis of practical theology.

### The Church Faces into the World

In the beginning of this moment in time, our world is not without form and void, but it may well be without direction and hope. Consider, for example, some of the issues facing the church in the decade of the 1990s:

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<sup>1</sup> For Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Yolanda Tarango, reform begins by listening to the voices and theological affirmations of Hispanic women, and for Chung Hyun Kyung, reform begins when Asian women analyze their stories and build meaning structures from their life experiences. See: Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Yolanda Tarango, *Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988); and Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991).

In these very moments, the former Yugoslavia is torn apart and people are being captured, raped, murdered, beaten and imprisoned, usually one religious group over another. In this case, the Muslims are particularly victimized.

Worldwide, war is waging in northern Ireland, fueled by the religious differences and power struggles between Protestants and Roman Catholics, and war is waging in the Middle East between Israelis and Palestinians, fueled also by religious differences and power struggles.

In my region, we are living in the aftermath of the April 1992 uprising in Los Angeles, followed by uprisings in Atlanta, Toronto and elsewhere. At the base of these uprisings were racial discrimination, physical and spiritual poverty, and interracial resentment and anger. In the days following the burning and looting and protests in Los Angeles, African American leaders denounced racial and class discrimination in the United States — discrimination that has become systematic genocide, killing African American life and quality of life. One Korean-American pastor at the California-Pacific Annual Conference (United Methodist) said that the Korean-Americans in Los Angeles were like Uriah in II Samuel 11:14-27; Uriah was sent to the front lines by David, but in the case of Korean Americans, white racism against Blacks was the power that sent them to the front lines.<sup>2</sup> And Latino leaders have pointed out that at least one third of the businesses and homes that were burned in Los Angeles were theirs, yet no one has named that reality in the media, political arena, or church; they have been an invisible people.

Another major issue that faces the churches in the United States and Canada is that of homosexuality. In the case of the United Methodist Church, decisions were made in the 1992 General Conference to maintain the language of the Book of Discipline regarding homosexuality, except for one addition to the "Social Principles" related to the civil rights of gay and lesbian persons.<sup>3</sup> Hence United Methodists will continue to refuse ordination and consecration to homosexual persons, and the study of homosexuality that will be conducted in the church will be guided by resources that are consistent with the existing

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<sup>2</sup> Chang Soon Lee, Address to California-Pacific Annual Conference, June 12, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> United Methodist Church, "Social Principles," *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 1992* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), par. 71G, p. 92. The paragraph begins: "Certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due all persons. We are committed to support those rights and liberties for homosexual persons."

"Social Principles" that declare homosexual practice "incompatible with Christian teaching."<sup>4</sup>

Consider now how much of ecclesiology has been grounded in the historical marks of the church — one, holy, catholic, and apostolic — or in the New Testament concepts of the church — *ekklesia*, *diakonia*, *liturgia*, *kerygma*, and *basileia*. Consider further how much of ecclesiology is constructed from foundations in Christian doctrines or philosophical systems; far less ecclesiology has been formed from anthropology, much less from a feminist anthropology. What would happen if the realities facing the church were taken as primary data in reshaping anthropology? Toward what kind of church would we hope and move? We will begin this exploration with a simple case study because some of these realities are revealed in very ordinary experiences of women in the church.

### **A Woman faces into the Church**

This summer, for the first time in my life, I was invited to preach in a church that was important to my own life journey — the small town church of my father's youth, and the church that I had visited about once a year with my cousins. My husband and I had talked with my Texas family about a visit, and my cousin asked if the two of us would be willing to preach. We said fine, and he made contact with the pastor to see what he thought. We checked and double-checked with my cousin about whether he wanted one or both of us to preach, and he repeatedly responded "both." After talking with the pastor and getting an enthusiastic response, my cousin asked for curriculum vitae, which I supplied, along with biblical texts and sermon title.

When we arrived in my father's hometown to visit the family, we were greeted warmly, and we did much visiting in a compressed time. Over lunch on Saturday, my cousin said:

I want to get some awkward items out of the way.

I told our pastor that I had invited both of you to preach, and he was enthusiastic, but last week, he announced with great fanfare that Allen Moore would be with us next Sunday to preach. He shared a lot about you, Allen, but he never mentioned Mary Elizabeth. Tomorrow, we will have a church full of Mullino family coming to hear Mary Elizabeth and a

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., par. 71F, p. 92. The fuller text reads: "Although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm that God's grace is available to all. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons."

church full of our regular congregation coming to hear Allen. This probably happens to you a lot, Mary Elizabeth.

I nodded because, indeed, it does happen to me often. My cousin, not knowing quite how to handle the situation, said to us:

Tonight we are having the pastor and his wife over for dinner, and I would surely appreciate it if you would find a way to communicate what you will be doing.

I first asked my cousin if the whole situation would be easier if Allen preached, but he hastily said no; Allen and I agreed that we would find a way to clarify the confusion.

That night when we explained to the pastor what we would be doing, an awkward silence was followed by a "fine" from the pastor. His wife added quickly to me, "Oh, I wish we had known this earlier, so we could have put your name in the bulletin".

Sunday worship came, and in the opening prayer, the pastor gave thanks for Allen's presence to preach; a long pause followed, and then he added, "and his wife." We preached to two-part sermon, and the service ended with an altar call and the singing of "Soldiers of Christ Arise." Standing by the exit door, we greeted people and enjoyed the warmth of the congregation and some friendly references to members of my family. One man shaking my hand did, "Did you know you were leaning on the Mullino pulpit this morning?" I had not known; my grandparents had donated the pulpit years before.

As I reflect on this moment in time, I meet myself and the church in a new way. I was touched to be asked to preach in the church of my family; *the invitation communicated that I was connected*. My father, not inclined to farming, had left this community almost 60 years ago. My parents and I had visited the west Texas town many times, but this was different. Allen and I were being asked to do what we do, and it was a homecoming. I was keenly aware as I prepared and preached that many generations of human beings and generations of Christians had gone before me, passed on their heritage, opened the doors I had entered, and travelled with me through hard times and good.

The ironic misunderstanding about who was preaching is indeed common for me; my cousin was correct. Just six months ago, I preached at a church in California on a Sunday designated to honor the pastor. My spouse was invited to present a certificate to the pastor. The local newspapers carried the story: "The distinguished Allen Moore, Dean of the School of Theology at Claremont, made a presentation to the pastor; he was accompanied by his lovely wife." These incidents used to anger me; now, they amuse me, but the so-

cial reality that stands under them does not amuse me at all. These nearly trivial events occur to me about once a month in the church and its institutions. *Such events are not themselves a problem; they are signal lights that illuminate the problem of women in the church — women who are ignored, silenced, identified only in relation to men.* For people who have never had such an experience, or who have had one or two and "risen above them", the phenomenon is difficult to communicate in more than a trivial way. For people who have had such experiences again and again, one trivial story is sufficient to illumine the complex social dynamics and all of its debilitating consequences. The message is clear: Women cannot, will not, should not preach; we shall not accept them as leaders. The message that is far more subtle and far more devastating is: We will not block women; we will simply ignore them.

The response of women to such a response by the church is often to fall silent, to self-destruct, to exercise strong (even manipulative) leadership behind the scenes, to doubt themselves, to distrust and compete with other women for the scraps of opportunity, or to choose some dramatic combination of these life-denying options. In the story I have shared, my first impulse was to volunteer silence, saying to my cousin that I would be happy for Allen to preach the entire sermon. Fortunately, my cousin chose not to participate in my voluntary silence, and Allen did not *want* to preach the full sermon. They both empowered me by choosing not to participate in my act of self-destruction. I also empowered myself by not continuing to volunteer silence as I would once have done. I have finally learned (almost learned) to be obnoxiously present when the forces of silence are at work. With the pastor, who probably would have accepted my voluntary silence, I introduced the topic of our shared preaching without apology; happily, my spouse (the presumed authority of the family) told a story that corroborated mine. *I have learned that survival — refusing to be obliterated — is itself a subversive act of liberation.*

But my experience of this summer communicated even more to me about women and the church. The words of the family friend at the door of the church linger still, "Did you know you were leaning on the Mullino pulpit?" I did not grow up in a family of religious leaders. I grew up in a family of farmers, homemakers, accountants, and small merchants. Furthermore, I grew up as a women child in a world where only men children were expected to give religious leadership. I inherited no religious mantles, received no special interest or expectations from the churches of my youth and young adulthood, and had no doors opened for me. In fact, I had to pry open the few doors that I did enter, and walk around others in order to climb in a window. Sud-

dently, on this summer Sunday, *I came to see myself as "leaning on the Mullino pulpit" — inheriting from the ordinary people who did their ordinary part in supporting the church of their community.* Again, for people who do inherit religious mantles or for men who are recognized and nurtured from a young age to give leadership, the power of this discovery is difficult to communicate. It is a power nonetheless — a power that promises to turn the church upside down by recognizing that the heritage of the church is passed down through ordinary acts of ordinary people. A church is not a series of ministers; it is a community of our ancestors — a heritage we can lean on. And the church is a heritage that we *do* lean on, though we often do not recognize it until someone asks, "Did you know you were leaning on the Mullino pulpit?"

One last word should be said about leaning and leaping. As much as I acknowledge the overwhelming power of my ancestors to provide for my leaning, *I acknowledge their equally overwhelming power to provide for my leaping.* The words that Allen and I were moved to proclaim on this summer Sunday were not words my ancestors would have proclaimed, or even condoned. The heritage they passed on was not a blueprint that we were obligated to follow, but a spirit of courage and persistence that emboldened us to leap in response to God's Spirit in that moment. We could speak of friends with AIDS, racial and class conflict, and the oppression of women, partly because our ancestors themselves had followed a Spirit of freedom and hope. But we were also compelled to leap in some new directions because those same ancestors had participated in destructive social forces that now cry out for change.

I have shared this story not as a story of all women or all churches, but as a light to illumine sexist social realities that do affect all women and men and all churches, albeit in many different ways. At the root of this reality is a denial of goodness and a limiting of human life. Such limits are so pervasive in sexist social acts and ideologies that they destroy our ability to perceive goodness at its best. The remainder of this essay will be focused on some particular ways in which the denial and distortion of goodness have undergirded the oppression of women by the church.

This question of human goodness is not just a personal issue for a few individual women. It is a political issue for women around the world, but it takes radically different forms as it is identified with diverse forms of racism; agism, nationalism, heterosexism, and anthropomorphism. The search for a new paradigm is urgent — a paradigm that will reshape views of human existence and the future of the church.

## Sin Reconsidered

Traditionally, the questions of human existence are often framed in terms of sin and goodness. This way of framing is filled with problematics, but one particular aspect of the problematic is addressed here — the limited view of human goodness that is put forth when goodness is defined in contrast to traditional understandings of sin. Although the conception of goodness as the counterpoint to sin may illuminate goodness in significant ways, such an approach cannot give a picture of goodness at its best.

In particular, we will look at traditional formulations of sin in relation to sexuality, power, and chaos. The identification of sin with these powerful dynamics is alarming for women, who have often been victimized by these dominant views. Women have been traditionally valued as virgins and feared as temptresses, they have been valued for humility and longsuffering and feared as wielders of power, and they have been valued as harmonizers within the home and feared as potential disrupters of social order. The traditional modes of identifying sin with sexuality, power, and chaos reinforce the very values and fears that have shaped women's lives, and often their oppression.

### *Sin and Sexuality*

The relation between sin and sexuality is a dominant mark of the Christian tradition, with celibacy seen as a state far superior to marriage. The question for this essay is whether celibacy, abstinence, and sexual control are adequate definitions of goodness at its best, particularly in an era when sexual preference and sexual conduct have functioned as primary criteria for defining the ministry of the church.

According to Paul's letter to the Corinthians, Paul places the higher value on celibacy, but regards marriage as better than burning with passion:

To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion. (1. Cor. 7:8-9, NRSV)

Although Paul's words were directed to a particular community at a particular time and although he and other early Christians expected the world to end at any moment, his words have not always been interpreted in that culture-specific way. In fact, they have been generalized and given a major role in shaping dominant Christian values of sexuality and abstinence.

Tertullian, for example, writing from North Africa in the early third century, appealed to Paul's language and argued that it is better neither to marry nor to burn: "Marriage, forsooth, is better because burning is worse."<sup>5</sup> Tertullian later made a case that marriage inevitably involves lust, so even monogamous marriage is contaminated with the desire for sexual relations, which is the same as fornication.<sup>6</sup> This negative valuing of sexual expression continued through the Patristic Age, during which time much was written in praise of virginity.

Much later in history, Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-1274) argued that, without the fall, intercourse would have existed without carnal desire because the "lower powers" would have been "entirely subject to reason."<sup>7</sup> Thus, Aquinas maintained the commonly accepted disdain for sexual feeling, but permitted the possibility that sexual intercourse itself might have been pure if desjoined from ardent desire.

Biblical texts that were commonly used by the church to support the value of celibacy were also used to describe women as threats to celibacy. One frequently quoted text appears in the Book of Revelation where the author speaks of the one hundred forty thousand who have been redeemed from the earth:

It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They have been re-

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<sup>5</sup> Tertullian, "To His Wife," *Tertullian: Treatises on Marriage and Remarriage*, transl. William P. LeSaint, S.J., S.T.D. (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1956), 13. This treatise (*Ad Uxorem* in Latin) was probably written between 200 and 206 C.E. when Tertullian was about 40-50 years of age and when he was still clearly a Catholic. (8, 5) Marriage, according to his argument here, is not an inherent good, but only comparatively better than burning.

<sup>6</sup> Tertullian, "An Exhortation to Chastity," in *Tertullian: Treatises on Marriage and Remarriage*, 57. This treatise (*De Exhortatione Castitatis* in Latin) was likely written between 204 and 212 C.E. during a time when Tertullian was moving toward the Montanists. (39)

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Vol. I, trans., Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947), Question 98, Article II, 493-494.

Aquinas saw himself in agreement with Augustine on these ideas, both seeing the age of innocence as a time when reason was in control: "Wherefore Augustine says (*De Civ. Dei* xiv.26): 'We must be far from supposing that offspring could not be begotten without concupiscence. All the bodily members would have been equally moved by the will, without ardent or wanton incentive, with calmness of soul and body.'" Aquinas embellished on his own argument by referring to this quote and explaining: "This is what Augustine means by the words quoted, which do not exclude intensity of pleasure from the state of innocence, but ardor of desire and restlessness of the mind." Aquinas imaged the age of innocence, then, as a state in which "fecundity would have been without lust," and he appealed to Augustine in making his case.

deemed from humankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb, and in their mouth no lie was found; they are blameless. (Rev. 14:4-5, NRSV)

In a somewhat more equitable text from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, Paul prescribes appropriate sexual behavior:

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: 'It is well for a man not to touch a woman.' But because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. (I Cor. 7:1-2, NRSV)

If you consider that both of these texts were written during times of threat, one can imagine the fears that may have haunted these authors and their communities. The Book of Revelation was apparently written during a period in which Christians were being persecuted, and internal evidence within Paul's Corinthian letters indicates considerable tension and fragility within the Corinthian Christian community. Both authors chose to stress the impending end of the world, and both placed emphasis on life purified of sexual sin. The haunting question is why women were chosen to represent the dangers facing the community and the threat to sexual prity. The corresponding questions are: What limitations are placed on human goodness by identifying it so narrowly with sexual abstinence and control, and what limitations are placed on the church by identifying the *bene esse* with the absence of sexual expression.

### *Sin and the Will to Power*

The relationship between sin and the will to power is another dominant theological theme — one that has led to extensive warnings against the dangers of power and pride, alongside elaborate praise for the virtues of humility, patience, and servanthood. The essential concern here is that though pride and the will to power can be devastating evils, and though the virtues of humility, patience and servanthood can be profound forms of goodness, these virtues cannot represent goodness at its best.

The history of Christianity abounds with examples of sin equated with power and pride, but two exemplars can represent the point in this brief essay. One eighteenth century Christian leader in England was John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement. Wesley's concern was not to found a denomination, but to renew the depth of Christian experience. With that vision, he engaged in an approach to theology that he called practical divinity, and he maintained a strong sense of the contrast between God's grace and human sinfulness. In making his case, he frequently exhorted against the dangers of human pride,

even the pride of thinking oneself receptive to God's grace. In one such passage, he said:

(H)e that cometh unto God by this faith must fix his eye singly on his own wickedness, on his guilt and helplessness, without having the least regard to any supposed good in himself, to any virtue or righteousness whatsoever. He must come as a *mere sinner*, inwardly and outwardly, self-destroyed and self-condemned, bringing nothing to God but ungodliness only, pleading nothing of his own but sin and misery.<sup>8</sup>

Wesley was persistent in warning against the dangers of claiming too much credit for oneself and, thus, slipping in one's relationship with God.

Frequently, he was explicit about the dangers of pride, as when he warned the professors in the Methodist societies against pride, enthusiasm ("the daughter of pride"), antinomianism (which often proceeds from enthusiasm), sins of omission, and schism.<sup>9</sup> The professors were those people who personally professed entire sanctification, and Wesley worried about their spiritual pride which led them into other dangers or sins. Pride was seen at the root of many evils.

In a similar fashion, the twentieth century U.S. Reformed theologian Reinhold Niebuhr developed a thorough theological exposition on pride as the root of human sin. He made a case, first, that human beings live in a tension between finitude and freedom, and human sin is an effort to escape that tension. People deny finitude through pride and the will to power; they deny freedom through sensuality, losing the self "in some aspect of the world's vitalities."<sup>10</sup> But Niebuhr argued that pride is actually more basic than sensuality; in fact, pride, or what Paul describes as self-glorification, can be said to give rise to sensua-

<sup>8</sup> John Wesley, "Justification by Faith," in *John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 208 (first appearing in print in 1746); cf: Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. XI (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1971), 366, 439; Wesley, "Advice to an Englishman," *Works*, vol. XI, 185-186.

<sup>9</sup> John Wesley, "Cautions and Directions Given to the Greatest Professors in the Methodist Societies," in *John Wesley*, 298-305. According to Albert Outler, these cautions were first printed "to cope with both a false doctrine (i.e., 'sinless' perfection) and a false temper (i.e., self-righteousness)." (299) The content was later abridged and woven into *Farther Thoughts on Christian Perfection* and, later, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. Wesley opened the original pamphlet with this "first advice": "Watch and pray continually against *pride*, against every kind and degree of it. If God has cast it out, see that it enter no more. It is full as dangerous as desire. And you may slide back into it unawares, especially if you think you are in no danger of it." (299)

<sup>10</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. I (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964, 1941), 178-179.

lity.<sup>11</sup> Niebuhr proceeded to describe three kinds of pride: pride of power, pride of knowledge, and pride of virtue, and he sought "to relate the Biblical and distinctively Christian conception of sin as pride and self-love to the observable behaviour of men (sic)."<sup>12</sup>

Niebuhr's analysis is based on an assumption that people suffer from too much pride and self-love, rather than too little. This assumption is questionable when viewed from the perspective of women, for whom the sense of inadequacy and self-hatred is often overwhelming. Valerie Saiving and Sue Nelson Dunfee have both critiqued Niebuhr's view, arguing that women are more likely to suffer from too little pride and self-love and are more likely to participate in what Dunfee calls the sin of hiding than the sin of pride.<sup>13</sup>

Niebuhr's analysis of the sin of pride has another fatal flaw from a feminist perspective, and that is his distinction between individual and corporate sin. In acknowledging corporate sin, he opens the way for a thoroughgoing analysis of the evil in social structures, but his view has another effect as well. According to Niebuhr, sin is not only found in individual persons, but it is actually escalated in the form of group pride, creating a tension between individual and group morality.<sup>14</sup> According to Niebuhr, "The group is more arrogant, hypocritical, self-centred and more ruthless in the pursuit of its ends than the individual."<sup>15</sup> Not only is the group the bearer of evil, then, but it is almost never the bearer of good. Herein lies a problem, especially for women whose women's communities are a primary source of life, and often far more trustworthy than what has been handed to them as biblical or distinctive Christian teaching (the authorities to which Niebuhr most often appeals.) Herein also lies a problem for the institutional church. Is the church to exist only as a support for individuals in their potential goodness of the church body itself and of the whole creation within

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>13</sup> Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 25-42; and Sue Nelson Dunfee, *Beyond Servanthood: Christianity and the Liberation of Women* (Lanham, MD.: University Press of America, 1989), esp. pp. 105-130. Dunfee is now exploring the reality that women - especially women of color - sometimes use hiding as a way of survival, but the attention of this earlier book is directed to the use of hiding as an escape from full selfhood rather than as a chosen strategy within an oppressive social milieu.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 208-209; cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960, 11932).

<sup>15</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. I, 208.

which it lives? If the latter, then the critique and reformation of the church body is urgent.

The association of the will to power with pride, and the association of both with sensuality is quite common in the Christian tradition, and women are the losers in both cases. They are often the people of the society whose power and sensuality are most feared, and they are often the people expected to carry forth the values of humility and sexual purity. Because women have traditionally had little public power or sense of personal power (pride), repudiating the will to power as a sin undercuts women's efforts to claim or assert power in the public realm and encourages women to deny their social and personal power altogether, as when I volunteered in the case not to preach. Because women have been traditionally associated with sexual desire (which is to be overcome), repudiating sexual expression as sin has been a way to cast dispersions on women's worth, to define clear boundaries around the women's proper place (e.g., in the home), and to close women out of male circles of leadership and influence.

### *Sin and Chaos*

Another traditional understanding of sin is also not very complimentary to women, and that is the identification of sin with chaos and the corresponding association in certain times and places, but it cannot represent goodness at its best, especially when order is so often used as an excuse not to ordain women or not to allow them to take certain roles in the church.

In Christian tradition, sin and evil have often been associated with chaos and uncontrolled nature, which need to be ordered and brought into control. Since women are commonly associated with chaos and nature, as are the men of some racial/ethnic communities, they too are identified as forces to be controlled. Susan Griffin makes a strong case for the common linkage in intellectual and religious traditions among eros, nature and women, and the common concern that all of these need to be controlled.<sup>16</sup>

Griffin argues that the fear of nature and natural forces is expressed in the metaphysical division of matter and spirit which is the foundation of Christianity and, also, of pornography. The strong Christian teachings against natural beauty, pleasure and sexual expression reinforce

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<sup>16</sup> Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 8-14; cf: Griffin, *Women and Nature* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

this mind-body split, as well as the urgency of control. Ironically, ascetic tendencies in Christianity contribute to the rebellion that is expressed in pornography but, in actuality, pornography actually reflects the same metaphysics as Christianity.

Griffin concludes, "For all the old shapes of religious asceticism are echoed in obscenity. And every theme, every attitude, every shade of pornographic feeling has its origin in the church."<sup>17</sup>

Griffin further recognizes the common distinction between culture and nature and the characteristic purpose of culture to control nature, hence, her subtitle "Culture's Revenge Against Nature." She makes the case that human control over nature corresponds with, and reinforces, male control over women. She says, for example,

The idea that the sight of a woman's body calls a man back to his own animal nature, and that this animal nature soon destroys him, reverberates throughout culture. We find it in the most ancient sources. In the Biblical story or creation, we discover Eve, who has spoken with a serpent, seducing Adam into eating an apple, the forbidden fruit of knowledge. Through this seduction, the commentators tell us, 'Eve brought death into the world.'<sup>18</sup>

The reaction to such reminders of animal nature is cultural control, which finally culminates in the objectification of women. The objectifying of women is seen in various forms of pornography, such as the striptease in which women's body is revealed as "flesh under culture's control."<sup>19</sup>

One can identify many further examples of the tendency to value control over nature, such as Christian interpretations of God's command for people to have "dominion" over nature (Gen. 1:28), or the preaching of Christian missionaries to encourage indigenous peoples to exert control over their traditional lifestyles (lifestyles that are often closely attuned with nature), or the emphasis in spiritual disciplines on self-control.

All of the contrasting of control and nature — order and chaos — is problematic for women because women have traditionally lived in the most chaotic realms of life — rearing children who are unpredictable, cleaning houses that get dirty again, working as secretaries and office administrators where everything happens at once, and so forth. Furthermore, in most of these settings, men are traditionally valued as the

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<sup>17</sup> Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, 16; cf: 14-16.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 33; cf: 31-46.

authorities, or they hold the formal positions of executive power. From a feminist point of view, chaos needs to be revalued, and goodness as order needs to be reconceived.

In concluding this reconsideration of sin, we can make claims about sin that turn some traditional formulations inside out. We can say that sin is *refusing to receive the gifts and blessings that we are given*, including our sexuality and power. Further, sin is *denying or thwarting chaos and creativity*, or refusing to make decisions in the midst of chaos, thus avoiding change in ourselves and our institutions. Sin, then, can be described in the traditional language of *missing the mark*—not being fully what we are created to be. As such, sin is a *way of being in the world that destroys or denies life*, and it includes participating in social structures and social movements that destroy or deny life. In all of these descriptions or definitions, sin is *alienation from God and the world*—a moving *against* relationship rather than a participation in relationship that is life-sustaining.

When these understandings of sin are related to the church, we are faced with the community called church will refuse to receive the gifts and blessings that we are given—denying sexuality and power, denying beauty, denying the possibilities of contributing to the repair of the world (the Hebrew vision of *tikkun olam*).

Further, the church will seek to deny or thwart chaos and creativity, a dynamic well revealed by the way the church often closes out children on the one hand and controversy on the other. One church near us will not allow children under twelve in worship because they disrupt the videotaping. John Hull (of England) recognizes that more individualistic churches often find children a distraction in worship because they disrupt individuals in their private communion with God.<sup>20</sup> The difficulty that the contemporary church has with controversy is also well documented in the stories of parishes and congregations, and in the centrist tendencies of denominations and global churches that seek to control the beliefs and actions of their various branches. In all of these ways, the church does miss the mark, and it contributes, as in the case study, to destroying or denying the life of women. What is denied ultimately is the community's relationship with God and its participation in the work of God.

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<sup>20</sup> John Hull, *What Privents Christian Adults from Learning* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 17-18.

## Goodness reconsidered

In light of this journey into sin, the possibility that goodness is the antithesis of sin is limiting, especially if the definitions of sin are limited in the ways described above. On the other hand, these traditional forms of defining sin may touch on forms of human energy that potentially embody human fullness as much they embody sin. Perhaps, this human energy points to goodness at its best.

## GOODNESS AS SENSUAL RELATING WITH THE UNIVERSE

Rather than conceiving human goodness as abstinence from sensual or sexual relationships, *goodness at its best can be described as sensual relating with the universe*. to relate sensually with the universe is to feel the tenderness and joy and hurt and outrage that relationships bring. It is *to be attuned with the rhythms of one's body, with rhythms of earth, with the rhythms and movements of other people and other beings*.

Perhaps this is a conceptual leap that comes more naturally for women than for men. As Catharina J. M. Halkes has said:

Women experience their body differently from men. They are more familiar with it, even if only through their experience of their body's cyclical behavior; but also from bearing and nursing children. . . . Men are more ambivalent with regard to their bodies. . . . The integration of body and spirit/soul seems very difficult for them.<sup>21</sup>

For women to conceive of goodness in terms of sensual relationships is an affirmation of body-awareness. The cycles of a women's body cease to be a curse distracting from normal social interchange; the cycles become a gift contributing to attunement, even attunement to pain and heightened physical and emotional sensitivity. Sensual relating is heightened.

The conceptual leap toward valuing sensual relationships may also be larger for women and men standing within the Reformed tradition than for those standing in more sacramental traditions such as Roman Catholicism.

Again, Halkes<sup>22</sup> is helpful:

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<sup>21</sup> Catharina J. M. Halkes, *New Creation: Christian Feminism and the Renewal of the Earth* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox 1991, 1989), 148.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 78; Halkes develops this case and also cites: M. E. Brinkman, *Het Leven Als Tekenen* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1986), 8.

In contrast with Roman Catholic theology, which saw in nature and in the earthly reality references to God's immanence, and which preserved and respected the earthly, material reality in its sacraments, Reformed theology always trembles before nature and symbols of nature, as before a dangerous fascination which could adopt a demonic shape.

Halkes further develops the idea that the separation of nature and history is a unique Reformation's emphasis, giving evidence in Rudolph Bultmann, Gerhard von Rad and others.<sup>23</sup> Halkes represents a critical voice within the Christian tradition whose diagnosis is remarkably similar to Susan Griffin's in regard to the destructive tendencies in dichotomizing culture and nature, in elevating culture above nature, and men above women.

Sensual relating with the universe may represent goodness at its best, but it does not necessarily represent pleasure at every turning. Sensuality involves pain as well as joy—the full range of human experience and feeling. In her poem, "I Give You Back," Joy Harjo, member of the Creek tribe, proclaims that she releases her fear for the sake of fuller living, even in the face of enormous anger and pain. She says,

I give you (my fear) back to the white soldiers  
who burned down my home, beheaded my children,  
raped and sodomized my brothers and sisters.  
I give you back to those who stole the  
food from our plates when we were starving.<sup>24</sup>

In giving back her fear, Harjo claims her openness to whatever sensual experience will come:

I am not afraid to be angry.  
I am not afraid to rejoice...  
I am not afraid to be hated.  
I am not afraid to be loved.<sup>25</sup>

This openness described by Joy Harjo requires discarding fear, but not denying that which is fearful. Here is not a naive openness, but an act of courage — courage to live fully in spite of the oppressive forces that abound.

For the church of the future to be so open to sensuality is to appreciate the sensuality of the sacraments (the bread and wine and water), the sensuality of human interactions within the community (the right hand of fellowship, the kiss of peace, the common meal), and the pre-

<sup>23</sup> Halkes, 78-80.

<sup>24</sup> Joy Harjo, "I Give You Back," in *Making Face, Making Soul*, ed., Gloria Anzaldua (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation Book, 1990), 151.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

sence of God within these sensual experiences. The kiss of peace, for example, is a sharing of the breath, or Spirit, of God.

Further if the church of the future is to be open to sensuality, it will have to *feel* — to feel joy and pain, peace and anger, hunger and fullness. The fear of sensual sharing and wrenching emotions represents the church's fear of knowing the world in its fullness and facing the questions that the world puts before us. The very traumas of religious-cultural-political wars in Bosnia, Northern Ireland, Israel and beyond are exacerbated by a denial of full sensual experience the unknown and the depths of fear that hide within us. The work of practical theology will be to reflect on these feelings and to propose structures and actions that enable the church to feel and to respond to the world.

### *Goodness as Power in Relationship*

The dangers in the sin of pride or the will to power are dangers inherent in power that is used to destroy or abuse relationships. If goodness is defined in terms of avoiding such destructive wielding of power, we have a very limited understanding of goodness indeed. What if we understand power as an energy of the universe, and hence, a natural human energy? *Goodness at its best, then, is a participation in the natural power that fills creation.* The challenge is to distinguish power that contributes to life from power that contributes to death — the power that nurtures whole relationships from that which destroys them.

One important perspective on power comes from Carter Heyward, who describes God as "power in relation." She grounds her theology in these basic assumptions:

... That the experience of relation is fundamental and constitutive of human being; that it is good and powerful; and that it is only within this experience — as it is happening here and now — that we may realize *that the power in relation is God.*<sup>26</sup>

In God we relate powerfully with the whole of creation, and the relationship with God is one that demands of us the exercise of power. The work of God is done in relation to our human work, and God's redemptive activity requires our participation. Heyward says, "We co-operate with each other and with God in a process of mutual redemption — that is, in the deliverance of both God and humanity from

<sup>26</sup> Isabel Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relations* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1982), 1-2.

evil."<sup>27</sup> Heyward adds that the work of Jesus is to reveal the power of justice and right relation, for he "can help us see the power, love the power, claim the power, use the power."<sup>28</sup>

Considering our world in which some countries and cultures are oppressed by the abusive or negligent use of power by other countries and cultures, we cannot deny the reality of Niebuhr's warnings. On the other hand, considering that same world in which many peoples are oppressed because their power is denied and where human bodies and the natural world are oppressed because they are defined negatively (in need of control), we cannot deny the hope in Heyward's vision that people will seek to participate fully in power in relation.

The challenge of goodness at its best is not for the church to deny or hide power, nor to suppress pride, but to support relational power and pride. The challenge is to create structures and processes that invite people into full participation. This is very different from working to maintain present structures or to place a few people into key positions as tokens. This is a mission of inclusiveness that demands full sharing of power and responsibility, as well as full representation in all aspects of the church's life by gender, race, age, class, culture, and sexual preference. Imagine a church where people are encouraged to give of themselves through their unique charisms — their unique gifts and interests; imagine a church where the whole body witnesses to the Spirit of God in the world.<sup>29</sup> Such a view does not eliminate the hierarchy of the church, but recognizes that its distinctive role is integration — leading the whole body, with the fullness of its diverse gifts, toward unity.<sup>30</sup>

The further challenge for the church is to develop the ability to discern goodness at its best — to discern the extent to which power and pride contribute to life — the life of the individual, the community, the society, the whole earth. The heart of goodness, and the guide for des-

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 2. In explaining the human vocation, she says, "Simply because we are human, we are able to be co-creative agents of redemption. Our vocation is to take seriously the creative character of who we are—both in relation to one another (humanity) and to the power of relation itself (God)." (2)

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>29</sup> This proposal is very similar to Leonardo Boff's model of the Church as Sacrament of the Holy Spirit; he envisions the church community as structured by charism—the charisms given by God to every person for the sake of building up the whole of the community. Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power* (New York: Crossroad Press, 1988), 144-164.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 163-164. Boff calls this the charism of unity, which is "responsible for harmony among the many and diverse charisms." (163)

cerning goodness, is to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28; cf: Matthew 22:34-40; Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Leviticus 19:18). In such loving, we do not avoid power, but we participate fully in the power of God's love.

### *Goodness as Integrity*

Rather than describe human goodness as escape from chaos, *goodness at its best can be described as integrity — a wholeness in which the many experiences of God and the world are woven into a full fabric in human life.* Integrity is *not* denying differences or always living peacefully and harmoniously, especially not living in a trivial harmony that subjugates the less powerful to the more powerful. Likewise, integrity is not avoiding the realities of conflict, and it is not taming chaos.

*Integrity is allowing, celebrating, and coming to deep appreciation of differences.* To live with integrity is to accept and live in relationship with difference — the differences that exist between God and the world, between human beings and the rest of creation, among peoples of diverse cultures and life situations, and even within individual people.

In the future of the church, integrity will require an understanding and appreciation of difference. The danger that one social group will abuse another is real, however, and the discussion of this danger is more developed by feminists-of-color. Gloria Anzaldua makes her case strongly when she describes how white feminists often deny racial difference and thereby deny the unique reality of feminists-of-color:

'Diversity' and 'difference' are vague, ambiguous terms, defined differently by whitefeminists and feminists-of-color. Often whitefeminists want to minimize racial difference by taking comfort in the fact that we are all women and/or lesbians and suffer similar sexual-gender oppressions. They are usually annoyed with the actuality (though not the concept) of 'difference,' want to blur racial difference, want to smooth things out—they seem to want a complete, totalizing identity.<sup>31</sup>

Such an effort to totalize or absorb the identity of others is not integrity, but domination. If the future of the church is to be integrous, we will need to learn new ways to be multicultural and diverse — ways that are neither condescending nor dominating, but ways in which we

<sup>31</sup> Anzaldua, "Introduction," *Making Face, Making Soul*, xxi.

live toward what Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza calls a "discipleship of equals" and what Letty Russell calls a "household of freedom."<sup>32</sup>

*Integrity is allowing disharmony to open issues for the sake of a more significant, inclusive harmony.* Nelle Morton, for example, was quite happy to stir discomfort with divine images such as Mother or Goddess in order to shatter the limited and destructive patriarchal images of God and to introduce people into a fuller, more liberating reality.<sup>33</sup> In public speeches, Morton often argued that iconoclasm is sometimes the only way to shatter oppressive images, a lesson she learned from James Cone who insisted in saying that "God is black." She observed that Cone could not have opened people to liberating images by the more innocuous "God is both black and white."

This suggests, also, that *integrity is allowing, even stirring, conflict in order to deal with significant issues.* Conflict that confronts us with significant issues is a blessing. Conflict is only dangerous when it is used to avoid significant issues or when it is ignored and people refuse to deal with the realities that it brings to the surface. For the church of the future to live constructively with conflict is a challenge indeed, but a challenge that encourages the church to face into pain and discord for the sake of a more just and loving reconciliation.

Thus, *integrity is also allowing chaos to brood (even when it is threatening) so that it may give birth to something new.* Chaos can be creative and regenerative — a very natural part of human existence. In fact, Victor Turner observes that the rhythm between social structure and *communitas* (characterized by more direct and immediate relationships) is a natural rhythm of human communities.<sup>34</sup> Integrity is living with these natural rhythms, however uncomfortable they may sometimes be. Integrity is allowing our churches of the future to move

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<sup>32</sup> Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals* (New York: Crossroad Press, 1993); and Letty M. Russell, *Household of Freedom* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), esp. 25-28.

<sup>33</sup> Nelle Morton, *The Journey is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 145, cf. 122-146. Morton says, "I do not argue for the use of *God the Mother* or a return to the *Goddess*, except for iconoclastic purposes. It may be the only way to shatter the old male god image and return a patriarchal culture to the *Goddess* along with the restoration and public expression of worthy self-images of women. . . I believe the *Goddess* could ultimately become the same kind of idol the male god has become. But in a sexist culture and sexist religion the option for the *Goddess* may be the only, the only sane, redemptive move." (145)

<sup>34</sup> Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1969), 119-154.

through history and to shift between structure and *communitas* as the needs of the church and world change.

In this feminists view of goodness as integrity, sin and evil are not identified with disorder and chaos or with finitude. Sin is the attempt to eliminate creative chaos or deny finitude. Sin is closing out the influences within us and around us, or refusing to make decisions, thus, ignoring chaos or seeking escape from its creativity. Goodness has to do with receiving and integrating the moments of chaos into a new fabric — a fabric that by the grace of God may be more filled with goodness than the one that went before.

## Conclusions

In launching this address with issues facing the church in Bosnia, Northern Ireland, Israel, and Los Angeles, I named only a few realities that face the church as the church faces the world. The inability of the church to address racism within its structures and in the world, the inability of Christians to make peace with peoples of other cultures and religious traditions, the inability of the Christian church to embrace fully gay and lesbian persons, and the inability of the church to resolve conflicts without the violence of combat are testimonies to the crying need for practical theology — theology done by and for those who live in the midst of these realities.

In further launching this address with a personal case study, I acknowledged some contradictory affirmations that emerged from one particular moment of praxis: An experience of being connected, alongside the experience of being rejected; an awareness of the power of women to self-destruct in the face of rejection, alongside awareness of the subversive power of women when they do survive against the odds; an experience of inheriting from ordinary people rather than theological or pastoral giants; and an experience of our Christian heritage as simultaneously comforting (good for leaning) and disruptive (a goad for leaping into issues that our ancestors would have never imagined or accepted as Christian).

The personal anguish of women living with the church and envisioning its future is more than the anguish of a few overly sensitive women. It is a reality of the institutional church and all of its institutions — institutions where glass ceilings still exist for women and people of color; institutions where, from the simplest rural church to the most sophisticated theological guild or seminary, women are still ignored, denied, and silenced; and institutions in which the very theories of human

existence (including theories of sin and goodness) reinforce the oppression.

So what of the future of the church? Perhaps the anguish of women is itself a gift. Whether women are inside or outside the church, contented or angry, they raise contradictions as they live day by day. Their lives are so embroiled in controversy that traditional formulations of sin and goodness are hopelessly tainted, and we have no good choice but to re-form those formulations and re-form the church. We have no choice but to hope for and work toward *tikkun olam* (the repair of the world); the very brokenness of the earth, the brokenness of our human community, the brokenness of the church cry out for liberation and wholeness. If practical theology cannot contribute to the repair of the world, then we do not need practical theology.