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# **Reconsidering Ecclesiology: Feminist Perspectives**

**Natalie Knödel**

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Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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**ABSTRACT**

The predominant model in feminist theologians' critique of theology and praxis of the church has been that of women-church based on the concept of base ecclesial communities developed by liberation theology. The first part of this thesis challenges the women-church model by arguing that even though women-church asserts that women are church, its shortcomings lie in its lack of use of the ecclesiological tradition as well as its unawareness of the dimension of gender for ecclesiology. A feminist reader-response critique of four traditional ecclesiologies shows that women have so far not participated in the process of writing ecclesiology, but that women need to reclaim the ecclesiological tradition because they participate in the church.

An analysis of the use of liberation theology for feminist ecclesiology demonstrates that the ecclesiology of liberation theology, even though it points out that the reality of human beings being church shapes the theology of the church, remains unaware of the dimension of sexual difference.

Chapter five discusses 'gendered ecclesiology' as pointing to the importance of sexuality for the rewriting of ecclesiology. In order to write an ecclesiology conscious of the fact that the church consists of sexuate human beings feminists need to reclaim the communion of saints, Mariology and most importantly the relationship between Christ and the church.

Chapter six concludes that feminist theologians are not to develop one particular ecclesiological model as the most apt one, but to redefine the ecclesiological debate from the perspective of women being church. In order to do that it is necessary to reclaim the power centres of patriarchal ecclesiological discourse: sacramental celebration, the word of God and the presence of Christ. The church as the community that embodies the body of Christ becomes the space where the stories of women's lives tell and perform the story of Christ.

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## **Declaration**

I confirm that no part of this thesis has been submitted for a degree in this or any other university. I also confirm that the thesis conforms to the word limit set out in the Degree Regulations.

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## Chapter 1

### **Introduction: For the first time in history? From women-church to feminist ecclesiology**

#### **1.0 Introduction**

Feminist theologians who discuss the topic of ecclesiology, the theological reflection of the church on its own being, can approach their critical endeavour from two perspectives which are both equally relevant. On the one hand, as the work of post-Christian theologians and philosophers shows most explicitly, the church has been site and instrument of women's oppression and the patriarchal abuse of power which feminism so avidly opposes. On the other hand, however, historical inquiry shows that to focus on this alone would mean omitting the lives of numerous women through the history of the church from its beginning who created their own, women's, spaces within the church and thereby made it the site and the means of the liberation feminists advocate. In the words of the women-church movement: 'Women are church and have always been church.'

It is this fundamental ambivalence which provokes my task of writing a feminist ecclesiology in a critical and yet a constructive way which needs to be done by means of critical feminist dialogue between a theologian and an historian. Therefore, the following thesis seeks to map out the task of writing a feminist ecclesiology done as the work of a theologian, but uses the framework of women's church history as the expression of women being church and having been church throughout its existence. The work of the church historian may then in turn sustain the reconsideration of ecclesiology as the theologian seeks to speak about a church embodying the body of Christ in the lives of men and women. Thus, the argument of the thesis oscillates between the work of an historian and more essentially that of a theologian, and, as I hope to show cannot be done

without the critical and constructive impact of both. The discussion begins and ends with the voice of the historian, while the main body of the argument is that of the theologian. To set the framework for my theological inquiry, I will begin my argument with a short history of the women-church movement, the movement in the recent history of the Roman Catholic church which has most explicitly challenged the patriarchal and hierarchical structures of the church from which women have so far largely been excluded by theology and canon law. The purpose of this outline, however, is theological rather than historical<sup>1</sup> or sociological<sup>2</sup>.

### 1.1 Outline of the Argument of the Thesis

The argument in this thesis takes place in critical dialogue with both the history and theology of women-church, the first and most important expression of 'feminist ecclesiology' and the Christian ecclesiological tradition. In the remainder of this first chapter I have outlined briefly the history of the women-church movement. In chapter two I will discuss the work of two feminist theologians whose theological work reflects the life and theology of women-church. Women-church understands itself mainly as a movement within the Roman Catholic church, but my a discussion of feminist ecclesiology also evaluates the work of feminist authors within Reformed traditions. In

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<sup>1</sup>For studies on the history of the women-church movement see for example Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Women-Church: An American Catholic Feminist Movement' unpublished paper (I am grateful to the author for making this paper available to me.); Jutta Flatters, 'Zur Frauenkirchenbewegung in den USA' Schlangenbrut 28 (1990), 20-27; Mary Jo Weaver, New Catholic Women. A Contemporary Challenge to Traditional Religious Authority (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 109-144.

<sup>2</sup>For a sociological approach to the women-church movement see Tracy Memoree Thibodeau's doctoral work in progress at Southern Illinois University/Carbondale, Illinois as well as Kathleen Mc Phillips, 'Feminism, Religion and Modernity', PhD thesis, University of Newcastle, New South Wales.

addition to my discussion of the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether, I will therefore discuss ecclesiologies in the work of Letty Russell and Rebecca Chopp in order to show that there are in fact common issues emerging from the work of all four theologians who represent feminist ecclesiological reflections so far. As my critical analysis of the work of feminist theologians of both Roman Catholic and Protestant backgrounds will show, the authors on the one hand reflect the particular contexts and issues raised in their respective denominations, but at the same time my analysis shows two obvious areas not addressed. These are: the lack of critical engagement with the written ecclesiological sources of their traditions and the fact that questions of ecclesiology and sexuality are overlooked and ignored.

These issues are discussed in the main part of the thesis. In chapter three I provide a feminist reader-response analysis of four case studies of prominent ecclesiologies in this century. I argue that women have not participated in the process of ecclesiological self-reflection either as authors nor as anticipated readers. The four examples discussed show that ecclesiologies have been written with the assumption of a gender neutral male subject, but have at the same time been ridden with strongly gendered concepts which have been used to put and keep women in a subordinate position. The feminist reader response method which I use to challenge this double thesis, however, shows that it is in fact possible to re-read the ecclesiologies discussed in ways which do express women's being church. Given that one of the main theological contentions of the 1980s and 1990s has been to gain a more global vision of theology which includes a conscious moving away from Euro-centric theological reflection, the choice of four white European, mainly German, ecclesiological sources demands justification. My choice of 'Lumen Gentium', Karl Barth, Paul Tillich and Jürgen Moltmann reflects my evaluation of these four ecclesiologies as contextual and contingent sources which need to be read and re-read not as expressions of a universally valid way of doing theology, but as theology and ecclesiology in the context in which this thesis has been written, my own theological

education in the Universities of Tübingen and Durham. Contextual theology in a global context begins by becoming aware of one's own particularity and seeks to bring this particular context into dialogue with other contexts. It is one of the aims of this thesis to develop a platform on which such a dialogue is possible. While with regard to theology in a wider sense the gaining of a more global perspective has been an important development, feminist theologians in Europe are only slowly moving away from the dominance of North American feminist theology and are beginning to develop feminist theologies in a European context which on the one hand unearth the contextuality and contingency of North American feminist theologies in the 1980s and on the other hand embrace their own contextuality and the necessity of re-evaluating their own theological traditions. It is to this development that this thesis seeks to contribute.

In chapter four I investigate whether the use feminist theologians of the 1980s have made of the theological paradigms of liberation theology has managed to solve the question of finding an ecclesiology that expresses that women are church and have always been church. I argue that liberation theology itself is an androcentric theological paradigm which has only latterly engaged with the issues of women and its use by feminist theologians has been a re-reading not unlike what I have proposed in chapter three. The significance of liberation theology as a theological paradigm is that it has pointed out the importance of those who are church, be it 'the poor' or women, for defining what the church is. Yet, its obvious omission lies in the fact that it did not provide the means to discuss the fact that this being church takes place in a framework of sexual difference which influences and transforms any theological discussion of what the church is.

I then return to the critical dialogue with the Christian tradition, and in chapter five I address the one aspect of the ecclesiological tradition which has been most often used to legitimate a social symbolic order in which a woman's position is that of the church-bride submissive to her male husband who represents Christ. After a deconstruction of the use of this most gender-ridden concept, I provide a feminist reconstruction of gendered

ecclesiology as in fact pointing to the reality of a sexuate ecclesiology, an ecclesiology which understands the church as the body of Christ embodied in the particular sexuate bodies of women and men. I argue that a feminist ecclesiology needs to break the binary of the male Christ and the feminine church by claiming women's presence and representation on both sides of the binary. This results in an ecclesiology which celebrates sexual difference in all its expressions such as liturgy, spirituality, art and theology. It is an ecclesiology that is no longer constructed on the basis of a male/female dichotomy, but a church that embodies the incarnation in its wholeness.

The concluding chapter six seeks to summarise the results of my study and to put them in the context of a continuing task. It describes feminist ecclesiology as a process of reclaiming the power centres of patriarchal ecclesiology, the Word of God, sacramental celebration and the relationship between Christology and ecclesiology. I then seek to reevaluate the relationship between feminist critical ecclesiologies and the churches as such by contrasting Mary Daly's concept of 'sisterhood as anti-church' with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's feminist reconstruction of Christian origins. I conclude that feminist ecclesiology has to provide a framework which is much more flexible. Such a framework, I argue, can be found in a narrative feminist ecclesiology which reconstructs the feminist ecclesiological task as that of a dialogue between feminist theology and women's church history.

The task of writing a feminist ecclesiology is one of deconstruction, reconstruction and constructive theological creativity. I understand what follows not as the presentation of one normative model of the one and only possible feminist ecclesiology, but as one possible model which has the theological potential of constructing many others, the realisation of the one body of Christ celebrated in a multiplicity of men's and women's bodies through their sacramental encounter with each other and in doing that with Christ incarnate.

## 1.2 Setting the Scene: Women-Church

The question of the nature of the church and its own theological reflection on itself, can be acknowledged as being one of the most central aspects of Christian theology. Yet, the problem mentioned just above continues, not surprisingly, when it comes to the church reflecting on its own being. This does not mean that women themselves have not reflected on the nature of the church. To the contrary, the situation of women in the church, considered in the light of the disappointment with renewal movements within the church and the influence of the women's movement outside the church, can be seen as the main factors that led to the beginning of what is now known as feminist theology. A thesis that reflects the possibilities of both a feminist theological critique and possibilities of rewriting ecclesiology from a feminist perspective therefore naturally takes its starting point from the approaches of women and Christian feminists to the church as the site of women's experiences of community, spirituality and relationships divine and human.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza distinguishes essentially two different approaches to the concept of women-church. First, there is that of ecclesial base communities, feminist liturgical base communities, rooted in the methodological alliance between feminist-theology and liberation theology, which is most prominently used by the North American authors studied and evaluated in this chapter. Second, there is that of women-church as 'synod' which finds more implementation in the emerging feminist liberation theology in

a European context.<sup>3</sup> Women-church as a political movement and a theological concept first occurred in the United States and can be understood as a phenomenon which reflects the particular culture in which it was developed.<sup>4</sup> Women-church movements, quite distinct from the North American one, exist in other cultural contexts such as Australia<sup>5</sup>, Europe<sup>6</sup> or Asia<sup>7</sup>. In this thesis, however, I will concentrate on the theology and life of women-church in the North American context from which my sources originate.

Members of women-church claim that while there have been numerous church councils throughout the history of the church, none of them can be understood as fully representing the ekklesia as the assembly that represents those who are church, as women have always been denied presence in it or even representation by it. Yet, at the heart of the women-church movement and at the same time perhaps its only common denominator is the statement that women are church and have always been church<sup>8</sup>. We can thus say

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<sup>3</sup>See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Discipleship of Equals. A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation (London: SCM, 1993), 325. On women-church as synod see Michaela Moser, 'Working on Creating Space for Each Other: Towards the First European Women's Synod' Women Churches. Networking and Reflection in the European Context. Eds. Julie Hopkins Angela Berlis, Hedwig Meyer-Wilmes and Caroline Vander Stichele Yearbook of the European Society of Women in Theological Research Vol. 3 (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995) 100-105 and Lieve Troch, 'The Feminist Movement in the Churches in the Netherlands' Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 5 (1989), 113-128 as well as Frauen und Macht. Dokumentation der Ersten Deutschen Frauensynode (Frankfurt: Spener Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1994). For a detailed analysis of the diversity of movements for which the term 'women-church' is used, see Kathleen McPhillips, Feminism, Religion and Modernity, Chapter 2 'Theorising Women's Religious Agency'.

<sup>4</sup>Ruether, 'Women-Church: An American Catholic Feminist Movement', 1.

<sup>5</sup>Erin White, 'Women Together: Women-Church' Knowing Otherwise. Feminism, Women and Religion. Ed. Erin White and Marie Tulip (Melbourne: Lovell Publishing, 1991), 134-161.

<sup>6</sup>See note 3.

<sup>7</sup>Christine Tse, 'New Ways of Being Church: A Roman Catholic View' We Dare to Dream. Doing Theology as Asian Women Ed. Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 33-43.

<sup>8</sup>Fiorenza, Discipleship, 234.

that this being church which women claim is practised and celebrated in the lives of the different groups is simply not discussed by and reflected on in the work of academic or ecclesial theologians.

The term 'women-church' or 'ekklesia of women' is an oxymoron that 'indicates that ekklesia will become historical reality only when women are fully incorporated into it.'<sup>9</sup> Women-church is therefore not an exclusive term with regard to men, but rather seeks to make conscious the reality of women's exclusion from ecclesial processes of decision making. Fiorenza for example understands women-church as the movement of self-identified women and men who identify with women's struggles. Using a term like women-church rather means that the traditional, patriarchal church can no longer claim to be the sole representation of church, let alone to be a realisation of the dynamic reality of the ekklesia. A conference that took place in November 1983 in Chicago, entitled 'From Generation to Generation: Woman-Church Speaks', understood itself as the first occasion in history in which women publicly and collectively claimed that they were church and sought publicly recognised participation and dialogue with the official church as well as attention to their concerns and issues.

It is necessary to distinguish between the Women-Church Convergence, a particular network of organisations founded after the 1983 women-church conference in

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<sup>9</sup>Fiorenza, Discipleship, 196.

Chicago<sup>10</sup>, and the movement as such, which is much wider than this particular network.<sup>11</sup> The Convergence represents such a large variety of groups with different concerns, each of which maintains its particular identity, that it would be impossible and not reflecting the nature of the groups represented to claim any structures of a large-scale ecclesial character. The Women-Church Convergence understands itself not as an authoritative organisation, but rather as a support network of local groups which affirms the values of women-church, equal rights, social justice and mutuality. Groups involved range from small local women-church groups to large national organisations. The members are committed to issues such as women being free moral agents, especially with regard to issues concerning reproductive rights, sexuality and women's health. They are also committed to women being full agents in the life of the church whose contribution to ministry, justice work and sacramental life is essential for the life of the church. Primary goals of the work of the coalition are the equal distribution of resources, the elimination

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<sup>10</sup>Members of Women-Church Convergence as of October 1995 are: 8th Day Centre for Justice, Boston Women-Church, BVM Network for Women's Issues, Catholics for a Free Choice, Chicago Catholic Women, Chicago Women Church, Community of the Anawim/Denver, Conference of Catholic Lesbians, Dignity/USA: Committee for Women's Concerns, Feminist Interest Group, SSF, Feminist Network of SFCC, Grail Women Task Force, Geater Cincinatti Women-Church, Intercommunity Justice/Peace Center, Loretto Women's Network, Louisville Women Church, Massachusetts Women-Church, Mercy Justice Coalition, National Coalition to American Nuns, San Antonio Women-Church Network, Sinsinawa Network on Women's Issues, Spirited Women of Rhode Island, Sister of St. Joseph/Nazareth: Women's Issues, The Women's Office-Sisters of Charity, BVM, Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER), Women's Ordination Conference, Women-Church: Baltimore, Women-Church: Los Angeles and Women-in-Spirit of Chicago.

<sup>11</sup>See the statement of the planning commission of the 1987 conference on the Interfaith Dimension of the Conference: 'that the women-church movement is much broader than Women-Church Convergence, that the Convergence is one expression of the movement, rooted in the Catholic tradition and therefore dealing with some issues that are specifically Catholic; that rather than try to find one umbrella term to amalgamate all the traditions, we think it is better for each group to embody women-church in terms of its own background; as groups form, we can build toward coalitions.' Women and Leadership Archives, Ann Ida Gannon Centre for Women and Leadership, Loyola University, Chicago, IL (in future WLA), Series 2, Folder 6.5.

of racism, sexism and heterosexism and the eradication of violence. Liturgy and ritual are among the expressions of the convergence, but are far from being the only form of activity the groups have in common. The involvement of both liturgical groups and organisations working for the establishment of social justice show that women-church does not understand itself as a religious movement which can be separated from political activity<sup>12</sup>, but that being church, life as church, is always first and foremost political praxis.

Representatives of the member groups meet once a year for a small conference at which current issues are discussed, but the aim is never to develop a new institution and to put the main effort into supporting local feminist base communities. These small conferences to which the different member organisations are to send delegates were preceded by three national conferences: 'From Generation to Generation: Woman Church Speaks' 1983 in Chicago, 'Women Church Claiming Our Power' 1987 in Cincinnati and 'Weavers of Change' 1993 in Albuquerque/New Mexico. These national conferences, which were also attended by some international delegates, were organised as meetings of mutual empowerment and encouragement for women of Roman Catholic background. However, they by no means represent the main purpose of the work of women-church<sup>13</sup>, but rather one form in which the life of women-church can take place. These conferences should therefore be understood as landmarks in the historical development of the movement rather than as the sole expression the movement takes. It has in fact been a concern at all three conferences to implement participatory models of valuing and encouraging the contributions of individual participants rather than to emphasise the

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<sup>12</sup>The complexity of issues important to the women-church movement is for example shown in the topics of the three focus sessions of the 1983 conference: spirituality, sexuality and survival.

<sup>13</sup>Carol Cook (Eighth Day Center for Justice) in conversation with the author, Chicago, 20th August 1996.

impact of keynote speakers. Much room was given to discussions at conference tables as well as to the life stories of women from a variety of backgrounds. This identifies women-church as a base ecclesial movement. It expresses that women are church rather than the church being represented by the hierarchy of persons of theological expertise and warranted ecclesial power.

Women-church means women's entrance into the religious mainstream, women's reclamation of the centre of ecclesial life, on terms defined by them themselves<sup>14</sup>. Four historical factors can be named as influencing the origins of the women-church movement: the Second Vatican Council<sup>15</sup>, the impact of the women's movement within the church, the development of liberation theologies and the movement for the ordination of women<sup>16</sup>, primarily within the Roman Catholic church.

The development of women-church can be understood as a major paradigm shift in the history of women's approaches to their participation in the life of the church. Diann Neu and Maria Riley identify three steps leading up to the development of women-church: women move from 'impacting the church' to 'identifying as church' to

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<sup>14</sup>Mary Hunt, 'Spiral Not Schism: Women-Church as Church' Religion & Intellectual Life 7 (1989), 83.

<sup>15</sup>It is important not to attribute too much theological significance to the Second Vatican Council, but to understand it as one historical factor among others. Women-church and the development of feminist theology would not have been possible without the changes following the council, but it should not without reluctance be classed as crucially influential for the development of women-church without taking into account other factors like the women's movement and the civil rights movement. Rosemary Radford Ruether in conversation with the author, Evanston, IL, 15th August 1996.

<sup>16</sup>I will not discuss the issue of the ordination of women and debate over it in different denominations in this thesis as it presents an entirely different theological question. Historically the movement for the ordination of women, and the Roman Catholic 'Women's Ordination Conference' in particular present one contributing dimension of women-church. For the history of the Women's Ordination Conference see Laurie Garry's PhD research in progress at Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisc. I am grateful to Chuck Elston for making the archives of the Women's Ordination Conference accessible to me.

'proclaiming women-church'.<sup>17</sup> The struggle for the ordination of women represents women's striving to become involved in all aspects of the life of the church, yet mostly without questioning any of its existing structures or the distribution of power within the church. The largest official organisation representing this desire of women to be ordained to the ministerial priesthood is the Women's Ordination Conference, which started out as a separate organisation, but is now part of the women-church movement and can no longer be seen as exclusively focussing on ordination, but rather as reframing the question of women's ordination in the context of its work towards transformation of the church as a whole<sup>18</sup>. In the late 1970s and early 1980s the Women's Ordination Conference managed to establish a platform for dialogue with the American Roman Catholic bishops. When, however, this dialogue appeared to show no evident results or move towards changes in ecclesial politics, the Center of Concern, a social justice organisation based in Washington D.C.<sup>19</sup>, called for a national conference of Roman Catholic women working for social justice and transformation of the church. A national conference of the Women's Ordination Conference, originally planned for the same year, had been cancelled and

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<sup>17</sup>Diann Neu and Maria Riley, 'Introduction' in: Women Moving Church Ed. Diann Neu and Maria Riley (Washington: Centre for Concern, 1982), 1. I am indebted to Maria Riley for making this publication available to me.

<sup>18</sup>Already at the second women's ordination conference 1979 in Baltimore Ruether observes that the issues of ordination became less significant and the transformation of the existing ecclesial structures became the focus of the women's movement in the church. A case in point is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's paper 'To Comfort or to Challenge', reprinted in Fiorenza, Discipleship, 129-150.

<sup>19</sup>Mary Jo Weaver quotes the self-definition of the Centre of Concern as an 'independent, inter-disciplinary team engaged in social analysis, religious reflection and public education around questions of social justice with particular stress on the international dimension'. Weaver, New Catholic Women, 85.

replaced by a number of more local meetings<sup>20</sup>. The conference organised by the 'Centre for Concern' in Washington, D.C. was called 'Women Moving Church' and can be seen as the place where the concept of 'women-church' or the ekklesia of women was first pronounced. It marks the shift from women seeing themselves within the church to understanding themselves as church and therefore as arguing for the transformation of its structures:

In planning WOMEN MOVING CHURCH we sought to design a feminist process: a conscious structuring of the conference design to embody the values feminists identify as alternatives to patriarchal structures. These values include community, mutuality, empowerment, wholeness, equality, participation and transformation. These values have the potential to negate the false myths which affect human interaction, namely privatism, hierarchical decision-making, domination, submission, dualism, passivity and co-optation.

By consciously seeking to develop a feminist conference model, we entered into processes of mutuality, participation, listening, and reflection that transformed our initial dream. Our idea of assessing the impact the Women's Movement is having on the US Roman Catholic Church was reshaped into our continuing action of facilitating the empowerment of women as church.<sup>21</sup>

This transformation of self-understanding can be seen as the first expression of what subsequently became known as the women-church movement. In her paper 'Gather Together in My Name...Toward a Christian Feminist Spirituality' Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza assesses the impact of the women's movement for Christian spirituality. In this paper she formulates the vision of the 'ekklesia of women' which, according to Fiorenza,

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<sup>20</sup>Mary Jo Weaver sees this as the beginning of the widening of the agenda from arguing for ordination to transformation. Weaver, New Catholic Women, 117. See also the conference proposal for the Third International Women's Ordination Conference: 'As a result of the ordination prohibition, however, we have come to sounding the trumpet ourselves. In so doing, we have learned that there are many tunes to play, that there are many styles of liturgy, many ceremonies and symbols which are meaningful to us. In fact, we are not terribly interested in celebrating eucharist according to the Roman rite.'

<sup>21</sup>Neu/Riley, 'Introduction', 1.

was to find its historical embodiment in the lives of Roman Catholic women today<sup>22</sup>. I will discuss Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's work on the 'ekklesia of women' in more detail in the following chapter.

Women-church does not understand itself as a schismatic movement, as the women-church movement is reluctant to found new institutions, but tries to keep administration and structures to a minimum. It exists as a loose network of a number of groups which claim their Roman Catholic heritage as the background against which their quest for transformation develops. Avoiding the foundation of new institutional structures not only means the refusal to separate entirely from the Roman Catholic church, but is an expression of the constant potential for change which should be inherent in all forms of Christian community. It represents a certain reluctance to establish power structures which may potentially be abused. It also enables the practice of more participatory models of organisation. Because of this conscious decision to do without new institutional structures, no one group can claim to represent the women-church movement more than any other, even though, due to diversity with regard to the size of groups involved, power struggles between large and often financially powerful and smaller local groups do occur quite frequently<sup>23</sup>. This hesitancy about founding new and alternative structures is also connected with a reframing of the issues on which the movement concentrates. The focus is not so much on providing a platform on which official dialogue with the established church can take place, but rather a platform on which women's voices can be heard and women can be empowered to be church in whichever situation they find themselves. It

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<sup>22</sup>Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Gather Together in My Name...Toward a Christian Feminist Spirituality' Women Moving Church Ed. Diann Neu and Maria Riley (Washington: Centre for Concern, 1982) 11 and 25.

<sup>23</sup>Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Women-Church: An American Catholic Feminist Movement', 9.10.

affirms women's identity as part of the church which cannot claim to speak or act on their behalf nor claim to be the sole and complete representation of the ekkllesia<sup>24</sup>.

Another reason why women-church avoids establishing more than the necessary minimal structures is the diversity of relationships to the church as an institution being represented within the movement. While Roman Catholicism serves as a common denominator of the movement as a whole, some women involved in the movement maintain a strong and close relationship to the traditional church and are actively involved in the life of their local parish, while others have left the institutional church behind and are looking for new and alternative ways of living out their spirituality. The loose network structure which the women-church movement claims for itself has also resulted in its development from being a movement of women who claim their Roman Catholic background, to a 'multitendency network of feminists with highly ambiguous connections with Christianity of any kind.'<sup>25</sup> This loosening of the ties of the women-church movement to the Roman Catholic church points to the fact that the concept of 'women-church' cannot be seen as the last word on feminist ecclesiology, but that a new reconsideration of the church's understanding of itself in the light of women's presence in the church is necessary.

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<sup>24</sup>One of the participants described her expectations prior to the conference as follows: 'That this would work an historic new step for Catholic women - that they would stop placing major emphasis on reacting to patriarchal church and gather strength, structure, and power to be a presence apart from patriarchal church and able eventually to challenge it more powerfully than it now does.' Jackie McMahin, Conference evaluation form, 1983. WLA Sub-Series 1, Folder 3.03..

<sup>25</sup>Dorrien quotes as an example the fact that the '1993 conference in Albuquerque featured more than thirty varieties of Sunday morning services, including Goddess worship, an Indian pipe ceremony, Sufi dancing, a Holocaust remembrance, a Quaker meeting, and various feminist liturgies, but not a Catholic mass.' Gary Dorrien, Soul in Society. The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 275.

Apart from the short period between 1978 and 1981 there has hardly been any official dialogue between the institutional church and representatives of the women-church movement as a whole, though there have been various attempts to address the Vatican which have been ignored.<sup>26</sup> That women are denied ordination to the ministerial priesthood is one example of patriarchy as an oppressive system which is present within the church, but it is seen as a symptom which needs to be addressed as part of a much wider agenda of social justice for women. We can say that the relationship between the women-church movement and the official church has become one of mutual disinterest<sup>27</sup>. There is, however, a strong emphasis on not leaving the church, despite the fact that individual members may have chosen to do so or have become alienated from the church. This would mean leaving all power to the existing church structures as well as

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<sup>26</sup> See for example a Press Release by the Women-Church Convergence in Preparation for the 1987 conference, 15th September, 1987: 'Over 1900 participants have already registered for the Second National Conference of Women-Church. Diann Neu, coordinator of the conference says: "We believe the Papal Visit has prompted many women to register for this conference in order to have an opportunity to express themselves as Church, to be in ecumenical solidarity, and to register their dissatisfaction with present Church policies toward women.'"

In May of this year, the Women-Church Convergence, sponsors of the Cincinnati event, requested a meeting with the Pope during his visit. To date, they have received no response from the Vatican and were told by the U.S. Catholic Conference Papal Visit Coordinator in Washington D.C. that the request came too late.' WLA, Subseries 2-D, Folder 7.11.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. the following statement from a representative of the Australian women-church movement: 'The danger for women-church, its temptation to weakness, is to emphasise, not the bonding and friendship between women, not the specificity of femaleness, but the patriarchal church that women are struggling against or exiting from. Patriarchal institutions seek such an emphasis. Assisted by the androcentric bias of language itself, all patriarchal institutions constantly seek to remain paradigmatic. It is impossible, therefore, to ignore them completely and extraordinarily difficult, not to conform to them. Women who concentrate all their attention on a patriarchal church, even when disagreeing with it, simply reinforce this paradigmatic status. To divide over the choice of struggling against such a church or departing from it is to allow this church, yet again, to set the agenda for women.' Erin White, 'Women together: Women-church', 145.

abandoning a wealth of tradition, especially that of women throughout history seeking to make their own space within the existing tradition.<sup>28</sup>

The women-church movement rather seeks to stay in a relationship with the institutional church which is characterised by a certain ambiguity. While total schism and the establishment of new institutional structures is refused, so is a clear answer to the question of whether the women of women-church are inside or outside the church. Women-church is rather in critical dialogue not only with its Roman Catholic background tradition, but also with other traditions, and it is developing a spirituality of choice and critical evaluation of its rituals and symbols<sup>29</sup>. Rosemary Radford Ruether describes it as one of the central features of the women-church movement to be on both sides at once, in critical dialogue with the tradition and at the same time seeking new ways of spirituality<sup>30</sup>. In contrast, Mary Hunt sees the requirement of an either/or, of deciding to opt for or against the church and its tradition and not being given the option of a partial choice or even of participation and structural transformation, as a characteristic of a patriarchal church which no longer has meaning for women.<sup>31</sup> We can therefore say that it is one of the main characteristics of the women-church movement to create a third option to the choice between conformity and schism, to live in conscious ambiguity with regard to their relationship to the structures, rituals and symbols of the established church. This means that the church is acknowledged as an institution of salvation which cannot

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<sup>28</sup>Hunt, 'Spiral Not Schism', 87.

<sup>29</sup>Women-church has not made a decision to be either confined to Christianity or to move out of Christianity completely. It finds some Christian symbols reclaimable for feminism and others irredeemable. It is engaged in creating a new synthesis between the symbols it finds good in Christianity and symbols drawn from goddess religions. Its genius may lie in refusing to be forced into one side or the other of the boundaries that divide Christianity from other religions - especially from nature religions - but in reaching for a new synthesis across this divide.' Ruether, 'The Women-Church Movement in Contemporary Christianity', 208.

<sup>30</sup>Ruether, 'Women-Church: An American Catholic Feminist Movement', 29.

<sup>31</sup>Hunt, 'Spiral Not Schism', 83f.

easily be left behind or replaced, but which needs to be reclaimed and transformed by women.

After the paradigm shift that initiated the theology and history of the women-church movement, another smaller, but not insignificant paradigm shift occurred within the movement. While the 1983 conference was entitled 'From Generation to Generation: Woman-Church Speaks', the next conference in 1987 had the motto 'Women-Church: Claiming Our Power'. The original singular, interpreted as some women attempting to establish a voice which speaks for all women, was changed to the plural which represents the diversity of women from different backgrounds involved in women-church<sup>32</sup>. It has always been one of the objectives of women-church to be open to women from different social, racial and cultural backgrounds, as well as women of different sexual orientations. The embodiment of women-church means addressing issues of racism, sexism and classism and replacing them with values of diversity and the celebration of difference.<sup>33</sup> It was one of the main objectives of all three conferences, and certainly of the movement as such, to address the different situations with regard to class, religious experience, sexuality and race in which women live and shape their experience of what it means to be a woman and also what it means to be a woman in the church. This was, for example,

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<sup>32</sup>It is interesting to observe that the issue of diversity and difference has been on the agenda of the European Women's Synod from its very beginning and are central to this movement. See Moser, 'Working on Creating Space for Each Other', 105.

<sup>33</sup>Letter signed by Marilyn C. Steffel (Women of the Church Coalition), July 1983: 'The conference is aimed at addressing racism, sexism, and classism as Woman Church comes together to speak about Gospel values in troubled times. Two thousand women are expected to participate, coming from diverse racial and ethnic groups, from different ages and relationships to the institutional church.' WLA, 1983, Folder 1-01. I disagree with Fiorenza's statement: 'Although the second conference changed back to the plural form women-church, the tension between an essentialist "feminine" and a sociopolitical-ecclesial notion of woman remains inscribed in the self-understanding of the women-church movement.' (Fiorenza, Discipleship, 212) as I could not find any evidence for a concept of the 'essentialist feminine' whilst the struggle for diversity of contexts and plurality remains a continuing theme within the movement.'

attempted by providing bilinguality at the different conferences as well as the provision of financial aid for those unable to attend the women-church conferences.

But the history of the movement, represented for example in the conferences organised to celebrate women-church, shows that inclusiveness of women of, for example, Hispanic or Black background, as an expression of social justice and equality, has often been more an ideal than an actual achievement. It shows that inclusivity and openness are learning processes within the movement which occasionally fail.<sup>34</sup> In a sense failing to be inclusive, and not merely tolerating, but celebrating and encouraging diversity, represents and reflects the experience of the American context of the women-church movement. The women-church movement appears to be a melting pot in which women of different backgrounds can share their experience of being women who are church, but at the same time, reflecting the American experience, one culture tends to dominate. Despite all attempts to do otherwise, the history of women-church shows the difficulty of embracing diversity, as white, educated and often religious women in the technical sense remain dominant within the structure.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>See for example, Gabriele Gummel, 'Frauenkirche und soziale Gerechtigkeit. Interview mit Mary Hunt' *Schlangengrützel* 32 (1991), 9. See also Letter to Johanna S. by Maria Pedro (not dated): 'I was very proud to be a HISPANIC, my hispanic sisters were very beautiful. I am confident that we will be giving much to WOMAN CHURCH. But sometimes I am concerned that those who have adapted well into the English way of manifesting our presence are not completely concerned about those of us who speak and think in SPANISH. For example: MUJER IGLESIA = CHURCH WOMAN, not Woman Church. To really convey what we meant, we must say IGLESIA MUJER, that is revolutionary and different from what we have said all along.' WLA 1983, Folder 3-01.

<sup>35</sup>A number of examples can be given to illustrate this issue: See for example the statistics of participants at the 1983 conference: 81.1% of all participants were of Anglo-American background, while only 3% of all participants were Black and 9.6% Hispanic.

See also the 'Statement of the Hispanic Caucus' at the 1983 conference: (...) *Afirmamos nuestra belleza y valor como mujeres hispanas; somos MUJER IGLESIA principalmente porque somos mujeres hispanas.*

The failure to implement inclusivity points to the need to radicalise the notion of particularity with respect to what it means to be church and to evaluate a number of different ecclesiological paradigms with regard to their value for women in their respective historical, social and cultural contexts<sup>36</sup>. It is one of the most important aspects of the women-church movement that it claims a certain kind of historical novelty: for the first time in history women are claiming to be church. Yet at the same time, as I will show in more detail later, women-church also claims the continuous presence of its vision of equality, though often subdued, throughout the history of the church. I want to interpret women-church as a highly culturally and historically contingent ecclesiological model (even though I do not understand this judgment as diminishing the importance of it). This

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(spoken only in English): 'And finally, we call ourselves sisters and yet at this Conference: 1) We were placed at the end in the talent show and left out whenever the schedule was running late. 2) We put up with only English from most of the speakers but you walked out when we were addressed in our language this morning.' WLA, 1983, Folder 1-10.

As the conference evaluation forms of the 1983 conference show black women also felt underrepresented. One woman for example writes: 'The Black church was not visible except through Toinette Eugene (sc. one of the conference speakers).' Helen Legeay, Conference Evaluation Form, WLA, 1983, Folder 3-03. Another evaluation form reads: 'Black women represented in program, but where were the Black participants?' Elisa Sagau, Conference Evaluation Form 1983, WLA, 1983, Folder 3-03.

Another attempt at being open to other cultures and including them in the celebration of being women-church was the choice of Albuquerque, New Mexico as the location for the 1993 conference which opened up the possibility of including the situation of Native American women and their spirituality in the life of the conference which was something previously noted as an omission.

A parallel example is the situation of lesbian women who often felt underrepresented as issues of diversity were more focussed on race or class, but not sexual orientation, whilst some other women did not see the importance of addressing the situations of lesbian women and in fact felt offended by it.

<sup>36</sup>Mary Hunt argues: 'The strategy I advise for women-church is to redouble our efforts to be inclusive and, at the same time, to encourage women of diverse racial/ethnic groups to be religious agents out of their own integrity in their own communities. Women-church can listen to and learn from these women, whether or not they are participants in our movement.' Mary E. Hunt, 'The Challenge of a "Both/And" Theology' Women and Church. The Challenge of Ecumenical Solidarity in an Age of Alienation. ed. Melany A. May (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991). 32.

contingency is to a certain extent also inherent in the task of ecclesiological reflection itself, as ecclesiology always seeks to find a theological understanding of the church in the light of the present reality of the church. Women-church, apart from its value for women in the present, also points to the wider task of developing criteria by which a multiplicity of ecclesiological paradigms can be evaluated in the light of its fundamental claim that women are church. I understand the argument of this thesis as formulating these criteria as both a theological and an historical task.

The women-church movement can by no means be perceived as one entity represented by one organisation. It is rather a movement of a number of different groups in which certain common interests can be identified.<sup>37</sup> Women-church is a spontaneous contextual movement which concentrates on the life and experience of women in the church rather than on the development of a theological concept of the church<sup>38</sup>. The alleged spontaneity with which women-church happens leads to almost avoiding any kind of systematic reflection about women-church as an ecclesiological model. Any methodological, systematic theological analysis of women-church could be understood as a betrayal of its spontaneous pragmatic political character which at the same time identifies it as a movement which consciously or unconsciously embraces its U.S. American context. One could say that the women of women-church 'do' church rather than write ecclesiologies. This becoming aware of the North American context of women-church must be understood as triggering a two-fold challenge to which this thesis is one of many possible responses. First, it points to the fact that women-church as a model of feminist ecclesiology is not easily transferable to other contexts which means to

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<sup>37</sup>Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'The Women-Church Movement in Contemporary Christianity' in: Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions: Explorations Outside the Mainstream Ed. Catherine Wessinger (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1993), 196.

<sup>38</sup>Cf. Fiorenza, Discipleship, 244.

take the contingency women-church claims seriously. Second, one needs to search for different models within other particular contexts in which women can reflect on being church. In this thesis I re-enter into a constructive feminist dialogue with traditions of European systematic theology which feminist theologians within the pragmatist tradition have dismissed. For me as a European feminist theologian much of feminist theologising not only takes place within a more and more consciously global context, but also within a framework which is aware of and takes seriously the traditions of theological thought within which theologising takes place. It is within those traditions that and doing theology as a woman is situated.

## Chapter 2

### **Feminist Theologians Reinvent The Church: Critical Discussion of the Ecclesiologies of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Letty Russell and Rebecca Chopp**

#### **2.0 Introduction**

In the first, introductory chapter I described women-church as a movement, an historical event which expressed women's first public claim to be church. In the first half of this chapter I want to evaluate the ecclesiology of women-church as it is expressed in the work of its two major theologians, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether. Like the women-church movement itself, both authors are situated within the Roman Catholic tradition which is reflected in the ecclesiological and political issues they address. Yet their claim is not so much to contribute to the process of contemporary Roman Catholic theology, but to speak for women within this particular tradition and in the wider sense. Feminist theology is contextual theology which takes place as a critical and creative re-reading of the ongoing Christian tradition in which its authors are situated. I therefore want to contrast the feminist ecclesiology of Ruether and Fiorenza with the feminist critical ecclesiologies of two authors from Reformed traditions, to show how each author has been influenced by the ecclesiological and political concerns of their respective traditions, but at the same time how common features in, as well as common omissions from, their ecclesiologies, lead to the task set in the main body of the thesis, that of a feminist critical evaluation of ecclesiological traditions. First of all, however, I want to concentrate on the two authors who have most intensely reflected theologically and ecclesologically on the life of women-church.

## 2.1 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's theological background is to be found in both pastoral theology and her work as a New Testament scholar. Both strands have influenced her work on women-church. Being the first woman to complete a full theology degree at the University of Würzburg/Germany, Elisabeth Schüssler completed a dissertation which was subsequently published under the title Der vergessene Partner which is study of women's role in the church in the light of the contemporary debates that eventually led to the Second Vatican Council<sup>1</sup>. Fiorenza argues that women should demand nothing less than consecration to the episcopate in order to participate fully in the life of the church. Ordination to the ordinary priesthood could not be enough as it meant only participation in the clerical system at its lowest rank rather than full participation. As such women's ordination would therefore be open to exploitation by the church without having inherent transformative power.<sup>2</sup> Already in Fiorenza's early work it is obvious that the emancipation of women, the goal of the radical women's movement, can only be achieved if women not only gain access to the hierarchical structures of the church, but work towards the complete transformation of these very structures<sup>3</sup>. Her thesis was influenced by the theology of the Second Vatican Council which was in process at the time of writing and was beginning to make its impact on the wider church. Fiorenza's argument can be seen as on the one hand an example of the hope for renewal expected from the developments of the Second Vatican Council, but on the other hand also points to one

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<sup>1</sup>Elisabeth Schüssler, Der vergessene Partner: Grundlagen, Tatsachen und Möglichkeiten der beruflichen Mitarbeit der Frau in der Heilssorge der Kirche (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1964).

<sup>2</sup>Fiorenza, Discipleship, 32.

<sup>3</sup>Already in 1967 Fiorenza wrote: 'To achieve women's emancipation in particular and that of all the laity in general nothing short of a reconceptualization of church and ministry is necessary.' Fiorenza, Discipleship, 32.

of its strongest weaknesses: the obvious neglect of a revision of the role of women in the church.<sup>4</sup>

In Fiorenza's work the term 'ekklesia of women' predominates over her use of 'women-church', but it is this very concept of women participating in the life of the ekklesia, being full citizens within the Christian community, in fact women being church which is at the heart of the idea of women-church. Her understanding of ekklesia is best summarised in her own words:

Ekklesia, the Greek word for church, describes the democratic assembly of full citizens responsible for the welfare of the city-state. To link ekklesia or church with women makes explicit that women are church and have always been church. It asserts that women have shaped biblical religion and have the authority to do so. It insists on the understanding and vision of church as the discipleship of equals. Thus women-church is not to be understood in exclusive, sectarian terms. Rather it is a hermeneutical feminist perspective and linguistic consciousness-raising tool that seeks to define theologically what church is all about. As a movement it claims the center of biblical religion and refuses to move relinquish (sic) its inheritance.<sup>5</sup>

Her paper 'Gather Together in my Name: Towards a Feminist Spirituality'<sup>6</sup> is the first description of the concept of the 'ekklesia of women'. In the context of Fiorenza's own work this paradigm shift from ordination to transformation appears much earlier though the particular form is only developed here. Ekklesia is a dynamic term which describes a community where radical democracy is practised. Radical democracy, according to Fiorenza, in fact represents the vision of the earliest Christian communities which, though later submerged by dominant patriarchal ecclesial structures, has never entirely been lost. It must, however, not be confused with existing democratic political structures, or what Fiorenza calls the 'kyriarchal actualization' of democracy, which in fact often have not been concerned with the lives and needs of women and can therefore not be seen as realisations of the

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<sup>4</sup>This last point will be developed more explicitly in chapter three of this thesis.

<sup>5</sup>Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Changing the Paradigm' In God's Image 10:1 (1991), 15.

<sup>6</sup>See Ch.1, footnote 22.

ekklesia<sup>7</sup>. Only a feminist model of radical democracy enables women-church to become a space for alternative, counterhegemonic discourses of faith and political commitment<sup>8</sup>. For Fiorenza, the 'ekklesia of women' is an alternative vision of what it means to be church, a theological or better hermeneutical concept as well as a political agenda.

We can summarise Fiorenza's ecclesiology as arguing that women are to reclaim the centre of hermeneutical and ecclesiological discourses for the vision of the ekklesia. In fact the 'ekklesia of women' could be realised for the first time in history<sup>9</sup>. This reclamation of the centre of ecclesiological discourses takes place in three areas which are characteristic not only of Fiorenza's understanding of women-church, but of her theology as a whole: the reconstruction of Christian origins and a feminist critical hermeneutics of liberation and social justice.

Fiorenza refuses to accept the marginalisation of women in history as a complete description of historical reality, but understands it as reflecting androcentric historiography and choice of sources rather than what actually happened<sup>10</sup>. Therefore all sources available and made canonical are to be treated with equal suspicion as

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<sup>7</sup>Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet. Critical Issues in Feminist Christology (London: SCM, 1995) 16.

<sup>8</sup>In short, I argue that within the logic and rhetoric of radical democracy we can conceptualize the ekklesia of wo/men as the metaphoric space that can sustain critical practices of struggle for transforming societal and religious kyriarchal institutional discourses.' Fiorenza, Jesus, 28.

<sup>9</sup>Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'The Will to Choose or to Reject: Continuing Our Critical Work' In Feminist Interpretation of the Bible Ed. Letty Russell (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 126.

<sup>10</sup>Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her. A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins (Second Edition London: SCM, 1993), xvi.

being influenced by a particular, patriarchal<sup>11</sup> or as Fiorenza prefers to call it, kyriarchal agenda. The fact that Fiorenza refuses to accept the marginalisation of women in the church as a given fact, does not mean that she does not acknowledge the oppression of women throughout the history of both church and society, but she refuses to accept it as an entirely representative picture of reality, as it neglects the fact that women have always been present in the church and have always sought to resist patriarchal structures.<sup>12</sup> Fiorenza argues that the egalitarian vision to be found in the earliest Christian movements has never been completely extinguished despite the competing influences of patriarchal tendencies.<sup>13</sup> She draws a picture of early Christianity which views it as being in constant tension between the vision of radical equality and women's full participation in leadership, in other words as being an alternative to existing Graeco-Roman society, and the increasing influence of the

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<sup>11</sup>Patriarchy for Fiorenza is not restricted to male domination over women, but she describes it as an network of oppressive structures which along with sexism/heterosexism include racism, classism and ageism. She understands it as any kind of hierarchical structure which seeks to define women only in their relationship to men. 'Patriarchy as a male pyramid of graded sub-ordinations and exploitations specify women's oppression in terms of class, race, country, or religion of the men to whom we "belong." This definition of patriarchy enables us to use it as a basic heuristic concept for feminist analysis, one that allows us to conceptualize not only sexism but also racism, property-class relationships, and all other forms of exploitation or dehumanization as basic structures of women's oppression.' Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza Bread Not Stone. The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation (Boston: Beacon, 1984), xiv.

In her later work, Fiorenza prefers the term 'kyriarchy', which describes a more refined concept of domination and of those who are victims of it. Kyriarchy is a network of domination and rule of some human beings, be they men or privileged women over others. This means that the commitment of women-church cannot simply be defined as 'women' over against male domination, but we have to speak of a much wider commitment for all victims of oppression and domination. This implies Fiorenza's use of the spelling wo/men in order to express the fragmentation and particularity of women's lives shaped by structures of class, race, sexual orientation and religion as factors constructing women's social identity. Fiorenza, Jesus, 24.

<sup>12</sup>Fiorenza, "The Will to Choose or to Reject", 134.

<sup>13</sup>The remembrance of women's sufferings in religious patriarchy must be explored structurally in order to set free the emancipatory power of the Christian community which is theologically rooted neither in spiritual sexual dimorphism nor in patriarchal ecclesial dominance, but in an egalitarian vision and in altruistic social relationships that may not be "genderized." Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, 92.

cultural values of the surrounding society, 'the gradual adaptation to the patriarchal order of the Greco-Roman society' which 'robbed the church of its clear-cut social boundaries vis-à-vis its prevalent patriarchal cultural-religious norms and environment'.<sup>14</sup> So Fiorenza understands the adaptation of patriarchal structures, such as monarchical episcopacy, not so much as a gradual process of distortion of originally pure egalitarian structures, but as a struggle in tension between two competing powers, in which patriarchy eventually gains hegemony, but the original egalitarian vision is never lost entirely and can therefore be reclaimed. Fiorenza understands the gradual acceptance and domination of sexist attitudes and structures as well as the refusal to let women participate in church leadership not only as a sin from which the church needs to repent as it left behind racism and its support of slavery, but a denial of the catholic and apostolic identity of the church.<sup>15</sup>

Fiorenza calls for all sources describing the history of early Christianity to be carefully analysed. The goal of such an analysis is the recovery of what Fiorenza understands as the biblical vision of equality and radical democracy, as well as the political goal of liberation, rather than an exact listing of historical facts<sup>16</sup>. At first sight Fiorenza's approach of grounding the alternative vision of the 'ekklesia of women' in a reconstruction of early Christianity appears to be an essentially Protestant approach. It is important here to understand the purpose of Fiorenza's project of reconstruction of Christian origins and to distinguish it from other attempts at reconstructing early Christianity, for example by conservative Protestant groups<sup>17</sup>. Fiorenza uses a constructive rather than a descriptive approach to early Christianity.

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<sup>14</sup>Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, 303.

<sup>15</sup>Fiorenza, Discipleship, 88.

<sup>16</sup>An interpretative model should, therefore, not only be judged by whether it adequately lists various traditions and information, but must also be scrutinized as to whether it provides a comprehensive vision of early Christian history, making its emancipatory life-praxis and theology available to contemporary church and society.' Fiorenza, Discipleship, 155.

<sup>17</sup>Brian Hewitt, Doing a New Thing? Seven Leaders Reflect on the Past, Present and Future of the House Church Movement (London: Hodder&Stroughton, 1995), 45.

That means, she does not seek to identify and reconstruct the early church 'as it was' in order to construct a model of the church 'as it ought to be', but rather seeks to identify a particular vision of liberation and equality which then serves the purpose of a critique of the contemporary Christian community as well as a vision to transform both church and society. The purpose of Fiorenza's project of reconstructing Christian origins is not to reenact the pure and true church, whatever shape it might take, but to construct a political and hermeneutical agenda which has its prime locus in the reclamation and transformation of present ecclesial structures. The model of radical democracy which Fiorenza sees realised in the 'discipleship of equals' of early Christian communities does not, however, function as a static historical mode, an archetype which needs to be reenacted, but as a prototype which not only can be, but in fact must be implemented in different historical contexts.<sup>18</sup> 'The static' may be a characteristic of the patriarchal church, but its constant transformation is a significant characteristic of a feminist reading of the Christian tradition. The significance of reconstructing Christian origins is that of reclaiming women's experience of struggle against patriarchal oppression and of liberation in the past as a source of empowerment for women today.<sup>19</sup> It is the concept of such an alternative vision of equality and human liberation, the enactment, rather than mere re-enactment, of the concept of the ekklesia, the discipleship of equals which is the foundation of Fiorenza's feminist ecclesiology.

The life of the Christian community is, however, only one aspect of reality, which, according to Fiorenza, needs transformation. Fiorenza's contemporary political

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<sup>18</sup>Women as church have a continuous history and tradition that can claim Jesus and the praxis of the earliest church as its biblical root model or prototype, one that is open to feminist transformation.' Fiorenza, Memory, 36. See also Fiorenza, 'The Will to Choose', 136: 'Such a notion of the Bible not as a mythic archetype but as a historical prototype provides women-church with a sense of its ongoing history as well as Christian identity. It is able to acknowledge the dynamic process of biblical resources, challenges, and new visions under the changing conditions of the church's cultural-historical situations.' See also Fiorenza, Bread not Stone, xvii.

<sup>19</sup>Fiorenza, Bread not Stone, xvi.

agenda is the transformation of the lives of women in Biblical religion, in other words Judaism and Christianity, which are at present subjected by kyriarchal structures, but have never entirely lost the vision of liberation and equality which can be reclaimed from the life and praxis of the Jesus movement. The self-affirmation of women in Biblical religion as human beings no longer defined by patriarchy and no longer subject to its structures is the primary goal of the feminist movement in which the creation of the 'ekklesia of women' is located.<sup>20</sup>

The discussion of possibilities of reconstructing the presence of women as historical agents in early Christianity lays the groundwork for what is the location of women-church as a continuing presence in Fiorenza's work: women-church is constructed as the hermeneutical centre where the process of discernment of tradition takes place<sup>21</sup>. In fact there are significant parallels with Fiorenza's development of the hermeneutical process of discernment which takes place in women-church and women-church as a re-interpretation of what it means for women to be church. The Bible, the primary object of hermeneutical discernment, has in the past been used as an instrument of patriarchal oppression against women as well as having been the source of strength and commitment for women's struggle for liberation. In the same way the church has been the location of the oppression, exclusion and marginalisation of women as well as space for women's discourses of faith which can be claimed as women's history and become a source of transformation of the present. The hermeneutical process of both scripture and the life of the church therefore is a critical and dialectical praxis of discernment which recognises the situation of women between both oppression and liberation and seeks to evaluate all texts 'at issue' for women being part of the hermeneutical community. Within this ambiguity of the Scriptures and the church being locations of both oppression and liberating vision,

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<sup>20</sup>Fiorenza, Bread not Stone, xiv.

<sup>21</sup>Fiorenza, Bread Not Stone, xiv.

Fiorenza seeks to create the 'ekklesia of women' as a metaphor for the reframing of theological discourse outside of male dominated concepts of theology.<sup>22</sup>

The 'ekklesia of women' appears as women-defined space in which hermeneutical processes of reading, discernment and construction can take place. Here Fiorenza's interest has shifted from being concerned with constructing a feminist spirituality to hermeneutical issues, though her political agenda of liberation and of women as agents of their own spiritual welfare against patriarchal oppression remains the same. Fiorenza, certainly in her later work, is not so much concerned with the particular form this hermeneutical space takes, nor with whether or not it takes place inside or outside the established church. What is of importance to her is rather that women, and in fact all those who have become victims of kyriarchal oppression and marginalisation, take their active place in the hermeneutical process which is a way of women claiming the centre of ecclesial life and theological discourses. The implementation of the liberating praxis of women-church as a counterspace to patriarchy in fact becomes the criterion according to which all hermeneutical processes are to be judged<sup>23</sup>.

Fiorenza's use of terminology like 'church' or 'women-church' is not meant to be an expression of exclusivism in any form, be it Christian exclusivism by using the term 'church' or a community that is exclusive of men by calling itself 'women-church'. By using terminology like 'church' Fiorenza rather seeks to express that the male dominated church of patriarchy no longer has the right to claim to be the

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<sup>22</sup>Cf. for example Fiorenza's concept of reframing christological discourses within the 'ekklesia of women', Fiorenza, Jesus, 3.

<sup>23</sup>Fiorenza, Bread Not Stone, xxiv.

exclusive representative of 'church'<sup>24</sup>. Fiorenza does not seek to correct traditional theological concepts of church. Her use of terminology like 'church' is one of 're-inventing' the church as counterspace to 'kyriarchy' rather than 're-naming'. Exclusivity was a characteristic of the church under the old paradigm which Fiorenza seeks to replace by one of openness and participation of all.

The purpose of Fiorenza's project of reconstruction of Christian origins as well as her feminist hermeneutics within women-church is the transformative praxis of connecting the Biblical texts as prototypes with the experiences of contemporary women. This involves a process of choice between those texts of the Bible which empower women to work for their liberation and those which support patriarchy as a system of power structures in which women are subordinate and eventually reduced to the status of victims<sup>25</sup>.

But this second aspect of Fiorenza's ecclesiology, the church, women-church, as hermeneutical space constructed and defined by women, cannot be seen without the third aspect, the implementation of the vision of liberation into the life of society. Only in practising justice and equality in all aspects of life can the vision of the Jesus movement, the life of the ekklesia, be fully realised. The vision of justice is grounded in the egalitarian praxis of baptism as Fiorenza sees it in the early Christian community. Through baptism, which, as opposed to circumcision, is applied to all believers equally, all previous determinations of identity like race, sex or social status become irrelevant and new structures of equality, in which women can participate at

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<sup>24</sup>Such an argument can be seen as representative of the women-church movement as a whole. Cf. for example the debate over whether or not ritual meals at conferences should be called "eucharist". There is no unanimous decision over this issue, for while some understand the use of terms like "eucharist", "ordination" or "church" as a claim indicating women-church as being no more and no less church than the institutional Roman Catholic church, others point to the hurt that has been done to women by what these concepts traditionally have expressed and argue for the introduction of new terminology as well as entirely new theological concepts of being church.

<sup>25</sup>Fiorenza, 'The Will to Choose or to Reject', 131.

all levels, are created<sup>26</sup>. Differences of biological sex continue to exist, but become irrelevant for the construction of the new community, the discipleship of equals. The same egalitarian praxis takes place in eucharistic fellowship. Participation in the ekklesia of women is therefore at the same time theological agency and political commitment<sup>27</sup>. In fact, Fiorenza explains that hermeneutics itself is not primarily a theological activity, but always also a political process of commitment<sup>28</sup>.

Hermeneutics as the task of women-church is not primarily concerned with faithful exegesis and adherence to the canonical Scriptures as an authoritative text, but to the liberation and flourishing of women as agents in history.<sup>29</sup>

Women-church, for Fiorenza, is a manifestation of the universal church, not a separation from it. As such she understands it as transcending all artificial boundaries between human beings and between women in particular. These include boundaries of race, class or religious denominations, as well as for example the difference between religious and lay women within the church. Justice is implemented where these divisions between human beings and between women in particular are overcome. Fiorenza pays particular attention to the relationship between nuns, or 'nun-women' and laywomen. She understands this division as imposed by the patriarchal church in order to create a hierarchy similar to that between clergy and laity. She urges religious women to give up the privileges granted to them by the patriarchal church in order to unite with laywomen in a coalition of 'sisterhood' as the foundation of a renewed and transforming church. This vision of sisterhood is grounded in Fiorenza's understanding of ekklesia as the discipleship of equals and is the goal women in the

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<sup>26</sup>Fiorenza, Memory, 211.

<sup>27</sup>Fiorenza, Memory, 351.

<sup>28</sup>'The Bible is not only written in the words of men but also serves to legitimate patriarchal power and oppression insofar as it "renders God" male and determines ultimate reality in male terms, which make women invisible or marginal....At a time when patriarchal oppression is on the rise again in American society and religion, the development of a feminist biblical hermeneutics is not only a theological but also a profoundly political task.' Fiorenza, Bread Not Stone, xi.

<sup>29</sup>Fiorenza, Bread Not Stone, 14.15.

Catholic church should work for in order to transform the church. It is also the context in which the question of the ordination of women needs to be reconsidered:

Our most pressing task is therefore, in my opinion, to build a feminist Catholic sisterhood, which can close the institutional gap between women and women in the Roman Church. Women who wish to be ordained should be rooted and must be accountable to such a new Catholic sisterhood if women's ordination is not to function as tokenism, but rather is to engender the transformation of the church toward the vision expressed in Galatians 3:28.<sup>30</sup>

While the question of women's ordination and the transformation of actual ecclesial structures are very important to her earlier work, Fiorenza has given less attention to these questions recently. Her understanding of women-church is that of an alternative vision, a dream, an anticipation of a transformed reality as well as the theoretical space to create such a reality. She does, however, point out that the patriarchal church is not the space where such an alternative reality of radical democracy can be realised, but that it is necessary that women create their own space. It is too simplistic to say that the primary focus of Fiorenza's ecclesiology is simply 'women'. The purpose of Fiorenza's alternative vision of being church is rather the transformation of all aspects of life for the liberation of women and all victims of kyriarchy<sup>31</sup>. The patriarchal institution is not of particular interest to her. Her concern remains theoretical and hermeneutical as that of creating 'a space where women attain full spiritual autonomy, power, self-determination, and liberation.'<sup>32</sup> But she does understand the transformation of the patriarchal church as a necessary presupposition in order to achieve liberation of all victims of racism, sexism and classism within society. Fiorenza not only challenges women's desire to be ordained to the priesthood

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<sup>30</sup>Fiorenza, *Discipleship*, 90.

<sup>31</sup>Fiorenza distinguishes between 'gynecentric' (sic!) and 'feminist-centric'. 'It (sc. the expression "ekklesia of women") seeks to create an intellectual, symbolic, and spiritual universe that is not just gynecentric (sic!), but feminist-centric. The vision of the ekklesia of women focuses on the empowerment of women because women as church have been excluded from the interpretation of the world and of the divine.' Fiorenza, *Discipleship*, 329.

<sup>32</sup>Fiorenza, *Discipleship*, 12.

as the lowest rank in a clerical hierarchy which would essentially be retained, in other words what would change would be the location of women's exploitation not the fact that women are exploited. She also argues for the need to replace a concept of ordained ministry as 'service' to the church with a feminist understanding of ministry as 'equality from below', in other words not self-denying service to the church as an abstract and disembodied entity, but solidarity with all victims of patriarchy/kyriarchy.

Concluding we can say that women-church, the ekklesia of women, is a continuing theme in Fiorenza's theology that names the location of spiritual and political processes of transformative reading and response to the tradition which can take place. Her contribution to the theology of women-church is the mapping out of an alternative vision of being church. This in a sense remains eschatological. We could argue that her primary interest is not so much ecclesiological, but that ecclesiology becomes the vehicle to describe where and how women's alternative discourses of faith are to take place<sup>33</sup>. The ekklesia of women is therefore more to be understood as a theological concept than a particular form of church organisation, but it is still of significance for our discussion of women's ecclesiological discourses, as Fiorenza's alternative vision of church and society, the ekklesia of women, grounded in the discipleship of equals, can be seen as the starting point for the development of the concept of women-church at least within the Roman Catholic church. Identifying the ekklesia of women as an alternative concept of space where hermeneutical and theological discourses can take place, however, confirms rather than denies the significance of ecclesiological discourses for the project of a critical feminist theology. Feminist ecclesiological discourses, as Fiorenza describes them, reclaim the centre of ecclesial life as space for women's discourses of faith, but at the same time

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<sup>33</sup>See for example her understanding of the ekklesia of women in her book Jesus: Miriam's Child. Sophia's Prophet: 'metaphoric space that can sustain critical practices of struggle for transforming societal and religious kyriarchal institutional discourses.' Fiorenza, Jesus, 28.

locate feminist theological discourses on the edge between church, academe and society.

## 2.2 Rosemary Radford Ruether

Rosemary Radford Ruether can in a number of areas be seen as a pioneer in the development of feminist theology. A church historian by training, she was not only the first to develop a concept of feminist christology as well as a feminist critical hermeneutics, but she also developed the practical implications of the alternative concepts of women-church. Her theology of women-church is written in creative dialogue with women's experiences of being marginalised by the institutional church, but also the experiences of feminist liturgical base communities. Traditional ecclesiology, the theological description of the church's understanding of its own nature, is therefore not at issue as a subject of critique<sup>34</sup>, but the primary focus is on women's practices of faith and of being community. Even though her book Sexism and God-Talk<sup>35</sup> is still modelled on traditional theological systems and uses Paul Tillich's 'method of correlation' in its approach to various theological subjects, Ruether essentially blurs the categories set out by traditional systematic theology. Her work on women-church not only develops women-church as an alternative theological concept, but also uses insights from feminist liturgical praxis and pastoral theology. Its starting point is therefore, again, the already existing life of base communities as well as the urgency of change in the life of the institutional church. This experience of

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<sup>34</sup>An exception are her chapters 'Mistress of Heaven: The Meaning of Mariology' and 'Guarding the Sanctuary: Sexism and Ministry' in Rosemary Radford Ruether, New Woman, New Earth. Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation. (Boston: The Seabury Press, 1975), 36-85. Here Ruether discusses the implications of traditional ecclesiology which portrays the church as the subordinate ideal feminine as the epitomisation of sexist dualistic mindsets. I will discuss this form of 'gendered ecclesiology' in chapter five of this thesis.

<sup>35</sup>Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk. Toward a Feminist Theology (Boston: Beacon, 1983).

praxis, women's experience of the life of both the traditional church and alternative structures, is always prior to theological reflections about the nature of the church. She understands the primary task of the church, in fact of women-church, as a conversion from sexist structures as well as working towards liberation<sup>36</sup>.

Her indebtedness to Latin American liberation theology as the origin of the model of base ecclesial communities is much more obvious than it is in Fiorenza's work. Her ecclesiological work concentrates on the life of small feminist liturgical base communities. In recent years Rosemary Radford Ruether has also begun to write on the history of the women-church movement in which she has been involved as one of its main theological influences<sup>37</sup>.

The starting point of Ruether's feminist ecclesiology is the praxis of various feminist liturgical communities, which as liberated zones are in dialectic tension with the patriarchal mainstream church. Base ecclesial communities or feminist liturgical communities are a variety of different groups which develop from particular needs of those who participate in them and therefore can 'take on as many or as few functions of church as they choose.'<sup>38</sup> Base communities and parallel organisations provide space for women to develop their own spirituality, theology and work for justice without entirely separating from the institutional church, but at the same time they are

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<sup>36</sup>Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 201.

<sup>37</sup>See for example Ruether, 'Women-Church: An American Catholic Feminist Movement' or Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'The Women-Church Movement in Contemporary Christianity' *Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions: Explorations Outside the Mainstream*. ed. Catherine Wessinger. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993). 196-210.

<sup>38</sup>Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 205: 'They might range from consciousness-raising groups that primarily share experiences, to groups who engage in study and analysis as well, to groups that also worship together. From a study, teaching, and worshipping group, such a community might also choose to share means of livelihood with one another. They might further choose to make their shared spiritual and social life together the base of political action.'. See also Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church. Theology and Praxis of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 25f.

outside the control mechanisms of its power structures<sup>39</sup>. Feminist base communities for Ruether are parallel structures on the edge of the mainstream of the church which ensure the spiritual survival within the patriarchal structures of the church. In her words:

Women should move in and occupy any space for ministry that is opened to them and seek to make it livable space.... But we should do this with our eyes wide open to the spiritual dangers of patriarchal working conditions. These conditions are dangerous to our spiritual health. So one should not put one's own life and soul into such communities, but also create alternative free communities of spiritual nurture and support. Both of these options need to exist side by side, if we are to survive spiritually and help the institutional church to reform. We need to find creative ways to bring institutional and free communities into interaction so that they can enliven each other, rather than assuming that they are mutually exclusive options.<sup>40</sup>

For Ruether, the praxis of base ecclesial communities is the way to approach the inseparability of ecclesial life and political commitment.<sup>41</sup> Even though Latin American base ecclesial communities provide the model for feminist ecclesiologies like Ruether's, she emphasises the need for adjusting this particular model to the particular needs of the situation in which a group finds itself<sup>42</sup>. What is important here is that feminist base ecclesial communities provide a valid ecclesiological model for the development of a feminist counterculture which opposes patriarchy and seeks to develop alternative structures, but at the same time does not want to separate entirely from the established church, and seeks to make creative use of it in order to eventually transform it.

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<sup>39</sup>Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Being a Catholic Feminist at the End of the Twentieth Century' *Feminist Theology* 10 (1995), 18.19.

<sup>40</sup>Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Women's Difference and Equal Rights in the Church' *The Power of Naming. A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology* Ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (London: SCM, 1996), 213f.

<sup>41</sup>I will discuss the significance of the base ecclesial communities model for feminist ecclesiology in chapter four of this thesis.

<sup>42</sup>Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Women-Church: Emerging Feminist Liturgical Communities' in *Popular Religion* Ed. Norbert Greinacher and Norbert Mette (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 56.

Ruether's ecclesiology is not schismatic, but she in effect accuses the church of alienating women from the practices of faith in which they are entitled to participate. The history of the church is therefore portrayed as one of increasing patriarchal influences during which, however, there have always been alternative traditions of women's leadership and theology which have often been marginalised through the canonisation processes of a church in which women have been attendants, but not participants<sup>43</sup>. The alienation and marginalisation of women by the institutional church has taken place predominantly in three areas, which Ruether identifies as sacramental celebration, ecclesial administration and theological education. These need to be re-appropriated to the people of the church and most importantly to women. That Ruether argues for the re-appropriation of these symbols central to a Roman Catholic understanding of the church is a sign of her ecclesiology finding itself in dialectical tension with the institutional church rather than separating from it. If separation is to take place, it is understood as a temporary process during which women create liberated zones on the edge of the institutional church in which they can be nurtured, find their own voice as agents of theology and develop their own concepts of spirituality. This may mean a temporary withdrawal from the church as a male dominated institution, but it does not mean a complete separation from it, nor the total exclusion of men from women-church's discourses of faith. The goal that women-church communities aim for, as liberated zones in critical dialogue with the institutional church, is that of a liberated co-humanity of both men and women, but a temporary withdrawal of women might be necessary for processes of consciousness-raising in order to develop a feminist community<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup>See for example Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Tradition Ed. Eleanor McLaughlin and Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979) and Catherine M. Wilcox, Theology and Women's Ministry in Seventeenth Century English Quakerism Studies in Women and Religion 35 (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995).

<sup>44</sup>Ruether, Women-Church, 59.

With regard to women-church's relationship with the institutional church Ruether develops the liberation theological concept of the 'exodus community'<sup>45</sup>. The exodus is not to be understood as being an exodus from a church that has become a symbol of patriarchal power, but Ruether sees the exodus community as something the whole church is meant to be: a community on its way from patriarchy to the 'eschatological' goal of a liberated co-humanity of men and women. To witness to that goal, which Ruether understands as the gospel itself, is Ruether's understanding of the particular vocation of women in the existing structures of the church<sup>46</sup>. It is not the church as such from which women, and in fact the church, itself need to be liberated, but patriarchy as an oppressive ideology. The emphasis in Ruether's work, however, remains not on the eschatological goal to be realised, but on the present struggle for liberation, in other words on the praxis of feminist liturgical base communities.

We must think of Women-Church as a feminist counterculture to the ecclesia<sup>47</sup> of patriarchy that must continue for the foreseeable future as an exodus both within and on the edges of existing church institutions.<sup>48</sup>

But it is important here that Ruether identifies the exodus of women-church not as an adjunct to the exodus from a male church, but as the first time in history that women

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<sup>45</sup>The concept of the 'exodus' as both spiritual salvation and political liberation is explicitly developed by the liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez (Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation. History, Politics, and Salvation. Trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (London: SCM, 1971), 88ff.) Rebecca Chopp summarises Gutierrez's understanding of the 'exodus' as follows: 'The exodus portrays redemption as the fulfillment of creation through re-creation and as the fulfillment of creation through transformation of concrete situations. God's salvific work unites with God's creative work and is linked to human participation in the transformation of history.' Rebecca Chopp. The Praxis of Suffering. An Interpretation of Liberation and Political Theologies. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986), 53..

<sup>46</sup>Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'The Call of Women in the Church Today' in Women of Faith in Dialogue ed. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 79.

<sup>47</sup>Note that Ruether's use of the term ekklesia essentially differs from Fiorenza's. While for Fiorenza the political concept of the ekklesia describes the dynamic reality of an alternative vision of church in which women participate as full citizens, Ruether speaks about the 'ekklesia of patriarchy' which sanctions male dominated political structures.

<sup>48</sup>Ruether, Women-Church, 62.

collectively claim to be church themselves<sup>49</sup>. Ruether argues that in the past, male exodus movements have often resulted in greater liberty for men, but not necessarily in an improvement in the situation of women, often even in an increase in their oppression<sup>50</sup>. The collective nature of women's exodus is of importance as it represents the rejection of boundaries between women, for example between religious and lay women, which are imposed on them by the patriarchal ideology women-church denies.

The area of sacramental celebration is of strong interest for Ruether as a Roman Catholic. The strongest example she gives of the need for re-appropriation of an ecclesial symbol is the celebration of the eucharist:

The Eucharist should be the symbol of our nurture, growth, and participation in the authentic human life of mutual empowerment. Yet it is the sacramental symbol that has been most radically alienated from the people and transformed into a clerical power tool. Classical Catholicism did concede that baptism was a sacrament that could be administered by the laity in a crisis situation when no priest was available. But the Eucharist is the sacrament most rigidly guarded as a clerical reserve and defined as an act that no lay person can validly perform.<sup>51</sup>

So far the liturgical tradition in both form and content has been shaped by men, and women have been forced to participate in a liturgical life in which they are essentially not represented. Ruether argues for a re-appropriation of the sacraments to the people which reinterprets them as a place for celebration in the community and a source of mutual empowerment for each other<sup>52</sup>. Ruether therefore extends the 'canon' of liturgical celebrations from those celebrated by the male church in which women are not represented, to liturgical celebrations which take into account women's experiences of life and affirm women as being church.

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<sup>49</sup>Ruether, *Women-Church*, 57

<sup>50</sup>Ruether, *Women-Church*, 55.

<sup>51</sup>Ruether, *Women-Church*, 77f.

<sup>52</sup>I will discuss the significance of the sacramental dimension of feminist ecclesiology in chapter six.

As such the Eucharist becomes a symbol of what Ruether views as perhaps the gravest distortion of what the church is meant to be: 'clericalism'. 'Clericalism' is a form of power structure which attributes all power of sacramental celebration, theological knowledge and decision making to experts, in other words: to members of the clergy on whom this kind of power is imparted by ordination. Women on the grounds of their sex are excluded from taking on this kind of power. But Ruether does not argue for the inclusion of women into these structures of clerical power, but rather for their transformation or, as she calls it, the 'dismantling of clericalism', as a feminist understanding of ministry and clerical ecclesial structures are diametrically opposed to each other.<sup>53</sup> 'Clericalism' creates divisions or hierarchical binary structures which can be seen in Ruether's understanding as the strongest characteristic of a patriarchal thinking<sup>54</sup>. All binary structures, according to Ruether's concept of patriarchal ideology, are essentially modelled on and resemble the male-female binary in which the male is seen as the dominant, the strong and the normative while the female represents that which at best complements the male. These binary structures create boundaries between human beings which deny the building of a community. They not only exist between hierarchy and laity, between men and women, but are also imposed by a patriarchal system on women themselves. The most important example Ruether mentions here is the division between lay women and nuns who, on the grounds of denying their female sexuality are understood as superior to 'ordinary' women. The

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<sup>53</sup>Clericalism is built upon and presupposes patriarchy. The symbols of clerical power duplicate on the level of ecclesiastical hierarchy the symbols of patriarchal domination of men over women, fathers over children. It is impossible to liberate the Church from patriarchy and retain a clerical definition of the ministry.' Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, 207.

<sup>54</sup>Clericalism is the separation of ministry from mutual interaction with community and its transformation into hierarchically ordered castes of clergy and laity.' Ruether, Women-Church, 75. See also Ruether, Sexism, 206.207 or Ruether, 'The Women-Church Movement in Contemporary Christianity', 201: 'Clerical sacramental disempowerment of the people means taking the life symbols of the community's relation to God and claiming that the divine power and efficacy of these symbols belongs to the clergy alone, through a special infusion of this power from God that takes place at ordination.'

hierarchy-laity binary structure, which is established through ordination and manifested in every celebration of the eucharist, is also found in the two other areas of marginalisation which Ruether identifies: church administration and theological education.

Clericalism represents the sanctioning by the church of one particular order of society which models its structures of organisation after a particular secular model of society. This form of ordering both church and society is then theologically justified as the order of creation. In other words clericalism can be seen as the ecclesial embodiment of patriarchal ideologies.<sup>55</sup> Ruether argues for the replacement of existing clerical structures with structures that enable ministries of mutual empowerment and which are based on the aim of making use of the talents of individual believers. In such a form of ministry, according to Ruether, the very being of women-church as a community of liberation is embodied.

Ruether argues to replace existing power structures which reflect structures of domination within society with those of social justice and a 'preferential option for the poor'. Through this preferential option for the poor which is symbolised by the Mary of the Magnificat, structures of equality and justice can be implemented in the church. Women who are often the first victims of poverty and oppression then become models of faith and their liberation becomes an issue of supreme urgency, in fact the primary concern of the church<sup>56</sup>. In her earlier work she argues for a reinterpretation of the relationship between Mariology and ecclesiology. Rather than understanding the

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<sup>55</sup>Ruether defines 'patriarchy' as 'a historically contrived social system by which the 'fathers' - that is, the ruling-class males-have used power to establish themselves in a position of domination over women and also over dependent classes in the family and society. Ruling-class males have built social structures and systems of cultural justification to assure that they would monopolize the cultural, economic, and political power of the society. Others are forbidden access to this power and are confined to auxiliary status as physical laborers in production and reproduction, whilst the ruling males own and command the fruits of this labor.' Ruether, Women-Church, 57.58.

<sup>56</sup>Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, 157f.

Marian symbol/the church as the symbol of the feminine, the inferior, Ruether sees Mary as the symbol of the new and liberated humanity which has essentially overcome patriarchal dualistic binary structures<sup>57</sup>.

Ruether criticises clericalism as one aspect of the patriarchal church which is experienced as particularly oppressive, but she also addresses the question of ecclesial institutionality as such. While Fiorenza uses her development of an alternative vision of being church and its anticipatory implementation as a vehicle for constructing an alternative location for women's hermeneutical and theological discourses, Ruether concentrates on particular questions of creating parallel and alternative structures to the institutional church. The rejection of patriarchy and clericalism as its embodiment do not, however, mean the rejection of institutional structures as such. The development of base ecclesial communities does not lead to ecclesial anarchy, but rather to a reconceptualisation of power structures. Authority that is being exercised within the church can no longer be understood as endowed upon a (by ontological necessity male) person on his ordination, but is rather redefined as functional authority that serves the members of the community rather than supports particular hierarchical power structures for their own sake. Ruether acknowledges the necessity of institutional structures as a pragmatic necessity, but denies the right of particular structures, like the institutional Roman Catholic Church, to claim sole representation of being church. According to Ruether, Jesus founded a movement rather than an institution. Institutionalisation therefore is reduced to being an historical necessity which means that 'all patterns of church polity are relative and historically developed, patterned after political and social patterns in the culture.'<sup>58</sup> This implies the radical contingency of all ecclesial structures as well as the need for the church to acknowledge its own fallibility. No church, and it is the Roman Catholic church with

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<sup>57</sup>Ruether, *New Woman. New Earth*, 58.59. See also Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Mary-The Feminine Face of the Church* (London: SCM, 1979).

<sup>58</sup>Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Differing Views of the Church' in *Authority, Community and Conflict* Ed. Madonna Kolbenschlag (Kansas: Sheed & Ward, 1986), 105. See also Ruether, *Women-Church*, 33.

which Ruether is dealing in particular, can therefore claim a monopoly to represent salvation or an infallible teaching of truth. To acknowledge the possibility of erring as well as denying the need for such certainties in favour of a multiplicity of perspectival truths, according to Ruether, is a necessary step towards maturity which the church needs to take, but which is also an important growing process for women in their claiming to be church and becoming agents of their own faith.<sup>59</sup>

According to Ruether, the church always finds itself in a dialectic tension between being an established historical institution and a spirit-filled community which works on its constant renewal.<sup>60</sup> While the establishment of the church as a static historical institution in the past has often meant the establishment of male power structures from which women were excluded, there have been alternative traditions of spirit-filled communities, like for example Montanists or Quakers, in which women participated more fully.<sup>61</sup> Ruether therefore argues that women-church needs to reclaim these alternative traditions which have often been excluded or declared heretical by the established church in their history. Ruether uses a review of the history of the church as a means to show how this dialectic tension has always existed within the church. Ruether criticises the church for its one-sided focus on itself as a divinely justified institution which she calls 'sacramental materialism' by which the work of the Holy Spirit as one of constant renewal is quenched<sup>62</sup>. However, rather

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<sup>59</sup>Ruether, 'Being a Catholic Feminist at the End of the Twentieth Century', 14.15.

<sup>60</sup>'Only by this creative dialectic between renewal community and historical institution is the Church regenerated by the Spirit within history. This is the inescapable paradox of living in the liberating community within the framework of historical existence.' Ruether, *Sexism*, 206. See also Ruether, *Women-Church*, 22.

<sup>61</sup>Eleanor McLaughlin and Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Women's Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions: Continuity and Change' in *Women of Spirit*, 19.

<sup>62</sup>'The error of historical institutions lies in their attempt to make false claims of spiritual efficacy for purely institutional forms of mediation of words, symbols, and rituals. The institutional church tries to make itself the cause of grace and the means of dispensing the Spirit, rather than simply being the occasion and context where these may take place. It institutionalizes forms of communicating religious meaning, and it pretends that these are the only valid channels of grace.' Ruether, *Women-Church*, 32.

than abandoning institutional structures altogether because of their potential for being abused, Ruether argues for creatively using them and thereby developing their potential for transformation<sup>63</sup>.

This leads to an expansion of what women-church is able to claim as its source material. Traditional processes of canonisation are understood as a means of establishing and legitimating male ecclesial power and it is therefore necessary for women-church to re-evaluate the Christian and also the Jewish tradition, which for Ruether leads to an essential opening of the canon. Ruether calls this the finding of 'usable tradition'. The hermeneutical criterion according to which texts are to be judged is whether or not they promote the 'full humanity of women'. The Christian tradition, though retained as the background of women-church, can no longer claim to be the predominant one, let alone to have a monopoly of a source for the hermeneutical processes that take place in women-church. Ruether establishes the 'prophetic tradition' as the 'canon within the canon' in her assessment of the Christian tradition, but she also includes marginalised traditions from within Christianity, together with texts from other religions, as well as philosophical texts, into her agenda of finding usable tradition. With regard to women-church, Ruether sees herself as a religious feminist who on the one hand seeks to reclaim aspects of both the Jewish and the Christian tradition, but on the other hand recognises the need to go back behind biblical religion and to transcend it<sup>64</sup>.

### **2.3 Issues in Roman Catholic Feminist Ecclesiologies**

A number of common features can be identified as the result of the preceding analysis of a theology of the church, in effect a theology of women-church, as it is approached by women of Roman Catholic background.

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<sup>63</sup>Ruether, Women-Church, 39.

<sup>64</sup>Ruether, Women-Church, 3f.

1. We observe that the relationship between women-church and the traditional established institutional church is of particular importance to Roman Catholic authors. While this relationship appears to be characterised by an essential ambiguity of not wanting to decide whether the women-church movement or its individual participants are inside or outside the church, the church is still of significance, be it as a common identifier for those participating in the struggle or in the refusal to establish new alternative institutional structures beyond the necessary minimum. The church is in a sense still perceived as the site of salvation, which cannot easily be left behind, but needs to be transformed. What the women of women-church are doing is to claim the church which denies them representation and participation as the potential location of their salvation, as from a Roman Catholic perspective there can only be one church.

2. It is significant that in reframing the ecclesiological debate, Roman Catholic feminist theologians either deny or ignore the connection between ecclesiology and Christology. In the context of Ruether's Christology as well as her ecclesiology we can say that both focus on reflection on the life and praxis of either Jesus as Ruether finds him in the synoptic gospels or Christian communities rather than on reflections on the nature of Christ or the nature of the church. Though we can observe structural similarities between Rosemary Radford Ruether's Christology and ecclesiology, and Fiorenza argues for the ekklesia of women as the location for the reframing of christological discourses, neither of them makes any attempt to reconstruct a relationship between Christology and ecclesiology in a feminist paradigm. What the women-church is is defined by those who participate in it, not by an understanding of the church as being modeled on its relationship to Christ. Fiorenza's alternative vision of the ekklesia of women is modeled on the identity of movement that followed Jesus, but not so much on the life and praxis of Jesus himself or even the identity of Jesus as the Christ, which is then mirrored in the identity of the church. This could be seen as related to an ambiguous relationship to bodiliness, and to women's bodies in particular, which is inherent to the Roman Catholic tradition. Ruether identifies

Christology as that part of Christian theology which has been used the most to marginalise and exclude women as agents of faith. That is most obvious in the arguments used in refusing to ordain women as they do not physically resemble Christ and bear the curse of Eve. The maleness of Christ in such an understanding becomes a matter of ontological necessity which is contrary to an understanding of women-church as the ekklesia of women. Ruether in particular sees hierarchical binary relationships like that of Christ and the church as part of the kind of sexist ideology inherent to much of the mainstream Christian tradition which she seeks to deny and replace by more egalitarian and inclusive structures. It is interesting to observe that, despite the fact that Ruether ignores the relationship between Christ and the church, she does focus on what is essentially the most central female symbol within Roman Catholic theology and reconstructs Mariology as symbolic ecclesiology.<sup>65</sup>

3. It is not insignificant that the beginnings of the women-church movement, despite marginal attempts to become more ecumenical, have developed essentially against a Roman Catholic background and primarily seek to serve the needs of Roman Catholic women. One of the reasons for this can be seen in the fact that while the Reformation essentially omitted female symbols such as the Marian tradition, as well as the abolition of women's religious communities from the life of the church, Roman Catholicism, though in a way which appeared to be oppressive for women, retained the essentially gendered character of its theology. While this on the one hand meant the theological sanctioning of patriarchy and female submission, it on the other hand left the presence of female symbols and not least spaces for the development of women's spirituality. Even though women have been denied the right to be ordained into the ecclesial hierarchy, within the Roman Catholic tradition there remained spaces of women's acknowledged presence which could be reclaimed as the tradition

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<sup>65</sup>See Ruether, New Woman, New Earth, 36-62, Sexism and God-Talk, 139-158 and Mary - The Feminine Face of the Church (London: SCM, 1979).

and history of the foremothers of women-church.<sup>66</sup> Even though the Roman Catholic tradition despises women's bodies and seeks to replace the reality of women's lives with models of an ideal constructed female, it can be perceived as a tradition which is consciously gendered and therefore does not deny women's presence as such. But we can say that though both Ruether and Fiorenza understand women-church as women's collective claim to be church, neither of them explores the dimension of the genderedness or sexuateness of ecclesiology as potentially liberating and transformable. I will return to this issue in chapter five of this thesis.

4. The fact that we can identify the indebtedness of the authors studied to their Roman Catholic background shows that feminist ecclesiology can only be done in its particular political and ecclesial situation and does not seek to replace the fact of the particularity of political structures within the church. This is most obvious in the work of Roman Catholic authors who focus on the church as such rather than on the life of the local community. Another example could be the very conscious anticlerical conception of ecclesiology, which does not deny the necessity of administrative structures within the church as such, but sees it as one of its main tasks to decentre the conception of the church as being represented by the clergy. Such an understanding of clerical power as spiritual power which only in the second place is political power, can be seen as characteristically Roman Catholic. Yet we have to notice that this indebtedness to the Roman Catholic background of both Fiorenza and Ruether rather reflects the experiences of women in the contemporary Roman Catholic church than engagement with the ecclesiology as it is presented in the sources this tradition claims as relevant.

We can therefore see that women-church, despite claiming its critical relationship with the Roman Catholic tradition, can only be understood as being

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<sup>66</sup>For example at the first women-church conference 1983 in Chicago, 43 % of the participants were members of religious communities, by far the largest represented group. See Weaver, New Catholic Women, 71-108 about the significance of women's religious communities in recent Roman Catholic history.

situated within its particular political situation as the struggle and claim of Roman Catholic women. As being woman can only be conceived in terms of particular and contingent situatedness rather than in terms of biological essentialism, so can being church, the ecclesiological discourse of being women-church, only be understood in the context of reflecting the life of a particular traditional community and its theological and political self-reflection.

Feminist ecclesiologies and the concept of women-church are usually associated with the Roman Catholic background they claim for themselves and with which they identify. Yet the feminist ecclesiology I propose as the result of my inquiry rather takes the form of a hermeneutical paradigm which can be applied to a number of different ecclesial and ecclesiological contexts. I therefore suggest crossing the confessional boundary between the Roman Catholic and the Protestant tradition and evaluating the work of two Protestant feminist theologians, in order to see whether their discussion of feminist ecclesiology has succeeded in providing a more adequate model of a consciously feminist critique of the church and its theological self-reflection.

The first author whose work I want to evaluate is the Presbyterian Letty M. Russell. The other, Rebecca Chopp, does not identify from which particular tradition she originates. As in the case of the Roman Catholic authors studied in the first half of this chapter, the background traditions of Russell and Chopp cannot be considered insignificant, as they set the scene for an understanding of ecclesiology which can only be written in the light of a particular political context.

#### **2.4 Letty M. Russell**

The first and most obvious difference between Letty Russell and the authors and groups studied so far is that Russell's feminist liberation ecclesiology can be seen

as a reflection of her experiences as an ordained minister in a Presbyterian church in Harlem/New York as well as her involvement in the work of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. Her work for the World Council of Churches in particular has lead Russell to provide what can be seen as one of her major contributions to feminist theology: to do feminist theology as a white American woman, but yet with a global and especially a Third World perspective in mind<sup>67</sup>. Like Ruether her theology is indebted to liberation theology as a theological paradigm which takes its starting point from ecclesial praxis and the lives of those not normally considered agents of society. Russell's ecclesiological work, which is most explicit in her book The Church in the Round<sup>68</sup>, is an extension of her earlier work on topics like 'mission' and 'koinonia as partnership'<sup>69</sup>. Feminist theology in her understanding is done in close connection with other liberation theologies. Russell argues that feminist theology as an advocacy theology for women cannot overlook the oppression of other marginalised groups, but that at the same time no liberation theology can claim to be truly about the liberation of those marginalised and oppressed by society, unless it also advocates the liberation of women. Russell understands feminist theology as an advocacy theology, a theological method that seeks to represent the interests of a particular group. This tension is maintained through Russell's work on ecclesiology which is in the first place an ecclesiology of liberation which then as one of its concerns seeks to apply a feminist 'spirituality of connection' to her reconstruction of the Christian community.

Letty Russell points out that there is now a need for a feminist interpretation of the church, for an actual 'ecclesiology', after feminist theological writing so far has

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<sup>67</sup>See her book Inheriting Our Mothers' Gardens. Feminist Theology in Third World Perspectives ed. Letty Russell (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1988).

<sup>68</sup> Letty M. Russell, The Church in the Round. Feminist Interpretation of the Church (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

<sup>69</sup>See Letty Russell, Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective. A Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974); Letty M. Russell, The Future of Partnership (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979); Letty M. Russell, Growth in Partnership, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981).

mainly been concentrating on practical questions like the issue of the ordination of women and the use of inclusive language in the liturgy. Her feminist ecclesiology is therefore seen as a feminist re-evaluation of the life of the church in all its aspects rather than just addressing isolated issues. The women's movement, both inside and outside the church, appears as yet another challenge to the traditional church. Letty M. Russell understands ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church, as an 'interpretation of the experience of gathering in Christ's name and then the experience in Christ's service'<sup>70</sup> So again, as in the two authors previously studied, the starting point for any feminist liberation theological work on the church cannot be an abstract theological discourse on the nature of the church, but must rather be the experience of those who are struggling for a church which is more just and includes everyone. Feminist ecclesiology, according to Russell, must be oriented towards the praxis of church communities and seeks to point out changes needed in the theological interpretation of the church in order to make it more inclusive.<sup>71</sup> Feminist liberation ecclesiology is written in the context of the dialectic Russell mentions in the beginning of her study on the church:

How do we develop a feminist theory about the church that makes sense of women's reality and experiences of oppression and yet continues to affirm Jesus Christ as the source of life and connection of the Christian community?<sup>72</sup>

Russell describes the church as the 'community of Christ where everyone is welcome'. This short summary of her ecclesiology points to two of the main features of her approach to re-constructing the theology of the church. While Christology as well as the relationship between Christology and ecclesiology do not have much significance for the ecclesiology of women-church as it is described by Roman Catholic authors, Russell's feminist liberation ecclesiology has a christological focus that is not found in other feminist approaches to ecclesiology. The life and work of Jesus Christ is at the

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<sup>70</sup>Russell, Church in the Round, 8.

<sup>71</sup>Russell, Church in the Round, 14.

<sup>72</sup>Russell, Church in the Round, 21.

same time starting point and guideline for the life and identity of the church. While the authors studied in the first part of this chapter concentrate on constructing a community with just relationships of mutuality among the members of the group and emphasise the need to overcome all hierarchical structures, Letty Russell points out the importance of Christ for the relationships of the members of the church among each other. While Ruether and Fiorenza entirely neglect the connection between their critique of Christology and their approach to new ways of being church, Letty Russell understands the praxis of the Jesus of the synoptic gospels as the model for the life of the church. The praxis of Jesus is one of fundamental openness to those marginalised and excluded in society which is to be continued by the church in its praxis of hospitality. The life of the church is a continuation of God's Trinitarian activity. Again Letty Russell's approach differs from other authors in her making the connection not only to Christology, but also to the Trinity as a fundamental Christian symbol. Even though the practical implications of Russell's feminist liberation ecclesiology are very similar to those of the Roman Catholic authors studied previously, her ecclesiology appears to be much more rooted in traditional interpretations of Christian symbols than those of the Roman Catholic authors. Symbols like Christology or the Trinity as well as any theological reflection on the identity of the church can only take place in the light of the community's self-reflection, but the identity of the church does not merely rest in the reflection of its own experiences, but these experiences are reflected in the light of its identity as a Christian community which is focussed on Christ and understands itself as participating in God's Trinitarian mission. In being open to strangers and welcoming them to the church as the table community of God, the church participates in God's mission which, according to Russell should be one of its primary characteristics<sup>73</sup>. It is, however, important to note that Russell does not understand 'mission' in the traditional sense of the word as evangelising and

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<sup>73</sup>Russell, Church in the Round, 90.

proselytising, but rather as the extension of God's mission of liberation of the oppressed and marginalised and therefore essentially as working for justice<sup>74</sup>.

Russell chooses the 'table metaphor' as the most adequate way of describing the character of the church in a feminist liberation theological perspective. The 'table principle' is therefore the criterion according to which a community is to be judged, its critical principle: a community is most authentically a Christian community if it is hospitable and open to those who are marginalised by society.<sup>75</sup> That ecclesial life in Russell's theology takes place around tables also means that along with hospitality models of participation and equality among the members of the community can be practised. Hospitality as it is practised by the church as a table community implies that it seeks to overcome the division between margin and centre. A feminist liberation ecclesiology makes it its primary concern to integrate those on the margin of both church and society and to replace the concept of margin and centre with that of the church as a round table community. This can, according to Russell, only be achieved if the church focusses on Christ who is the centre of the church, but whose life was dedicated to reaching out to those on the margin.<sup>76</sup>

The basic principle of the round table community is that of the fundamental equality of all its members grounded in baptism, which is seen as the vocation to a Christian life and thereby of ministry. In the context of the baptismal equality advocated by Russell, all ministries are valued equally and are based on a concept of functional rather than clerical ecclesial authority<sup>77</sup>. Despite being a member of the ordained clergy herself, Russell argues for the ultimate abolition of all clerical structures, a feature common to both Roman Catholic and Protestant approaches to

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<sup>74</sup>Here it is important to note that Russell's work is significantly influenced by that of her husband Johannes Christian Hoekendijk. See Johannes Christian Hoekendijk, *Die Zukunft der Kirche und die Kirche der Zukunft*. Trans. Robert Heeger (Stuttgart: Evangelische Buchgemeinde, 1964).

<sup>75</sup>Russell, *Church in the Round*, 25.

<sup>76</sup>Russell, *Church in the Round*, 27.

<sup>77</sup>Russell, *Church in the Round*, 54.

ecclesial transformation. Russell distinguishes between patriarchal and feminist paradigms of leadership. Feminist models of leadership are primarily geared towards partnership and service to the life of the community. Clerical structures, according to Russell, are to be replaced by structures of leadership as service to the community. Leadership as service rather than grounded in clerical authority enables the minister to focus on and to respond to the specific needs of a particular community<sup>78</sup>. The author prefers the term 'leadership' to the term 'service', as the paradigm of servanthood has often been used in the Christian tradition in a way that has damaged the self-esteem of women rather than empowered them as full participants in the church<sup>79</sup>. Feminist models of authority and leadership are also based on sharing functional authority in the interest of the community rather than authority which is conferred through ordination and is connected to the person ordained. The focus of her feminist approach to authority is therefore on the community, where authority is necessary to maintain the life of the community, rather than on the bearer of authority. This functional approach to authority can be understood as a fundamental denial of clerical structures which is characteristic of all feminist approaches to ecclesiology. Russell seeks to replace a concept of authority over the community with a model of authority being exercised in community<sup>80</sup>. True leadership in Russell's understanding sees its primary task in empowering those on the margins of the community and intergrating them into the life of the community.<sup>81</sup>

Even though Russell uses the table metaphor as well as models of partnership and koinonia, it is characteristic of her ecclesiology that she understands it as an 'open ecclesiology.' An 'open ecclesiology' is 'open-ended view of ecclesiology which investigates the variety of possible shapes the church might take in order to participate

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<sup>78</sup>Russell, Church in the Round, 56.

<sup>79</sup>Russell, Church in the Round, 55.

<sup>80</sup>Letty M. Russell., 'Partnership in Models of Renewed Community' Ecumenical Review 40 (1988), 19.

<sup>81</sup>Russell, Church in the Round, 58.

in God's traditioning action'.<sup>82</sup> An 'open ecclesiology' differs from traditional ways of doing ecclesiology in taking its starting point in the function of participation in the church rather than in the nature and the form of the church. The church is not the only place where God is present but rather one sign among others which shows God's salvation. Another important feature of an 'open ecclesiology' is that it points to the contingency of all church structures. 'Open ecclesiology is always provisional and in search of new structures because it is open to what may happen in the future.'<sup>83</sup> Such an 'open ecclesiology' depends on people seeking dialogue with their fellow people, men and women, and with God. Church structures cannot be static, but are to reflect the life and the needs of the particular, the local community as well as those to whom it seeks to reach out. Russell argues that such an approach to ecclesiology can be understood as reversing traditional forms of ecclesiology as it takes its starting point from the function of the church rather than from its unchangeable nature. Such a functional approach to ecclesiology is an expression of the radical provisionality, a fundamental openness to change, of all ecclesial structures. It moves the church's action from self-reflection to 'theopolitical' involvement in the liberation of humanity as participation in God's mission and the building of the kingdom of God<sup>84</sup>. The church, according to Russell, is not a secluded space opposed to the world, but rather part of the world and open to it and its needs. The fundamental difficulty with this kind of openness as it is suggested by Russell is that she does not seem to leave any room for the church being not only open to the world, but at the same time critical and functioning as a counterspace to the patriarchal structures of the world. Russell sees the need to free the church from ecclesial provinciality and concentration on matters

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<sup>82</sup>Russell, Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective, 158.

<sup>83</sup>Russell, Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective, 162.

<sup>84</sup>Russell, Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective, 162: 'It constantly moves and changes, not simply in response to the whim of a changing world, but in response to its calling to work and live by the promises of God who works in and through history.'

spiritual to the detriment of political commitment, but she overlooks that such political involvement could involve a harsh critique of the 'ways of the world' as well.

The concept of an essentially open ecclesiology implies that the one church, which is the church Letty Russell speaks about, can be embodied in many different manifestations. The one church is at the same time the bearer of a prophetic tradition of the liberation of humanity and also the bearer of the seeds of 'patriarchal domination and a supporter of the status quo in many parts of the world.'<sup>85</sup> Within this ambiguity it is necessary to uncover the paradigm of patriarchy<sup>86</sup> and to replace it with the idea of human liberation which, in Russell's understanding, is the core message of Christianity. This appears to remain at the level of a critique of its own actions on the part of the church, but does not appear to see the need to extend that critique to the world on a larger scale.

Russell's understanding of the church is characteristically oriented towards the future. The church, as Russell maintains, must understand itself as working to anticipate the future of God's New Creation. It does that in becoming partners with those 'who are at the margins of church and society'<sup>87</sup> and working towards implementing the justice that will be fully realised in God's New Creation already in this world.

Justice, according to Russell, should in fact be added as a fifth 'mark of the church' (along with oneness, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity). Justice is defined as the 'right relationship' among human beings and with the whole creation<sup>88</sup>. The church can only claim to be a place of salvation if it understands its primary task in

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<sup>85</sup>Russell, Church in the Round, 37.

<sup>86</sup>Russell understands 'patriarchy' not only as the domination of women by men and the marginalisation of women as a consequence but any kind of hierarchical domination of one group over another.

<sup>87</sup>Russell, Church in the Round, 12.

<sup>88</sup>See also Karen Lebacqz, 'Justice' Dictionary of Feminist Theologies ed. Letty Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996), 158-159.

taking sides for the poor and oppressed, as 'there can be no salvation outside the poor.' As all creeds of the Christian tradition reflect the particular theological questions of the times in which they were written, Russell maintains that the central question for the church of this time is how it responds to the people on the margins and seeks to effect justice for them as well as include them into the church as the community where hospitality is practised. This hospitality as an expression of justice finds its expression in the sacramental life of the church. In the church as the table fellowship, the table of Christ, the Eucharistic table, is at the centre of the life of the community and expresses an anticipation of the future the church is aiming for: the New Creation of the world and of humanity, the ultimate fulfilment of justice.

While for most of Russell's elaborations on feminist ecclesiology, her work does not appear to be focussing on women's issues, but rather appeals to the commitment to human liberation and the liberation of all marginalised groups which feminist theology as a liberation theology has to make<sup>89</sup>, she provides a few clues to the specifically feminist aspect of her work which is rather set in a more general liberal framework. For Russell the Christian community is a 'community of faith and struggle' for human dignity and personhood. Russell's argument for the improvement of the situation of women in the church, in fact her concept of a feminist ecclesiology is essentially rooted in the context of human rights and liberation. In other words, Russell's understanding of feminist theology is one of a theology committed in the first place to humanity in general rather than to women in particular. It is in the context of humanity and the humanisation of society that that Russell refers to women's particular struggle. Russell's theology is essentially based on a liberal framework of Christian ethics which assumes the necessity and existence of fundamental human rights as well as the value of the individual as a person. It is this insistence on the rights and autonomy of the individual which Russell claims for women in what she calls a 'spirituality of choice'. The choice to be woman and as a

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<sup>89</sup>Russell, Church in the Round, 43.

woman to participate in the Christian community, is one of embracing an identity as a woman as something positive and contributing to the life of the community. It means the choice to move beyond the roles assigned to women by a patriarchal concept of ordering society which sees women's bodies as well as women's intellectual and spiritual capacities as inferior<sup>90</sup>. But we must ask whether Russell's concept of a spirituality of choice really enables her to move beyond a patriarchal concept of ecclesiology in which women are not only included on the basis of their general humanity, but actually participate in the life of the community as women and take an active part in shaping it. Russell secures value for the personhood of the individual woman, but she does not transfer this to reconsidering her understanding of the community. Women are therefore, like other marginalised groups, invited to be included in the life of a community which they have not had the privilege to shape as well<sup>91</sup>. In effect what Russell does here is to replace one patriarchal concept with another. Russell's 'spirituality of choice' therefore does not go far enough and cannot be seen as a viable tool for an ecclesiology that can be called feminist. It appears that Russell's ecclesiology has to be gender neutral in order to be applicable to women. In other words, Russell, like other feminist theologians, manages to strip traditional concepts of ecclesiology from their gendered frameworks of oppression, but fails to recreate them as expressions of women's being church as women. Such a focus on humanity which sets women's choice to be women within the framework of humanity and does not even attempt to move beyond the female identity of the individual woman cannot be seen as a satisfactory model for a feminist ecclesiology as it does

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<sup>90</sup>Russell, Church in the Round, 184.

<sup>91</sup>Cf. Susan Parson's critique of liberal feminism: 'As there was no attempt from the beginning to include a whole range of people in social and political reforms, their inclusion at a later stage means that they have had to accept existing institutions as the status quo, and relate to these as already given social realities. This suggests that the story of progressive inclusion is at the same time the story of the ascendancy of political, social and economic institutions as the status quo and relate to these as already given social realities.' Susan Parsons, Feminism and Christian Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 44.

not address the particular implications which sexual difference has for the transformation of ecclesiology.

The choice to be woman, to live out a woman's identity as part of the life of the community points to the impossibility of a disembodied feminist ecclesiology. Russell understands sexuality not as reduced to sex, but rather as an aspect of identity which is closely connected to spirituality and needs to find its expression in it. Only then can spirituality be seen as being and expression of a whole personality. The other important aspect in relation to this choice of a woman's spirituality is the acceptance of other women as 'sisters' who share the experience of being woman in a patriarchal church and society and work and pray for justice to be embodied in the church as a community of hospitality. This involves the celebration of diversity as a value very central to the identity of a feminist community:

The contradiction here is that community is not built on sameness. Community is built out of difference. In fact, you cannot even create community and experience the possibility of new gifts of partnership without diversity.<sup>92</sup>

Like the other authors, Russell very strongly argues that a feminist liberation ecclesiology cannot be describing a church which essentially excludes men, but she maintains that one must question the commitment of any group that does not consciously seek to be concerned with making women full participants in the work of liberation.<sup>93</sup> The struggle for a consciousness of the full humanity of women and for an improvement of the conditions of all women's lives must certainly be seen as a primary commitment in the communities described in Russell's feminist ecclesiology.

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<sup>92</sup>Russell, Church in the Round, 195.

<sup>93</sup>Russel, Church in the Round, 96.

## 2.5 Rebecca Chopp

The other Protestant feminist theologian who has done significant work in the area of feminist ecclesiology is Rebecca Chopp. Unlike Letty Russell she is not a member of the ordained clergy, but her work is situated in the context of academic theology and theological education. She does not identify her own commitment to any particular denomination as the context of her ecclesiology, but speaks about 'communities of emancipatory transformation' which can take place anywhere, and the main characteristic of which is their fundamental openness. The site of her ecclesiological discourse is her postmodern and postliberal approach to individualistic and private religion and a concept of the church which is not based on solidarity with victims, but on 'the Word' as an objective historical event. In her approach to ecclesiology she reinterprets the ecclesiologies of Karl Barth<sup>94</sup> and Friedrich Schleiermacher who, as diverse as they are, see the church as essentially a community. Of particular importance is her re-interpretation of Barth's understanding of the community being founded on 'the Word'. She contrasts Barth's understanding of the Word of God which is spoken once and for all in history in Christ with her concept of the Word as the 'perfectly open sign' which empowers those who have been denied speech to speak words of liberation and transformation<sup>95</sup>. Even though Chopp shares the understanding of community as the fundamental tenet of ecclesiology with both Barth and Schleiermacher, her theology differs significantly from both of them. While for Barth, Christ, the Word, appears to be objective reality that constitutes the community once and for all and for Schleiermacher the community is founded in the

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<sup>94</sup>I will provide my own feminist re-reading of Barth's ecclesiology in chapter three of this thesis.

<sup>95</sup>Rebecca Chopp, *The Power to Speak. Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 77: 'The relation of women and the church is as painful and difficult as that of women and the Word, since the Word configured as the unique foundation of the church demands women's marginality.'

faith and the feeling of utter dependence of believing individuals, for Chopp the community precedes the individual, the individual cannot be perceived as outside of particular social structures, be they oppressive or liberating, and both community and individual are subject to constant change and transformation. Chopp states that both Barth and Schleiermacher essentially 'failed to reconsider the underlying relation of Word, women, and community and thus both had to define and constitute Christian community only in relation to the dominant social-symbolic order.'<sup>96</sup> While for both Barth and Schleiermacher the community is a static existing reality, for Chopp it is a process of transformation which is open ended. Chopp takes Barth's concept of the relationship between the Word and the community as her starting point, but as her understanding of the Word differs from Barth's, so does her concept of the community:

Feminism's theological reconstruction of Christian community can begin with Barth by asking how, within the words of women, community is created in, with, and through the Word in the reception of the Scriptures and the reality of emancipatory transformation.<sup>97</sup>

Chopp combines her re-interpretation of the ecclesiological concepts of Barth and Schleiermacher with that of the Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner. Following Rahner, Chopp understands the church as the sacrament, the sign of liberation and transformation in the world<sup>98</sup>. The concept of an ecclesiology, though she avoids the word and a term like 'theology of community' would be more adequate, is that of a community which is liberated through 'the Word' and therefore able to proclaim words of liberation to the world. The church is a space of freedom where 'emancipatory transformation' can take place. Not only the lives of individual women, but also relationships between women, and in fact between all human beings, are in need of this kind of emancipatory transformation. The church, the community, is therefore the

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<sup>96</sup>Chopp, The Power to Speak, 84.

<sup>97</sup>Chopp, The Power to Speak, 84.

<sup>98</sup>Chopp, The Power to Speak, 4

space where liberation from oppressive structures and empowerment to speak out against them take place:

As Christianity offers discourses of emancipatory transformation to and for the world, the church must be the embodiment of emancipatory transformation, that which constitutes the proclamation and that from which this proclamation comes. The church must be the freedom of the embodied Word, embodied in glimpses of hope that the Bible gives, embodied in Word as perfectly open sign, embodied in human action and contemplation.<sup>99</sup>

Chopp employs part of the canon of symbols of traditional Christianity, even though she re-defines them. The terminology of 'sin' and 'grace' is central to her ecclesiology. The church, or, as Chopp, following Fiorenza, prefers to call it, the ekklesia, is a place 'which opposes patriarchy and which envisions new ways of flourishing, or what I speak of in terms of the denunciation of sin and the annunciation of grace.'<sup>100</sup> She understands sin in structural rather than individual terms. Sin means the disruption of relationships, not only among human beings, but also with the divine and with the earth. Patriarchy is a web of sinful, destructive relationships of oppression. The ekklesia is the space where these structures of patriarchal oppression and sin can be analysed as well as denounced. The central task and raison d'être of the church is therefore to maintain a critical presence in the world<sup>101</sup>. The emancipatory transformation that takes place within the community which is made possible through the Word of liberation not only enables the community to speak out against sinful structures, but also to announce, to proclaim grace and liberation to the world. Grace, the other central reinterpreted concept that appears in Chopp's ecclesiology, describes the vision of abundance and right relationships, flourishing, which is anticipated in the life of the ekklesia and proclaimed to the world.

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<sup>99</sup>Chopp, The Power to Speak, 72.

<sup>100</sup>Rebecca Chopp, Saving Work. Feminist Practices of Theological Education (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 52.

<sup>101</sup>Chopp, The Power to Speak, 85: 'For a world that has distorted the richness of difference and particularity into the violence of control and repression and that suffocates the plenitude of desires and dreams, the possibilities of community today must be heard and lived out.'

At the centre of Chopp's ecclesiology is 'the Word', the perfectly open sign which essentially can be understood as empowerment to speak. Yet this understanding of the Word is not entirely without ambiguity for Chopp as elsewhere she states that the Word as a central symbol requires women's marginality<sup>102</sup>. Though Chopp builds on Rahner's concept of the church as the sacrament in the world, the focus in her concept of the life of the church is, following Barth and Schleiermacher, on the spoken, preached Word rather than on acts of sacramental celebration. Following a liberation theological re-interpretation of the sacraments as signs of God's presence and salvation in the world, Chopp overcomes a dualistic understanding of church and world by replacing it with a concept of the world as public and the church as counterpublic which enables public discourses of liberation. The Word as the constituting element of the community constructs its rhetorical character which is at the heart of what the church is in Chopp's understanding. Language, for Chopp, creates and constitutes the life of the community. The embodiment of the Word can only take place through language. Receiving the Christian tradition, the Bible is not itself the constituting process of being community, but the community is a speaking community, even before it can receive the scriptures as prototypical sources of creative reading and interpretation. It is central to Chopp's ecclesiology that women experience themselves as participating in this process of speaking and interpreting the word<sup>103</sup>. The church as a rhetorical community experiences itself not as being preceded by the Scriptures, but as being in constant dialogue with the Bible. But the process of dialogue with scripture is but one act of rhetoric which takes place within the Christian community, its main task is the proclamation of emancipatory transformation:

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<sup>102</sup>See footnote 94.

<sup>103</sup>'In speaking freely together and in speaking through all that women are and do the Word becomes manifest. Community, born in this relation, created continually in its deliberation of life together, receives within itself the Bible' Chopp, The Power to Speak, 90.

The proclamation of emancipatory transformation names the rhetorical nature of Christian community, the corporate nature of Christian life: in deliberation, conversation, and dialogue that grows out of connections and differences, out of intersubjectivity, out of ongoing participation in emancipatory transformation.<sup>104</sup>

One of the greatest weaknesses of Chopp's theology is the vagueness of her approach<sup>105</sup>. As attractive as the 'perfectly open sign' sounds in contrast to the restrictions put on women with regard to public speech, it can also be understood as a refusal to commit oneself to the kind of discernment of both the tradition and the structures of the world which Fiorenza sees as the task of women-church. Chopp's approach lacks the context of particular political commitment which is essential to a feminist liberation theology. Though Chopp speaks about the necessity of change and the importance of community as the site where change in the lives of individuals and women can take place, her concept of change is named 'emancipatory transformation' which can be understood as connected to the individualism which Chopp seeks to deny.

One of the roots of Chopp's vagueness with regard to ecclesiology, and in fact her theology as a whole, can be identified as her obvious lack of Christology. Reacting to Barth's overemphasis on the connection between Christology and ecclesiology, as the church being the community which is modelled on the Word of God spoken once and for all in Christ, Chopp replaces the particular historical human being Christ with the essentially disembodied concept of the word as an open sign. Even though the Word essentially enables discourses of embodiment and interaction in community, it lacks the embodied foundation of a historical event. While Chopp's focus on the 'Word' which empowers to speak must be seen as a way of reclaiming the central

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<sup>104</sup>Chopp, *The Power to Speak*, 94.

<sup>105</sup>See for example Chopp, *The Power to Speak*, 4: 'Furthermore, the church makes such discourses persuasive, by embodying and expressing the fluidity of images, texts, voices, and figures of freedom that it creates and discovers in the words that give rise to person's lives, in the words that speak of freedom in the Book, in the words of praise and communion in the community, in the words enlivened by the Word.'

Protestant feature of preaching (which is what women have been denied within the Protestant tradition), her understanding of the church as the rhetorical community of poets takes away the urgency to act for change that is at the heart of, for example, the women-church movement. It must be seen as one of the strengths of Russell's approach that her ecclesiological reflections are essentially rooted in her experiences within particular communities rather than, like Chopp, dwelling on abstract concepts of rhetoric, intersubjectivity and mutuality which remain essentially meaningless as they are not situated within a particular institutional and political context.

The rhetorical character of the community is present not only in the proclamation of the Word to the world, but also in the community's search for dialogue and intersubjectivity<sup>106</sup>:

The Word as a perfectly open sign, not spoken once and for all and down from above, but embodied in the words of the community, establishes the character of the community as rhetorical space. It enables the community to be not only a space for discourses which envision diversity, multiplicity and otherness as a possibility for the future, but actually to begin to embody discourses of multiplicity and otherness.<sup>107</sup>

In embodying discourses of multiplicity and the celebration of otherness the sacramental character of life in the community is constituted. Chopp understands the community as sacramental space for the 'restoration of the basic elements of existence into the transforming possibilities of life together where those gathered at the table are accepted in their differences, set free in their particularities, and graced into solidarity with the world.'<sup>108</sup> Sacramentality takes place and is embodied in the life of the community, in mutual interaction and the embodiment of discourses of liberation which are the fulfillment of divine grace and flourishing. Grace is conveyed through the life of the community, but grace does not exist as an objective material reality

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<sup>106</sup>Chopp, The Power to Speak, 35.

<sup>107</sup>Chopp, The Power to Speak, 23.

<sup>108</sup>Chopp, The Power to Speak, 88.

which is administered by the church as an institution, but grace is participation in the very life of the community itself.

The church, in Chopp's understanding, has three main characteristics: it is defined by the poetics of community<sup>109</sup>, by the rhetoric of life together and by the gifts of the spirit<sup>110</sup>. These not only enable the life of the community, but more so enable it to live out its purpose of proclaiming liberation to the world. These characteristics take their starting point from some symbols and texts of traditional Christianity and in assuming their fundamentally liberating power, but are constantly working on their creative transformation. Proclamation to the world rather than concentrating on its own life as a collection of private individuals is what Chopp understands as the purpose of the community. Chopp seeks to replace private religion as well as a concept of ecclesiology as focussing on a cult of a particular institution with an ecclesiology which is based on political commitment for the transformation of the world into flexible structures of intersubjectivity, mutuality and the celebration of multiplicity. Proclamation does not so much mean conversion to a particular religion or ideology, but rather the transformation of relationships as well as resistance to the social and symbolic order or patriarchy. Chopp's use of the term 'world' is not one of a dichotomy between church and world, but rather one that understands the world not as sinful space which needs to be fled, but rather as public space in which discourses of life take place. The community understands itself not as space for withdrawal into private religion, but as a counterpublic space in which relationships of emancipation

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<sup>109</sup>Chopp, The Power to Speak, 85: 'A poetics of community will not replace other modes of discourses in community, but it will fund their richness and fullness in a communion of words which is multivocal and multiform, dense and rich, imaginistic and creative. Such a poetics that allows community to be communion with Word is itself a process of emancipatory transformation that informs and reforms all other modes of discourse.'

<sup>110</sup>The 'gifts of the spirit' are not to be understood as given to the community from the outside, but are formed within the community for it to exist as a community of justice, vitality, wisdom and love. See Chopp, The Power to Speak, 96.

and transformation, of empowerment for women to speak words of liberation, can be practised only to be announced to the world as a possibility of transformed living.

We must question Chopp's use of the concepts of sin and grace. Sin for Chopp is structural sin, patriarchy as the all encompassing structure of oppression, while grace is flourishing and abundance of life. We must ask whether this is not a decentering away from the particularity of life which feminist ecclesiology due to its commitment to the change of specific situations cannot afford. We must ask whether the theology of flourishing can ever be more than a romantic dream which only replaces the forms of Christian eschatology which authors like Ruether deny as they take away the focus from the urgency of liberation in the present situation. If feminist ecclesiology is essentially reflection and strategising of particular situations which need transformation, we must ask whether a case could be made for ecclesiology embodying the potential for change of a particular situation using the means available to reach liberation for all. Feminist ecclesiology cannot afford to be based on a utopian dream, but must found itself on what women have often done in the past, which was to create and transform structures with the means available. Chopp's understanding of sin as structural is used to contrast and overcome an individualistic understanding of salvation<sup>111</sup>, but we must ask whether she really achieves her goal by replacing this kind of individualism with a concept of a flourishing interactive rhetorical community. The task of the community in Chopp's understanding is to identify sinful structures and to proclaim grace as the possibility of liberation for all. The church, the Christian community, in Chopp's understanding is counterspace, liberated space for the sake of the world. In a sense Chopp tries to achieve the same as Russell's concept of mission as the identifying task of the church, but we must ask whether or not she re-creates a dualism between church and world which feminist theologians seek to overcome. It is the purpose of a concept of salvation as the

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<sup>111</sup>For a summary of the concept of flourishing in feminist theology see Grace Jantzen, 'Feminism and Flourishing: Gender and Metaphor in Feminist Theology' *Feminist Theology* 10 (1995), 81-101.

announcement of grace and flourishing to overcome individualistic concepts of salvation which withdraw attention from the necessity of political commitment and the inseparability of political commitment, ecclesial life and spirituality. But we must ask whether the kind of church-world/public-counterpublic concept which Chopp creates draws attention to sinful structures of patriarchy in the world, but creates an understanding of the church as an ideal space and perfect reality which by no means reflects reality. What most feminist ecclesiologies lack is concepts of dealing with conflicts and sinful structures within the community. Here lies one of the weaknesses of a structural concept of sin as it analyses and addresses sin as a reality in the world or even the traditional church, but does not address the issue of sin within the community.

Chopp sees her vision of the church as a community of emancipatory transformation already realised in groups considered marginal by mainstream Christian churches, such as the base ecclesial communities or the African-American church. She also sees it realised in experiences of women's bonding within and on the margins of a number of church structures. But on the whole her approach remains vague and idealistic as it paints an ideal picture of the life of the community as the beginning of a transformation of the world which lacks its starting point both in a particular political situation and in the Christian tradition as potentially liberating.

## **2.6 Issues in Feminist Ecclesiology in the Reformed Traditions**

A number of characteristics of the two Protestant approaches to ecclesiology I have described can be named. For the context of this chapter I want to focus on those two particular approaches, while in a later chapter I will question the validity of Protestantism for a feminist critique of ecclesiology as such. Protestantism functions

in this chapter as the political situation in which these two particular approaches to feminist ecclesiology are set. This background is reflected in a number of ways:

1. Both Russell and Chopp focus on the particular local community as the location of ecclesial life, but do not engage in discussions of the wider structure of the church. The centre of attention is the local Christian community which is a manifestation of the church as such. Despite Russell's anticlerical approach, she does not see any particular need to engage in a discussion of institutional structures beyond the level of functional authority within the local community. This makes Russell's approach in particular appear to be functional and pragmatic. The church is interpreted as the local community of believers where being church takes place. It can take any possible form as long as the general values of inclusivity, focus on Christ and hospitality to those on the margin are realised. It does not function as the institute of salvation and is therefore not perceived as an entity outside the believer, but as the body of those belonging to Christ who are to pursue God's mission. The church does therefore not appear as an a priori, but is rather constituted in the particular situation. Therefore salvation can take place in the church, but can also be found outside the church. For Chopp as a theologian of Protestant background the question of the relationship between feminist communities and the institutional church is less significant than for women of Roman Catholic background. Chopp's reflections on the church are not so much focussed on the particular reality of one institution, but the church, being community, is something that takes place where structural sins of patriarchy and oppression are denounced and emancipatory transformation of lives and relationships is made possible. Church for Chopp is creative space where values of difference, specificity, embodiment, solidarity, anticipation and transformation are central and celebrated<sup>112</sup>. In her work on feminist approaches to theological education Chopp points out that for women the question is often not so much whether to stay in the church or to leave the church, but how to develop alternative visions of church or

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<sup>112</sup>Chopp, The Power to Speak, 78.

community. This alternative vision then enables them to work towards the transformation of the existing ecclesial structures in which they find themselves. We must carefully evaluate the potential of these institutional differences between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism which are reflected in the feminist concepts of ecclesiology discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis.

Likewise the question of the teaching authority of the church is irrelevant for both Russell and Chopp, which shows the differences with regard to the particular institutions to which the different authors presented in the first two chapters of this thesis respond.

2. Both Russell and Chopp use and reinterpret traditional Christian symbols with greater liberty than the Roman Catholic authors do. Among these are Christology, the Trinity and the 'Word'. This is partly due to the fact that in the context of churches which focus on the word and on preaching rather than on sacramental celebration, these concepts appear to be far less gendered. Russell can embrace the christological symbol because her understanding of the imitation of Christ is not one of resembling Christ physically in order to perform the sacramental celebration of the Eucharist, but it is one of following the praxis of Christ and implementing it in the life of the individual believer and the life of the community. Chopp on the other hand seeks to replace the rigidity of the 'Word' being spoken once and for all and being a means of restriction and discipline with the fundamental openness of the 'Word' which essentially disconnects it from the particular historical event of incarnation and embodiment which can be seen as foundational for Christian theology. The creative reinterpretation of the fundamental symbols of Christian theology must be seen as one of the central and most important tasks of feminist theology. But that also implies the affirmation of their liberating potential. It must be seen as one of the important tasks of a feminist critique and reinterpretation of ecclesiology to find ways of interpreting and connecting the most central symbol of Christian theology, Christology. The central feature of Christology for feminist theologians, and at the same time the

starting point for a creative reinterpretation of the neglected relationship between Christology and ecclesiology, is an understanding of Christology as the foundational event of embodiment and an affirmation of historical particularity. While Russell's concept of the church being centred on Christ and imitating the praxis of Christ can be seen as a starting point, it does need further development as it remains essentially disconnected from the bodily reality of women's lives. The Christ event, the creative 'Word' must not only be seen as empowerment to speak and to enable the life of a rhetorical community, but it must also be seen as empowerment to embodied being, to the particular embodied lives of women as being church.

## Chapter 3

### **'Reading of a Church that Women Are Not'. Feminist Critical Readings of the Ecclesiologies of 'Lumen Gentium', Karl Barth, Paul Tillich and Jürgen Moltmann**

#### **3.0 Methodological Introduction**

In the previous two chapters on feminist approaches to ecclesiology, or more appropriately to 'being the church', I have shown that what feminist theologians do in their writing about women being church is in fact a recentering and refocussing of an ecclesiological debate in which women have hitherto not participated. By creating an ecclesiological 'écriture féminine' women transfer the centre of the ecclesiological debate from either the timeless essence of the church or Christ to reconceiving what it means to be church in the light of the experiences of those who are church: women. This can be understood not as a matter of correcting traditional concepts of ecclesiology, but as a process of 'reinventing the church', developing new models of being church in which women's experiences of being church not only exist, but more importantly are factors which shape the life of the church.

In the process of 'reinventing the church', feminist theologians, despite their occasional eclectic use of symbols from the Christian tradition, have more or less ignored the ecclesiological traditions as they are represented in the work of male theologians. Their emphasis is not on reconstruction or correction, but on the implementation of an alternative vision of being church as the 'discipleship of equals'. Feminist theologians have therefore not been disrupting male-dominated ecclesiological discourses, but have largely ignored them. I argue that feminist critical theology also has to engage in a reading of traditional texts which opts for a third way beyond either ignoring or merely correcting traditional ecclesiologies. I suggest an alternative reading which disrupts the search for the timeless nature of the church through being guided by its purpose of a critique of the non-representation of women

in traditional ecclesiologies as well as their mis-representation based on particular underlying gender constructions with which these ecclesiological self-reflections are ridden.

In the present chapter I suggest that those who hold such an alternative vision and its practical implementation in the history of the 'women-church movement', despite being a matter of strategic necessity prompted by the urgency to act on behalf of women being marginalised in malestream churches, may have discarded the developing ecclesiological tradition as a source of criticism and reconstruction too quickly. I argue that if women see themselves as participating and reclaiming the church and the Christian tradition they cannot ignore the historical development of this church and the impact of its self-reflection on the lives of women. In this chapter I therefore propose a feminist critical reading of four approaches to ecclesiological reconsideration and reform in this present century. My expositions of these four approaches do not claim to be complete accounts of what the respective authors understood to be the nature/theology of the church. They aim at focussing on those aspects of the respective ecclesiological concepts which are significant and relevant to a feminist critical reading and re-evaluation of the work of the authors as part of a Christian tradition which women claim for themselves.

It is one of the main features of the new paradigm of doing theology which is proposed by feminist liberation theologians that they are more concerned with the study of women's experience and faith praxis in the church than with the study of theological texts. At times the study of theological texts as the basis of theological discourse is discarded as an obsolete remainder of theology in the androcentric paradigm which feminist liberation theology seeks to replace. It is certainly one of the main contributions of feminist liberation theology that theological discourse is no longer seen as solely based on texts, but that this study of texts must be complemented and challenged by a critical analysis of women's experiences and faith praxis in the church if women are to be fully valued as subjects doing theology. Yet, the study of

women's experience and faith praxis can by no means replace the study of theological texts, if feminist theology wants to retain a critical presence in theological dialogue with mainstream theology as one of its functions. Feminist theology can only fully take up its role as a critique of theology in an androcentric paradigm with the aim of changing it into theology in a discursive or dialogical paradigm if it is also concerned with challenging patriarchy where androcentric theologising to a vast extent takes place: in the writing and critiquing of theological texts. Feminist theology not only has to be concerned with writing new texts and establishing new ways of practising the Christian faith. If it wants to establish its voice as a partner, as an indispensable contributor to the praxis of theological discourse, it has to engage in a critical dialogue with those whose theological writings are considered influential. This is no less true for the study of ecclesiology.

Before I begin to discuss the ecclesiologies of the four chosen sets of texts, those of the Second Vatican Council, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich and Jürgen Moltmann, I want to ask the question why ecclesiological reconsideration from a feminist perspective is necessary at all. If the church is perceived as a 'given' and as a cultural religious institution of value for men and women, this points to the necessity of 'ecclesiology' as the reflection on what the church is. It points to finding ways of expressing what the church is which are relevant to both women and men and of reconstructing ecclesiology as a form of theological discourse which is neither exclusive of women nor describes the church as a means of religiously sanctioned male power over women, but outlines the church as 'Lebenszusammenhang' of both

men and women.<sup>1</sup> As such the church is also a meaningful social institution which in turn creates meaning for women. The importance of the church as the space for discourses of faith, sacramental celebration and community urges the necessity of not discarding ecclesiology altogether, but of rethinking discourses of being church. Our analysis identifies ecclesiology as a form of male discourse by which men have attempted to define valid and invalid forms of being church as well as identifying women's discourses of church as not being church<sup>2</sup>. We must question the function of ecclesiology as a discourse which describes the church as a vital religious space, but does so in a way which supports a particular, predominantly patriarchal social symbolic order. What ecclesiological discourse describes is from a critical feminist point of view, often not only not the church or its theological essence, but a discourse

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Teresa Berger's description of liturgical women's studies: 'Ziel dieser Frauenforschung ist vielmehr eine Revision der bisherigen Rezeption und Interpretation des gottesdienstlichen Lebenszusammenhangs als Ganzem (in einem gewissen Sinne kann man deshalb sagen, daß es letztlich Ziel der liturgiewissenschaftlichen Frauenforschung ist, sich selbst - als ausschließliche Frauenforschung - überflüssig zu machen)... Vielmehr geht es der liturgiewissenschaftlichen Frauenforschung darum, die Liturgie als Lebenszusammenhang von Frauen und Männern, als die von beiden geteilte gottesdienstliche Lebenswirklichkeit zu interpretieren und zu rezipieren.' Theresa Berger, Liturgie und Frauenseele. Die liturgische Bewegung aus der Sicht der Frauenforschung (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1993), 17.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Grace Jantzen, 'Disrupting the Sacred: Religion and Gender in the City' unpublished paper 1996. I am grateful to the author for making this available to me. Jantzen suggests, following Irigaray and Foucault, the necessity of reassessing the function of religion as one of the most important factors in culture, disrupting discourses which have in the past been defined almost exclusively by men.

of the legitimisation of an ordering of society which leaves no space for women's discourses of faith<sup>3</sup>.

The church as a subject of theological discourse can be seen as a mirror in two ways: on the one hand it mirrors the respective theologian's concept of other aspects of his (sic!) theology, such as Christology or Pneumatology, and at the same time it reflects the situation and the need of reform of a church at a particular time. The purpose of this chapter is on the one hand to analyse the significance of the church's self-reflections expressed by theologians who saw themselves as very much part of the church, and to evaluate their potential as sources of alternative ecclesiological discourses for women. Feminist theology is concerned with providing two vital aspects of theology for women and of women: to reflect on the theological significance of women's discourses of faith in order to incorporate them into what is perceived as the body of Christian tradition and to develop theological discourses which are relevant and salvific<sup>4</sup> for women. Building on these premises, the study of

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<sup>3</sup>It is one of the main tasks of feminist theology to 'make women visible', to find ways in which the meaning of a particular text can be expressed in a way that breaks the silence of women in traditional Christianity: 'Not only have women been excluded from shaping and interpreting the tradition from their own experience, but the tradition has been shaped to justify their exclusion. The traces of their presence have been suppressed and lost from the public memory of the community. The androcentric bias of the male interpreters of the tradition who regard maleness as normative humanity, not only erase women's presence in the past history of the community but silence even the questions about their absence.' Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation' in Feminist Interpretation of the Bible Ed. Letty Russell (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 112.

<sup>4</sup>Feminist theologians have to a large extent disputed individualistic concepts of salvation and aimed to replace them by an understanding of salvation as 'flourishing and right relation to both fellow human beings and the whole of creation'. See for example Mary Grey, Redeeming the Dream. Feminism, Redemption and Christian Tradition. (London: SPCK, 1989); Grace Jantzen, 'Feminism and Flourishing: Gender and Metaphor in Feminist Theology' Feminist Theology 10 (1995): 81-101; Diane Neal, 'Out of the Uterus of the Father: A Study in Patriarchy and the Symbolization of Christian Theology' Feminist Theology 13 (1996): 8-30. Following such an understanding of salvation we have to work towards an understanding of church as the space where all human beings and women in particular are able to flourish.

ecclesiology combines the two aspects in order to develop discourses of being church which reflect women being church.

A critical reading of ecclesiology therefore takes place given the ambiguity of ecclesiology being a male dominated discourse and the church being a vital space of life for women. This ambiguity can also be understood, parallel to feminist critical readings of scripture, as that of the church being at the same time space of oppression and site of liberation. If the church is supposed to be a space of liberation for women, we have to ask whether we can identify the ecclesiological texts of 'Lumen Gentium', Karl Barth, Paul Tillich and Jürgen Moltmann as texts which describe such a liberating church. At the same time we have to develop strategies of liberation and change in order to liberate the texts themselves from being texts that describe an institution which is oppressive and marginalising for women. Such a feminist reading is always a biased reading, but it seeks to overcome the myth of 'objectivity' which is claimed by conventional ecclesiologies as theology of the church which speaks for all of its members in all their diversity. It takes its starting point from what we have identified as the fundamental premise of all feminist ecclesiologies: that women are church and have always been church. It is not scripture or a particular understanding of scripture and the Christian tradition which is the measure of our reading of ecclesiological texts, but our reading is one which seeks to advocate women's presence and representation in theological reflections on the church, in other words, to find ways in which particular ecclesiologies express, or at least potentially express, that women are church.

Another reason for engaging in ecclesiological discourse is that the church as the community of men and women also becomes an important transfer point of power between men and women. A feminist analysis is therefore necessary in order to identify the gender-power interaction between men and women in an institution as important as the church. We identify sexuality as a hitherto neglected dimension of

ecclesiology and argue that because of this neglect, dominating and oppressive power structures could develop.<sup>5</sup>

I now turn to the critical method chosen for my feminist critical evaluation of ecclesiological texts. In this chapter I employ a double strategy of feminist critical reading which combines methods of feminist political theory and feminist literary criticism and hermeneutics. This critical reading takes place in what Ruether has identified as the social location of women-church, the ambiguity between identification with the church and the necessity to develop alternative structures, claiming that women are church and demand for themselves the right to define what church is. This ambiguity, according to Ruether, is characteristic for the life of women-church. Therefore we can argue that traditional ecclesiological texts are still relevant for women, as they are expressions of a church with which women at least partly identify, even though women have, despite the texts claiming to speak for women, not been participating in this process of self-reflection. Such a feminist critical reading is therefore always a subversive reading. Its purpose is not to outline the nature of the church in terms of its timeless essence or even to identify the theology of the church of a particular author, but to overcome the notion of 'legitimate' ways of doing ecclesiology, by reclaiming the significance of women as authors of being church<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup>The assumption that sexuality is a historical construct which is the site of and especially dense transfer point for relations of power: between men and women, young people and old people, parents and offspring, teachers and students, priests and laity, an administration and a population makes sexuality an important site for the analysis of power without prescribing the precise importance of sexuality.' Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 7.

<sup>6</sup>We are used to a universal reading of the scriptures (for example, "for all humanity"), without suspecting that such an ample perspective excludes a lot of people from marginal groups. The universal reading is really European, male and white. To read from a different perspective does not sound "legitimate". But this is the point: it is not a legitimate reading that we want, since legitimization is the instrument of support of patriarchal ideologies, inside and outside the churches. Our interpretation wants to rescue elements of illegitimacy and subversion.' Marcella Althaus-Reid, 'Walking with Women Serpents' *Ministerial Formation* 62 (1993), 32.

The political philosopher Seyla Benhabib understands the tasks of a feminist critique as both an 'explanatory-diagnostic analysis of women's oppression' and an 'anticipatory-utopian critique' of the norms and values of our current society and culture<sup>7</sup>. For the purpose of the present study, a feminist theological critique of traditional and contemporary ecclesiologies, I suggest three steps which take their starting point from Benhabib's understanding of critical social theory: Such a study has first of all to provide an 'explanatory-diagnostic' analysis. Such an analysis identifies that, up to the present, theological studies of the church have ignored the relevance of questions of gender identity for a theological study of the church, but at the same time they have worked with strong explicit as well as implicit constructions of gender which are culturally contingent, but sanctioned by their use in an ecclesiological context. From there a feminist theological critique has to move on to the deconstruction of the results of the first step. The third step will then be a reconstruction, or in Benhabib's words an 'anticipatory-utopian critique'. In other words, out of the ambiguity for women some aspects of the texts studied, we can attempt to construct different and feminist constructive ways of reading the text which open possibilities of multiple forms of ecclesiology<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup>Seyla Benhabib, 'The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Feminist Theory' In: Feminism as Critique. Essays on the Politics of Gender in Late-Capitalist Societies ed. by Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (London: Polity Press, 1987), 80f.

<sup>8</sup>From a much wider perspective in the study of religion June O'Connor proposes a method of 'rereading, reconceiving and reconstructing' religious traditions. See June O'Connor, 'Rereading, reconceiving and reconstructing traditions: feminist research in religion' Women's Studies 17.1 (1989), 101-123. She develops 'gender-sensitive hermeneutic' focussing on five areas: '(1) some measure of suspicion, given the androcentric context and content of inherited sources; (2) attention to recovery and remembrance of women's lives and history, together with efforts to reconstruct the lives of those who had little voice in their societies; (3) criticism, correction, and transformation of given concepts, such as inherited claims regarding what is universally human; (4) efforts to rethink and alter the ways scholarship itself is approached and carried out, given the findings of feminist perspectives; and (5) feminist self-critical examination, part of the process of following questions wherever they lead us and refusing to turn feminist inquiry into an ideology or orthodoxy.' June O'Connor, 'The Epistemological Significance of Feminist Research in Religion' Religion and Gender ed. Ursula King (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 46.

Feminist literary analysis draws on a number of different methods of literary critical reading of texts. It can be identified as a method in its own right in using the historical and textual marginalisation of women and advocacy of their liberation and representation as its starting point. It rejects the 'notion of a "proper way" to read a text as but another expression of male control of texts and male control of reading.'<sup>9</sup> Its main characteristic can be described as introducing the category of gender as fundamental to the analysis of literary texts<sup>10</sup>. Feminist scriptural hermeneutics applies this way of 'reading through the perspective of gender' to the texts of canonical and extra-canonical texts. In my application of feminist hermeneutics to non-canonical texts I view these texts, the works of theologians who see themselves as participating in the process of ecclesial self-reflection and thereby doing theology 'on behalf of the church', as (though with a different degree of authority) part of the developing tradition the church claims as its own. This begs the question whose tradition the theological tradition of the church is. Three factors are involved in this process of feminist critical reading: first of all, we have to ask about women's participation in the authoring process of the texts in question, that is, the process of development of the text as one from which women were excluded, though they might appear as hidden authors in some cases and their presence needs to be identified. Second, we have to look at women as readers and authors of new meaning. Women as women have traditionally not been the intended readers of theological texts, which again identifies ecclesiology in its traditional forms as a male theological discourse. With regard to the genre of text we are dealing with, we have to take into account that it is an essentially male genre that in the past could only be accessed by women if they consented to

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<sup>9</sup>David J.A. Clines and J. Cheryl Exum, 'The New Literary Criticism' in The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible ed. J. Cheryl Exum and David J.A. Clines JSOT Supplement Series (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 17.

<sup>10</sup>'Whether concerned with the literary representations of sexual difference, with the ways that literary genres have been shaped by masculine or feminine values, or with the exclusion of the female voice from the institutions of literature, criticism, and theory, feminist criticism has established gender as a fundamental category of literary analysis.' The New Feminist Criticism. Essays on Women, Literature and Theory. Ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Press, 1985), 3.

taking the role of the supposed male reader, in other words, if they consented to leaving their identity as women behind and agreed to their temporary immasculation, their assumption of the role of the supposedly neutral male reader<sup>11</sup>. Women as readers simply by being women challenge conventional and intended forms of reading theological texts. Women as readers challenge the acceptance of their absence as authors and agents of theology by consciously embracing their identity as women readers in their particular socio-cultural situation. By identifying themselves as women readers who reject the process of immasculation demanded of them prior to reading, women engage in an interactive process of reading, with the third factor, the text itself. Ecclesiological texts, such as the ones studied in the latter part of this chapter, cannot be seen as describing the empirical historical reality of the church, but must be read as texts which construct reality and women's being a part of it<sup>12</sup>. Reflecting on the texts themselves we have to ask what role women have played in the

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<sup>11</sup>Often a woman reading an androcentric/patriarchal text is immasculated, that is, she reads and identifies as male. Yet as the reader identifies with the male as universal and dominant, she knows she is female. She constructs herself as Other.... Hers is always a female difference and power that must be domesticated....Once a woman is aware of immasculation, she can read as a feminist. As she reads she recognizes the text immasculating her and the particular male reading strategies she uses. She also reads recognizing what the text forbids or tensions within it. She also reads recognizing that she and other feminists can resist or affirm the text, read it against the grain or transform it for feminist use.' Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Janice Capel Anderson, 'Literary Critical Methods' in Searching the Scriptures I A Feminist Introduction ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 251. See also Judith Feterley's discussion of literature as male: 'In such fictions the female reader is co-opted into participation in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded; she is asked to identify with a selfhood that defines itself in opposition to her; she is required to identify against herself.' Judith Feterley, The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), XII.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. for example Cheryl Exum and David Clines' approach to literary readings of the Hebrew Bible: 'It is not a historical discipline, but a strictly literary one, foregrounding the textuality of the biblical literature. Even when it occupies itself with historical dimensions of the text - their origin and their reception - its primary concern is the text as an object, a product, not as a window upon historical actuality.' Exum/Clines, 'The New Literary Criticism', 11.

process of creating the text itself as well as in the process of creating the meaning of the text.

By stating that genres, like conciliar pronouncements or systematic/dogmatic theology, have conventionally not been accessible to women as authors and/or readers, and returning to our starting point, the neglect of those texts by feminist theologians themselves, the question remains in the background of our critical analysis whether ecclesiology as a theological category can remain valid and viable for women's discourses of being church.

It is important, however, in our reading of the texts suggested not to remain at the stage of merely identifying women as victims of patriarchal oppression. Despite the fact that the ecclesiological approaches to be evaluated primarily construct women as being in a subordinate place in society, our analysis must also take into account the historical reality of the church as the site of women's discourses of liberation. Only a reading of ecclesiological texts which bears in mind both sides of women's experiences of being church can be a truly non-patriarchal or counter-patriarchal reading of ecclesiology which enables us to recover the liberating potential of a multiplicity of ecclesiological sources<sup>13</sup>. Such an approach to reading ecclesiological writings is a resisting, a subversive way of dealing with theological tradition, but it

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<sup>13</sup>The German feminist theologian Monika Fander makes this point very aptly with regard to feminist scriptural hermeneutics: 'The common starting point of all feminist approaches is a profound suspicion of the results of a patriarchal system of her thinking in which women are often excluded from the symbolic, public, and social forms of communication, and by which femaleness has been devalued and frequently reduced to the role of victim.... To define oneself exclusively as a victim means to understand one's very being in terms of dependence on patriarchy....The anthropological approach ... focusses our attention on women themselves. When women are seen exclusively as victims of patriarchy, there is great danger that what men say about women will be given more authority than is appropriate, and that such statements will be regarded all too easily as representative of women's reality.' Monika Fander, 'Historical-Critical Methods' trans. Linda M. Maloney in Searching the Scriptures I A Feminist Introduction Ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 205f.

seeks ways of reading which enable women to move beyond mere consent to existing structures as well as beyond merely asking to be included in what already exists<sup>14</sup>.

### 3.1 'Lumen Gentium'

After outlining my methodology for analysing traditional ecclesiological texts as documents of ecclesial male self-reflection, I now want to apply this method to four ecclesiological approaches in this century. The reason for choosing 'Lumen Gentium' as one of the texts to be analysed lies in the historical significance of the Second Vatican Council as one of the most important events in the history of the Roman Catholic Church in this century<sup>15</sup>. It also represents the church's acknowledgement of the need to respond to the 'modern world' which can also be seen as the context of the development of feminist theology. 'Lumen Gentium' is referred to as the main document issued by the council. In it the church reflects on its own identity in a changing and transforming world. It is interesting to see that the council in fact does acknowledge the changing role of women in society as one of the features of the changing world in which it finds itself and even praises these changes as an

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<sup>14</sup>Clearly, then, the first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader and, by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcising the male mind that has been implanted in us....While women obviously cannot rewrite literary works so that they become ours by virtue of reflecting our reality, we can accurately name the reality they do reflect and so change literary criticism from a closed conversation to an open dialogue.' Feterley, The Resisting Reader, XXII/XXIII.

<sup>15</sup>See for example John Mahoney, The Making of Moral Theology. A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 302: 'The council itself was the major event of this century in the Church's life and the most momentous exercise to date of the Church's hierarchical magisterium in all its history, not only for the extent and depth with which it dealt, but also for the overall orientation which it gave to the Church's life and activity.'

improvement<sup>16</sup>. However, the recognition of the changing role of women remains restricted to the situation of women in society while the issue of the role and status of women in the church remains unaddressed<sup>17</sup>. An explicit reference to the situation of women in the church is given only marginally in the 'Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People. Apostolicam Actuositatem':

Since in our days women are taking an increasingly active share in the whole life of society, it is very important that their participation in the various sectors of the Church's apostolate should likewise develop.<sup>18</sup>

The marginality of this reference indicates the significance the council attributed to the issue of women in the church. The council's concern for women does not reflect its willingness to correct a past theological error, but is driven by changes in the 'secular'

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<sup>16</sup>This is most explicit in the 'Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. Gaudium et Spes' 29: But forms of social and cultural discrimination in basic personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language or religion, must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design. It is regrettable that these basic personal rights are not yet being respected everywhere, as is the case with women who are denied the chance freely to choose a husband, or a state of life, or to have access to the same educational and cultural benefits as are available to men.' in: Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents Ed. Austin Flannery (Herefordshire: Gracewing, 1993), 929 (In the following all page numbers referring to Vatican Documents refer to this edition, unless otherwise stated.).

<sup>17</sup>A notable exception is the Belgian Cardinal Suenens who pointed to this omission with regard to women religious. He argues that 'the ecclesiastical world has not yet recognized and accepted that increased role of woman which is today an accomplished and uncontested fact, at least in the developed countries' Suenens urges religious women not to wait for men to approach this question, but to speak out on behalf of their own emancipation themselves as 'The woman religious, as a woman, has a contribution to make to the church and to the world.' (Léon-Joseph Cardinal Suenens, Corresponsibility in the Church Tr. Francis Martin (London: Burns & Oates, 1968), 176-196) But we must also consider the limitation of Suenens' concerns as he only reflects on women religious, who in effect are counted on the side of the clergy rather than the laity, which means that the concerns of the majority of women who are church were left without attention.

Earlier than that, in the discussion Lumen Gentium on October 23, 1963, Suenens argued that 'systematically excluding women from active church participation made no sense in an age when they go almost to the moon.' See McEnroy, Guests in their Own House, 35.

<sup>18</sup>Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People. Apostolicam Actuositatem', 9 (777).

world. Even though the council affirms that the church has to be aware of the 'signs of the times' which to some extent are attributed revelatory character, such an argument lacks the theological depth required.

The council excluded women from its decision-making process and only reluctantly admitted them as observers at conciliar sessions<sup>19</sup>. Women have indeed not participated in 'Lumen Gentium', nor in the writing and discussion of any of the other dogmatic texts issued by the council, either as authors nor as readers, yet they have been affected by it as participants in a church that was considered to be changing and opening to the concerns of a modern world. Since this is a discussion of feminist approaches to ecclesiology, I propose a reading of the 'Dogmatic Constitution on the Church' which, though perhaps not intended by the original authors, assumes women as readers of this document which indeed is part of the ongoing and changing tradition of the Roman Catholic church. The presuppositions of the Second Vatican Council and feminist approaches to the Christian tradition can be seen as similar as both are based on the necessity of transformation and change within the Christian tradition. But the question for a feminist critique of the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council must be whether the changes proposed by the Magisterium for the church to respond to the needs of the 'modern world' actually reflect the needs of women and whether they take into account that women, indeed all women and not only women religious, are church and have always been church.

The church in the modern world is one which understands unity as one of its main characteristics and simultaneously provides room for diversity, though this

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<sup>19</sup> On the issue of the presence of women at the council see Helen Marie Ciernick, 'Cracking the Door: Women at the Second Vatican Council' Women and Theology. Ed. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Phyllis H. Kaminiski. The Annual Publication of the College Theological Society (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 62-80; Carmel McEnroy, Guests in their Own House: The Women of Vatican II (New York: Crossroad, 1996) and Carmel McEnroy, 'Women of Vatican II: Recovering a Dangerous Memory' in The Church in the Nineties: Its Legacy, Its Future Ed. Pierre Hegy (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), 149-157.

variety, which is in fact encouraged by the council, only refers to different localities and is still bound by the supremacy of the Roman Pontificate. The emergence of local liturgies as well as the collegiality of the episcopate is encouraged, though the former still need the approval of the church and bishops are under the leadership and bound by the authority of the Roman Pontiff. What is offered here is, therefore, a modified centralism. Though the historical significance of the church for the first time in history presenting itself as a world-church cannot be underestimated, it must be pointed out that different local perspectives only provide one particular angle from which theologising or particular forms of liturgy could be informed. The church understands itself essentially to be as a universal church which works towards fulfilling its mission of incorporating all of humanity into it.<sup>20</sup> Such universality implies the essential unity of the church which is celebrated at the heart of the church, in the Eucharist. This universality is expressed through the existence of local churches which, each under their own bishop subject to the centralised power of the Roman Pontiff, affirm the catholicity of the church.<sup>21</sup> Though it is one of the achievements of the council that it in fact did recognise the potential salvation of non-Catholic Christians and members of non-Christian religions, the fullness of that salvation is still represented by the Catholic and Apostolic church itself. Karl Rahner, one of the theologians who essentially shaped the theology of the council, points to the fact that, though the theology of the Second Vatican Council is still to a certain extent very Eurocentric, its achievement is the recognition of the non-European world as being part of the church, represented for example by the presence of indigenous bishops. So the universalism affirmed by the council in fact does leave room for the existence of indigenous churches and in fact encourages their existence. Here lies a potential for further development which Rahner acknowledges:

If this task were fulfilled, there would then be a pluralism of proclamations, or, better, the real pluralism of proclamations and theologies within the western Church....They could mutually criticize and enrich each other, but

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<sup>20</sup>Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 13 (365).

<sup>21</sup>Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 23 (378).

every one of them would nevertheless have an historical individuality which in the last resort would be incommensurable with any other.<sup>22</sup>

A feminist theological critique must question whether the understanding of universality and pluralism which is put forward here operates on a rather narrow perspective. It does allow for a pluralism of different local perspectives. This was in fact taken up by the development of indigenous local theologies, such as Latin American liberation theologies. However, it does not take into account that the perspective which a theologian takes in writing her or his theology is in fact informed by a number of different perspectives other than his or her cultural context. So we must criticise the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council as operating with strongly gendered concepts which function to establish and maintain a patriarchal social order, and we must also point to the fact that gender itself does not appear as a category of the difference and multiplicity which are to shape the church in the modern world. Such a supposed 'gender-neutrality' helps to retain male dominance and essentially functions to exclude women as agents of ecclesial life.

A number of symbols are used to describe the nature of the church. These are mainly taken from the biblical tradition as well as from previous ecclesiological documents. It is because of this rootedness of 'Lumen Gentium' in the tradition that we can use it as a major example in our feminist critique of Roman Catholic ecclesiology. The central symbol used to describe the nature of the church is 'the people of God'. This in the understanding of the council does not diminish the hierarchical nature of the church, but is rather to be understood as an exclusive term which identifies the church as those who belong to Christ. The church is generally described as female as well as the body of Christ. In any case the very being and nature of the church is only defined through its relationship to Christ which is essentially one of dependence and subordination. The council sets the development of the church within the evolving

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<sup>22</sup>Karl Rahner, 'Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council' In: Karl Rahner, Theological Investigations XX. Concern for the Church Transl. Edward Quinn (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981), 88.

Trinitarian history of salvation. The term 'the people of God' also seeks to express a certain continuity with the history of Israel as the people of God. It is significant for this stage of the history of ecclesiological self-reflection on the nature of the church that there is an increasing awareness of the universal and global church. This leads to an emphasis on both unity and diversity among the members of the body of Christ. The church continues to appear as an institution that by means of sacramental celebration mediates salvation and therefore is the sacrament of Christ in the world. Its understanding of its sacramental character is exclusive: in other words: no salvation can be perceived or obtained outside the institutional church. Increasing attention is given to 'the faithful', the members of the church below the ecclesial hierarchy, but the distinction between hierarchy and laity, between common and sacramental priesthood is essentially maintained. In analysing the term 'the people of God' as it is being used as the central metaphor of 'Lumen Gentium', we have to ask whether the exclusive notion of 'the people of God' actually presumes an understanding of 'people' in which women participate or whether it conceptualises the church as a people using a political term, thereby continuing the tradition of the split into public and private which understands women's religious discourses as essentially apolitical and private.

Second we have to question the hierarchical ordering of the church as the people of God. The church according to 'Lumen Gentium' essentially consists of three parts: hierarchy, laity and religious. The hierarchy is discussed at length immediately after the first two chapters on the spiritual nature of the church and it is pointed out that one cannot be perceived without the other. The hierarchy is divided into four parts: the supreme pontiff to whom absolute power is attributed, the college of bishops which represents the college of the apostles, the priesthood and the diaconate. Even though the document itself does not argue against women's participation in the hierarchy, men are explicitly mentioned in the discussion of the restoration of the lowest rank of the hierarchy, the diaconate which, as the authors of the document

argue, might be opened up to married men and younger men. The urge to retain the law of celibacy for the latter is yet another contribution to the exclusion of women. The hierarchy exercises the threefold ministry of Christ in teaching, ruling and sacramental celebration. From a feminist perspective this threefold ministry must be understood as a paradigm of threefold exclusion of women from what is considered normative in the church.

A feminist reading introduces the category of gender into the supposedly universal and gender neutral concept of the 'people of God'. The concept of the people of God imposes a static concept of (gendered) hierarchies which leaves no room for multiple forms as both personal and social identity reflected in the being of the church.<sup>23</sup> We have to deconstruct the concept of the 'people of God' in order to find out how it and other ecclesiological concepts become sites of the production of gender identities which are oppressive, but not liberating for women. These need to be identified as changeable and feminist theology has to develop models of how such a change is possible and can be implemented. The 'people of God' is identified with the Roman Catholic Church as the institution necessary for salvation. It is acknowledged that truth also exists outside the Roman Catholic Church, but the church retains its understanding of superiority. The very identity of the people of God is built on the transmission of male power, the apostolic succession in which disruption on the part of women is not even perceived as possible. The apostolic succession is established as an eternal order which is legitimised by its institution through Christ and his commission to Peter and the apostles<sup>24</sup>. The power of the college of bishops is dependent on the power of the pope as the supreme bishop and the college of bishop

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<sup>23</sup>Cf. Linda Nicholson and Nancy Fraser 'Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism' In: Feminism/Postmodernism Ed. Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson (London: Routledge, 1990), 34.

<sup>24</sup>Moreover, just as the office which the Lord confided to Peter alone, as first of the apostles, destined to be transmitted to his successors, is a permanent one, so also endures the office, which the apostles received, of shepherding the Church, a charge destined to be exercised without interruption by the sacred order of bishops.' Dogmatic Constitution on the Church III, 20 (p.372).

exercises power over the lower ranks of the hierarchy. What is presented here is essentially a male society governed by authoritarian power structures. Diversity within the church is expressed through diversity in the college of bishops. This concept of diversity is then used to assert the universality of the claims made by this hierarchical and exclusively male understanding of the church<sup>25</sup>. It is a diversity of males exercising power which is essentially subsumed under the power of one male: the supreme pontiff.<sup>26</sup> Such an understanding of the 'people of God' identifies itself as essentially male and though women's presence in it is presumed, the identity of the people of God hinges on the 'hierarchy' as the highest and essentially defining rank of the 'people of God'. Following the work of the Jewish feminist theologian Judith Plaskow I argue for a reconceptualisation of our understanding of 'the people of God' which includes the lives and experiences of women. This cannot be achieved by male theologians, let alone by members of the male hierarchy. If we are to continue to use the metaphor of the church as the 'people of God', it cannot be a concept of the 'people' which depends on a hierarchy from which women are by virtue of their gender excluded, nor an understanding of 'the people' which states the superiority of one group over another. It has to be an understanding which empowers women to name their own reality in it as women rather than having their reality named by male

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<sup>25</sup>This college, in so far as it is composed of many members, is the expression of the multifariousness and universality of the People of God; and of the unity of the flock of Christ, in so far it is assembled under one head.' Dogmatic Constitution on the Church III, 22 (p. 375).

<sup>26</sup>The college or body of bishops has for all that no authority unless united with the Roman Pontiff, Peter's successor, as its head, whose primal authority, let it be added, over all, whether pastors or faithful, remains in its integrity. For the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, namely, and as pastor of the entire Church, has full, supreme and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered.' LG III, 22 (p. 375).

superiors<sup>27</sup>. The present concept of the 'people of God' constructs women as the 'Other', as those who are included in 'the people', those who participate in a mission which is not their own, but that of a church in which they only participate by being dependent on a male hierarchy.

It is generally considered one of the major achievements of the Second Vatican Council to reconsider the significance of the role of the laity. This is of particular importance for our feminist discussion of 'Lumen Gentium' as the laity is where the majority of women in the church are to be found. We must therefore ask whether the increased appreciation of the role of the laity in the church can also be seen as a step towards the liberation of women. Bearing in mind that the chapter on the laity, like the remainder of the document, is the product of an exclusively and consciously male body of authors, we must, however, treat it with the necessary hermeneutics of suspicion. To begin with, we must ask about the structures in which the discourse on the laity is located in the context of the ecclesiology of 'Lumen Gentium'.

The laity as one of the two major groups in the church to which women by virtue of their sex can belong are 'the faithful who by Baptism are incorporated into Christ, are placed in the People of God, and in their own way share the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ, and to the best of their ability carry out the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the whole world.'<sup>28</sup> The council stresses the fact that members of the laity participate in the mission of the church, though their ministry is confined to the realm of the secular. By maintaining

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<sup>27</sup>Feminism demands a new understanding of Israel that includes the whole of Israel and thus allows women to speak and name our experience for ourselves.' Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai. Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*. (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 9. See also *ibidem*, 87: 'To redefine Israel from a feminist perspective, we must incorporate into the understanding and practice of the Jewish people so that women's contributions to Jewish community are not driven underground, thwarted, or distorted, and men's are not given more weight and status than they ought to enjoy. Until that happens, both our concept of Israel and the dynamics of Jewish life will remain thoroughly mishapen by sexism.'

<sup>28</sup>Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 31 (388).

the distinction between the realm of the sacred and that of the secular as reflected in the hierarchical structure of the people of God and taking into account that women's being in the church cannot take place in the realm of the sacred, women's discourses of faith are attributed minor value within the church, implicitly defined as discourses of the 'Other'. The model of the church proposed in the documents of the Second Vatican Council is an essentially relational one.<sup>29</sup> The existence of the laity is only defined in their relationship to and dependence on the hierarchy. And it is an essentially dualistic system which connects the difference between hierarchy and laity with the dichotomy between spiritual and secular. The purpose of this study is to show how this model, though not explicitly, works with very strong underlying gender constructions and therefore is shaped in a similar way to a gender binary model. If a feminist theological critique wants to be aware of and oppose the explicit and implicit use of such gender binaries it has to apply its critique in an ecclesiological context and question the appropriateness of any ecclesiological model which operates on such binaries. For, as Seyla Benhabib points out, 'the logic of binary oppositions is also the logic of subordination and domination.'<sup>30</sup> Such a relational model which sets up a hierarchical binary between hierarchy and laity essentially resembles the construction of woman defined as the 'Other' from the normative male. We have to replace the present concept of relationality as dependence with one of being in relation as interdependence and connectedness which reconstructs the church as a network of human beings interacting with each other.

Women also participate in the third group among the people of God: the religious. Religious life is seen as a special vocation to holiness and ministry for some

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<sup>29</sup>The distinction which the Lord has made between the sacred ministers and the rest of the People of God involves union, for the pastors and the other faithful are joined together by a close relationship: the pastors of the Church - following the example of the Lord - should minister to each other and to the rest of the faithful; the latter should eagerly collaborate with the pastors and the teachers.' Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 32 (390).

<sup>30</sup>Seyla Benhabib, Situating the Self. Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics (London: Polity Press, 1992), 15.

members of the people of God. As opposed to the laity the religious are counted on the side of the hierarchy. This can be seen as an unnecessary and unfruitful division that patriarchy imposes on women. Religious life is therefore an ambiguous category for women. While on the one hand it attributes status and recognition to women in a clerical church, it at the same time creates a hierarchy among women and forces women to deny their sexual identity as women for the sake of status in a male dominated church. While being religious gives status to some women it may do so at the expense of just relationships among women. A significant number of participants in the women-church movement are members of women's religious orders, though we also find a strong argument addressed by lay women to religious women to give up their privileges in order to join their lay sisters in their struggle. A feminist re-reading of ecclesiology must therefore include a reconceptualisation of religious life. It presupposes the overcoming of dichotomies between hierarchy, laity and religious in order to reconceptualise religious life as a valid and important form of life within the church which is not based on an understanding of a special and superior vocation, but as one of a multiplicity of possible forms of life within the church.

We also have to reconsider the significance of the sacraments in the ecclesiology of 'Lumen Gentium'. Following Karl Rahner and others the church is understood as 'the sacrament in the world', in other words the symbol of God's saving presence in the world and for the world. By means of sacramental acts the church mediates salvation to individuals and therefore appears as an institution of salvation. As for the life of the church itself, the sacramental celebration of the Eucharist is its focal point and its dynamic centre. The focus on the Eucharist as the priestly celebration of the sacrifice of the mass again confirms the church's self-understanding as an essentially male church which fosters the relationship of dependence between hierarchy and laity, between priests and people as its basic characteristic. This structure cannot be disrupted or else it would deprive the church of its dynamic centre, the celebration of the Eucharist. This again identifies the church of 'Lumen Gentium'

as an essentially male church which is centred around a male priesthood which alone can represent the people of God:

The ministerial priest, by the sacred power that he has, forms and rules the priestly people; in the person of Christ he effects the Eucharistic sacrifice and offers it to God in the name of all the people.<sup>31</sup>

This identifies the sacramental priesthood essentially as a structure of power over the people and in particular as male power over women. To receive the sacraments, to participate in the sacramental life of the church for a woman therefore means to give up her identity as a woman in order to be incorporated into a church which merely identifies her as other, as 'second in line'. Sacraments are in theory understood as celebrations of the whole church, as means of establishing right relation with God and with the church. Yet as with the core metaphor of priesthood the sacraments are an area where women have experienced exclusion and denial of their bodily existence rather than affirmation of their being church. Like men, women are incorporated into the body of Christ through baptism which can be seen as the sacrament of inclusiveness. Confirmation is seen as a re-affirmation of baptismal allegiance with the church. It equals a confirmation into a church which will continue to marginalise and exclude them as adults. As long as we have not achieved a concept of the sacraments as celebrations of girls' and women's bodies embodied in the body of Christ, the sacramental nature of the church, expressed in the existence of the church as a whole as well as in individual sacramental celebration will be a symbol of the exclusion of women from the body of Christ, from the people of God rather than as expressions of women being church<sup>32</sup>. The church of the Second Vatican Council understands itself as 'the church of the people' or 'the people of God', but a feminist analysis of the sacramental life of the church and the concept of sacramental celebration in 'Lumen Gentium' shows that the sacraments rather occur as celebrations of the priest who is by definition male on behalf of the people or for the people.

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<sup>31</sup>Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 10 (361).

<sup>32</sup>I will discuss the sacramental dimension of a feminist ecclesiology in chapter 6 of his thesis.

Women are under such a definition of sacraments excluded from what it means to be the sacramental body of Christ.

The document itself does not mention women, but works with the assumption of a generic subject which must be identified as male. The people of God are a priestly people, in other words the character of their distinctness is identified by different degrees of priesthood. This must be seen as a means of alienating rather than empowering women, as priesthood especially in a Roman Catholic context has always been a fundamentally male category from which women on the grounds of gender have always been excluded. We must ask whether it is actually relevant or meaningful for women to identify themselves as having a vocation for the priesthood or whether such an identification would again be another form of immasculation as well as giving in into establishing women's lower status within the church. This is inevitably so since the fundamental category of distinction, that of priesthood, common or sacramental, is one from which women are at present by definition excluded. Though the notion of common priesthood is used to acknowledge and improve the status of the laity, it at the same time confirms the notion that only priests, only members of the hierarchy, can be fully church. Even if women are assumed to be included in the understanding of the laity, they are so in a way that does not reflect the reality of their participation in ecclesial life. In other words: priesthood is a metaphor in the definition of which they do not participate and at best it places them at the bottom of any ecclesial hierarchy. With regard to women as members of the laity, the notion of the common priesthood does not improve the status of women in the church, but simply contributes to their alienation from the institutional church.

The priesthood is only one example of a symbol which remains essentially alien to women and identifies the church, though itself referred to as female, as an essentially male defined institution. The council itself identifies four areas from which ecclesiological symbols are taken: the life of the shepherd, the cultivation of land, the art of building and family life and marriage. At least in the context of the kind of

western society for which Lumen Gentium was originally written most of these are areas of life essentially attributed to male members of society or, if women are involved, it is often at a functional level rather than one of defining power. A closer analysis shows that the metaphors taken from this realm restrict themselves to a patriarchal concept of the family in which women are essentially defined in terms of their submissive relationship to their husbands. A feminist hermeneutics of suspicion identifies these metaphors as potentially harmful for women as they confirm and sanction the status of women in a patriarchal society and again leave no room for multiple concepts of family life any more than multiple concepts of ecclesiology. The choice of these fields of metaphor shows that the ecclesiology of 'Lumen Gentium' on the one hand ignores the presence of women in the church and the concerns of women as church, but on the other hand works with strongly hierarchical and gendered imagery which not only excludes women from the process of defining church, but also supports a patriarchal concept of family life which is harmful for women.

Another important aspect to be considered in a feminist critique of the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council is that of ambiguous body symbolism. The church, following the Christian tradition, is defined as the body of Christ which is united by Christ as its head and celebrates the diversity of its members. Such body symbolism is of particular importance to the Roman Catholic tradition, but also for a feminist critique of it. The tradition has often identified women with bodiliness and declared such bodiliness impure and defiling.<sup>33</sup> This argument has on many occasions been used to exclude women from the heart of ecclesial life: the sacramental celebration of the Eucharist. For the church to be defined as a body, it has to be the body of Christ, a male body which in addition is entirely dependent on the head of the body, Christ. Such a concept of the church as the body of Christ does not take into account the reality of embodiment, of human beings' bodies as men's bodies and

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<sup>33</sup>For examples see: Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Women's Body and Blood: The Sacred and the Impure' In: Through the Devil's Gateway. Women, Religion and Taboo Ed. Alison Joseph (London: SPCK, 1990), 7-21.



women's bodies. It identifies the aspect of bodiliness as inferior and essentially subordinate to the mind. It reduces the range of metaphorical meaning attached to the understanding of the body to the diversity of its members, while at the same time carefully defining the range of such diversity. Diversity in such a limited understanding is only celebrated as diversity which is disconnected from an understanding of embodiment. It is not the diversity of bodies, of particular embodied sexuate existence, which defines the body of Christ, but its uniting submission to the male head of the body: Christ. Only such a literal deconstruction of what can be seen as one of the root metaphors of Christian ecclesiology helps to identify its potentially harmful character for the reality of women's lives both in the church and in society, but at the same time leaves room for a liberating re-reading of ecclesiology. Even though the disembodied androgyny which is created by identifying the essentially female church as the body of the male Christ appears absurd to a feminist understanding of embodied reality, it points to the significance of considering the relationship between ecclesiology and bodies, essentially between ecclesiology and women's bodies. I will undertake such a reconsideration in the final two chapters of this thesis by approaching the subject of church as sexuate embodiment from a christological perspective, leading up to a reconceptualisation of feminist sacramental ecclesiology. What our feminist re-reading of 'Lumen Gentium' can point to here is the way in which ecclesiology has become a means of constructing women's bodies and their significance in a particular way. What we can retrieve for our reconsideration of ecclesiology is the importance of bodies, in fact of embodiment, for our understanding of the church, but this is only possible if we continue to struggle with the ambiguity of reclaiming ecclesiology by claiming a right to a different reading of 'Lumen Gentium' as a male conciliar text and to a critique of what is actually said in the text itself.

The document concludes with two chapters which could be seen as a potential starting point for a feminist re-reading, though they, like the remainder of the document, require a feminist deconstruction. In the second half of the document the

authors are concerned with the connection of the life of the church and the lives of believers. The life of believers is supposed to be one of holiness which is derived from the holiness of the church. The church identifies itself as being part of the continuing history of God's people, as the 'pilgrim church'. The life of the pilgrim church is identified through the significance of the lives of saints, male and female. As the pilgrim church the life of the church has eschatological character, but at the same time is characterised by its transitoriness. Its holiness exists only through its being firmly rooted in the transcendent. The church identifies itself as being permanently on the way to heaven and in continuity with those who have gone before. The concept of sainthood is a very ambiguous one for women. On the one hand it identifies individual women as models of faith, even when they are mere constructions of a male church for the purpose of education, but on the other hand the concept of saints again sustains and creates a hierarchy between women, as it exalts women as particularly holy who lived a life of conformity to the standards set by the patriarchal church which often meant denying their female sexuality. The concept of women saints restricts women's participation in the history of the church to those individuals while the church itself remains dominated by men. Church history as it is conventionally done is the history of the male church in which women only in exceptional cases participate. On the other hand the concept of saints and the pilgrim church can be re-evaluated as a starting point for the acknowledgement of women's presence in the life of the church. Yet women need to be very careful in evaluating the models of sainthood they are presented with. After all the canonisation of saints is still a process of the male church. Women need to recover the idea of sainthood from the context of canonisation and also from the context of saints having to be dead before they can be venerated as saints, to searching the life of the church in past and present for women who in their experiences of faith and friendship with Christ can be role models for women in their realisation and embodiment of being church<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup>I will further discuss the issue of 'saints' in chapter five of this thesis.

The council had decided not to issue a separate statement on the subject of Mariology, but to include its discussion of Mariology into its statement on the church, as Mary is believed to be both mother and supreme personification of the church. I will at this stage not discuss the implications of a Marian ecclesiology as this issue will reappear in the last but one chapter of this thesis, but I want to argue that the addition of a chapter on Mariology, while the first section of the document hardly mentions women at all, can be seen as symbolic for the significance of the presence of women, (in this case real women, not women as they are constructed by patriarchal theology), in the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council. The chapter could perhaps be seen as the acme of the document<sup>35</sup>, but on the whole appears as rather supplementary to the self-reflection of the church in the modern world. By constructing Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, as an idealised, disembodied feminine figure which bears no resemblance to the reality of women's lives, but rather adds to the denial of their existence, the ecclesiology of 'Lumen Gentium' does not fill the space of the absence of women in the church, but rather increases the exclusive maleness of the church by reducing women to the status of a supplement and denying the significance of their bodily being by replacing women being church with one woman whose main strength is that she is not like all other women. Even Mary's significance and existence depends on the male existence of her son, while other

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<sup>35</sup>See for example Francis Frost, 'Mother of God and Mother of the Church' The Month 29.12 (1996), 506: 'In devoting the last chapter of Lumen Gentium to Mary, the Fathers of the Council gave recognition to the key position of Mary in right thinking about the nature of the Church. The Church cannot simply be a "people", motivated by almost aggressively activist structural and sociological concerns. Like Mary, and as the body-spouse of Jesus, the Church is feminine. Within the living reality of all that she is, priority must be given to a mystery of fruitfulness in maternity and to the virginal spousality, in faith, hope and love, which makes that fruitfulness possible. Hence the eminent dignity of Catholic women within the feminine Church.'

relationships are not even considered<sup>36</sup>. The church modelling itself on Mary is constructed in a way that contradicts the reality of the life of other women and confirms that women's identity can only exist in dependence on the male. This is most clearly expressed in the following quotation which summarises the way the Marian ecclesiology is constructed:

The Church indeed contemplating her hidden sanctity, imitating her charity and faithfully fulfilling the Father's will, by receiving the word of God in faith becomes herself a mother. By preaching and baptism she brings forth sons, who are conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of God, to a new and immortal life. She herself is a virgin, who keeps in its entirety and purity the faith she pledged to her spouse. Imitating the mother of her Lord, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, she keeps intact faith, firm hope and sincere charity.<sup>37</sup>

Mary is portrayed as already having achieved the perfection that believers, the church, are aiming for, if 'sons' includes 'daughters'. We have to ask whether such a concept of a perfect model of faith, be it a woman or not, can be empowering for women, or for any member of the church. What is of importance for women at this stage is rather the re-affirmation of their particular sexual lives as spaces of revelation and sacramental presence over against such a Mary, who as model of perfection rather points to women having to deny their female sexuality before they can obtain sanctity, while such a denial is not required from men. The text also favours some relationships over others, for Mary as well as the church is celebrated as giving birth to sons, but not to daughters, as a mark of her fidelity to her 'spouse'. The text does not mention relationships between mothers and daughters nor between women or non-spousal relationships as models of the church. This identifies the Marian ecclesiology of the

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<sup>36</sup>See for example Dogmatic Constitution on the Church 53 (414): 'Redeemed, in a more exalted fashion, by reason of the merits of her Son and united to him by a close and indissoluble tie, she is endowed with the high office and dignity of the Mother of God, and therefore she is also the beloved daughter of the Father and the temple of the Holy Spirit. Because of this gift of sublime grace she far surpasses all creatures, both in heaven and on earth.... Wherefore she is hailed as pre-eminent and as a wholly unique member of the Church, and as its type and outstanding model in faith and charity.... The Catholic Church taught by the Holy Spirit, honors her with filial affection and devotion as a most beloved mother.'

<sup>37</sup>Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 64 (420).

council as a self-expression of a patriarchal male dominated church which does not consider other possibilities of women's lives as part of itself.

In conclusion we can say that 'Lumen Gentium', though it is and must be seen as the self-reflection of a male church, provides a starting point for possible reconstructions of ecclesiology. This, however, can only happen as the result of a process of feminist deconstruction which identifies the text as on the one hand ignoring the reality of women's lives in the church and on the other hand working with strong gender constructions which in no way represent the reality of women's lives. Yet, our analysis is built on the assertion that women's claim that they are church and have in fact always been church involves the claim to participate, if not in the original authoring process, yet in the process of reading these ecclesiological documents, a reading which in turn can be seen as part of the process of authoring new meaning and constructing new ways of being church.

### **3.2 Karl Barth**

The three authors whose ecclesiological work I want to study and evaluate from a feminist point of view in the remainder of this chapter are from Protestant backgrounds. While ecclesiology has always been one of the most important aspects of theology in a Roman Catholic context, the Reformers did not establish their own ecclesiology, mainly as a result of fear of being seen as wanting to found a new and separate church. Ecclesiology therefore did not become prominent until this century when it became necessary to define the identity of the church against the challenges of political authority which tried to usurp the authority of the church and thereby the

authority of Christ<sup>38</sup>. The challenge to Protestant ecclesiology was therefore originally more an external than an internal one which for our feminist analysis points to the question whether the church in its apologetic self-reflection took into account also the consequences these external constraints entailed for the situation of women. This is of particular interest with regard to Karl Barth's ecclesiology in relation to the Confessional Church and National Socialism.

The most lucid example in the theology of Karl Barth to take here is Article 5 of the 1934 Barmen Theological Declaration<sup>39</sup> since it presents the most important aspects of Barth's ecclesiology in concise form:

The Christian Church is the community of brethren in which the Word and sacrament, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christus is present as Lord. With both its faith and its obedience, with both its message and its order, it has to testify in the midst of the sinful world, as the Church of pardoned sinners, that it belongs to him alone and lives and may live by his comfort and under his direction alone in expectation of his appearing.<sup>40</sup>

The aspects of this short paragraph from one of the most important documents of Protestant theology in this century are that the church is a 'community of brethren', that Christ is its Lord who is present through the Holy Spirit and that the church takes an exemplary role in relation to the world. For a feminist enquiry into Barth's ecclesiology this means asking whether the 'community of brethren' could also

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<sup>38</sup>See for example Wolfgang Greive, Die Kirche als Ort der Wahrheit. Das Verständnis der Kirche in der Theologie Karl Barths (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 1991), 18: 'Die Zurücknahme der gesamten Kirchenfrage auf das punctum mathematicum des Wortes Gottes und seiner schöpferischen Kraft, die mit allen Folgeproblemen der modernen Welt zusammenhängt, stellt nun das spezifisch protestantische Problem der Ekklesiologie dar, denn im konkreten Kontext der neuzeitlichen Welt führt die Betonung der Unverfügbarkeit des Wortes Gottes und der Unmittelbarkeit im Glauben an Jesus Christus zu einem Individualismus, der die permanent Krise des Kirchengedankens ist.'

<sup>39</sup>Barth was part of the committee which drafted the Barmen Theological Declaration and can be seen as its main author. See Klaus Scholder The Churches and the Third Reich. Volume two: The Year of Disillusionment 1934 Barmen and Rome Transl. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1988), 137.

<sup>40</sup>The Barmen Theological Declaration translated by Douglas S. Bax quoted after Eberhard Jüngel, Christ, Justice and Peace. Toward a Theology of the State in Dialogue with the Barmen Declaration (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), XXV.

provide space for women's discourses of faith or in what way constructions of gender roles to be found in Barth's anthropology are reflected in the construction of his ecclesiology. I will mainly concentrate on the second aspect mentioned here, the dominating presence of Christ in Barthian ecclesiology which degrades the Spirit almost to having merely instrumental function rather than being ontologically a person of the Trinity. I will here only marginally take up the third aspect of the mission of the church to remind the world of its being through Jesus Christ. This will mainly take place in the recontextualisation of my own interpretation of Barth's ecclesiology by reflecting on the significance of the threefold contexts of Barth's theology of the church for a feminist interpretation of church.

In this present study I will concentrate on the final form of Barth's ecclesiology as it is found in his Church Dogmatics. Barth's ecclesiology is indebted to the Calvinist Reformed tradition in which he stands and does not appear as a separate section within his main opus, the Church Dogmatics, but is incorporated in the doctrine of reconciliation, the third major part of the Church Dogmatics. Barth distinguishes between the objective realisation of reconciliation in Jesus Christ and its subjective realisation in the life of the individual human being through the Holy Spirit, which finds its most fundamental form in the existence of the Christian community as the community of those who are aware of their reconciliation with God. A feminist reinterpretation has to begin by challenging such a distinction between objective and subjective experiences of reality as gendered, as well as such a reduction of salvation to reconciliation with God which leaves no room for an interpretation of both sin and reconciliation as gendered experiences. A separation into objective and subjective forms of reconciliation must be challenged in the light of feminists' claims regarding the significance of experience which point to the inseparability of the two aspects. We must also query whether Barth's association of 'objectivity' with male experience and the pejorative use of 'subjectivity' as female experience are not to be interpreted as pointing to male dominance justified through the maleness of Christ, who remains the

supreme agent in the context of the understanding of reconciliation which provides the context of Barth's ecclesiology.

Barth also deals with his two main theological contenders: Roman Catholicism, which he sees as the realisation of absolutising the authority of the church over the authority of Christ, and liberal Neo-Protestantism which he sees as a challenge to the authority of Christ by secular philosophy and science outside the only proper context of theology: the church. From a feminist point of view this threefold background of Barth's ecclesiology is not without interest. National Socialism, as the attempt to subsume the authority and the entire life of the church under the power of a political party, also meant severe repression of women's lives in society. While women in Germany had acquired considerable freedom (including access to universities and professional life) in the 1920s, National Socialism attempted to restrict women's lives to the idealisation of the 'German mother' and her reproductive function<sup>41</sup>. In terms of historical background we must note that the Confessing Church which Barth represented theologically on the whole refrained from providing a counter model which valued women as human beings in their own right and established the life of the church as a counter-public which challenged the political

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<sup>41</sup>Andrea Bieler, 'Aspekte nationalsozialistischer Frauenpolitik in ihrer Bedeutung für die Theologinnen' "Drum wagt es Schwestern..." Zur Geschichte evangelischer Theologinnen in Deutschland ed. Frauenforschungsprojekt zur Geschichte der Theologinnen Historisch-Theologische Studien zum 19. und 20. Jahrhundert (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1994), 243-269.

authorities in this respect<sup>42</sup>. I am not arguing that the Confessing Church in this respect took sides with the powers of National Socialism, but I am pointing out the neglect of the concerns of women by a church governed by a Council of Brethren. While women were, in cases of absence of a pastor due to reasons of war, allowed to work in parishes, it was always made clear that this was no more than a temporary arrangement, but by no means was to foster the longer-term interests of women. With regard to Barth's emphasis on ecclesial law as exemplary law, we have to ask whether Barth's church, the historical Confessing Church and the church Barth constructs in the context of his Church Dogmatics, have indeed lived up to their mission to the world as far as women's lives are concerned.

Roman Catholicism as the second main theological contender of Barth's theology is at the same time the denominational background of most feminist theologians to this day. In a sense Barth's Protestant challenge to the church as a domineering institution runs parallel to that of feminist theologians who experience their own oppression and marginalisation within the institutional church, but our

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<sup>42</sup>The history of women in the Confessing Church is to a large extent still not researched. Bieler quotes Ilse Härter: 'Jedenfalls war es in der BK nicht von Anfang an einhellige Meinung, daß das NS-Frauenbild im Grunde eine Entwürdigung der Frau bedeutete.' (Ilse Härter, 'Theologinnen in der Bekennenden Kirche' unpublished paper 12. April 1989, quoted in Bieler, 'Aspekte nationalsozialistischer Frauenpolitik', 264). See also Ilse Härter, 'Gemeindefarbeit als Arbeitsfeld für Theologinnen in der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus' "Drum wagt es,, Schwestern..." Zur Geschichte evangelischer Theologinnen in Deutschland. ed. Frauenforschungsprojekt zur Geschichte der Theologinnen. Historisch-Theologische Studien zum 19. und 20. Jahrhundert (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1994), 447-459. Scholder mentions a debate between the Lutheran and the Reformed party of the Confessing Church as to whether women should be admitted to the Barmen synod. According to Scholder, the Lutheran fraction vehemently opposed this, while Barth 'saw this as more "a concession to the male spirit of the time" which could "in no way appeal to scripture and confession". The "arbitrariness" of such regulations, he thought, amounted to "an injustice to the countless women who nowadays are no less intensively involved than we men in the distress and the struggle of the church. Simply to suppress their voice in the organs of the community and the church in the future could be a very dangerous insult.'" Scholder, The Churches and the Third Reich, 134. At the actual synod only one woman, Stephanie von Mackensen from the Pomeranian Council of Brethren, was present. See Scholder ibid., 140.

feminist critical enquiry must question whether Barth's approach can be a viable alternative for women or whether Barth merely provides alternative ways of supporting and justifying male power over women within the church.

Feminist theology is also to a certain extent indebted to the liberal paradigm of doing theology, and in particular to Friedrich Schleiermacher, whom Barth sees as the epitomisation of the theological failures of the nineteenth century. While the Second Vatican Council seeks to find ways for the church in a world which is consciously perceived as modern, Barth's theology is consciously anti-modern. This is of importance with regard to the fact that modernity must be seen as the context of the development of feminism and feminist theology.

Another factor has to be taken into account. Barth's theology appears in the form of 'dogmatics' which a feminist theologian is likely to see as an expression of male authoritarian theology. Yet we have to mention the participation of a woman in the authoring process of the Church Dogmatics. Only in recent years has the role of Barth's assistant and close companion Charlotte von Kirschbaum been acknowledged<sup>43</sup>. We know that von Kirschbaum did to a significant extent participate in the writing and research of what later appeared as the culmination of Barth's theological career. Yet apart from that we can maintain that women were not intended

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<sup>43</sup>Barth's biographer Eberhard Busch describes Charlotte von Kirschbaum as Barth's close companion and co-worker. See Eberhard Busch, Karl Barth. His life from letters and autobiographical texts Trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1976), 185-186. Regarding von Kirschbaum's contributions to the Church Dogmatics see also The Question of Woman. The collected writings of Charlotte von Kirschbaum Ed. Eleanor Jackson, Transl. John Shepherd (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 8ff. Von Kirschbaum has only recently been acknowledged as a theological author in her own right. Her views on the ordination of women appear as preceding much work done by feminist theologians of later times: 'It will be the church's task to reach the practical decision of whether to call women publicly to the ministry of the proclamation of the Word. However, this cannot mean that women should wait around passively for this decision from their respective church leaders. For they too are part of the church, they too are called to share the responsibility for this decision, and are thus by no means merely the object but also and very definitely the subject of this decision.' Charlotte von Kirschbaum, 'The Ministry of Women in the Proclamation of the Word (II)' in Jackson, The Question of Woman, 201ff.

to be primary participants in Barthian theology, except as recipients. Their role remains restricted to that of members of the church which Barth describes, as well as secondary recipients of Barthian theology in the form of sermons by male ministers influenced by Barth's theology. We can therefore say that women were excluded from the authoring process of Barth's ecclesiology, but it still remains part of the Christian tradition in which some women participate and which may therefore to be reclaimed with new meaning. This requires feminist critique and the disruption of traditional forms of reading Barth's ecclesiology in order to find new and constructive meaning in it. As I mentioned before this is not supposed to be an all encompassing study of Barth's ecclesiology, but it rather seeks to suggest a particular way of reading Barthian theology as theology potentially relevant to women. I therefore propose to focus primarily on one particular aspect of Barth's ecclesiology which is most central to it and identifies its distinct character: the christological focus upon which all other aspects of Barth's ecclesiology depend.

After this brief sketch of the theological and political context of Barth's ecclesiology, however, we also need to evaluate Barth's anthropological approach which has been the main area of critique of Barth's theology by feminist theologians while other areas remain largely unattended so far. A feminist critique of Barth's ecclesiology cannot take place without this preliminary study of Barth's understanding of women in the order of creation and redemption. A reading of Barth's ecclesiology that claims to take into account the dimension of gender as essential for writing about the church today, cannot be done outside the context of Barth's own views on concepts of gender: a feminist critical reading of his ecclesiology is not possible without first viewing his anthropology. Even though Barth himself does not make this connection between ecclesiology and anthropology, a feminist reading of Barth's ecclesiology has to combine two perspectives in reading: that of Barth as the author of an anthropology which is ultimately detrimental for women, and that of finding approaches to reading Barth's ecclesiology in ways which are in fact liberating and make it usable for the

reconsideration of women as agents of being church. The first perspective requires a hermeneutics of suspicion as the basis for reading Karl Barth's ecclesiology<sup>44</sup>, while the second identifies Barth's writings as part of a Christian tradition in which women indeed participate. Bearing in mind Barth's position on the role and position of women in the 'order of creation' we have to conclude that a feminist reading of Barth's ecclesiology cannot take Barth's concept of women as its foundation for the role of women in the church. We have to contrast Barth's concept of normative heterosexual marriage as the foundational human relationship with a concept of sexual difference which allows for multiple forms of women's being in the church which are not necessarily dependent on women's relationship to men.

According to Barth, man (sic) is created to be in relation with his (sic) fellow humans in similarity to the relationships among the three persons of the Trinity. Humanity for Barth means fellow humanity, man in relation to both the divine and the human other. Barth continues:

The first and typical sphere of fellow-humanity, the first and typical differentiation and relationship between man and man (sic), is that between male and female.<sup>45</sup>

Barth speaks of a 'structural and functional difference' on which the relationship between male and female rests and which makes it unique among other human relationships. Barth characterises the differentiation between male and female as the

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<sup>44</sup>For a general feminist critique of Karl Barth's theology and his anthropology in particular see Joan Arnold Romero, 'The Protestant Principle: A Woman's Eye View on Barth and Tillich' Religion and Sexism. Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974) 319-340. For a view that tries to reconcile Barth see Clifford Green, 'Liberation Theology? Karl Barth on Women and Men' Union Theological Seminary Quarterly Review 29.3-4 (1974), 221-231.

<sup>45</sup>Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics III/4 The Doctrine of Creation Transl. A.T. Mackay, T.H. Parker, Harold Knight, Henry A. Kennedy, John Marks (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 117. See also Gareth Moore, 'Gender in Relationships' unpublished paper 1996.

most significant and universally valid one, in other words an unquestionable given.<sup>46</sup> Male and female are for each other and toward each other. Barth regards this fundamental relationality of heterosexuality as unquestionable.<sup>47</sup> A human being with regard to his or her sexuality lives in total obedience to God's command as to how to practise one's sexuality. Sexuality, maleness and femaleness as well as the fact that, in Barth's view, the two are ordered toward each other, can, according to Barth, not be viewed in isolation from other aspects of being human, nor can other aspects of human existence be separated from the sexual existence of man and woman. The ultimate fulfilment of male/female relationships is marriage<sup>48</sup>. Barth does not leave any room for any other forms of life than heterosexual marriage, let alone for

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<sup>46</sup>Barth, Church Dogmatics III/4, 150: 'Male and female being is the prototype of all I and Thou, of all individuality in which man and man differ from and yet belong to each other.' See also Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics III/1 The Doctrine of Creation Transl. J.W. Edwards, O. Bussey and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T&T.Clark, 1958), 186f. Here Barth sees the differentiation between male and female as the fundamental differentiation which exists within any other form of differentiation, but does not take into account that what it means to be male or female in a particular cultural context is itself defined by other forms of differentiation, such as race, class etc. In Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics III/2 The Doctrine of Creation Transl. Harold Knight, G. W. Bromiley. J.K.S. Reid and R.H. Fuller (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 286. Barth speaks about the male/female differentiation as the only structural differentiation in which human beings exist.

<sup>47</sup>Barth, Church Dogmatics III/4, 163: 'All the other conditions of masculine and feminine being may be disputable, but it is inviolable, and can be turned at once into an imperative and taken with the utmost seriousness, that man is directed to woman and woman to man, each being for the other a horizon and focus, and that man proceeds from woman and woman from man, each being for the other a centre and source....Relationship to woman in this sense makes the man a man, and her relationship to man in this sense makes the woman a woman.' Colm O'Grady points out that Barth in fact understands the relationship of male and female as what he sees as 'the crowning mystery of the work of creation', the relationship between Christ and the church. See Colm O'Grady, The Church in the Theology of Karl Barth (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968), 92.

<sup>48</sup>See for example Barth, Church Dogmatics III/4, 182.

singleness and friendship.<sup>49</sup> What each sex is, its rights and privileges as well as its duties, exist only in relation to the other sex, not on its own or in relation to partners of the same sex.

Barth's concept of mutual relatedness is very closely connected with his understanding of the ordering of creation as the sequence of male and female, in which man has his place and woman hers. That the relationship between man and woman is one of sequential order and not of mutuality is particularly expressed in marriage as the ultimate fulfilment of male/female relationships<sup>50</sup>. Equality of men and women, according to Barth, exists before God, but man and woman are allotted their specific and unchangeable place, for which Barth uses the letters A and B.<sup>51</sup> Barth endeavours to explain that neither sex can claim a privileged position simply due to the fact of being male or female, but from a feminist perspective we must question whether he succeeds in doing so, or whether it will not always be members of Barth's own sex who profit from what Barth proposes as the divinely-willed

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<sup>49</sup>This is most explicit in his views on homosexuality: 'These first steps may well be symptoms of the malady called homosexuality. This is the physical, psychological and social sickness, the phenomenon of perversion, decadence and decay, which can emerge when man refuses to admit the validity of the divine command in the sense in which we are now considering it.' Barth, Church Dogmatics III/4, 166.

<sup>50</sup>Barth, Church Dogmatics III/4, 192f.: 'In accordance with our general observations about the relationship of husband and wife, it must finally be said that to marriage, as the perfect life-partnership of one man and one woman, it also belongs that the order in which he is first and she second is valid and effective particularly in this sphere.'

<sup>51</sup>Barth, Church Dogmatics III/4, 169.

order<sup>52</sup>. Karl Barth uses the analogy between Christ and the church and the relationship between husband and wife in compulsory heterosexual marriage as an argument for the required submission of the wife to her husband<sup>53</sup>. In her subordination to the husband the wife represents the church submitting to its head Christ. Yet any power the husband has over his wife is ultimately limited by Christ. Therefore although we cannot speak of an exact analogy between Christ and the Christian community and husband and wife, Barth does his best to avoid some of the implications of his proposal:

This basic order of the human established by God's creation is not accidental or contingent....It is solidly grounded in Christ, with a view to whom heaven and earth and finally man were created. It is so solidly grounded in the lordship and service, the divinity and humanity of Christ that there can be no occasion either for the exaltation of man or the oppression of woman.<sup>54</sup>

Even though Barth sees such submission to Christ as the ultimate condition of all relationships between men and women, we must ask whether his Christology can itself be a viable basis for a feminist ecclesiology or whether feminist theologians might have to explore alternative models of the relationship between Christ and the church. This includes the question whether or not an ecclesiology at the foundation of which we find an ultimately hierarchical relationship between Christ and the church will not inevitably reproduce such an ontologically hierarchical organisation in its

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<sup>52</sup>See for example Barth Church Dogmatics III/4, 170.171: 'Thus man does not enjoy any privilege or advantage over woman, nor is he entitled to any kind of self-glorification, simply because in respect of order he is man and therefore A, and thus precedes and is superior in relation to woman. This order simply points him to the position which, if he is obedient, he can occupy only in humility, or materially only as he is ordered, related and directed to woman in preceding, taking the lead as an inspirer, leader and initiator in their common being and action....By simply protesting and rebelling, woman, even though she were a thousand times in the right, does not affirm and respect the order under which she also stands and by which alone she can vindicate her rights. Indeed, it may well be that her protesting and rebelling spring from the same source of contempt for order with which man offends her so deeply.'

<sup>53</sup>Barth, Church Dogmatics III/2, 314: 'Because her subordination stands under this comparison, the woman must see to it that it is not broken but maintained.'

<sup>54</sup>Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics III/2 The Doctrine of Creation Transl. G.W. Bromiley, R.H. Fuller, Harold Knight and J.K.S. Reid (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), 311f

in any way, it has to find a way to do so that allows for multiple ways of perceiving Christ. Christ's particularity as male, often seen as offensive by feminist theologians, could also be seen as the foundation of the importance of multiple sexuate particular human beings in the church. One of the limitations of Barth's ecclesiology is that through its utter christological determination he does not leave much room for an ecclesiology that focusses on those who are church and therefore for women as embodying church. Barth uses the term 'community' which refers to the local parish as the expression of the church as such and distinguishes it from the church as an authoritative institution, but does not give much attention to the particular members of the community who are church. His description of the church as the earthly-historical form of being of Christ does not go as far as finding ways in which those who are church in their particular lives and in their celebration of being church embody Christ's presence, so that Christ's incarnation as male from the body of his mother could provide a clue as to how women must be seen as 'incarnating'.

A feminist critique of Barth's ecclesiology has to take into account a further aspect of the christological foundation of Barth's ecclesiology. Barth is concerned with the reconstitution of divine authority in the church. This divine authority, which is focussed in the authority of Christ present in the church, is supposed to limit the abuse of illegitimate human/male authority, as the exercise of all authority within the church is derived from the authority of Christ. But we must ask whether the authority of a male Christ can indeed function to limit or prevent the abuse of authority in the church or whether it is not more likely to be the legitimisation of male authority over women within the church.

In conclusion we can therefore say that the christological basis of Barth's ecclesiology is in part usable for women while other aspects of it need to be discarded as detrimental for women becoming full agents of ecclesial life. A feminist ecclesiology has to be written in the full consciousness of the significance of gender for theology. If Christ is perceived as the superior male Christ from which the

dependent feminine church takes its being and self-consciousness, such an ecclesiology merely supports a social-symbolic order in which women are inferior and passive. Such underlying gender constructions need to be identified and resisted by a feminist re-consideration of ecclesiology. If, on the other hand, women begin to understand themselves as being church and as such as earthly-historical forms of Christ's new being, such a christological foundation can be empowering for women as it connects women's gendered/sexuate experience in the church with the being of Christ who is the foundation of the church<sup>59</sup>.

The church exists where God allows this form of fellowship between human beings to happen and remains dependent on the grace of God as the ultimate condition of its existence<sup>60</sup>. Here we see a fundamental difference from feminist approaches to ecclesiology which always contain a certain 'voluntaristic' strand which is characteristic of those of US American background. A feminist approach to ecclesiology which reflects women's experiences of being church and considering theological self-understandings of the church has to combine both aspects and should go to neither extreme. Barth's utter christological determination of the church is experienced by women as a reflection of male domination which denies women's own being as women, while voluntarism can lead to the extreme of separatism which establishes women-church in secession from the already existing church. A feminist approach to ecclesiology has to find a way to combine both angles: to affirm women as church and therefore as part of God's story and at the same time to create space for women to create the church as their own space, embracing voluntarism but not allowing it to count for everything.

Barth emphasises that despite its utter christological determination, the church still remains a human society. Our feminist critique therefore has to return to Barth's

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<sup>59</sup>Such a concept of women embodying Christ in the church will be taken up in a later chapter in connection with a feminist narrative ecclesiology.

<sup>60</sup>Barth, Church Dogmatics IV/1, 651.

understanding of humanity as male and female being significant in the life of the church, even though Barth does not explore this aspect himself. For Barth, the church as a human society means that our theological reflections on the church are to be based on the church as it exists in its sinfulness, but yet as the community of the redeemed. For feminist theologians, such an emphasis on the humanness/sinfulness of the church points in directions quite different from those envisaged by Barth. On the one hand we have to criticise male theologians' restricted conception of sin, which does not take into account dimensions like sexism as fundamental structural sin. For women sexism is one dimension of life in which the sinfulness and the need of redemption of the church are experienced and which in fact prompt the significance of reconceptualisations of what it means to be church for women. On the other hand Barth's understanding of the human/sinful church is one which can become a source of necessary criticism for feminist reconstructions of the church as well. Our analysis of feminist ecclesiologies has shown that the dimension of sin as a continuing reality within a feminist church is not explored by the authors studied, who mainly concentrate on structures of sin as a reality of the church they are critiquing. This can lead to a one-sided and idealistic picture of feminist communities which is not capable of providing a viable reconstruction of being church. It means that feminist approaches to ecclesiology have to find ways of exploring the dimension of sin, but more importantly of reconciliation and restoration of relationships as a so far neglected dimension of ecclesial life.

As for the life of the community, worship is at its centre and is the main means of edification for the community. Worship, according to Barth, is primarily the act of God in the life of the community<sup>61</sup>. Considering women's experiences of worship in the Christian communities to which they belong, we must note that, despite the fact that the majority of those present are women, it is not necessarily women's faith experience that is represented in language and forms of worship. For worship to be

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<sup>61</sup>Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/2*, 639.

considered an act of God in the life of the community means adding to the alienation experienced by women in church services in which they participate, but are not represented.

As I have emphasised before, the church's being, in Barth's understanding, is utterly determined by the being of Christ as the only being that exists of itself and is not determined by another. Barth points out that the church in its 'world occurrence' can take any possible sociological form, but that what determines the church's existence is the fact that it is the church of Christ. As such it is but a form of his being, always second in sequence after Christ<sup>62</sup>. Going back to Barth's anthropology which we have identified as a necessary focus of our feminist response to Barth, this reflects in an extrapolated form what Barth says about the relationship between male and female. On the one hand Christ, the male, is the one who is always prior and who, of his own free choice binds himself to the other, the church, the feminine. Yet Barth's emphasis elsewhere is a different one: in the context of anthropology he establishes that humanity can only exist as fellow humanity which at the same time sanctions heterosexual marriage as the normative form of such fellow humanity and this could lead to interactive interdependence. In the context of his christological ecclesiology Barth emphasises the fact that the church only exists as a predicated of Christ's being which always remains an act of grace. Yet, both point to the same: the derivative character of women's being, women as those who can only be through the other and as an aspect of the male's existence with no being of their own. This is bound to be reflected in the life of a church which understands itself not only as utterly determined by Christ, but also as a 'community of brethren' where 'sisters' have no representation of their own and are not required as agents of ecclesial life.

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<sup>62</sup>Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics IV/3/II The Doctrine of Reconciliation  
Transl. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1962), 754f.

### 3.3 Paul Tillich

Like Barth, Paul Tillich can be considered one of the most influential theologians of this century. The relation between his theological legacy and feminist theologies remains ambiguous. On the one hand feminist theologians have criticised Tillich for being ignorant of the questions and life experiences and prospects of women in his theology<sup>63</sup>, on the other hand he has also strongly influenced the development of a feminist theological method<sup>64</sup>. In the following section I want to evaluate this ambiguity with particular attention to Tillich's understanding of the church.

Tillich develops the final form of his ecclesiology in volume III of his Systematic Theology in the context of the theology of the Spirit. Again my comments are not meant to be a complete description and evaluation of Tillich's ecclesiology, but rather a proposal of one particular way of reading what is significant for Tillich's understanding of the church with regard to questions relevant for a feminist creative

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<sup>63</sup>See for example Judith Plaskow, Sex, Sin and Grace. Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich (Washington: University Press of America, 1980); Joan Arnold Romero, 'The Protestant Principle: A Women's Eye View of Barth and Tillich' In: Religion and Sexism. Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions Ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 319-340 and Mary Ann Stenger, 'Paul Tillich and the Feminist Critique of Roman Catholic Theology' In: Paul Tillich. A New Catholic Assessment ed. Raymond F. Bulman and Frederick J. Parrella. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1994) 174-188. A very appropriate summary is given by Mary Daly:

'While Tillich analyzes courage in universalist, humanist categories, he does not betray any awareness of the relevance of this to women's confrontation with the structured evil of patriarchy. I am suggesting that at this this point in history women are in a unique sense called to be the bearers of existential courage in society.' Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father. Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation (London: The Women's Press, 1973), 23.

<sup>64</sup>See Sharon Welsh, A Feminist Ethic of Risk (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 157. Examples are books like Rosemary Radford Ruether Sexism and God-Talk. Towards a Feminist Theology (London: SCM, 1983) and Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father.

constructive critique of ecclesiology. Like Barth, Tillich does not have a concept of gender as one of the dimensions of ecclesiology<sup>65</sup>. Building on a generalised concept of human existence which does not take into account the reality of women's experiences, the relevance of Tillich's conception of the church must be questioned from a feminist perspective.

The idea of experience is at the basis of Tillich's theology. Theology for him uses a 'method of correlation' between message and situation. Ecclesiology, like all other aspects of Tillich's theology, has to respond to the situation of humanity which is one of alienation and estrangement as well as the experience of ambiguity which leads to the constant search for an unambiguous life. Tillich's description of alienation as the human Grundsituation is based on a general concept of humanity, the human being as such, which does not take into account the particular situations of women's sexuate existence. Another aspect of life where women experience estrangement is the fundamental suspicion with which women's relationships between each other as well as women's communities, be they religious or not, are encountered. Society and the church work on the assumption of a common human experience, as does Tillich - which in fact contradicts the very concept of experience which is always particular and ambiguous experience<sup>66</sup>. Without further elaboration, Tillich's concept of estrangement of the human person is not very helpful as a starting point for feminist

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<sup>65</sup>I could only find one instance in Tillich's work where he uses gendered imagery in an ecclesiological context: 'Der Katholizismus repräsentiert die Wahrheit des Faktums, daß die "Heiligkeit des Seins" der "Heiligkeit des Sollens" vorangehen muß, und daß ohne die "Mutter", die priesterlich-sakramentale Kirche, der "Vater", die prophetisch-eschatologische Bewegung, wurzellos wäre.' Paul Tillich, 'Die bleibende Bedeutung der katholischen Kirche für den Protestantismus' In: Gesammelte Werke VII, 126. Here the male side is identified with the Protestant type of religion, in fact the one favoured by Tillich, but this example remains an exception and should therefore not be overestimated.

<sup>66</sup>Plaskow, Sex, Sin and Grace, 174: 'If what is common in human experience can be discerned only through the particularities of experience, it becomes the obligation of groups from which little has been heard to articulate their own experience and contribute their perceptions to a multi-faceted theological exploration of experience.'

ecclesiology, as it is too general and does not take into account different forms of estrangement as they are experienced by women and men or people with different socio-political locations<sup>67</sup>.

To make a different point, fundamental to Tillich's ecclesiology are two polarisations, that of 'spiritual community' and 'churches' (plural!) and that of 'Protestant principle' and 'Catholic substance'. A critical study of this aspect of his theology therefore has to begin with a critical evaluation of those two polarities.

First of all, the distinction between 'spiritual community' and churches. The 'spiritual community', according to Tillich, is the 'church as such', the invisible essence which is present in the lives of the churches, but can never be identified with one particular community. A community in which the 'spiritual community' is present need not even be connected to Christianity. The 'spiritual community' is founded on the New Being as it has appeared in Christ. Tillich seeks to replace the distinction between the church 'visible' and 'invisible', which he regards as unhelpful and confusing, with the distinction between 'spiritual community' and 'churches'. But like the visible and invisible church, 'spiritual community' and 'churches' cannot be distinguished as two existing entities, but the former must be understood as the 'essence' of the latter. The 'spiritual community' takes place where 'new being' in Christ is experienced. It is marked by 'ecstasy', 'certainty' (over against the ambiguities and uncertainties characteristic of life), 'self-surrendering love', the ultimate reunion of all the estranged members of humanity and the creation of an understanding of universality. While no particular community can be identified as 'the spiritual community', the manifestation of its presence remains the criterion by which all existing communities are to be judged. The concept of the 'spiritual community' enables the church, despite the existence of a diversity of different churches, to exist

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<sup>67</sup>See also Romero, 'The Protestant Principle', 335.

as the one church where diversity with regard to expressions of faith is possible and desirable.

In addition to what has been said so far, it is important to take into account that the 'spiritual community' is not an ideal which different groups aim to reach, but a reality which is present in existing churches. It has in fact always been present as the latent church, the 'spiritual community', which only came into being as the manifest church through the appearance of Christ, the realisation of the New Being. The relationship between 'latent' and 'manifest' spiritual community cannot be perceived in terms of time, as the spiritual presence is manifestly present as the essence of the Christian churches, but at the same time can be found latently present within other (not necessarily Christian) groups<sup>68</sup>. Tillich writes 'that the Kingdom of God in history is represented by those groups and individuals in which the latent church is effective and through whose preparatory work in past and future the manifest church, and with it the Christian churches, could and can become vehicles of history's movement towards its aim.'<sup>69</sup> According to Tillich the life of the manifest church would not be possible without the pre-existence of the church in its latency.

The 'spiritual community' should also not be understood as an élite among an existing group. It is rather a reality which is present, but which falls prey to the alienating ambiguities of religion if it is identified as one particular group. The churches' existence is paradoxical: at the same time they participate in the

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<sup>68</sup>Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. III* (Digswell Place: Nisbet & Co, 1963), 163. See also Tillich's concept of the 'Protestant principle' being realised outside the Christian church: 'Das protestantische Prinzip kann verkündigt werden von Bewegungen, die weder kirchlich noch profan sind, sondern beidem Sphären angehören, von Gruppen und Individuen, die mit oder ohne christliche und protestantische Symbole die wahre menschliche Situation ausdrücken angesichts des Letzten und Unbedingten. Tun sie dies besser und mit größerer Autorität als die offiziellen Kirchen, dann repräsentieren sie und nicht die Kirchen den Protestantismus für den Menschen der Gegenwart.' Paul Tillich, 'Die Protestantische Verkündigung und der Mensch der Gegenwart' in: Paul Tillich, *Gesammelte Werke VII* Ed. Renate Albrecht (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1962), 83.

<sup>69</sup>Tillich, *Systematic Theology III*, 402.

eschatological reign of God, but at the same time are involved in inner historical struggles against 'demonisation' and 'profanisation' as the powers against to the 'spiritual community' antagonises. The 'kingdom of God' as Tillich calls it, cannot be identical with the church as alongside the Spirit of God and Eternal Life for it is one of the symbols of the unambiguous life which humanity, according to Tillich, seeks to find amid the ambiguities of the present life<sup>75</sup>.

Protestantism, in Tillich's understanding, has two central features which are also of importance to several of the feminist approaches to ecclesiology evaluated in the first two chapters of this thesis: it is a 'lay religion' and it cannot accept church authority that claims to be absolute. With regard to church authority, Tillich argues that Protestantism has to develop its own understanding of ecclesial authority. In the context of his time Tillich argues for an understanding of church authority which does not imitate secular authority, but provides a valid alternative. While Protestantism has on the one hand to reject any form of absolute legal authority, it has at the same time so to represent its foundation, the New Being, that it becomes authority valid and acceptable for the individual and for the masses.<sup>76</sup> Therefore Tillich argues that it is rather the sacramental than the legal side of church authority that Protestantism has to

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<sup>75</sup>Tillich, Systematic Theology III, 115: 'Kingdom of God is the answer to the ambiguities of man's historical existence but, because of the multidimensional unity of life, the symbol includes the answer to the ambiguity under the historical dimension in all realms of life.'

<sup>76</sup>Und bei dieser Aufgabe kann der Katholizismus die mahnende und hinweisende, wenn auch nicht die führende Rolle übernehmen, da der Protestantismus nie die unfehlbare Autorität einer Hierarchie anerkennen kann. Er muß ernsthaft von der Geschichte lernen und fähig sein, sich in der Geschichte zu wandeln. Gleichzeitig aber muß er seine unwandelbare Grundlage, das "Neue Sein", so in Symbole und in Persönlichkeiten repräsentieren können, daß er für die Massen wie für den Einzelnen zu einer neuen Autorität wird.' Tillich, 'Die bleibende Bedeutung der katholischen Kirche für den Protestantismus', 129. It must be pointed out that the essay on which these thoughts are based is very much influenced by the historical background on which it was written. The essay was published in 1941. Tillich states that the urgency of the problem of authority for Protestantism as due to the situation in an age where people lack symbols and security and therefore cultivate a desire for authority where an anti-authoritarian understanding of Protestantism could not survive.

recover. Yet Tillich does not go beyond suggesting the significance of the problem of church authority for contemporary Protestant churches, and only hints at a potential solution by pointing to the necessity of a balance between the sacramental and the eschatological, the priestly and the prophetic forms of Christianity. To retain this balance, according to Tillich, is the significance of Catholicism for the Protestant churches<sup>77</sup>. The question of authority in the church is also one of the central aspects of feminist ecclesiological enquiries. Feminists have suggested replacing an understanding of absolute authority conferred on a person through ordination with a functional concept of church authority which limits the power of the individual and relates authority to charism. Authority then becomes a means of 'getting things done' in the life of the community, but has no meaning outside a particular contingent situation<sup>78</sup>.

The Protestant principle, according to Tillich, is realised in his concept of the 'functions' of the church. Tillich identifies the functions of the church as functions of constitution, functions of expansion and functions of construction. These three functions are related to three further polarities of tradition and reformation, verity and adaptation and form-transcendence and form-affirmation. These polarities in turn reflect the ambiguities of religion to which the churches are subject. The purpose of defining functions of the church is to relativise the power of particular institutions. The functions of the church materialise under the conditions of the ambiguities of religion in particular religious institutions, such as churches, but no particular institution can legitimately claim to be the only realisation of the 'spiritual

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<sup>77</sup>Tillich, 'Die bleibende Bedeutung der katholischen Kirche für den Protestantismus', 132.

<sup>78</sup> See for example: Letty M. Russell, Household of Freedom. Authority in Feminist Theology. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987). For a functional understanding of authority within the church see also: Stephen Sykes, 'Institutional Transformation: Power and Polity in the Churches', Society for the Study of Theology Annual Conference. Durham, 1995.

community'.<sup>79</sup> Tillich's concept of the functions of the church therefore can be seen as a way of expressing the necessary contingency of particular ecclesial institutions and forms of church administration, theology and worship which is also very important for the reconstruction of a feminist ecclesiology. As such it is at the same time one of the main tenets of Tillich's understanding of Protestantism<sup>80</sup>. Feminist authors like Mary Daly have appropriated Tillich's concept of 'demonisation and idolatry' with regard to the all encompassing power of patriarchy<sup>81</sup>. The value of Tillich for feminist ecclesiology is that since a feminist critique has carefully to identify the functions of the church for a multiplicity of women's lives and discourses of faith, Tillich provides resources for overcoming the claim of particular ecclesial institutions to be the sole representatives of being church. Feminist ecclesiology therefore has to work on two levels: on the one hand women have to claim the existing institutions for themselves by declaring that women are church and the church cannot claim to be the *ecclesia*, the manifestation of the reign of God in the reality of the present world, unless women's realities are represented in it. On the other hand it also has to challenge the claim of patriarchal institutions to be church if those institutions make this claim on the basis of exclusivity. This necessary relativisation of the significance of all particular

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<sup>79</sup>See Ronald Modras, Paul Tillich's Theology of the Church - A Catholic Appraisal (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1976), 80: 'Institutions serve the functions of the Church and depend on them. But particular institutions are not necessary to the nature or functions of the Church. Institutions may become obsolete and be replaced by new institutional forms which grow up spontaneously and exercise the same function.'. See also: John Heywood Thomas, Paul Tillich. An Appraisal. (London: SCM, 1963), 145f: 'However, the functions of the Church are immediate and necessary expressions of its nature whereas the institutions of the Church are mediated and conditioned. This distinction protects the Church, Tillich thinks, against ritual legalism, since every institution is challengeable and may come to an end without thereby destroying the essential fact that the Church is constituted not by anything that man has done or can do but by what God has done in Christ.'

<sup>80</sup>'Der Protestantismus bejaht die göttliche Souveränität gegenüber den Institutionen und Dogmen der christlichen Kirchen und protestiert gegen alle Versuche, die christliche Botschaft an die Lebensformen und Ordnungen irgendeiner geschichtlichen Kirche zu binden.' Paul Tillich, 'Prinzipien des Protestantismus' in: Paul Tillich, In: Gesammelte Werke VII Ed. Renate Albrecht (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1962), 136.

<sup>81</sup>Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father, 70-73.

ecclesial institutions is, however, an argument for the necessity of a constant reconsideration of what the church is and if it serves its purpose for those in the churches who embody the New Being in Christ.

As Tillich noted, the Protestant principle of constant prophetic critique cannot exist without being in balance with Catholic substance which is expressed in the sacramental life of the church. It must further be noted that Tillich's understanding of the Catholic church remains rather stereotypical, as does his distinction between Catholicism and Protestantism, though these terms remain concepts rather than particular denominations for him. Even though Tillich's 'Protestant principle' encompasses a number of values also embraced by feminist theologians, we have to question whether his polarisation of Protestantism and Catholicism can be regarded as helpful for the reconstruction of feminist ecclesiology. That it remains very stereotypical can be explained from the historical context of Tillich's understanding of Roman Catholicism. Tillich speaks about and criticises the Roman Catholic Church of the First Vatican Council as the affirmation of absolute papal authority, which he sees as yet another realisation of the ambiguity of religion. However, the context of our feminist re-reading of Tillich is the Roman Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council, which can, using Tillich's terminology, to a large extent be seen as a realisation of the 'Protestant principle' while retaining 'Catholic substance'. Ronald Modras points to the significant amount of critical presence within the worldwide Roman Catholic church<sup>82</sup>, of which feminist theologians, for example the women-church movement, are one part. As a consequence Modras argues for the postconciliar Roman Catholic church being seen as a realisation of Tillich's concept of the dialectic of 'Catholic substance' and 'Protestant principle'. Modras does not explicitly mention the feminist movement as part of this critical presence within the Roman Catholic church, but in our search for a meaningful reassessment of Tillich's distinction we

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<sup>82</sup>Ronald Modras, 'Catholic Substance and the Catholic Church Today' In: Paul Tillich, A New Catholic Assessment Ed. Raymond F. Bulman and Frederick J. Parrella. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994), 33-47.

may find a way of reading Tillich's distinction which takes it out of the context of denominational polarisation and assesses its value for women in our postconciliar context. On the other hand, Joan Arnold Romero identifies present day women as the 'new Protestants', but we must question whether the Reformation as one of the most revolutionary events in the history of the church, and Reformed theology as such, can be seen as by definition liberating for women. Most feminist theologians, though not all, so far have developed their theology from a Roman Catholic background and to some extent identify their theology with this background. While Protestantism did value the significance of women's contribution in the realm of the domestic and for example the rearing of children, it on the other hand restricted it to the normativity of heterosexual marriage and family life. Supposedly gender-neutral theologies like those of Barth and Tillich became possible. While the Protestant Reformation may be seen as a liberation of enslaving religious practices in many ways, we must question its value for women<sup>83</sup>. We must ask whether there is not indeed 'Catholic substance' to recover for women insofar as in Roman Catholic theology, despite strong gender-ridden constructions, such as Mariology and the conception of the church as 'feminine', women's presence is acknowledged rather than simply ignored or banned

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<sup>83</sup>In order not to fall prey to the same stereotypical conceptions as Tillich we have to state that the Protestant Reformation did not entirely quench the presence of women in the churches. Even though mainstream Protestantism, through its reevaluation of the domestic, restricted women's realm of activity and spiritual responsibility to the domestic, there are a number of occurrences of for example prophetesses in more marginal groups such as those of radical Pietism.

into the house.<sup>84</sup> This does not mean that these aspects can be accepted as they are, but they provide starting points for the reconsideration of theology and ecclesiology in a feminist critical way.

For Tillich, the significance of Catholicism for the contemporary churches lies on the one hand in pointing to the importance of the consideration of the meaning of the church<sup>85</sup>, and on the other hand in its greater valuing of the sacramental aspects of ecclesial life. Tillich sees the development of a comprehensive doctrine of the church as one of the most urgent tasks of contemporary Protestantism<sup>86</sup>. Its theological self-interpretation is one of the essential functions of the church.<sup>87</sup>

The other dimension of which Catholicism reminds the Protestant churches is that of sacramentality. In a way similar to the whole of his ecclesiology, his understanding of sacramentality remains abstract and disembodied. Tillich understands sacraments as meaningful symbols, but does not regard any symbol more significant than any other. Any aspect of life can become a sacramental symbol according to Tillich. Feminists too have claimed that the canon of sacramental celebrations has been too narrowly defined and therefore needs expanding if it is to be

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<sup>84</sup>I will discuss this issue further in Chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis. I do not want to follow the mistake of a number of liberal feminists who only value women's contributions to life if they occur in public and follow male forms of thinking in devaluing the sphere of the domestic, but I argue against a concept of 'family values' which identifies heterosexual marriage as the only valid form of life justified by Christianity. See Jean Bethke Elshtain, 'The Power and Powerlessness of Women' *Power Trips and other Journeys. Essays in Feminism as Civic Discourse*. Ed. Jean Bethke Elshtain (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 134-148; Anne Bathurst Gilson, 'Family Values Versus Valuing Families of Choice' *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 12.1 (1996), 99-106; Elizabeth Bounds, 'Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea. Feminism, Family Values, and the Division Between Public and Private' *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 12.1 (1996), 111-126.

<sup>85</sup>Paul Tillich, 'Die bleibende Bedeutung der katholischen Kirche für den Protestantismus', 127: 'Da dem Protestantismus das Verständnis für Wesen und Bedeutung der Kirche in großem Maße fehlt, muß versucht werden, es mit Hilfe dieser katholischen Erscheinungsformen des Christentums wiederzugewinnen.'

<sup>86</sup>Tillich, 'Die bleibende Bedeutung der katholischen Kirche', 128.

<sup>87</sup>Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol. I (Digswell Place: Nisbet & Co, 1951), 12.

meaningful for women. However, in the Roman Catholic context, sacramentality has often been used as a means of excluding women and defining women as unholy and unworthy of participating actively in what is the dynamic centre of ecclesial life. But Tillich's emphasis on sacramentality could be taken as an important incentive for women to reclaim sacramental celebration for themselves. Women need to identify what is sacramental for them and to give particular examples of aspects of their lives which may involve meaningful celebrations of what it means to be church. Women's sexual lives and identities are themselves to become expressions of the unity of word and sacrament within the church.

For example, Tillich criticises the Protestant 'churches of the word' for their lack of awareness of the sacramental aspect of ecclesial life which is vital to 'Catholic substance'. This means for Tillich that ecclesial life becomes restricted to the social, inter-human aspect of life, while the presence of the divine in the whole of creation is ignored<sup>88</sup>. Feminist theologians like Rosemary Radford Ruether<sup>89</sup> and Mary Grey<sup>90</sup> have in a similar way attempted to reclaim the dimension of sacramentality for feminist theology by including the whole of creation into their theology. From a

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<sup>88</sup>At this point we must ask: What does it mean that the churches are not only embodiments of the Spiritual Community but also representatives of the Kingdom of God in its all-embracing character? The answer lies in the multidimensional unity of life and the consequences it has for the sacramental manifestation of the holy.... The sacramental consecration of elements of all of life shows the presence of the ultimately sublime in everything and points to the unity of everything in its creative ground and its final fulfilment. It is one of the short-comings of the churches of the "word", especially in their legalistic and exclusively personalistic form, that they exclude, along with the sacramental element, the universe outside man from consecration and fulfilment. But the Kingdom of God is not only a social symbol; it is a symbol which comprises the whole of reality. And if the churches claim to represent it, they must not reduce its meaning to one element alone.' Tillich, Systematic Theology III, 402f.

<sup>89</sup>Ruether, Women-Church, 6: 'This book then moves on to revisioning church as a community of liberation from patriarchy. How will women-church understand the primary sacramental symbols of baptism and the Eucharist? How will it relate faith and praxis? The final section of the book crystallizes theory into liturgical forms and also imagines new forms of ritual that will sacramentalize women's rites of passage that have been either ignored or relegated to the profane.'

<sup>90</sup>Grey, Redeeming the Dream, 169-176.

feminist point of view the concept of a 'church of the word' can be understood as a male-dominated patriarchal limitation of ecclesial life, while Tillich's theology could be used for a reclamation of the complexity and multidimensionality of life which is manifested and celebrated in the sacramental life of the church. Such a multidimensional sacramental understanding of the church locates the church in history in its complexity rather than merely in history as a sequence of events dominated by men. Being a church of the word which neglects the sacramental dimension means a restriction of ecclesial life to one of its dimensions: that of the exercise of dominating power over other human beings rather than the acknowledgement of interdependence not only between human beings but also within creation as a whole. This is for example expressed in the creation of new feminist liturgies which not only celebrate events of salvation history and the ecclesial year of the patriarchal church, but also take into account and celebrate events of the life of nature and the human/female body. Such a narrow understanding of the church as a church of the word follows from an understanding of salvation as the unique event of salvation from sin rather than salvation as the liberation of the whole of creation from patriarchal structures<sup>91</sup>. But it is important to understand Tillich's concept of the relationship between sacramentality and nature rightly. Nature, and any aspect of it, is the 'carrier', the 'object' of salvation and therefore any aspect of it can potentially gain sacramental significance. It is therefore not the realm of nature as such that is sacramental. Tillich does not have a magic-ritualistic understanding of sacraments. Nature can only be sacramental if it becomes a 'carrier' of the New Being in Christ:

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<sup>91</sup>This is developed in particular by ecofeminist theologians who see the oppression of the female by the male as part of larger patriarchal structures of domination and destruction and argue for the reclamation of a more wholistic concept of salvation and connectedness. See for example Mary Grey, Redeeming the Dream. Feminism, Redemption and Christian Tradition. (London: SPCK, 1989); Rosemary Radford Ruether, Gaia and God. An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing (London: SCM, 1992); Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Ecofeminism: Symbolic and Social Connections of the Oppression of Women and the Domination of Nature', Feminist Theology 9 (1995): 35-50; Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Ecofeminism and Healing Ourselves, Healing the Earth' Feminist Theology 9 (1995), 51-62.

Alle sakramentale Wirklichkeit auf christlichem und auf protestantischem Boden geht auf dieses neue Sein in Christus zurück, und keine protestantische Kritik wäre denkbar, in der dieses Sein selbst aufgelöst wäre.<sup>92</sup>

Feminist theologians have so far attempted to recover the significance of nature as a whole, beyond the boundaries of humanity, but it is important for feminist theologians to work on a recovery of Tillich's connection between Christology and the sacramentality of nature. A natural sacramentality which is based on a concept of nature on its own can easily become the vehicle of a demonisation of women, of putting women in the realm of magic powers, while a feminist Christology which is based on incarnation as the embodiment of the divine as male/female sexuate being celebrates nature, human nature, women's nature as the site of divine being which is again and again embodied in being church.

The importance of the relation between incarnational Christology and sacramentality for a feminist ecclesiology leads us to our consideration of Tillich's understanding of the relationship between Christology and ecclesiology. For Tillich the Christ cannot be the Christ without the community which receives him as the Christ<sup>93</sup>. The community is therefore always prior to the Christ. A Christology on which a feminist ecclesiology can build is one which identifies Christ as one who identifies with women and with whom women can identify. Such a concept has to develop an understanding of Christ as the one whose story is being told through the

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<sup>92</sup>Paul Tillich, 'Natur und Sakrament' In Paul Tillich, Gesammelte Werke VII Ed. Renate Albrecht (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1962), 120.

<sup>93</sup>Tillich seems to be somewhat inconsistent on this point. In the context of his Christology he writes: 'The appearance of the Christ in an individual person presupposes the community out of which he came and the community which he creates. Of course, the criterion of both is the picture of Jesus as the Christ; but, without them, this criterion never would have appeared.' (Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology II (Digsweil Place: Nisbet & Co, 1957), 156). Later he states: 'As the Christ is not the Christ without those who receive him as the Christ, so the Spiritual Community is not Spiritual unless it is founded on the New Being as it has appeared in the Christ.' (Tillich, Systematic Theology III, 160). On the other hand the Spiritual Community, according to Tillich is not restricted to the Christian churches, but can be present anywhere, so Christ is not necessarily explicitly needed.

stories of women's lives and as such a community embodies the presence of Christ. Thus the presence of Christ is more than the abstract 'spiritual community'. It is the reality of God's being in the lives of a community of mutuality and particular sexual being. In such an understanding, Christ's significance goes beyond that of being an example. The reality of his particular embodiment is of importance and is realised in the bodily existence, the celebration of every body's presence in the Christian community. Therefore the church can develop images of Christ which do not absolutise the fact of the maleness of Christ, but where Christ is represented in the particularity and bodiliness of those in the Christian community.<sup>94</sup> Feminist ecclesiology has to build on concepts of Christology which realise concepts of women's and men's 'socio-political sexual wholeness'. By seeing these embodied in Christ, Christ identifies with women and men in their particular situations in the life of the church, while they in turn identify their own lives and stories with the life and the story of Christ being represented in the life of the community<sup>95</sup>.

Summarising we can say that despite the fact that Tillich does raise a number of issues also relevant to a feminist critique of ecclesiology, on the whole his ecclesiology remains too abstract and based on principles rather than on the experiences of human beings being church. With regard to his distinction between 'Protestant principle' and 'Catholic substance' we can argue that what is at issue for women is not so much an abstract 'Protestant principle', but rather the reality of those churches which claim to embody Protestantism. This does not mean that I understand Tillich's 'Protestant principle' as an abstract ideal, as Tillich himself is indeed concerned with the reality of human life and the failure of Protestantism in history, as for example an essay like 'Protestantisches Prinzip und Proletarische Situation' shows.

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<sup>94</sup>I will develop this concept of a possible reconsideration of the relationship between christology and ecclesiology more fully in chapter five of this thesis.

<sup>95</sup>For such an understanding of Christology see Robert Beckford, 'Does Jesus Have a Penis? Black Male Sexual Representation and Christology' *Theology and Sexuality* 5 (1996), 10-21. Beckford's article will be discussed in more detail in chapter five of this thesis.

But again Tillich's understanding of the 'proletarian situation' is built on a concept of humanity which takes no account of the particular experiences of women.

Despite the fact that Tillich takes human experiences of life, and in particular the experience of ambiguity and alienation, as the starting point of his theology, Judith Plaskow's view, that these human experiences remain ignorant of the experiences of women, must still be maintained<sup>96</sup>. Even though Tillich's basic theological method is that of correlation between 'message' and 'situation', we have to ask whose situation it is Tillich reflects in his theology. Tillich's concept of ambiguity as the foundational human condition remains rather general, while it does not reflect the particular situations of women in what it means to be church. The same applies to his concept of 'spiritual community' as the essence found in the lives of different 'churches'<sup>97</sup>. Such a concept is not helpful for women, as what a feminist ecclesiology should argue for is a move away from general conceptions of being church to church being the particular experiences of particular men and women reflected in preaching, liturgy and action<sup>98</sup>. A feminist ecclesiology must argue that women as particular sexuate human beings are church, since the idea of a spiritual community being the 'essence' of existing churches will not bring about change within the community. The non-particularity of Tillich's concept of the spiritual community identifies it as a supposedly gender-neutral concept which ignores the fact that human experiences of ambiguity and alienation take place in a socio-cultural ordering of society in which gender is one aspect of human identity.

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<sup>96</sup>His principles of sanctification can be filled in ways which are most relevant to women's experience, but he himself gives these principles little content.' Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace*, 139. Plaskow also writes: 'In fact, however, his description of community under the impact of the Spiritual Presence is equally abstract.' (140).

<sup>97</sup>John Heywood Thomas identifies Tillich's distinction between 'spiritual community' and 'churches' as 'unhelpful' as it does not actually say anything about the church as such and 'also no indication is given of the way in which it is applied.' Thomas, *Paul Tillich. An Appraisal*, 148.

<sup>98</sup>An example here is the 'women-church' movement which constituted itself not as an ecclesial institution, but as a network of both liturgical and social action groups.

From a feminist perspective, one which is primarily concerned with advocating an understanding of the church, which is healing and liberating for women, we can argue that despite Tillich's neglect and ignorance of the situations in which women live in both church and society, some aspects of his ecclesiology remain usable and can be filled with feminist content. For example, Tillich identifies the church as both a sociological and a theological entity, for both aspects are important to him and cannot be separated from each other. That the church is always both and neither description on its own represents the whole story is important for Tillich's rejection of the classical distinction between the 'visible' and the 'invisible' church which essentially always values the 'invisible church' over the visible. But we must ask whether what Tillich has to offer: the ambiguity of sociological and theological ecclesiology and the distinction between 'spiritual community' and 'churches', between 'latent' and 'manifest' spiritual community, is indeed more helpful for feminist reconstruction. To show this ambivalent identity inherent in any form of ecclesiology is the starting point of any feminist critique of theological concepts of the church. These can neither identify themselves as 'pure theology' nor take notice of the findings of other disciplines as careful evaluation is, however, necessary for critique<sup>99</sup> which takes on board resources from the social sciences without carefully evaluating them.

### 3.4 Jürgen Moltmann

The last author to be evaluated in this feminist critical reader-response study of traditional approaches to ecclesiology is the one whose work is most consciously influenced by feminist and liberation theology. Yet what the German Lutheran theologian Jürgen Moltmann offers in his ecclesiology The Church in the Power of the

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<sup>99</sup>See for example John Milbank, Theology and Social Theory (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

Holy Spirit. A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology<sup>100</sup> is by no means a feminist ecclesiology.

As the first one explicitly concerned with feminism, Moltmann's work must be understood in the context of the German Lutheran Volkskirche and is very much a theological response to it. It evaluates the question whether small communities rather than large anonymous parishes can be a response to the mass exodus out of the traditional churches. At the same time it is influenced by the works of liberation theology and the question of Jewish-Christian dialogue. Among the authors studied in this chapter, Moltmann is the only one who is explicitly concerned with issues relevant to feminist theologians with regard to ecclesiology. His emphasis on the Trinity and the fellowship of the Spirit seeks to overcome the shortcomings of both hierarchical and christomonistic approaches to ecclesiology, and to realise structures of equality and mutuality between men and women in the church. Moltmann represents an example of how to recover aspects of the tradition in a new and liberating way which is adequate and appropriate to the church in its crisis of relevance.

We therefore have to evaluate two dimensions of Moltmann's ecclesiological work. First, we have to see to what extent Moltmann's own feminist concerns provide a basis for a reconsideration of ecclesiology by feminist theologians in different contexts. Second, we have to study his ecclesiology in the context of the other dimensions of his theological work of re-evaluating the Christian tradition, with particular attention to the Trinity, Christology, pneumatology and eschatology. We have to ask whether Moltmann's combination of the two dimensions of traditional systematic theology and feminist theory in particular, can provide a useful resource for the development of feminist contextual ecclesiologies.

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<sup>100</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, The Church in the Power of the Holy Spirit. A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology Trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

Moltmann himself recognised how he was unaware of the impact of the church as 'the community of men and women' in the original text of The Church in the Power of the Spirit, but discusses this dimension in a contribution together with his wife Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel to the Ecumenical Consultation in Sheffield<sup>101</sup>, as well as in an appendix to the German edition of The Church in the Power of the Holy Spirit<sup>102</sup>. Within his original ecclesiology Moltmann discusses the issue of 'sexism' in relation to his post-Enlightenment concept of human rights as the characteristic of the kingdom of God, the liberation of humanity that the church as the community of the liberated is seeking to realise. Patriarchy for him stands in the way of the implementation of justice in church and society. If the reality of patriarchal domination and language is overcome, the open society, the community of human solidarity of men and women can be realised. For Moltmann, such a concept of justice is part of the messianic life<sup>103</sup>. Justice can never remain an innerworldly dimension for Moltmann, but is first of all to be found in the life of the divine Trinity as the community of equal partners who share common divinity, but are yet distinct persons. This is depicted in his anthropology, which Moltmann develops in the context of his doctrine of creation. To be human for Moltmann means to be sexually differentiated as well as to share common humanity. Only in the tension of those two aspects of human beings do we exist in the image of God<sup>104</sup>. Humanity for Moltmann therefore essentially means co-humanity, humanity in hetero-sexual differentiation which is then the basis for the fundamental human right of equality.

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<sup>101</sup>Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel and Jürgen Moltmann, 'Becoming Human in New Community' in: The Community of Men and Women in the Church. The Sheffield Report ed. Constance Parvey (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983), 29-42.

<sup>102</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, Kirche in der Kraft des Geistes. Ein Beitrag zur messianischen Ekklesiologie (München: Kaiser, 1989), 389-396.

<sup>103</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, History and the Triune God. Contributions to Trinitarian Theology Trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1991), 16-18.

<sup>104</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, God in Creation. An ecological doctrine of creation (London: SCM, 1985), 222.

Moltmann understands the 'triune God as the God who is community, who calls community into life and invites men and women into sociality with him. The community of Christ is permitted to see itself as an earthly reflection of the divine Trinity.<sup>105</sup> With regard to the feminist question of the maleness of the Trinity Moltmann develops a model of mutuality, perichoresis, between the persons of the Trinity which he in turn sees as the model for human fellowship between men and women:

The fellowship of the triune God is thus the matrix and the sphere of life for the free community of men and women, without domination and without subjection, in mutual respect and mutual recognition.<sup>106</sup>

The church as the community of men and women in relationships of equality and mutuality is the only adequate depiction of the divine Trinity. Addressing the question of gender in the context of the Trinity, and in particular with respect to God as Father, serves the purpose of implementing the equality and mutuality seen in the divine trinitarian community within the human community.<sup>107</sup> Moltmann sees the 'de-patriarchalization of the church' as an almost automatic consequence of the 'de-patriarchalization of the picture of God'.<sup>108</sup> Moltmann develops this in particular with regard to the dimension of pneumatology which has often been omitted in Western concepts of theology. The 'fellowship of the Holy Spirit', in some traditions portrayed as mother<sup>109</sup>, makes relationships beyond domination and subordination possible. It is

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<sup>105</sup>Moltmann, The Church in the Power of the Spirit, XV.

<sup>106</sup>Moltmann, History and the Triune God, xvf.

<sup>107</sup>Moltmann, History and the Triune God, 23.

<sup>108</sup>Moltmann, The Spirit of Life, 160.

<sup>109</sup>Certainly the doctrine of the Motherly office of the Spirit can lead to unjustified speculations about the Trinity as a 'divine family' with Father, Mother and Child. But what is meant is first and foremost the Motherhood of God, which has equal rights with his Fatherhood; this justifies the full and independent integration of femininity into the dignity of the image of God and leads to a community of brothers and sisters, not just of 'brothers'. Moltmann, History and the Triune God, 64.

in the sexually specific sociality of human beings with each other that the divine, God as trinitarian community, is experienced<sup>110</sup>.

Moltmann's ecclesiology is also embedded in the context of his work on the Trinity and his trinitarian and messianic Christology, and cannot be understood outside this context of re-evaluating the tradition. Moltmann argues that the church cannot resign itself to the current crisis of ecclesial life, but has continuously to re-evaluate its own identity with regard to its own past and future, tradition and hope.<sup>111</sup> As such it therefore provides a useful source for evaluating the significance of the relationship between ecclesiology and other theological symbols such as the Trinity and Christology. In doing this I want to show that feminist ecclesiology cannot merely be a contextual response to a particular situation, but that it is necessary and viable to root feminist ecclesiology in the context of a more systematic theology too. Moltmann shows that the three dimensions of ecclesiology - the theological dimension, the social dimension and the political dimension - are in fact inseparable. This aspect is essential for feminist ecclesiology which on the one hand has to be essentially theological, but on the other hand, due to the nature of feminism as a political movement, has also to work on the political and social dimension of its work.<sup>112</sup>

The church of Jesus Christ, according to Moltmann, is the fellowship of those liberated through Christ. Moltmann also speaks about the fact that the realisation of this reality of the fellowship of liberating persons which denies privileges to particular individuals or groups in the church can be difficult. The realisation of human rights, and here women are named among the poor and the victims of society, is the most

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<sup>110</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, The Spirit of Life. A Universal Affirmation Trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 94.

<sup>111</sup>Moltmann, The Church in the Power of the Holy Spirit, XVIII.

<sup>112</sup>Cf. for example Russell, Church in the Round, 26: 'An ecclesiology that integrates commitment to justice and freedom with the liturgical and communal life of the church is needed so that the unity of the church in regard to race, sex, class and sexual orientation can be lived out as a global reality.'

important starting point for the church of Christ.<sup>113</sup> This is expressed in the experience of friendship as an open and total relationship between God and human beings and human beings among each other.

The whole life of the church, its history, its proclamation, its sacramental celebration and its ministry can only be understood in this trinitarian-pneumatological context. The church, for Moltmann, is at the same time the church of Word and sacrament and the charismatic church. In a debate with both Karl Rahner's concept of the church as the basic sacrament and Karl Barth's understanding of Christ as the Ursakrament, Moltmann develops a trinitarian understanding of the sacraments. They are for him acts of Christ through the Holy Spirit. This understanding of sacraments not only includes the traditional sacramental acts of baptism and communion, but also the proclamation of the gospel as the 'sacrament of the future'. As the proclamation of God's future with this world it makes eschatological reality manifest in history. Such a proclamation of God's future is liberating and creates a messianic fellowship as the community of the Gospel. This 'messianic community' essentially differs from 'voluntaristic' Christian communities which separate themselves from the concerns of society and at the same time also from post-Enlightenment Christianity which has lost its Christian identity and commitment. The messianic fellowship is a community which, through its own being and its own story, tells the story of Christ and thereby liberates humanity for a messianic life. The messianic era, the eschatological age, is made present through the celebration of the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. Baptism marks the beginning of participation in the messianic fellowship, while the Eucharist is the sign of the fellowship's being on its way in hope. The Eucharist is at the same time a sign which makes present and remembers the liberating suffering of Christ, the presence of grace and the redeeming future and glory of Christ. It continuously situates the fellowship within the eschatological history of the triune God and is therefore an expression of the fellowship's openness to all, as it is first and

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<sup>113</sup>Moltmann, The Church in the Power of the Spirit, 108.

foremost a celebration of the liberating presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit. The celebration of the Eucharist cannot be disconnected from its original event of Christ's own meal with his disciples. It can therefore not be reduced to mere fellowship among the members of the community. While on the one hand it always refers back to the historical event of Christ's last supper, it also cannot be disconnected from the presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit. The celebration of the Eucharist becomes an expression of what the church is: the mediation between present, past and future of Christ, between the Christ event of the past and Christ's liberating future:

As a feast open to the churches, Christ's supper demonstrates the community's catholicity. As a feast open to the world it demonstrates the community's mission to the world. As a feast open to the future it demonstrates the community's universal hope. It acquires this character from the prevenient, liberating and unifying invitation of Christ.<sup>114</sup>

In a similar way the experience of worship connects the daily life of the community and its members to the context of the history of God with the world. Proclamation of the gospel, sacramental celebration and worship are anticipations of God's eschatological future.

The daily life of the community always stands in creative tension between the anticipation of the future of God and participation in the suffering of the world. In order to be a messianic fellowship, the Christian community has to participate in both. Proclamation, sacraments and worship are not means of withdrawal from the present, but in connection with a life style of messianic participation in the world's concerns and the world's suffering they become realisations of God's history of salvation as well as anticipations of God's future:

The community which is filled with different energies of Christ's liberating power is therefore not an exclusive community of the saved, but the initial and inclusive materialization of the world freed by the risen Christ.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup>Moltmann, The Church in the Power of the Spirit, 260.

<sup>115</sup>Moltmann, The Church in the Power of the Spirit, 293.

As the messianic community the church is the earthly form of Christ's presence. For Moltmann that means that the messianic community first and foremost submits to the rule of Christ and not to an earthly ecclesial hierarchy. As a consequence, it has to establish a form of democracy among its members, as all are seen as equally equipped with the life-giving power of the spirit which establishes and maintains equality through baptism and eucharistic fellowship. The community and all of its members participate in the priestly, prophetic and kingly ministry of Christ in the present world. A multiplicity of gifts, of charismata, is characteristic of the life of the community in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. For Moltmann almost every aspect of human life has the potential of being a charisma which contributes to the life of the community. In fact, being man and being woman are seen as charismata as well<sup>116</sup>, but Moltmann does not develop this aspect any further.

At the basis of such an understanding of the community is the call of Christ into fellowship which is at the same time the endowment with particular gifts. 'For the call puts the person's particular situation at the service of the new creation.'<sup>117</sup> The performance of particular ministries remains dependent on this call to life in the community and is in effect an implementation of Christ's ministry. This is also used as a limitation of the exercise of power within the community, as any form of ministry can only happen in dependence on Christ. Ministry cannot be taken out of the context of the calling of the community. Such a charismatic understanding of the capacities of the members of the community creates a concept of radical equality which as an ideal denies the possibility of power struggles within the church. By painting such an idealistic picture of a charismatic community, Moltmann neglects the dimension of authority within the church as a necessary means of organisation. It is the experience of the spirit, the realisation of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, which creates the

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<sup>116</sup>Moltmann, The Spirit of Life, 194.

<sup>117</sup>Moltmann, The Church in the Power of the Spirit, 296. See also 297: 'In principle every human potentiality and capacity can become charismatic through a person's call, if only they are used in Christ.'

church as a counter reality to structures of domination and oppression. One of the shortcomings of Moltmann's theological study of the church is that he does not address what is one of the most central questions to feminist ecclesiology: the question of authority. For Moltmann the central paradigm for the messianic church is liberation and freedom from oppression and absolute power, which would be one of the central features of a feminist church too, but Moltmann does not address the question of 'necessary authority'<sup>118</sup> or the exercise of power within the ecclesial community. This can certainly not be discussed in terms of the opposition between coercive and liberating, but needs to be expanded to encompass pragmatic concepts of organising the life of the church in an empowering way. A feminist reconstruction of ecclesiology has to seek to avoid falling towards either one of the extreme positions regarding authority within the church. Feminist theologians may well argue against any concept of power within the church that means domination of the church as an institution over the lives of human beings, but to describe equality and charismatic giftedness within the church as flourishing outside the conditions of time, space and human life is unrealistic and thereby treats power as merely negative.

The question for Moltmann is which particular model of the church is the most appropriate for the charismatic church of Jesus Christ. He denies the possibility of deciding matters of institutional organisation on a merely pragmatic basis, as all questions regarding the church are questions of the realisation of God's history with the world. The church which is the earthly form of Christ's reign must make all

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<sup>118</sup>See also Richard Bauckham, Moltmann. Messianic Theology in the Making (London: Marshall Pickering, 1987), 135: 'Perhaps the most cogent criticism of Moltmann's concept of the Church as free fellowship is that in simply opposing power and authority, on the one hand, and love and freedom on the other, Moltmann too easily equates the former with domination. He neglects the inevitability of some kind of power and authority in human society and therefore misses the opportunity to explore the way in which power and authority can be based on consent, exercised in love, and directed to fostering, rather than suppressing, freedom and responsibility.'

decisions regarding its organisation in consideration of this fundamental identity<sup>119</sup>. Moltmann seeks to find a way to realise this liberated and liberating fellowship under his own historical conditions, avoiding both the form of the state church which he sees as prone to deterioration and the form of small sectarian or ascetic communities detached from the concerns of the world. As the most viable model for his own situation Moltmann creates a model of a double strategy of retaining the existing mainstream churches and small discipleship groups which embody the life of the messianic community. The model of community life combines approaches to church reform 'from above' and 'from below' at the level of the local congregation with which Moltmann is primarily concerned. In contrast to small sectarian groups, the community is open to the world and its concerns, but at the same time highly aware of its identity as the community of Christ. In an autobiographical sketch, Moltmann describes the context of his ecclesiology as both the theological discovery of the dimension of pneumatology and the attempt to respond to the crisis of relevance of the German state church. The concept of the community church develops ideas based on the concept of the church as the 'church of the people' with renewal through the experience of the spirit.<sup>120</sup> Moltmann argues for a more participatory model of congregation in which diversity and equality, empowerment and acceptance of responsibility, are fundamental characteristics. It is one of the strengths of Moltmann's approach that it seeks to combine 'universal' theological assumptions with the practical implications of finding ways of solving the particular crisis in which Moltmann finds his church, but it is with Moltmann's particular way of doing this that our feminist critique has to start.

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<sup>119</sup>The special thing about the community of Christians is not so much its character as a social model (exemplum) as the redeeming experiences of the fellowship of Christ found there, and the liberating experiences of the Holy Spirit - in short, the assurance of the fellowship of God (sacramentum).' Moltmann, The Spirit of Life, 231.

<sup>120</sup>Moltmann, History and the Triune God, 174f.

For feminist theologians the primary concern is that of meaningfulness and relevance for women connected with the question whether or not women's identities and concerns are indeed represented in any given approach. Moltmann's genuine concern is that of liberation of human beings, men and women, as the anticipation, but not separated from or instead of, God's eschatological salvation. The Christian tradition, both Eastern and Western, yet to a very limited extent outside the mainstream churches, is his primary source for developing such a concept. Moltmann argues for the community of men and women in the church as the true representation of the Triune God, but we must ask where in his theology women's particular lives and concerns as women in their particular situations are represented as issues of being church. Moltmann argues for the inclusion of women as a matter of course, but does not go beyond a framework that would allow for a multiplicity and flexibility of gender identities as his ecclesiology (with the whole of his theology) remains limited to a heterosexual framework. His concern for equality remains rather general and does not leave room for particular identities and concerns of women outside their relation to men. Moltmann's concept of shared humanity may be an important starting point in contradicting arguments about male domination within the church, but we must question its value in application to other situations. Moltmann does not sufficiently address the issue of sexual difference and the distinctiveness of women's lived experiences for the life of the church. One of the strengths of his approach is in fact its attempt at a conscious contextuality, but his general approach remains more universal than can be seen as satisfactory from a feminist point of view.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup>Cf. Susan Parsons' critique of the liberal paradigm to which Moltmann is also indebted. 'What may be excellent as a formal method for arriving at universal principles, and what provides a splendid viewpoint from which to be critical of present life, is less satisfactory in application, and ultimately in expression of the fullness of our humanity. To remedy this may mean revisiting the issue of difference, reintroducing the question of the distinctiveness of men and women.' Parsons, Feminism and Christian Ethics, 42.

For example, Moltmann understands the church as participating in God's history with the world. The dimension of history is one which feminist theologians are only beginning to explore as women in the past have been denied a history of their own. This demands the expansion of our concept of history in all its dimensions, world history, church history and the theological interpretation of God's history with the world. Moltmann's concept of God's history with the world remains one of a linear sequence of significant events in which women only to a limited extent are recorded as having participated. This begs the question whether such an understanding of God's history with the world is one in which women find themselves represented. The world remains a rather abstract and general concept which does not leave room for women's particular lives and experiences to be understood as 'God's history'. Such an understanding of history retains history as 'public history' which neglects the hidden spheres of life in which women's lives have often taken place. It must be secured theologically that women being church view themselves as an essential part of the Trinitarian history of God. Even if the history of the church has to a large extent, though not exclusively, been written as that of men in the church, God's Trinitarian history is that of women too. The Trinitarian history of God, embodied in the church, is that of all three persons of the divine. Women have often played a significant role in those movements which emphasise the working of the Holy Spirit, movements which have often been declared heretical by the dominant traditions of Christianity<sup>122</sup>. In becoming human Christ identified with women. Women are explicitly mentioned in the event of Pentecost. Women have to claim that their lives are part of God's history with the world as well as that God's history is part of their history. Women's struggle to be church is part of God's history of liberation. The lack of available written

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<sup>122</sup>See for example Ulrike Witt, Bekehrung, Bildung und Biographie. Frauen im Umkreis des Halleschen Pietismus Hallesche Forschungen 2 (Halle: Verlag der Franckeschen Stiftungen - Halle im Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1996); Women in New Worlds Ed. Hilah F. Keller Thomas and Rosemary Skinner Historical Perspectives in the Wesleyan Tradition (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981) and Amanda Porterfield, Female Piety in Puritan New England. The Emergence of Religious Humanism Religion in America Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

sources, as well as androcentric judgements as to what counts as relevant sources, often makes the reconstruction of women's church history difficult. To overcome this difficulty, women have to be empowered to understand their history as history of the church and therefore as God's history. In God's history which is one of three particular, equally divine persons there cannot be any marginal movements, but rather a multiplicity of different voices of women and men telling their stories as God's story.

Moltmann's main contribution to ecclesiology is undoubtedly his emphasis on the Holy Spirit as the enabler of fellowship, equality and mutuality. Moltmann sees a pneumatological ecclesiology as one which overcomes the limitations of a christological ecclesiology used to justify structures of male domination. The feminist theologian Mary Grey points in a similar direction by stating:

The vision of Church which the Spirit of Connection presents cracks open preexisting notions of Church, seeking to make Christ's presence powerful today through our commitment to liberation and transformation.<sup>123</sup>

Moltmann's pupil Michael Welker speaks about the 'creative pluralism of the Spirit' which is made possible through the event of Pentecost. Welker shows the essential connection between the 'creative pluralism of the Spirit' and a theological understanding of the church. He perceives it as one of the essential tasks of the church to show that diversity can be a fruitful source for dialogue and creativity without necessarily leading into relativism and chaos:

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<sup>123</sup>Mary Grey, 'Where Does the Wild Goose Fly to? Seeking a New Theology of Spirit for Feminist Theology' New Blackfriars 72 (1989), 95. Maria Clara Bingemer points out the 'pneumatological gap' in Western theology. According to her its result with regard to ecclesiology is 'an ecclesiology in which canonical interpretations of the "institution" predominate in the organizational definition, and the different segments of the people of God have great difficulty in integrating this with the mystery aspect of the church in their understanding and behavior.' Maria Clara Luchetti Bingemer, 'Woman: Time and Eternity The Eternal Woman and the Feminine Face of God' Concilium 1991/6 (1991), 99.

Gegenüber allem vagen Gerede von "Vielfalt" und "Pluralität" hat die Kirche die Aufgabe, den schöpferischen "Pluralismus des Geistes" und des "Leibes Christi" klar zu erkennen. Sie hat die Aufgabe, entsprechende konstruktive und schöpferische Formen des Pluralismus selbst auszubilden und entsprechende Formen in ihren Umgebungen zu stärken. Sie hat die Aufgabe, den konstruktiven und schöpferischen Pluralismus von zerstörerischen und zerrüttenden Ausprägungen des Relativismus zu unterscheiden.<sup>124</sup>

Elizabeth Johnson characterises the Spirit as both the 'source of transforming energy' and the 'power of mutual love'. These are characteristics of a church which is restructured according to a feminist theological paradigm. A church where Christ is present through the Holy Spirit is one which is willing to be constantly transforming itself and working towards the transformation of the world in which it lives.

Spoken of in terms of mutual love proceeding, God who is Spirit cannot be used to legitimise patriarchal structure but signals a migration toward reciprocity in community as the highest good. As the creative dynamic of mutual love, the Spirit vitally moves, attracts, impels, connects, and sets up a solidarity of reciprocal, freeing relation throughout the whole world as well as between herself and creation.<sup>125</sup>

A feminist understanding of the Spirit as the power that opens up multiple forms of discourses within the church also overcomes an understanding of the history of God in which the church participates as a universal history in which women are merely retrospectively included. Such an understanding of the liberating power of the spirit refocusses the concept of the history of God with the world as that of many different and interacting histories of God with human beings and communities.

Moltmann finds the necessity of structures of equality and justice within the church in his concept of the divine persons relating to each other. The relationships of the three divine persons of the Trinity among each other are mutual and open to the participation of human beings in them. At the same time these relationships of

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<sup>124</sup>Michael Welker, Kirche im Pluralismus (Munich: Kaiser, 1995), 8. See also Michael Welker, Gottes Geist. Theologie des Heiligen Geistes (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1992).

<sup>125</sup>Elizabeth A. Johnson, She Who Is. The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 143.

mutuality and equality are supreme models for the ordering of any human community and first and foremost the church<sup>126</sup>. Like feminist theologians, Moltmann recognises the possible impact of particular understandings of the divine on human relationships<sup>127</sup>. For women such a justification of relationships of equality and mutuality cannot be enough. Women need to be valued as they are and where they are, in their human bodily experiences. In his doctrine of creation Moltmann relates the creation of man and woman in the image of God, in sexual differentiation and shared humanity, with the essentially open character of the divine Trinity. In this combination, both aspects of the Christian tradition could indeed be helpful for the development of a feminist ecclesiology. I have identified it as one of the weaknesses of Barth's anthropology that he sees co-humanity corresponding to the divine Trinity most aptly depicted in human marriage which in turn also depicts Christ's relationship to the church. The image of the open Trinity as the model which is embodied in co-humanity would leave room for a multiplicity of other human relationships between men and women other than heterosexual marriage. The church as the embodiment of the divine community can then consist of many different relationships and forms of

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<sup>126</sup>Bauckham identifies these as two different strands which in the end remain irreconcilable contradictions. He points to the limits of Moltmann's social model of the Trinity as essentially blurring the fundamental differences between persons human and divine. See Richard Bauckham, The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 177-179. Yet we must point to the necessity of a social model of the Trinity for a feminist reconceptualisation of Trinitarian ecclesiology as one possible means to overcome the culturally bound gender constructions enhanced and supported by a christologically dominated ecclesiology. A social model of the Trinity as the basis of ecclesiology from a feminist perspective sees the two lines of argument in Bauckham's analysis of Moltmann not as contradicting each other, but as in mutual relation. An understanding of the Trinity which provides a model for relationships must be identified as working with a similar structure as the christological ecclesiology which we have dismissed. Concepts of divine relationships and relationships within the church are essentially anthropomorphic in character, but must be identified as metaphorically suggestive of each other and therefore transformable and open to change.

<sup>127</sup>Cf. for example Rosemary Radford Ruether's analysis of the consequences of the emphasis on Christ's maleness for women's lives in the church (Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, 122-126) as well as Mary Daly's dictum 'If God is male, the male is God.'

shared life, be they friendship, marriage, companionship, sisterhood, solidarity in struggle. Mary Jo Weaver criticised Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and the 'women-church' movement for their idealised concept of sisterhood<sup>128</sup>. Despite the advantages of friendship as a fundamental model for relationships within the church, we have to be aware of a similar danger of idealisation which we find not only in Moltmann's work, but also in that of feminist theologians like Mary Hunt<sup>129</sup> and Elizabeth Stuart<sup>130</sup>. Women live in a multiplicity of relationships, voluntary and involuntary. A feminist understanding of the church has to develop criteria which value those relationships in their multiplicity and develop criteria for judging those relationships which are not healing and empowering for women. In relating his understanding of the church to co-humanity between men and women and the concept of the open Trinity, Moltmann has provided an important starting-point for a feminist reconsideration of traditional concepts of ecclesiology, but this needs to be developed further through consideration of the particular lives of women if the concept of the open Trinity is not to remain a transcendent ideal society.

### 3.5 Concluding Remarks

Four analyses of ecclesiological texts written in this present century by male authors have identified ecclesiology as a theological discipline dominated by the perceptions of their male authors and showing an obvious neglect of women's presence as a significant factor in what it means to be church. The church indeed appears as a 'community of brethren', as the hierarchy or at best a male institution into which women are only subsequently included without any creative space of their own.

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<sup>128</sup>Weaver, New Catholic Women, 137-142.

<sup>129</sup>Mary E. Hunt, Fierce Tenderness. A Feminist Theology of Friendship (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

<sup>130</sup>Elizabeth Stuart, Just Good Friends. Toward a Lesbian and Gay Theology of Relationships (London: Mowbray, 1995).

Such an understanding of the church and of ecclesiology is in any case disempowering for women:

To be excluded from a literature that claims to define one's identity is to experience a particular form of powerlessness — not simply the powerlessness which derives from not seeing one's own experience articulated, clarified, and legitimized in art, but more significantly the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self, the consequence of the invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male — to be universal, to be American — is to be not female. Not only does powerlessness characterize women's experience of reading, it also describes the content of what is read.<sup>131</sup>

Yet the feminist 'reader-response' critique attempted in this chapter suggests the importance of women not only reclaiming the church, but also its theological self-interpretation as a means of retrospectively participating in what the church understands as its theological tradition. Such a feminist reclamation has to be creative and not dictated by methods of male-dominated scholarship. Its aim, as it has been established by the ecclesiological concept of women-church which is of importance here, is not to find out what the (male) authors meant by their conceptions of the church, but to reflect on women's reading of texts that were not originally meant for women. Feminist re-reading of the tradition on the one hand means re-discovering women as authors who have largely been forgotten by the church's canonical tradition, but also doing what women have always done and have had to do throughout the history of the church: creating spaces of their own within the male tradition.

The analyses of ecclesiological texts in this chapter not only show that women were not taken into account in ecclesiological reflections, but also that such creative reclamatory re-readings are in fact possible and empowering for women who claim to be church. As I pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, feminist theologians have mainly ignored traditional approaches to ecclesiology as sources of their re-inventing the church, and chosen the methods of liberation theology as their predominant theological paradigm with regard to ecclesiology. In the present chapter I

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<sup>131</sup>Feterley, The Resisting Reader, XIII.

have attempted to show the adaptability of other ecclesiological models to feminist reconstructions. This challenges the almost exclusive use of liberation theology in the area of feminist ecclesiology. It points to the necessity of applying the methods developed in this chapter not only to ecclesiological texts neglected by feminist authors, but also to the method favoured by feminist theologians: base ecclesial communities and liberation theology, to which I now turn.

## Chapter 4

### Moving Beyond Base Communities?! Reflections on the Use and Significance of the Liberation Theological Paradigm for the Construction of Feminist Ecclesiologies

#### 4.0 Introduction

In a recent article on 'Being a Catholic Feminist at the End of the Twentieth Century' Rosemary Radford Ruether wrote:

Whether or not we have reasonable parish communities where we feel nourished in weekly worship, it seems to me that base communities in which small groups of 8-12 people covenant together for regular prayer, study, worship, discussion, and mutual support are an important base for Christian life.<sup>1</sup>

This quotation points to the continuing significance of base communities and the liberation theological paradigm for the development of feminist ecclesiologies. Beginning with Mary Hunt's doctoral thesis 'Feminist Liberation Theology: The Development of Method in Construction'<sup>2</sup>, liberation theology has been the dominant theological paradigm used by feminist theologians in their search for a theology that is no longer used to oppress women, but uses women's experiences of faith and life as one of its fundamental sources, and establishes women as agents of theology and Christian practice.<sup>3</sup> The model of small base communities, the church of the people and the poor, in particular mirrored in women's claim to be church, has presented one of the major challenges to traditional ecclesiologies and their viability and usefulness for women being church.

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<sup>1</sup>Ruether, 'Being a Catholic Feminist in the End of the Twentieth Century', 10.

<sup>2</sup>Mary E. Hunt 'Feminist Liberation Theology. The Development of Method in Construction' (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1980).

<sup>3</sup>See also Linda Hogan, From Women's Experience to Feminist Theology (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 72-83 and Linda Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan, Introducing Feminist Theology (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 72-79.

In the fourth chapter of this thesis I seek to evaluate the concept of liberation theology and the ecclesiological models presented by liberation theologians from a feminist perspective. By this evaluation I attempt to challenge that almost exclusive use of liberation ecclesiologies by feminist theologians and to open my argument up to possibilities of reconsidering aspects of traditional ecclesiologies so far discarded by feminist theologians as fruitful sources of theological discourse about women being church. I argue that what feminist theologians do with the liberation theological model is in fact very similar to the kinds of constructive feminist readings I have suggested for mainstream ecclesiological models of this century as presented in the previous chapter of this thesis. Liberation theology in itself comes to be seen as another theological paradigm invented by male theologians which does not from its very beginning consider the significance of categories of gender in its reflections, but operates with the assumption of the dominant neutrality of the male perspective. This overlooks the dimension of gender and at the same time operates with gender constructions which are not flexible enough to enable women to be full agents in being church.

My argument will move in three steps. First I evaluate the ecclesiology presented by Latin American Liberation theologians in more general terms, pointing to the lack of women's voices in developing liberation theology<sup>4</sup>. Then I consider two areas where liberation theologians have in fact discussed what could be considered 'women's issues', the question of the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood and the importance of Mariology for liberation theology. In the final section of this chapter I want to show that the use of liberation theological models has in fact been an important and strategically necessary step in the development towards feminist

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<sup>4</sup>In my evaluation of liberation theology and the base ecclesial community model I have chosen to restrict myself to the Latin American context of liberation theology. This is mainly justified through the North American context of the feminist theologians who first developed the concept of women-church for whom Latin American liberation theology was far more influential than, for example, Asian or Black liberation theologies.

ecclesiologies, but that its inherent gender bias points to the necessity of considering other approaches in order to construct ecclesiologies which express women being church that are viable for the multiplicity of contexts in which women live as women and for whom church is an important context of life ('Lebenszusammenhang').

#### 4.1 The Church of the People: Base Communities

Leonardo Boff, whose book Church: Charism and Power<sup>5</sup> presents perhaps the most important account of the theology and praxis of base ecclesial communities in Latin America, summarises the meaning of base ecclesial communities as follows:

Grassroots communities signify a break with the old monopoly of social and religious power, and the inauguration of a new social and religious process involving the restructuring of the church and society.<sup>6</sup>

Liberation ecclesiologies seek to present an ecclesiological model which is new and most importantly a challenge to the power structures which have enabled the church for most of its history to be in alliance with other powers of domination as oppression. Liberation theologians have developed their ecclesiology from the attempt to implement and radicalise the results of the Second Vatican Council in the church in Latin America<sup>7</sup>. They take the model of the church as 'communion'<sup>8</sup>, as the 'people of

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<sup>5</sup>Boff, Leonardo. Church: Charism and Power. Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church (London: SCM, 1987).

<sup>6</sup>Leonardo Boff, 'Theological Characteristics of a Grassroots Church' In: The Challenge of Basic Ecclesial Communities Ed. Sergio Torres and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981), 134.

<sup>7</sup>This is most obvious in the final documents of Second Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) in Medellín/Columbia 1968. See: Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council. (Washington: Secretariat for Latin America, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1979) and William T. Cavanaugh, 'The Ecclesiologies of Medellín and the Lessons of the Base Communities' Cross Currents 44 (1994), 67-84.

God' and as the 'sacrament of salvation in history' as the starting point for their ecclesiology of the church of the poor. They radicalise the encouragement given by the council for greater participation of the laity to a reordering of the power structures of the church which no longer emphasises the ontological power given to the hierarchy, but rather the importance of the poor being church themselves. The promise of such a reordering of society and the church by reconstructing the church as the church of the people and of those whose voices have so far been unheard, along with the primacy of ecclesial praxis and experience, has made the model of base ecclesial communities attractive to feminist theologians.

Liberation theologians move in their ecclesiological reflections from a church for the people to considering the church as the church of the people. Being church is a response to the experience of God in the life of the poor. Therefore the life of the community, the experience of being the people of God is of greater importance and eventually seeks to overcome the emphasis on vertical hierarchical structures and clerical status<sup>9</sup>. The poor are attributed epistemological preference and in their own way — reflecting on their own experiences as those who are not only poor, but seen as non-persons — re-invent the church. Base communities according to Boff and others represent a new way of being church, though they must by no means be understood as schismatic. This is an important point to bear in mind for evaluating feminist base communities in the women-church movement.<sup>10</sup> The church, according to Boff, can no longer be defined by the exclusive rights of the hierarchy, but has to be a church constructed and lived by the people who are church and now begin to take an active role in the life of the church. The poor not only begin to define the church in their own

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<sup>8</sup>For a study of the ecclesiological motif of communion see Killian McDonnell, 'Vatican II (1962-1964), Puebla (1979), Synod (1985): Koinonia/Communio as Integral Ecclesiology' Journal of Ecumenical Studies 25:3 (1988), 399-427.

<sup>9</sup>Alvara Quiroz Magaña, 'Ecclesiology in the Theology of Liberation' In Mysterium Liberationis. Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology Ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 203.

<sup>10</sup>See for example: Hunt, 'Spiral Not Schism', 82-92.

terms, but become aware that they actually are church themselves<sup>11</sup>. The church of the people is a church of the laity, responding not only to the increasing importance of the laity after Vatican II, but also to the lack of pastoral care provided by the hierarchical church<sup>12</sup>. Due to the lack of priests, base communities are often run entirely by lay people, and often by women.

That the poor become agents of ecclesial life is most obvious in the movement of base ecclesial communities. These are small communities which exist within and alongside the structures of institution and hierarchy. The members of these groups meet regularly to read and reflect on the Bible in the light of their own experiences as those who are poor yet becoming agents of being church. Their reflection and celebration does not remain restricted to 'spiritual matters', but also relates to issues of social justice and everyday concern. This means that the boundaries between the spiritual and the secular cease to exist and the reality of the everyday lives of the poor becomes the realm where the sacred is revealed and experienced. The church itself is a 'sacrament of liberation' in history and acts as such<sup>13</sup>. That means that the reality of what the church is is embodied through Christ and in turn embodies Christ's being in

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<sup>11</sup>Cf. the core phrase of the women-church movement: 'Women are church and have always been church.'

<sup>12</sup>See Marcello de C. Azevedo, 'Basic Ecclesial Communities' in Mysterium Liberationis. Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology Ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 650.

<sup>13</sup>For the understanding of sacraments by liberation theologians see for example: Victor Codina, 'Sacraments' Trans. Margaret D. Wilde In: Mysterium Liberationis. Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology Ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993). 654-676; Joseph A. Fortuna, 'Contributing credibility to a sacramental theology of liberation' In: A Promise of Presence. Essays in Honor of David N. Power (Washington: Pastoral Press, 1992); Leonardo Boff, The Sacraments of Life and the Life of the Sacraments (Washington: Pastoral Press, 1987); Juan Luis Segundo, A theology for artisans of a new humanity v.4 The Sacraments Today (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1974); Christopher Rowland, 'Eucharist as Liberation from the Present' In: The Sense of the Sacramental Ed. David W. Brown and Ann L. Loades (London: SPCK, 1995), 200-215.

history<sup>14</sup>. This embodiment happens through particular political actions in which the church realises its own being as the liberating being of Christ.<sup>15</sup> That the reality of the church's sacramental being comes into effect in particular actions which are not necessarily reduced to the traditional seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic church shows that political and spiritual life are inseparable in the ecclesiology of liberation theologians. The church, being the church of the poor and oppressed, is the church which embodies the sufferings of Jesus in history, but at the same time always transcends any particular embodiment in history and can never be identified with one existing historical entity more than with any other<sup>16</sup>. This means that the ecclesiology and in fact all theological deliberations within base communities are essentially political. Political commitment therefore becomes an essential and important aspect of the life of the church in which its holiness and its true character as the church of the poor is reflected.

Both the institutional church, together with the network of base ecclesial communities, are the church. Base communities are not a more authentic way of being church, but rather instruments of renewal of the church as a whole. They are anticipations of structures of radical equality and democracy to be realised in church and society. Ecclesiology, according to Boff, can only be developed from studying the life and the praxis of the church and the church of the poor and underprivileged in particular. Even though Boff writes from his perspective as a theologian in Latin America (and at the time of writing Church: Charism and Power Boff was an ordained member of the clergy), his aim is to provide an ecclesiology for the church as a whole,

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<sup>14</sup>Ignacio Ellacuría, 'The Church of the Poor, Sacrament of Liberation' Transl. Margaret D. Wilde Mysterium Liberationis. Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology Ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 545.

<sup>15</sup>Ellacuría, 'The Church of the Poor', 548.

<sup>16</sup>Ignacio Ellacuría, 'The Crucified People' Trans. Phillip Berryman and Robert R. Barr Mysterium Liberationis. Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology Ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 602.

though for it to be a valid ecclesiology it must always begin from the situation of the poor.

Though Boff emphasises the newness of this approach to ecclesiology which reflects on the experiences of base communities rather than on the timeless spiritual nature of the church, the church Boff and others present is not a 'new church', but incorporates the existence of the institutional and hierarchical church. Boff does not understand the ecclesiology of grassroots communities as something radically new, but rather as in continuity with the tradition of the church of the people which has always existed, but has long been subdued by a concept of the church represented as primarily by the hierarchy. Base Ecclesial Communities do not understand themselves as replacing the institutional church, nor provide an alternative to its institutional structures, but they rather seek to represent the 'community element' in the life of the church.<sup>17</sup> Boff is aware that no historical community can avoid its institutionalisation, if it wants to exist for any length of time. Within the church both elements, institution and community, must exist and complement each other. Boff does not question the fact that the church has authority, but he does question the particular historical forms which this authority, (itself hitherto an unquestionable given), has taken and takes in Latin America today<sup>18</sup>. The life of the church, according to Boff, is characterised by the same forms of injustice and denial of basic human rights as the life of society. Boff therefore argues that the church should no longer restrict itself to 'spirituality', but rather should become politically active against injustice and the violation of human rights. In the ecclesiologies of Boff and other liberation theologians we find an approach to a 'realistic' ecclesiology, an ecclesiology which takes the 'real situation of the church' as its starting point. Boff identifies the 'real' as the 'political'. The reality the church has to face is that of a capitalist class society in which the poor, those at the bottom of the class system, are victims of oppression. For Boff and others this means

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<sup>17</sup>Leonardo Boff, 'Ecclesiogenesis: Ecclesial Basic Communities Re-Invent the Church' *Mid-Stream* 20 (1981): 436f.

<sup>18</sup>Boff, *Church: Charism and Power*, 43.

that the church has to dispose of its alliance with the ruling classes and become the 'true church of the poor'. Only by becoming a church of the poor may the being of the church as the sacramental presence in the world be revealed and experienced. The true church of the poor can only be a church that is led and guided by the people, by those who are church<sup>19</sup>. This entails a view of authority and power which is to a large extent influenced and guided by the possibility and the reality of its abuse, but does not leave room to develop positive conceptions of authority. Boff concentrates to a large extent on the abuse of authority which deprives liberation theology of its potential to subvert these other forms of ecclesiology which concentrate on hierarchical power structures. While the achievement of authoritative positions within the church must be understood as important, we must ask whether too strong a focus on the importance of authoritative positions is not inevitably to the detriment of an ecclesiology of those who are church: the people/women.

Liberation theologians (like feminist theologians) emphasise the contingency and flexibility of all church structures. This leads to the urge to become sensitive to the democratic movements of the present and to abandon feudal structures of the past. In the base ecclesial communities Boff sees the democratisation of the church being realised, which for him represents a new way of being church. Such a new way of being church is necessary in order to live out what, according to Boff, is the function of the church: 'to make visible, and historical, the salvific meaning of Jesus Christ and his mission and, doing so, become the sacrament-sign and sacrament-instrument of liberation.'<sup>20</sup> For the church this requires the reconsideration of its own organisation and its understanding of ministries towards structures which are more participatory

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<sup>19</sup>See for example: Douglas E. Wingeier, 'Leadership Patterns in Central American Base Christian Communities: Implications for the North American Church' *Quarterly Review* 14 (1994): 59-82.

<sup>20</sup>Boff, *Church: Charism and Power*, 109.

and democratic<sup>21</sup> and also reflect the pastoral needs of the people who are church. The poor can no longer be seen merely as objects of pastoral ministry exercised by members of the clergy. Rather, in the process of becoming aware of their own pastoral needs, the people also become aware of their own ability to meet these needs and to participate actively in the life of the church. This means that the ecclesiology of base ecclesial communities, taking its starting point from being the church of the poor and reflecting on the needs and experiences of the poor, essentially merges pastoral theology with ecclesiology. The pastoral situation of the poor, inseparable from their socio-economic situation, provides the agenda for the life of the church.

Boff writes what can be characterised as a 'contextual ecclesiology', an ecclesiology which reflects not so much on the timeless theological and spiritual character of the church, but as a true ecclesiology 'from below', concentrates on the life and situation of the church in his particular context. His ecclesiological proposal is best presented by his reflection and reinterpretation of the traditional 'marks of the church':

First of all, Boff reconsiders the meaning of the 'catholicity' of the church. In its history the church has always been challenged by its different cultural and political contexts and it has always adapted various characteristics of different cultural and political situations. This ability to adapt to different contexts shows the true catholicity, in fact the universality, of the church. It calls for a concept of what Boff calls 'syncretism' which denies the possibility of a pure church and has a radical openness to its context as one of its central characteristics. 'Valid syncretism' is an

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<sup>21</sup>In the base communities there is greater participation and ecclesial awareness by all the members, greater participation in social and ecclesial life, and a greater initiative by lay people and by people with diverse charisms. This entails a restructuring of the hierarchical ministries along a more communitarian line, better suited to channeling the energies and activities of the people (more pedagogical and inspirational than directive), the need for a more fraternal (not paternalistic) (sic!) style, and an exercise of authority more attentive to the abilities and needs of the faithful.' Juan Antonio Estrada, 'People of God' Trans. Margaret D. Wilde Mysterium Liberationis. Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology Ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 613.

essential aspect of the church being the result of the divine mediated through human means. It is an expression of historical and cultural character of the church as the embodiment of Christianity. While syncretism is one aspect of true catholicity of the church, another one must be the fact that a church which understands itself as catholic and universal must also see the church as shared among all social classes, that is, it can neither restrict itself to being in alliance with the ruling classes nor claim that only the poor are authentically church. True catholicity is therefore only achieved through the acknowledgement of valid syncretism and the overcoming of a socio-economic class system<sup>22</sup> which shows that liberation ecclesiology finds itself tested against the political situation in which base ecclesial communities live.

From there develops the church's mission to create structures of social justice. In fact, unity and catholicity of the church are closely connected and together reflect the possibility of the church being embodied in a multiplicity of different contexts in a multiplicity of different particular ways. From this concern for socio-economic justice, which reflects God's 'preferential option for the poor', Boff develops new reflections on the meaning of ecclesial unity. The unity of the church depends on its common concern for the poor and deprived, its mission of liberation<sup>23</sup>.

In the Roman Catholic context for which Boff develops his ecclesiology the concept of apostolicity is of great importance. Boff identifies the problem of traditional interpretations of apostolicity as equating it with an individualistic concept of apostolic succession. It is not the individual members of the hierarchy who are successors of the apostles, but the whole community in sharing the same vision shares the apostolicity of the church: 'Everyone is a bearer of the teachings of Jesus Christ and all share in the three basic tasks: to give witness, to sanctify, and to be responsible for the unity and life of the community.'<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>See Boff, Church: Charism and Power, 89-107.

<sup>23</sup>Boff, Church: Charism and Power, 121.

<sup>24</sup>Boff, Church: Charism and Power, 123.

In the same way an individualistic concept of holiness is to be replaced by an understanding of militant holiness:

Beyond fighting against one's own passions, the militant fights against exploitation and exclusive accumulation of wealth in an effort to build more communitarian and balanced social structures. New virtues are expressed in terms of class solidarity, participation in communal decisions, mutual aid, criticism of the abuses of power, defamation and persecution in the cause of justice, unjust imprisonment, loss of employment, boycotts, and the criticism of private ownership that lacks social responsibility. The communities find models in those persons who have suffered honorably because of their commitment to the community and to the Gospel, keeping alive the names of their confessors and martyrs, remembering them in their community celebrations.<sup>25</sup>

Such a militant understanding of holiness does not see the holy as something set apart from ordinary life, but seeks to discover the holy in the structures of the ordinary. In a similar way sacramental celebrations in base communities are celebrations of life, of ordinary everyday life in which the being of the new community, that is liberation, is identifiably present as reality which anticipates its future fulfilment.

#### **4.2 Liberation Theology: Does it Provide an Ecclesiology for Women?**

In the preceding part of this chapter I have attempted to give an account of the main characteristics of the ecclesiology presented by Leonardo Boff and other liberation theologians. Some of its main characteristics resemble very much the ecclesiology of women-church presented in the first chapter of this thesis. These are in particular the emphasis on being church rather than reflection of the nature of the church as an entity outside the particular human being; the non-clerical structures which are reflected in a functional understanding of ecclesial authority; and a new understanding of holiness which develops the secular as the realm where the sacred is present and revealed. Liberation theology presents itself as the church of the poor, the church of the people. Yet from a feminist theological perspective we must ask

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<sup>25</sup>Boff, Church: Charism and Power, 123.

whether the church of the people in the way it is presented by liberation theologians can also be the church of women. Does liberation theology indeed provide a more appropriate theological paradigm for women seeking to be church? Or do we have to be prepared to move beyond liberation theology as a dominant theological paradigm in order to develop an ecclesiology that does justice to the needs and the agency of women's discourses of being church?

First of all, we have to realise that women have not from the beginning been on the agenda of liberation theology. Liberation theology in its first generation was seen as the work of male clergymen who were educated in Western countries. Their reflection on women's issues therefore almost naturally remains limited<sup>26</sup>. Only more recently have women in Latin America and elsewhere begun to reflect on their

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<sup>26</sup>A characteristic example is Leonardo Boff's book The Maternal Face of God. The Feminine and its Religious Expressions Trans. Robert R. Barr and John W. Diercksmeier (London: Collins, 1979). The concept of the 'feminine' Boff presents here does not bear much resemblance to the reality of women's lives in Latin America or elsewhere, but is rather based on a disembodied and Jungian idealisation of the feminine. For a more detailed feminist critique see: Karen Marie Killoury, 'A Feminist Theological Critique of Texts and Traditions about Mary the Mother of Jesus' unpublished M.A. thesis University of Durham, 1992, 201-216 and Sarah Coakley, 'Mariology and "Romantic Feminism": A Critique' in: Women's Voices. Essays in Contemporary Feminist Theology. Ed. Teresa Elwes (London: Marshall Pickering, 1992), 97-110.

situation as women in the context of liberation theology<sup>27</sup> They have also pointed to the fact that liberation theology as such has not managed to break the dominance of male/masculine thinking in theological reflections such as Christology and ecclesiology. In his book Liberation Theology and its Critics Arthur McGovern names 'spirituality' and 'women' as the two main areas where liberation theology is developing at present. He writes: 'Women constitute a central force in the whole movement of liberation, but they have not generally had much opportunity to play this role "on center court" as prominent theologians or as a major focus of concern.'<sup>28</sup>. Oppression can no longer be understood in general terms, but only as the experience of particular human beings. This shows that liberation theologians have so far operated with concepts of the socio-political and economic situation which have been ignorant of the dimension of gender as one factor of such a situation. The general notion of poverty as the main characteristic of those who are church has so far not reflected on the effects of this situation of poverty on women who are often doubly victimised by being poor and by being women in a male dominated society.

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<sup>27</sup>See for example Arthur F. McGovern, Liberation Theology and Its Critics. Toward an Assessment (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), 92-99; Ana María Tepedino and Margarida L. Ribeiro Brandão, 'Women and the Theology of Liberation' In Mysterium Liberationis. Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology Ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 222-231 and the essays in part three of With Passion and Compassion. Third World Women Doing Theology Ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988. See also Feminist Theology from a Third World Perspective. A Reader Ed. Ursula King (London: SPCK, 1994). María Pilar Aquino describes the second Working Document Preceding the Fourth General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Santo Domingo in 1992 as the first time in the history of the Latin American church that an official document of the Latin American episcopal council 'shows a serious effort to incorporate women as subjects of its reflection and their vision as a hermeneutical perspective' María Pilar Aquino, 'Santo Domingo through the Eyes of Women' In Santo Domingo and Beyond. Documents and Commentaries from the Historic Meeting of the Latin American Bishops' Conference Ed. Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 215. See also María Pilar Aquino, 'La Presencia de la Mujer en la Iglesia. Perspectivas Eclesiológicas' MEMORIA. Congreso Feminino Latinamericano (Mexico: UFCM, 1992) 65-102.

<sup>28</sup>McGovern, Liberation Theology and its Critics, 83.

Yet at the same time we note that base ecclesial communities, though consciously remaining within the male dominated hierarchical structures of the church, provide a location where women can and do participate in the leadership of the community. The participation of women in the life of base ecclesial communities can almost be seen as one of the main characteristics of the movement. Félix Ursúa sees this equality of women within base ecclesial communities as a new development within the traditionally male dominated culture of Latin America<sup>29</sup>. This often happens out of necessity rather than as a chosen option, yet the fact that it happens is significant enough for our considerations. Women's participation in the life of base ecclesial communities is therefore part of a concept of fundamental equality. In other words, women are no longer excluded on the grounds of gender, but that does not necessarily mean their participation as particular sexuate human beings whose spirituality, for example, is valued and celebrated. Sonia E. Alvarez comments that

liberation theology and the Christian base community movement have made women more aware of themselves as citizens but not as women. When empowerment as citizens triggers women's consciousness of their gender-specific oppression ... the church has intervened to discourage this process of change.<sup>30</sup>

We must question whether this makes liberation theology and ecclesiology automatically a model more apt for feminist reconstruction. Hewitt states that, even though women are present within the base community movement, that does not mean that this movement actually addresses the concerns and issues of women.<sup>31</sup> We must ask whether women's participation in base communities actually manages to change

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<sup>29</sup>Félix Serrano Ursúa, 'Las Comunidades Eclesiales de Base en America' Estudios Teológicos 9 (1982), 380.

<sup>30</sup>Sonia E. Alvarez, 'Women's Participation in the Brazilian People's Church: A Critical Appraisal' Feminist Studies 16.2 (1990), 382. See also Anne R. Anderson, 'Dismantling Patriarchy - A Redemptive Vision: Ritual and Feminist Critical Theology in Basic Ecclesial Communities' In: Women and Religious Ritual Ed. Leslie Northup (Washington: The Pastoral Press, 1993), 183-201.

<sup>31</sup>W.E. Hewitt, Base Christian Communities and Social Change in Brazil (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 64.

the character of the communities or whether women are merely invited to participate, out of necessity, in an organisation that remains invented and dominated by men.

In assessing the usability of liberation theology we have to take into account that poverty and gender are not categories which operate on the same level of meaning. It is therefore not possible or desirable to replace the poor as the group reflected on by liberation theologians with 'women' as agents of a new feminist theology. While the concept of poverty as the starting point for liberation theological reflections restricts these reflections to a necessary contextuality, the dimension of gender, under the condition of the contingency of particular gender constructions, is universal. As I will argue in more detail in the remainder of this chapter, this difference in perspective enables us to define the agenda of our feminist ecclesiological reflections as developing criteria under which the dimension of gender can be included as informing all contextual ecclesiological reflections. Conventional feminist liberation theologies understand women as those underprivileged in both church and society and therefore as those who need to be reestablished as agents of being church. We can therefore argue that the ecclesiologies of women-church partly operated with a concept of 'women' which understands 'being women' as on the same level with 'being poor', and therefore does not leave enough room to reflect on what it means for women as women to be church.

We can therefore maintain that what happens when feminist theologians use concepts of liberation theology is in fact a feminist reinterpretation of a theological paradigm which does not have women's concerns on its agenda from the beginning. What liberation theology has achieved is to approach the humanising of theological reflection. Yet it has not attempted to overcome the inherent male bias in its own reflections. Even though liberation theology seeks to provide theological models of Christianity in the light of poverty and oppression, the oppression of women, often supported by patriarchal concepts of Christology, anthropology and ecclesiology, has not been challenged. As such, much liberation theology must be seen as supporting a

gender-neutrality which still operates with the generic male/masculine subject, but does not leave room for women as theological agents in their own right. The kind of justice advocated by many liberation theologians remains a male-invented and male-supported justice in which women are subsequently invited to participate, but not a concept of equality which is open for women as women<sup>32</sup>. In her critique of liberation theology from the point of view of a feminist sociology of religion, Victoria Lee Erickson, points to the gender-bias which remains inherent in much liberation theology and its consequences for importing liberation theological models into North American feminist theology:

Whether it is the North American feminist movement or the Latin American liberation movement, it is of utmost interest to discover the hidden bias that prevents the poor from adopting the platform or prevent the platform's creators from seeing the inappropriateness of their agenda. Building a theology around gender-blind social analysis can only facilitate the production of gender-blind and -biased theology. Simply put, a gender-biased social theory is oppressive, and no matter where this theology is transported it will remain biased if basic theoretical assumptions are maintained. Liberation theology suffers from gender bias.<sup>33</sup>

Having established that liberation theology, despite having a number of its ecclesiological aims in common with feminist ecclesiologies, is not feminist itself, we can point to the fact that what takes place in the use of liberation theology and the concept of base ecclesial communities is in fact a re-reading of male-biased theologies in order to make them usable for women. In doing so, feminist theologians attempt what I have attempted in the previous chapter, to show that male biased ecclesiologies can in fact be re-read from a feminist perspective and then become empowering for

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<sup>32</sup>It (sc. liberation theology) offers a more collective understanding of God and stresses the social nature of sin. God becomes the God of life and of justice who has a preferential love for the poor. But liberation theology has not changed the patriarchal anthropology and cosmology upon which Christianity is based. Liberation theology ... did not challenge the underlying patriarchal structure of Christianity itself.' Mary Judith Ress, 'Interview with Brazilian Feminist Theologian Ivone Gebara' *Feminist Theology* 8 (1995), 107-116.

<sup>33</sup>Victoria Lee, Erickson, *Where Silence Speaks. Feminism, Social Theory and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 168.

women to be church. Yet most feminist theologians have omitted the first step of identifying the point that the ecclesiology of liberation theology is in fact one in the construction of which women have not participated and which does not from its beginning reflect women's pastoral needs as well as women's gifts in being church. By identifying the inherent gender-bias of liberation theology and showing that the use of liberation theologies is by no means a unique possibility, we become open to developing a multiplicity of ecclesiologies in a feminist paradigm.

### **4.3.1 Women's Themes in Liberation Theology**

Before we embark on reconsidering the significance of liberation theology for writing a feminist ecclesiology in a postmodern context, I want to reflect on the arguments used by liberation theologians in their reflections on two topics of women's issues which do occur in the work of liberation theologians. These are the significance of a Mariology 'from below' and the debate of the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood.

#### **4.3.1.1 Mary as the Prototype of the Church in Liberation Theology**

Reflecting the importance of Mary in Latin American Roman Catholicism, Mary also plays an important part in the work of liberation theologians. Mariological concepts are used both by Latin American women theologians and by male liberation

theologians<sup>34</sup>. In fact, Virgil Elizondo calls Marian devotion 'the most popular, persistent and original characteristic of Latin American Christianity'<sup>35</sup>. While women theologians like Gebara and Bingemer emphasise the empowering notion of Mary as 'mother of God and mother of the poor', the use of Mary by male theologians is often ridden by concepts of gender which are counterproductive to the liberation of women. Liberation theologians focus on Mary's motherhood and draw their imagery to a large extent from the context of family life. In glorifying women's role in the family by linking it with the divine, liberation theologians yet again show that their theology is not free from the inherent gender bias pointed out earlier. By glorifying womanhood and maternity in the way liberation theologians do, they do not actually contribute to the improvement of the situation of women in family, society and church, but help to perpetuate the situation of women's captivity by the eternal feminine. This can for example be shown in the following quotation from the final document of the Puebla conference of Latin American bishops:

Mary is a woman....In her, God dignified woman to unsuspected dimensions. In Mary, the Gospel penetrated femininity, redeemed it and exalted it. This is of capital importance for our cultural horizon, where the woman should be much more highly valued and where her social roles are now being defined

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<sup>34</sup>When we speak of the ecclesial base communities we turn to Mary again, this woman who carried in her womb and gave birth to the Liberator of the poor. She is the figure of the Church born among the poor.' Ivone Gebara and María Clara Bingemer, 'Mary' in Mysterium Liberationis. Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology ed. by Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 494. See also Ivone Gebara and María Clara Bingemer, Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor (London: Burns & Oates, 1989), María Clara Luchetti Bingemer, 'Woman: Time and Eternity The Eternal Woman and the Feminine Face of God' Concilium 1991/6 (1991), 98-107, Virgil Elizondo, 'Mary and the Poor: A Model of Evangelizing' Concilium 168 (1983), 59-65 and Marcella Althaus-Reid, 'When God is a Rich White Woman who does not Walk: The Hermeneutical Circle of Mariology and the Construction of Femininity in Latin America' Theology and Sexuality 1 (1994), 55-72. For a study of feminist approaches to Mariology see Els Meackelberghe, Desperately Seeking Mary. The Feminist Reappropriation of a Religious Symbol (Kampen: Pharos, 1991), Rosemary Radford Ruether, Mary. The Feminine Face of the Church (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) and Maurice Hamington, Hail Mary? The Struggle for Ultimate Womanhood in Catholicism (London: Routledge, 1995). For a feminist critique of Gebara/Bingemer see also Killoury, 'A Feminist Theological Critique of Texts and Traditions about Mary Mother of Jesus', 218-235.

<sup>35</sup>Elizondo, 'Mary and the Poor', 59.

more clearly and fully. Mary is the guarantee of women's grandeur; she is the example of what being a woman means specifically — of her vocation to be the soul, a self-surrender that spiritualizes the flesh and fleshes out the spirit.<sup>36</sup>

A quotation like this is in tension with the statement that amongst other issues 'the yearning of women to better their situation, in line with their dignity and distinctiveness' is seen as one of the major movements on the Latin American continent.<sup>37</sup>

Mary is portrayed as the prototype of the church, as the one who is poor and receptive to God's word and in her situation of poverty and need experiences God. 'With the assumption of Mary as the figure and symbol of the new people of God, the church is already, even in the midst of ambiguity and sin, the community of salvation, the faithful people it is called to be.'<sup>38</sup> Such a Marian ecclesiology focuses on the Mary of the Magnificat as the theological expression of the challenge of the current socio-political order: Mary is at the same time the 'mother of God' and the 'mother of the poor':

She becomes once more the simple woman, the woman of the people, the mother of Jesus the carpenter's son, in solidarity with her folk and with the hopes of her people, handmaid of the Lord who topples the mighty from their thrones and exalts the humble, who fills the poor with good things and sends the rich empty away.<sup>39</sup>

Magaña points out that in becoming the prototype of those who are the church, Mary also fosters the liberation of women in the church in Latin America, for example their greater participation in leadership<sup>40</sup>. María Clara Bingemer explains a transfer in the focus of Mariology from an individualistic concept which idealises Mary beyond comparison with other women to an understanding of Mary as a collective symbol which makes it fruitful for ecclesiology as well. By replacing the Mary as an

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<sup>36</sup>The Puebla Final Document' in Puebla and Beyond. Documentation and Commentary Eds. John Eagleson and Philip Sharper (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), 164.

<sup>37</sup>The Puebla Final Document', 181.

<sup>38</sup>Gebara/ Bingemer, 'Mary', 488.

<sup>39</sup>Magaña, 'Ecclesiology in the Theology of Liberation', 205.

<sup>40</sup>Magaña, 'Ecclesiology in the Theology of Liberation', 205.

insurmountable ideal for women with a figure of Mary who is shaped by her identification with the poor and with women in particular, Mariology has the potential to become a source of empowerment for Latin American women and for the church in which they participate. She states: 'A church like that in Latin America, which seeks to be a church of the poor and of the people, will find in this Mariology produced by the wombs and heads of women a new and rich source of inspiration for working out its identity'<sup>41</sup>. Latin American women theologians put the emphasis on Mary not as a disembodied ideal, but rather as an historical figure to which women (and men) in contemporary Latin America can relate. Such a transformation from an idealised and disembodied symbol of oppression into a person with which women identify in fact has further implications that can be made usable for those in the church facing the question of gender. Mariology in the work of Maria Clara Bingemer and Ivone Gebara becomes the starting point for the reconsideration of anthropology and theology as a whole from a perspective which understands itself as the anticipation of liberated humanity. Such a use of Mariology attempts to move from a male/masculine dominated understanding of humanity to a concept which sees humanity and the revelation of the divine in it as a whole of both male and female. Such a reinterpretation of Mary makes her the symbol of hope for the kingdom of God which means not only the challenge, but the ultimate overthrowing of all patriarchal structures of oppression which characterise the life of women (and men) in Latin America. But we must ask whether a certain romanticisation of poverty of which Gebara's and Bingemer's interpretation of the Marian dogmas is not free, is inevitable. Must such romanticisation lead to a reconstruction of a symbol which is as

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<sup>41</sup>María Clara Bingemer, 'Women in the Future of Liberation Theology' Trans. Francis McDonagh, The Future of Liberation Theology. Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez Ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), 483.

disembodied and transcends the reality of women's lives as much as the traditional Marian symbolism does<sup>42</sup>?

The connection made by liberation theologians, male and female, between Mariology and ecclesiology, the interpretation of Mary as a poor woman who experiences the divine in her particular situation of poverty, can be useful in a transitory stage in moving away from patriarchal interpretations of Mary, but on the other hand it does not ultimately help to overcome the obstacle of a theology which remains inherently gendered. It rather leaves a certain unhelpful ambiguity which describes Mary on the one hand as the prototype of the poor who are church and at the same time like the poorest of the poor happens to be a woman, and Mary as the symbol of romanticised femininity. While, as I will show in the next chapter, I consider Marian ecclesiologies as very important for our project of developing feminist ecclesiologies, I do not think that liberation theologians, both female and male, have managed to provide more than helpful clues, such as the significance of an anthropology which is conscious of questions of gender, towards the realisation of feminist ecclesiology being theological discourse about women as women being church.

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<sup>42</sup>See for example: 'Marian dogmas, which exalt Mary, immaculately conceived, assumed into heaven, virgin and mother, must reflect a knowledge that in exalting her, they exalt precisely her poverty, her dispossession, and her simplicity.... This is...the only key for understanding the mystery of the church as the community of salvation, holy and sinful, striving amidst the most diverse kinds of limitations and problems to be a sign of the Kingdom in the world. Further, this is the only condition that will enable the church, which sees the symbol or figure of itself in Mary, to be in Latin America today, the church of the poor, those whom Mary declared liberated, fed, and exalted in the song of the Magnificat.' Gebara/Bingemer, Mary, Mother of the Church, Mother of the Poor 93.

#### 4.3.1.2 Women's Admission to the Ministerial Priesthood in Liberation Theology

The other main women's issue on which liberation theologians have reflected is that of the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood. This is of particular importance as liberation theologians like Boff on the one hand propose a model of church which is no longer centred around the clerical hierarchy, but at the same time want to retain some of the structures of the institutional church. With regard to sacramental celebration this means that on the one hand the range of potentially sacramental entities is much broader, as the sacramental is found in the 'ordinary', but at the same time the celebration of the mass by a priest is still of importance to the life of the base communities. With regard to women we have to take into account the actual situation of base ecclesial communities where women actively participate in ministry and leadership, though their participation is occasionally met with a certain resistance. The convergence of these factors necessitates the discussion of the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood in the context of the base ecclesial communities of Latin America. We can, however, not say that it has been among the primary concerns of liberation theologians to change the situation regarding the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood.

In his book Ecclesiogenesis Boff analyses the traditional concept of ministerial priesthood and he points out that it has so far been very much modelled on the celibate males that occupied it. It has also been a position of sacramental power exercised by the hierarchy which represented the church over the laity. Such a model of priesthood as exercising sacramental power over and for the people must be challenged from the understanding of the church as the church of the people. Sacramental priesthood in the light of this re-interpretation of church becomes a ministerial function among others. Clodovis Boff calls for what he calls a 'desacralisation of the priesthood'<sup>43</sup>. The priest lends himself to making Christ present in world and church. The power exercised in

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<sup>43</sup>Clodovis Boff, 'Der ekklesiologische Status der kirchlichen Basisgemeinde' Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft 68 (1984), 125.

the celebration of the sacraments is Christ's and remains Christ's, there is no ontological transfer of such power to the priest. Boff sees no reason why a woman should be barred from representing a priesthood of service rather than of sacramental power<sup>44</sup>. Boff explains that women are not simply to be fitted into the already existing priesthood, but are to exercise the priesthood in a specifically feminine way<sup>45</sup>. This reflects the emphasis on experience and praxis which is the central characteristic of liberation theology and the base community model. Boff reflects on what women are actually doing in base communities given the restrictions and liberties which the situation and the church administration provide. While Boff and others are aware of the importance of praxis, they in this and other areas are unaware of the dimension of gender. Boff attempts to construct a model of the ministerial priesthood which, though it may be different from the existing one, is still a model which is based on a male/masculine concept of the feminine and women's supposed pastoral qualities. Such a model does not take into account what it might mean for women to participate in the life of the church as women. Boff sees no reason why women, given the already existing experience of base communities in Latin America, should not be admitted to the ministerial priesthood, but he does not provide enough space to challenge the male dominated structures of the priesthood from a feminist perspective.

Liberation theology, as I have already pointed out, sees it as one of its central concerns to provide a model of church which reflects on the pastoral needs of those who are church and responds to them by making those who are church agents of their own ecclesial lives. As we have noted a general unawareness of the dimension of sexuality and gender in the theology of Leonardo Boff and other liberation theologians, we must now consider this point with regard to the pastoral dimensions of base ecclesial communities. In analysing the argumentation for admitting women to the ministerial priesthood we find that it is not so much the pastoral needs of women,

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<sup>44</sup> Leonardo Boff, Ecclesiogenesis. The base communities reinvent the church (London: Collins, 1986), 95.

<sup>45</sup> Boff, Ecclesiogenesis, 89.

but rather their supposed pastoral qualities, which are reflected here<sup>46</sup>. By ignoring the dimension of gender as an ecclesiological category the experiences of women as women are neglected in the same way as conventional pastoral theology in mainstream theology has neglected women's particular needs and concerns<sup>47</sup>. Women liberation theologians have more recently been pointing out that 'the option for the poor becomes concrete in the option for women - and women today are the poorest of the poor.'<sup>48</sup> For women to be made equal members of the Christian churches would mean that their participation is not so much grounded in culturally contingent gender role models, but that the actual pastoral needs of women are taken into account and women are enabled to define new ways of being church. Admitting women to the ministerial priesthood by idealising their supposed abilities to participate in it neither overcomes the clerical structures of the church, nor leaves room for the development of such models. We can therefore conclude that by limiting its agenda to pleading for the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood and admitting women to roles of

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<sup>46</sup>Cf. Peter Selby's discussion of the argument of women's pastoral qualities in the context of the Church of England: 'For the myth of women's pastoral gifts, however positive it sounds, and however admiringly it is recited, is a myth of origins. It seeks, that is, to found the destiny of persons in their physiology; it roots what they have to offer to humanity in the construction of their bodies and makes it as unchangeable as the colour of their eyes. To be trapped in a role that is not esteemed or valued may be a more obvious form of enslavement; but to be trapped by a myth of origins in a role that is apparently positive is still just as much to be trapped. To root a person's vocation in her biology is in itself an act of oppression, and to declare the vocation a high one is not so much a consolation prize, as simply a way of compounding the offence.' Peter Selby, 'They Make Such Good Pastors' In: Who Needs Feminism? Male Responses to Sexism in the Church Ed. Richard Holloway (London: SPCK, 1991), 125f.. For a critique of the arguments for a 'feminine priesthood' see Elaine Graham, Making the Difference. Gender, Personhood and Theology (London: Mowbray, 1995), 44-47.

<sup>47</sup>See Elaine Graham, Transforming Practice: pastoral theology in an age of uncertainty (London: Mowbray, 1996); Life Cycles: Women and Pastoral Care Ed. Elaine Graham and Margaret Halsey (London: SPCK, 1993); Elaine Graham, 'The Pastoral Needs of Woman' Contact 100 (1989), 23-25 and 'Pastoral Theology, Feminism and the Future' Contact 103 (1990), 2-9. See also: Isolde Karle, Seelsorge in der Moderne. Eine Kritik der psychoanalytisch orientierten Seelsorgelehre (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1996).

<sup>48</sup>Tepedino/Brandão, 'Women and the Theology of Liberation', 228.

leadership as a result of the lack of men, liberation theology does not live up to its own theological goals and its value as an ecclesiological paradigm for feminist ecclesiology remains questionable.

#### **4.3.1.3 Women's Issues in the Documents of the Conferences of CELAM**

Before I turn to a more general evaluation of the use and the usefulness of liberation theology for the reconstruction of feminist ecclesiologies, I want to briefly evaluate the increasing awareness of the Latin American conference of bishops (CELAM) which has consciously embraced liberation theology as its theological model with regard to the situation of women in both church and society. This survey together with our reflections on 'women's themes' in liberation ecclesiology, shows the limitations of liberation ecclesiology for women.

The final document of the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellín/Colombia hardly mentions women at all. Apart from the occasional reference to women and their changing role in society, the bishops, though showing their awareness of the particular Latin American context, do not extend this awareness to the situation of women in the church and the impact women could have in the church were they to participate with their conscious identity as women. The document mentions that women are, and are supposed to be, among the leaders of base communities which the conference in this document acknowledges as one of its parts, but it does not give any thought to the importance of reflecting on women as participating and transforming the church in Latin America. And given the fact that 'The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council' is an episcopal pronouncement, women continue to be excluded from the process of ecclesiological development.

The increasing participation of women in the life of the church which is influenced by liberation theology can still not be taken for granted, as these churches find themselves in the context of societies which, like the bishops, are influenced by machismo. It seems 'natural' for such a church to be dominated by male-defined structures, which is also evident in the 'Final Declaration of the Latin American Conference of Bishops' in Puebla/Mexico in 1979. Like the Medellín conference, it took the starting point of its reflections from the pastoral situation to which the church in Latin America has to respond. The document does acknowledge the increasing participation of women in the life of both church and society<sup>49</sup>. The most substantial portion of the Puebla Document on women argues for the church 'to contribute to the human and Christian advancement of women, thus helping them to move out of marginalized situations in which they may now find themselves and equipping them for their mission in the ecclesial community and the world.'<sup>50</sup> Yet we must note that despite these general statements for the improvement of the situation and status of women in society, women are still restricted to a rather limited role and are certainly not called out to speak for themselves. The bishops advocate 'the irreplaceable responsibility of the woman, whose collaboration is indispensable for the humanization of the process of transformation.'<sup>51</sup> Here the necessity of the inclusion of women's perspectives is acknowledged, yet we must again take notice of the fact that while women's essential role with regard to the transformation of society is pointed out, the fact that women are to play an equally important part in the transformation of ecclesial life is ignored. This is inevitable given the clerical

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<sup>49</sup>Women deserve special mention. Nuns, female members of secular institutes, and other lay women are now enjoying more and more participation in pastoral responsibilities, even though such participation is still viewed with a great deal of suspicion in many areas.' The Puebla Final Document', 138f.

<sup>50</sup>'The Puebla Final Document', 235.

<sup>51</sup>'The Puebla Final Document', 274.

character of the church advocated by the document<sup>52</sup>. If women are to participate, it is in structures in which they do not have an equal part in constructing. The document echoes the neglect of women's concerns and restricts itself to praising the advancement of women's position in society, while women's life as women in the church is not on the agenda.<sup>53</sup>

We can therefore conclude that in a way which is representative for many liberation theologians, the authors of the Puebla document, though they were aware of the urgency of a change of women's situations in both church and society, did not see it as a matter of supreme urgency and also did not see women as their own agents of transformation. The Puebla statement, though it gives considerably more space to women's issues than the documents of the Second Vatican Council, still remains the expression of a male church which praises the advancement of women in society and condemns sexism/machismo in society, but allows women only to participate in the

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<sup>52</sup>Another obvious example is the section on the preferential option for young people where the difficulties of the situation of young women are mentioned: 'Negative features of women's liberation and a certain machismo still prevalent are blocking the sound advancement of women as an indispensable factor in the construction of society.' while the difficulties of young women in a church which is dominated by male clergy are ignored. ('The Puebla Final Document', 268).

<sup>53</sup>This is most explicit in a paragraph like the following: 'Women ought to be present in temporal realities, contributing their specific reality as women and participating with men in the transformation of society. The value of women's work should not be solely the satisfaction of economic needs. Work should also be an instrument for achieving personalization and building a new society.' 'The Puebla Final Document', 234.

church as long as their participation is controlled by men<sup>54</sup>. In fact one could understand the situation of women in the Latin American church as part of the conditioning factors of oppression of Latin American women in general. Where women do participate their participation is considered as of minor value in comparison with that of male members of the clergy.<sup>55</sup> In more recent years Latin American women have in fact become agents of theology in their own right, and have put issues of women's concern on the agenda of liberation theology and base ecclesial communities, but this must be seen as a development which followed from the fact that the issue of women in the church and the situation of women in society cannot be considered part of the agenda of those who originally developed the concept of liberation theology.

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<sup>54</sup>Among the Puebla bishops the role of women, however, is not yet seen to be the pressing issue it has become among North American Roman Catholics, and in our society as a whole. In a Universal Church such as ours changes as the full participation of women can come only through a certain consensus among a strong majority of the regional Churches. Puebla demonstrates that majority view is still not in sight; a consensus among the regions on optional celibacy, I believe, will come sooner because of pastoral imperatives and pressures from within the presbyterate.' Joseph Gremellion, 'The Significance of Puebla for the Catholic Church in North America' Puebla and Beyond. Documentation and Commentary Ed. John Eagleson and Philip Sharper (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), 321. Robert McAfee Brown makes a similar observation: 'But overall, the experience of the women seems to suggest, if we can improve on the Puebla document, that they are triply oppressed: first, as part of an oppressed people generally; second, as women who are the oppressed within the oppressed; and third, as members of a Church that has, in its own inner life, consistently enforced patterns of oppression and discrimination and refused to give women responsible positions of authority.' Robert McAfee Brown, 'The Significance of Puebla for the Protestant Churches in North America' Puebla and Beyond. Documentation and Commentary Ed. John Eagleson and Philip Sharper (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), 334.

<sup>55</sup>See for example Cora Ferro, 'The Latin American Woman: The Praxis and Theology of Liberation' The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities Ed. John Eagleson and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981), 28: 'From the religious standpoint it is the woman who participates most assiduously in everything organized by the church: worship, social assistance, and catechesis. She transmits religious values and beliefs, but in the fatalistic vein in which she herself accepted them. They only help to confirm her in her attitude of passivity and resignation.'

#### 4.4. Moving on from Liberation Theology?

In the previous two parts of this chapter I have evaluated the significance of liberation theology and the base ecclesial community model for doing feminist ecclesiology, by showing that it does not easily lend itself to constructing a feminist ecclesiology, but that its use is a feminist reading of another male-dominated paradigm of doing theology. I have shown that liberation ecclesiology is neither free from assuming a gender neutral/male subject as the agent of being church, nor does it overcome the use of gender constructions of the feminine which idealise and romanticise women, but do not support women's ecclesial agency as a gift to themselves and others.

Yet the relationship between feminist theology and liberation theology is too important and historically significant to be discarded entirely. In the remainder of this chapter I therefore want to point out some perspectives for reassessing the strengths of the base community paradigm, but at the same time moving beyond this paradigm towards the development of feminist ecclesiological discourses which are indeed discourses about women being church.

The first aspect of the base community model that needs to be taken into consideration here is the fact that it favours small local communities instead of large church bodies, though it does not dismiss the institutional church altogether. Such small base communities make a greater amount of participation in the day to day life of the ecclesial community possible, and refocus the life of the church from being concentrated on the clerical hierarchy of the institutional church to the needs and charisms of those who are church, the people. These aspects are not only important in the context of Latin America, but also for women implementing their claim that they are in fact agents of their own spiritual and ecclesial life. The emphasis on praxis and experience must in fact be seen as one of the strengths of the liberation theology paradigm. Yet in order to gain a broader perspective of the multiplicity of other

possible feminist approaches to ecclesiology it is necessary critically to reassess the value and significance of small communities from a feminist perspective. In order to do that I use the work of the feminist political theorist Iris Marion Young. In her essay 'The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference'<sup>56</sup>. Young criticises the model of community as a concept of radical politics and proposes the 'city' as an alternative model. Building on Young's work on the 'politics of difference', I want to discuss whether the emphasis on small base communities does not inevitably entail a certain ecclesial and theological provincialism which disguises rather than enables the importance of difference. Young defines her concept of the 'politics of difference' as laying down 'institutional and ideological means for recognizing and affirming differently identifying groups in two basic senses: giving political representation to group interests and celebrating the distinctive cultures and characteristics of different groups'<sup>57</sup>. For our current purpose of reconsidering the church from a feminist perspective, we have to identify the character of sexual difference, of the dimension and relevance of gender, as a special case. The point is that women cannot simply be understood as yet another group represented in the 'unoppressive city' which Young proposes as an alternative model to the ideal of small communities. Therefore, it is mainly her critical argument about the ideal of community on which I draw here.

Young gives four reasons why a model of community cannot work and in fact is not desirable. First, she suggests that a community model denies the difference between subjects. It assumes equality between the members of the community which does not reflect the reality. Such a model denies what Young calls the 'irreducible particularity of entities which makes it impossible to reduce them to commonness'.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Iris Marion Young, 'The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference' In: Feminism/Postmodernism Ed Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 300-323. For a more extensive account of Young's feminist political theory see: Iris Marion Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>57</sup>Young, 'The Ideal of Community', 319.

<sup>58</sup>Young, 'The Ideal of Community', 304.

A feminist theological critique points out that human beings are in fact different but that in the context of Christian theology and praxis this difference cannot be the basis for exclusion or marginalisation but is rather a factor of enrichment for the church. Feminist ecclesiology has to first of all be a celebration of the different bodies participating in the life of the church. In a context where women are reflecting theologically on the experience of being branded 'the Other', feminist reconstructions of the church should take as one of their central concerns the development of a positive understanding of particularity, difference and multiplicity. Theologically such an affirmation of difference and particularity must be grounded in an understanding of Christ which describes Christ not only as the guarantee of the unity of the church, but also prevents such unity from being gained only at the price of diversity.

The second aspect of Young's criticism is that any community identifies itself by excluding or not reflecting on those who are not part of the community. She points to these dangers by comparing the community model with racism, ethnic chauvinism and political sectarianism. Community based models like women-church or the base communities in Latin America often focus so much on those who are in the community and their participation in the life of the church, that little attention is given to those who are not part of the community. This became particularly obvious in the history of the women-church movement, which on the one hand claimed to represent the first time in history women claimed to be church, but at the same time received a number of complaints from black women, Hispanic women, native American and women-identified women who felt underrepresented in their particular experiences of being women.<sup>59</sup> Being aware of the danger of a certain kind of ethnocentricity which is inevitable as the dark side of contextual awareness, we have to redefine or broaden the concerns a feminist enquiry into ecclesiology has to address. Building on our earlier claim that a feminist ecclesiology has to add the dimension of gender to the

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<sup>59</sup>See the historical overview of the women-church movement in chapter one of this thesis.

ecclesiological debate, we have to search for a model which allows for both gender particularity and the ubiquity of gender as a dimension to be addressed. Young does not say that community-based models inevitably lead to issues like racism and ethnic chauvinism, but she maintains that 'a desire for community often channels energy away from the political goals of the group and also produces a clique atmosphere which keeps groups small and turns potential members away.'<sup>60</sup> A feminist model of ecclesiology has to address the issue of difference in a way that allows for gender differences to become celebrated in the church as a whole and in its different parts, without viewing the small cell or community as the only centre where being church can and does happen.

Young's third criticism attacks the equation of mediation with alienation. She points to the fact that a model of decentralised, unmediated small units is both unrealistic and politically undesirable.<sup>61</sup> According to Young, there is no reason to assume that face-to-face relations in a small community are more authentic and unmediated than relations that are mediated in space and time. 'For both face-to-face and non-face-to-face relations are mediated relations, and in both there is as much the possibility of separation and violence as there is communication and consensus.'<sup>62</sup>

Such a model avoids, as her fourth criticism points out, the question of the relation among such decentralised groups. She argues:

The ideal of community, finally, totalizes and de-temporalizes its conception of social life by setting up an opposition between authentic and inauthentic social relations. It also de-temporalizes its understanding of social change by positing the desired society as the complete negation of existing society. It thus provides no understanding of the move from here to there that would be

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<sup>60</sup>Young, 'The Ideal of Community', 312.

<sup>61</sup>That only by eliminating structures of mediation do we eliminate alienation. If temporal and spatial distancing are basic to social processes, and if persons always mediate between other persons to generate social networks, then a society of immediacy is impossible.' Young, 'The Ideal of Community', 315.

<sup>62</sup>Young, 'The Ideal of Community', 314.

rooted in an understanding of the contradictions and possibilities of existing society.<sup>63</sup>

Young sees the danger of the detemporalizing and dematerializing of concepts of interaction and institutions which is also applicable to our reconsideration of ecclesiology from a feminist perspective. If we are aware of the contingency of particular concepts of gender, yet seek to affirm the importance of sexual difference and gender for a possible reconsideration of ecclesiology, we have to take into account the possibility — and in fact the necessity — of change in our thinking about the church. Such change is only possible if we consider the church in its wider historical and spatial context and reflect on the significance of gender from that perspective.

Young does not deny the value of small communities for human interaction, but rather argues against small communities as an ideal model of organising society, or in the case of our study, the church. Arguing against the tendency for feminist ecclesiology so far to favour models of small communities, in order to criticise the universal claims of a supposedly universal and impartial church, requires further explanation. While models of small communities on the one hand make greater participation and articulation possible, they on the other hand neglect the dimension of an awareness of the body of Christ as a whole, and of women in their particular situations and interactions with each other embodying Christ. A feminist ecclesiology must therefore seek to embody a 'politics of difference'. The theological justification of such difference, different bodies embodying the body of Christ, is founded in the reality of Christ's incarnation into sexuate particularity. One of the reasons to create models of ecclesiology which focus on base community structures rather than on a centralised concept of the church, was to avoid the dominance of one group, in this case that of white male power, over all others. This goal remains. Yet we have to attempt to identify this aim not only in a negative, but on a positive way. A feminist ecclesiology of difference must not primarily define itself as opposing power

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<sup>63</sup>Young, 'The Ideal of Community', 302.

structures of oppression and dominance, but must become able to move on to structures which are capable of representing difference<sup>64</sup>, and sexual difference in particular.

It is the exploration of the significance of sexual difference to which I now turn. French feminist philosophers like Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva have developed an interest in the implications of sexual difference for the transformation of legal structures which can also be applied to our reconsideration of ecclesiology. Irigaray understands the issue of sexual difference as perhaps the major issue of our time and seeks to point out the gender-blindness of philosophy, politics and religion so far. To transform these hitherto gender-blind structures, according to Irigaray, requires a revolution of thought, a change of subject. So far the subject of discourse has always been man and God, the 'guardian of every subject and every discourse' has been portrayed as male<sup>65</sup>. To change that reality, the world has to be constructed in a different way:

A genesis of love between the sexes has yet to come about in all dimensions, from the smallest to the greatest, from the most intimate to the most political. A world that must be created or re-created so that man and woman may once again or at last live together, meet, and sometimes inhabit the same place.<sup>66</sup>

This reconstruction of the world and the way it is understood is only possible if women claim their participation in the divine, not only in human relationships as the understanding of the divine determines the understanding of the world. This change of subject cannot be based on the concept of equality and justice which is central to liberal thinking and also to liberation theology. Irigaray insists on the 'affirmation of

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<sup>64</sup>If we give up the ideal of impartiality, there remains no moral justification for undemocratic processes of decisionmaking concerning collective action. Instead of a fictional contract, we require real participatory structures in which actual people, with their geographical, ethnic, gender, and occupational differences, assert their perspectives on social issues within institutions that encourage the representation of their distinct voices.' Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 116.

<sup>65</sup>Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* Trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 6.

<sup>66</sup>Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 17.

the distinctive identity of women<sup>67</sup> which moves beyond an understanding of equality defined by men. For a redefinition of ecclesiology in a feminist paradigm this must mean a reconsideration of Christology (and Mariology) as defining our understanding of what the church is in theological terms. Our feminist reconsideration of ecclesiology has to transcend the categories of opting for either an ecclesiology 'from below' or a high ecclesiology, but has to approach the subject from both sides at once. The fundamental premise for any feminist ecclesiology is that women are church because they participate in the divine and represent and embody Christ. We can argue that this has been the merit of liberation theology and its emphasis on praxis and experience, in other words on the 'real' life of 'real' people. Yet it must be seen as one of its weaknesses that it remained largely unaware of the reality of women's lives and the dimension of gender for ecclesiology, because of its one-sided preference for developing an ecclesiology from below. In doing that, liberation theology does not achieve its own goal, which is also at the heart of feminist ecclesiology: to point to the fact that women, 'not the eternal feminine of images or representation(s)<sup>68</sup>, are church and that it is their particular sexuate experiences which need to be written into our ecclesiology. Liberation theology, in taking the starting point of its ecclesiology from the church being the church of the people, does not achieve this goal which is at the heart of a feminist reconstruction of ecclesiology. However, in taking liberation theology as a starting point we are then able to write an ecclesiology which not only reflects the church as women being church, but also is able to re-interpret the images and representations of the feminine which are part of the Christian tradition in a way that is positive and empowering for women<sup>69</sup>. Images and representations of the 'eternal feminine' connected with an explicitly masculine Christology have been used to restrict women's participation in the life of the church. Liberation ecclesiology can

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<sup>67</sup>Susan F. Parsons, 'The Dilemma of Difference: A Feminist Theological Exploration' *Feminist Theology* 14 (1997), 65.

<sup>68</sup>Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 81.

<sup>69</sup>I will show such a reconsideration of the church as feminine and the christological dimensions involved in chapter 5 of this thesis.

## Chapter 5

### The Church as 'feminine' or women being church? Reconsidering gendered ecclesiology

#### 5.0 Introduction

For Christianity, gender is both important and irrelevant. God creates, Christ redeems, and the Holy Spirit sanctifies men and women alike, along with Jews and Greeks, rich and poor, black and white. But, apart from salvation, gender possesses a special importance in Christianity that cannot be viewed as either accidental or superficial.<sup>1</sup>

This quotation from the Roman Catholic theologian Evelyn Birge Vitz summarises both the significance and the insignificance of gender for Christian or more specifically Roman Catholic theology. While feminist theologians have made a great effort to point out the contingency of gendered constructions as part of Christian theology, certain strands of post-conciliar Roman Catholic theology have provided a reaffirmation of gendered theology with particular attention to the role of women as wives and mothers.<sup>2</sup> The most obvious example for the use of gendered imagery in traditional Christian theology is the analogy between Christ, the bridegroom, who loves his spotless bride, the church which then in turn submits to him. Relationships between husband and wife are to happen in analogy to their supreme example and

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<sup>1</sup>Eveleyn Birge Vitz, 'God and the Sexes'

<http://www.catholic.net/RCC/Periodicals/Crisis/index.html>. I am indebted to Dr. Michael Fraser for bringing this to my attention. On the issue of gender and theology see also Elaine Graham, 'Making the Difference. Gender, Personhood and Theology' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 48:3 (1995), 341-358; Elaine Graham, *Making the Difference. Gender, Personhood and Theology*. (London: Mowbray, 1995) and Anne-Louise Erikson *The Meaning of Gender in Theology* (Upsala: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1995) (I am indebted to the author for making this volume accessible to me) and *Bodies, Lives, Voices: Gender in Theology* Ed. Kathleen O'Grady, Janette Gray and Ann Gilroy (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup>See Tina Beattie, 'Mary, The Virgin Priest' *The Month* 29.12 (1996), 485-493 and Fergus Kerr, 'Discipleship of Equals or Nuptial Mystery' *New Blackfriars* 75.884 (1995), 344-354. See also Christine Gudorf, 'Renewal or Repatriarchalization? Responses of the Roman Catholic Church to the Feminization of Religion' *Horizons* 10.2 (1983), 231-251.

model, the relationship between Christ and the church. That also implies that while Christ is male, and as a matter of ontological necessity so his representative, the priest, the church is understood as essentially female, or rather 'feminine'. The late Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar for example, drawing on centuries of Christian tradition going back as far as the New Testament, points out that 'over against Christ - man and bridegroom - the Church is decidedly and primarily feminine.'<sup>3</sup> Statements like this are inevitably not only significant in terms of ecclesiology, the theological discourse about the nature of the church, but also and perhaps even more prominently, for the reality of the lives of women in the church.

In the preceding chapter of this thesis I have concluded that the merit of the use of liberation theological models of ecclesiology must be seen in so far as this points up the necessity of paying attention to the reality of the lives of those who are church, expressed in concepts like the 'primacy of praxis and experience' and the 'epistemological privilege of the poor' (and women as the 'poorest of the poor'). What the use of liberation theology for the construction of feminist ecclesiologies has not achieved, is the development of an awareness of gender and sexual identity as dimensions of ecclesiology. As such, so I concluded, its value as a source for a feminist reconstruction of ecclesiology remains limited. Traditional Roman Catholic ecclesiologies, however, have drawn heavily on what is a strongly gendered analogy: the relationship between Christ and the church as that of masculine and feminine, bride and bridegroom, husband and wife. Our project of reconsidering traditional ecclesiologies as potential sources for re-writing ecclesiology can therefore not proceed without an evaluation of this analogy as it unwittingly displays the

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<sup>3</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'Epilogue' in Louis Bouyer, Woman in the Church (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 113. See also for example: 'The Church, bride and mother, is actualized concretely in the community of the faithful; every member is expected to live the nuptial mystery and the maternal fecundity each in his or her own way.' Gilberte Baril, The Feminine Face of the People of God. Biblical Symbols of the Church as Bride and Mother (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995), 12.

significance of gender for ecclesiology as already present within the Christian tradition.

The evaluation I want to present in this chapter proceeds at several levels. I first suggest a deconstruction of the model by pointing to its potential for abuse in order to inscribe a particular gendered order which limits the space women have within the church. I do this by evaluating Monica Migliorino Miller's book Sexuality and Authority in the Catholic Church<sup>4</sup>. Miller is used here as an example of a certain kind of 'counter-feminist' theology which reflects the theology of womanhood presented by authors like Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri de Lubac, Louis Bouyer and Pope John Paul II<sup>5</sup>.

The second level on which the issue of gendered ecclesiology needs to be discussed is that of reconsidering the christological dimension of ecclesiology and its importance for a feminist ecclesiology. Only after evaluating the concepts of both masculinity and femininity behind gendered ecclesiology can we move on to discussing the significance of anthropology and the significance of sexuality and sexual difference as one aspect of it. In leaving anthropology to the end of my argument I reverse the order suggested by feminist theologians as diverse as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Daphne Hampson who reconsider Christology from the perspective of a reconstruction of anthropology and in so doing overlook the ecclesiological significance of both.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Monica Migliorino Miller, Sexuality and Authority in the Catholic Church (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 1995).

<sup>5</sup>Examples of this 'theology of womanhood' are Louis Bouyer, Woman in the Church (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985); Henri de Lubac, The Motherhood of the Church Trans. Sergia Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982); The Church and Women. A Compendium ed. Helmut Moll (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988). See also Leonardo Boff, The Maternal Face of God. The Feminine and its Religious Expressions Trans. Robert R. Barr and John W. Diercksmeier (London: Collins, 1979).

<sup>6</sup>See Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, chapters 4 and 5 and Daphne Hampson, Theology and Feminism (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) chapters 2 and 4.

I argue that a synthesis of both the base community model and gendered ecclesiology suggests the limits of the notions of gender as it has been used in traditional approaches to ecclesiology. I therefore do not recommend doing away with gender in an ecclesiological context altogether, but suggest that gendered ecclesiology can only be a viable concept if it takes into account dimensions of sexuality and sexual identity of the human beings who are church. I argue that a disembodied gendered ecclesiology ought to be replaced by a gendered ecclesiology which is in reconstructive feminist dialogue with both Christology and anthropology.

### 5.1 Gendered Ecclesiology

Despite the fact that Christianity at first sight appears to be far less gendered than Judaism for example, it uses strong gendered imagery in some of its aspects. The most prominent example is perhaps that of ecclesiology where a gender binary, that of the 'feminine' church which is at the same time virgin, bride and mother, and the essentially male/masculine Christ, the divine bridegroom-son-lover appear as the basic paradigm. In the first part of this chapter I will outline the concept of what I call 'gendered ecclesiology', the use of strong and often static concepts of gender in writing ecclesiology, the so-called 'nuptial mystery' which describes Christ and the church as bride and groom. It is evident that this imagery has been used to justify culturally contingent patterns of gender relationships, such as heterosexuality as the normative form of human sexuality beside which all other forms appear as deviations from the 'order of creation'. But even more explicitly it has restricted women on the grounds of their biological sex to the role of the subordinate, submissive feminine, or at best encouraged motherhood as compulsory and almost the only form of life in which the feminine is justified. My point here is not so much to elaborate the history of the use of these motives in Roman Catholic theology, but rather to show that such uses

inevitably have bearings on the situation of women in the church and therefore also on our feminist rethinking of theological reflections on the church.

### 5.1.1 New Testament Origins

The motif of the male Christ and the female church originates in the deuteropauline letter to the Ephesians. The author of the letter presents the relationship between Christ and the church as the model for the relationship between husband and wife in a Christian marriage. It is not so much the exegesis of the text itself which we have to take into account here, but rather the Wirkungsgeschichte of one particular aspect of the text. The text shows that love between spouses in a Christian marriage and the relationship between Christ and the Church are seen as a reciprocal analogy<sup>7</sup>. Some authors see the relationship between Christ and the church, as inherent in the fundamental structure of the universe, a reality beyond metaphor. Such a statement is possible through the mixing of contexts which is suggested by the text itself. There are two issues addressed here: relationships within the Christian household and the relationship between Christ and the church. The relationships within the Christian household are ones of love and mutual submission as well as of subordination and obedience. It is important that the text on the one hand argues for mutual submission, but on the other hand charges the wife to submit to the husband while the husband is to give himself to the wife in generous self-giving love. It is arguable that it has more often been the wife's 'duty' to submit to the husband than the call for husbands to love their wives which has been stressed. Love becomes a means

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<sup>7</sup> See for example John Paul II, 'Apostolic Letter Mulieris Dignitatem, Of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year' (Vatican City, 1988), 23: 'The covenant proper to spouses "explains" the spousal character of the union of Christ with the Church, and in its turn this union, as a "great sacrament", determines the sacramentality of marriage as a holy covenant between the two spouses, man and woman.'

to establish what is essentially a patriarchal ordering of the family, of society and of the church. And the role of women in the Christian family is transferred to the context of the role and place of women in the church. Put another way, through connection with heterosexual marriage the maleness/masculinity of Christ and the femaleness/femininity of the church become essential and as such become means of establishing a patriarchal order as the fundamental structure of both church and society.

### 5.1.2 Claude Chavasse

In his study The Bride of Christ. An Enquiry into the Nuptial Element in Early Christianity<sup>8</sup> the Anglo Catholic Claude Chavasse portrays the nuptial understanding of the relationship between Christ and his church as the 'key to the treasure-house of the church'<sup>9</sup>. He shows how the nuptial idea can be traced all the way through the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures as well as throughout the history of Christian theology.<sup>10</sup> Along with the idea of the Eucharist as sacrifice the concept of a marriage between Christ and the church, according to Chavasse, is fundamental for Christianity.<sup>11</sup> For Chavasse the understanding of Christ and the church as a marriage cannot be a mere allegory, but it is a fundamental structure of life as such, signified

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<sup>8</sup>Claude Chavasse, The Bride of Christ. An Enquiry into the Nuptial Element in Early Christianity (London: Faber & Faber, 1942). See also Odo Casel, 'Die Kirche als Braut Christi nach Schrift, Väterlehre und Liturgie' Theologie der Zeit 1 (1936): 91-111.

<sup>9</sup>Chavasse, The Bride of Christ, 17.

<sup>10</sup>I will for reasons of space not provide a historical overview of the use of the idea throughout the history of theology myself, but refer the reader to Chavasse's study which is a useful compilation of the relevant source material. My intention here is to concentrate on the use which is made of the idea of the nuptial mystery in contemporary Roman Catholic theology in order to provide the basis for a feminist theological critique of the use of feminine imagery for the church.

<sup>11</sup>Chavasse, The Bride of Christ, 17. see also 15: 'All phenomena can illustrate the realities of the unseen world and can be illumined by them. But far transcending all other symbols both in real content and historical importance, there stand two symbols, supreme and august, a Marriage and a Sacrifice.'

and made manifest in human marriage.<sup>12</sup> The whole of the Old and New Testament narrative of Heilsgeschichte is the story of the nuptial relationship between Christ and the church. This assumption affects even the meaning of the last supper, for this then becomes the marriage feast of Christ and the church: 'It is therefore no playing with words, but the sober truth, to say that Jesus, if not enacting a marriage at the Last Supper, was solemnizing the Marriage between himself and his Church in this, the New Covenant.'<sup>13</sup> This shows the consequences of the use of such a fundamental relationship like that of Christ and the church to justify a particular form of social order. Male dominance and female submission become the 'order of creation', beyond metaphor. Chavasse makes the ontological significance of the submission of the wife to the husband evident by explicitly denying its cultural contingency: 'It is not because he is a "typical oriental" that St. Paul says that "the head of the woman is the man", but because she is the type of the Church and he of Christ.'<sup>14</sup> Chavasse's study provides a vivid illustration how such a denial of the contingency of particular gender constructions can be used to justify particular forms of human relationships. He comments on the Hau斯塔feln in the letter to the Ephesians:

It is a remarkable fact that St. Paul never tells wives that they are to love their husbands. In the passage which we have quoted from Ephesians and the parallel from Colossians, he tells the wives that they are to be in subjection to their husbands and fear them; but he bids the husbands love their wives. The reason is that which he gives: Christ loves the Church, but it is for the Church to obey and submit to Christ. He is arguing from the Heavenly Marriage to human marriages, not vice versa; he is seeing the human in the light of the heavenly, and therefore will have the human model itself on the heavenly.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Chavasse quotes the Anglican marriage ceremony: 'matrimony is an honourable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocence, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church.' Chavasse, The Bride of Christ, 76. See also for example Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'How weighty is the argument from "uninterrupted tradition" to justify the male priesthood?' in: Women and the Church. a Compendium ed. Helmut Moll (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 155.

<sup>13</sup>Chavasse, The Bride Of Christ, 61 (italics in the original).

<sup>14</sup>Chavasse, The Bride of Christ, 76.

<sup>15</sup>Chavasse, The Bride of Christ, 77.

Chavasse refers to the 'heavenly marriage' in order to construct a form of essentialism 'that generates a biological difference into a gendered ontological dualism'<sup>16</sup>. As long as the church is portrayed as the heavenly bride matters of women in the church other than as submissive are not even at issue either for the author of the biblical text or for Chavasse. Christological and ecclesiological concepts are used to order the realm of the domestic which make a discussion of women in the 'public space' of the church almost superfluous.

The mystical union between Christ and the church also takes place in prayer. Here Chavasse uses explicitly sexual language in order to describe the intimacy of the relationship between Christ and the church as well as to emphasise its close connection to the only other context in which language of intimacy can be considered legitimate: that of heterosexual marriage.

Chavasse connects the concepts of the church as the bride of Christ and the body of Christ: 'She (sc. the Church) is only the Body of Christ because she is primarily the Mystical Bride of Christ.'<sup>17</sup> This expresses the utter dependence of the church, portrayed as woman, on the male Christ. The woman is taken from the man. She is therefore dependent on him for her existence. This is not merely an example of the expression of patriarchal gender relationships, but beyond that shows how gendered imagery used as and when necessary for the purpose of maintaining an established patriarchal order. The church can be the bride of Christ, defined through her relationship with him, but if body symbolism is employed, the picture changes and she represents to be the (male) body of Christ. This is an example of ecclesiology as a form of theological discourse which may well serve to alienate women from their own bodies. In addition, and by replacing the reality of women being church with a collective 'feminine' women may well be alienated from each other.

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<sup>16</sup>Hamington, *Hail Mary?*, 77.

<sup>17</sup>Chavasse, *The Bride of Christ*, 71.

### 5.1.3 Monica Migliorino Miller

A more recent example of the use of feminine imagery in the context of ecclesiology is Monica Migliorino Miller's monograph on Sexuality and Authority in the Catholic Church. Miller writes in the context of the present pope's concern with the nature and vocation of women as well as the work of a number of women religious who have taken up the issue of sex complementarity as a form of theological anthropology.<sup>18</sup> This book responds to the charges of feminism as well as the alleged Aristotelian distortion of theological anthropology which has taken over much Roman Catholic theology<sup>19</sup>. Three reasons can be given for this interest in 'women' as a subject of Roman Catholic moral theology. First, the changing situation of women in society could not easily be ignored by the church, as we have already seen in the pronouncements of the Second Vatican Council. Second, the feminist movement also has had its impact on both theology and the church and has challenged both in a major way. Finally, the quest for the ordination of women has threatened the inherently gendered order of the church. Maurice Hamington describes the Roman Catholic church as 'perhaps the world's most enduring and visible institution to maintain overt gender exclusion in its power structure.'<sup>20</sup> While the church on the whole rejects feminism, theologians like the pope and Miller attempt to answer the questions opened up by feminism by means of what they consider to be documents which affirm the dignity of women. Thus, for instance, Mulieris Dignitatem seeks to undermine the case of feminism by arguing that women are in fact very important for the life and

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<sup>18</sup>See for example Rose Marie Larkin, 'Religious Women and the Meaning of the Feminine' Communio 3 (1976), 67-89; Sara Butler, 'Second Thoughts on Ordaining Women' Worship 63.2 (1989), 157-164.

<sup>19</sup>See for example Prudence Allen, 'Integral Sex Complementarity and the Theology of Communion' Communio 17 (1990), 523-544 and Prudence Allen, 'Sex and Gender Differentiation in Hildegard of Bingen and Edith Stein' Communio 20 (1993): 388-414. The most extensive work on the subject of the Aristotelian distortion of Christian anthropology is Prudence Allen, The Concept of Woman. The Aristotelian Revolution 750 BC -AD 1250 (Montreal: Eden Press, 1985).

<sup>20</sup>Hamington, Hail Mary?, 40.

theology of the church, but essentially overlook that importance is only granted to her in what is essentially a patriarchal and male-defined framework. The most prominent documents issued by John Paul II on the significance of women are the 'Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women, Mulieris Dignitatem'<sup>21</sup> and the 'Letter to Women' on the occasion of the International Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995<sup>22</sup>. In both of them the pope stresses the fundamental importance of women's existence and their significance, supremely personified in Mary, in the order of salvation. The nature of women, as the pope understands it, is an important example for all humanity. Despite their claims to advocate the dignity and fundamental equality of women in creation and redemption, these papal pronouncements appear to be nothing less than statements which establish and retain the patriarchal order of power within the church. The pope attempts to distinguish between the church as the bride of Christ as a collective person and what can be said about women as individual persons.<sup>23</sup> But judging from the theological and ecclesiological applications of the pope's theological understandings of women, we must maintain that what is said about the collective subject of the church represents a particular attitude towards individual women, but by no means attends to those women themselves, let alone to the multiplicity of female individuals involved in the church<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup>Apostolic Letter Mulieris Dignitatem of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year, Vatican City August 15, 1988. See also Mary F. Rousseau, 'Pope John Paul II's Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Woman: the Call to Communio' Communio 16 (1989), 212-232.

<sup>22</sup>John Paul II, 'A letter to women' The Tablet 15 July 1995, 919.

<sup>23</sup>Mulieris Dignitatem, 25.

<sup>24</sup>Historically we can see a parallel between the response of Roman Catholic moral theology to the question of women and its response to liberation theology. While the 1984 declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith rejects liberation theology, the much more carefully prepared 'Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation', though it did not approve of liberation theology as such, attempts to respond to the concerns presented by liberation theologians in a way that presented them as on the agenda of the church itself.

It is in this context we must understand Miller's book on Sexuality and Authority in the Catholic Church. For Miller, salvation is actualised by its proper symbol, the nuptial union of Christ and his bride.<sup>25</sup> 'What needs to be understood is how man and woman are symbols of this covenant and how the covenantal authority of man and woman is exercised according to the glory of sexual differentiation.'<sup>26</sup> The nuptial mystery thus is not only one of the fundamental symbols within Christianity, but the essential order of creation and redemption. In effect the whole universe is nuptially structured.

This is reflected in the order of authority in the church which is essentially split into male and female authority. According to Miller, female authority has always played a significant role within Catholicism and without it the church cannot be the church. Female authority, the main subject of Miller's book, is essentially distinct from male authority, the authority of Christ represented and exercised by an essentially male priesthood. Female authority, on the other hand, is exercised where women take their place within the church, where they perform in essentially feminine roles as virgins, brides and mothers. If women fulfil their particular roles they exemplify the very being of the church, the motherhood and virginity of the church, personified in Mary and, in an extended form, in every woman. Female authority, for Miller, is not a power tool in the church, but is rather of a certain liturgical and sacramental character. Both male and female authority, in fact, the 'nuptial covenant' of creation and redemption, is enacted in the Eucharistic sacrifice, which is adapted to the act of marriage between Christ and the church. Male and female sexuality are symbols of this 'nuptial covenant'. Male sexuality, which in Miller's estimate is essentially 'exterior' and giving, represents the kenotic sacrifice made by Christ, while 'interior' female sexuality represents the passive receiving identity of the church. The ultimate aim of Miller's argument is to show how female authority can be exercised in

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<sup>25</sup>Miller, Sexuality and Authority 6.

<sup>26</sup>Miller, Sexuality and Authority, ix.

the church outside the ministerial, sacramental priesthood. The Eucharistic sacrifice can only be valid if it is made by a male priest who is exercising and physically representing the masculine authority of Christ. A female priesthood would be a violation not only of the covenantal symbolism, but of the Eucharistic sacrifice itself<sup>27</sup>.

Being male thereby becomes the 'proper liturgical sacramental sign of God's life-giving authority'.<sup>28</sup> Priestly authority is masculine or, in Miller's terms, male authority. That means that more than anything else it has to be a man who stands at the dynamic centre of ecclesial sacramental life. While it has to be a male priest who re-enacts the sacrifice of Christ the proper response of the feminine church is the 'sacrifice of praise'. The two, as Miller maintains, are not interchangeable and a 'bisexual' priesthood would render the sacrifice unintelligible.<sup>29</sup> Female authority can only be understood as complementarity to male authority, despite the fact that Miller and others also claim that woman has an existence independent from man which puts her into a state of equality with men.

Miller understands her concept of the nuptial order of ecclesial authority as a response to the charges of feminism and as a true defense of the dignity and authority of women. She criticises feminism for rendering the differences between the sexes as merely functional and as denying their sacramental and liturgical significance.<sup>30</sup> Miller accuses feminists of demanding equal power in the church and thereby destroying the gendered order of the church. She understands her own work as a kind of 'true feminism' as it takes into account and supports the nature, vocation and dignity of women in a similar way as the pope sees his pronouncements as advocating the dignity of women.

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<sup>27</sup>See also Donald J. Keefe, 'Gender, History, and Liturgy in the Catholic Church' *Review for Religious* 46 (1987), 866-881.

<sup>28</sup>Miller, *Sexuality and Authority*, vi.

<sup>29</sup>Miller, *Sexuality and Authority*, 78.

<sup>30</sup>Miller, *Sexuality and Authority*, ix.

My first criticism of Miller's argument is that the kind of feminism to which she responds is no longer undisputed among feminist theologians themselves. It is no longer token participation in male-defined institutions for which feminist theologians argue, but rather for their representation in the discourses and institutions of Christianity past and present in order to prepare for a future in which women's discourses of faith are an essential part of Christian theology.

Miller finds her theological understanding of authority in the church on the analogy between the relationship between Christ and the church and human marriage. She emphasises the fundamentality of the concept for Christian theology by stressing that this analogy is 'more than metaphor'. An analogical concept renders the idea of the nuptial mystery as indispensable to make cognitive ontological truth claims possible, not only about Christ and the church, but also about human relationships. I propose to replace Miller's use of analogy with one which renders the comparison between Christ and the church and human marriage as a form of metaphorical speech. Metaphor is understood as a form of figurative speech which is however not used at random, but the most adequate form of speaking about a particular aspect of reality. It too, is cognitive, but as a form of figurative speech, metaphor can be replaced as soon as other more adequate metaphors can be found.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Richard Swinburne sees analogy as a matter of degree and locates it between univocal and equivocal speech. Following James Ross he points out: 'The meaning relevant substitutes for a word form its predicate scheme. Words have the same meaning, are being used univocally, if they have the same predicate scheme (namely the same synonyms, contraries, determinables, etc.); similar meaning, are being used analogically with respect to each other, if they have overlapping predicate schemes, and are equivocal with respect to each other if their predicate schemes do not overlap.' Richard Swinburne, *Revelation. From Metaphor to Analogy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 40. (I am indebted to Dr. Tim Perry for bringing this to my attention.) In my understanding of metaphor I follow Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985). Soskice defines metaphor as 'that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another.' (Soskice, *Metaphor*, 15).

In her concept of gendered authority Miller understands gender as an ontological category inherent in human nature and based on the analogy of the nuptial covenant between Christ and the church. Miller's ontological understanding of gendered human nature therefore depends on a biological essentialism which makes the possession of male or female genitalia the most prominent feature of human existence. Miller does not take into account that being a man or a woman cannot be perceived outside a sociobiological and linguistic framework of interpretation of gender categories.<sup>32</sup> In her analogy of the relationship between Christ and the church she equates biological sex and gender and thereby makes one particular form of culturally contingent human sexuality the foundation of her understanding not only of human, but also of ecclesial authority.

Closely connected to Miller's ontological construction of gender is the fact that her theology is based on a fixed system of gender relationships, a system of compulsory heterosexuality, itself unexamined and treated as beyond criticism, even if we were to agree with her as to its normative character. In a concept in which a nuptial relationship is the fundamental structure of the universe, all other forms of human sexuality are rendered either deviant or essentially non-existent.<sup>33</sup> If the church, according to Miller, cannot be church without the exercise of female authority, even if it only takes place within the narrowly defined structures of patriarchal ecclesiology,

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<sup>32</sup>I agree with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's approach to the dilemma of there being 'women' and our inability to perceive women's being outside particular discursive frameworks: 'In order to mark this crisis in my writing I introduce here a particular spelling of "wo/men" that seeks to indicate that women are not a unitary social group but rather a fragmented and fractured by structures of race, class, religion, heterosexuality, colonialism, age, and health. Nonetheless, I do not think that feminists can relinquish the analytic category "women" entirely and replace it with the analytic category "gender" if we do not want to marginalize or erase the presence of women from our feminist discourse.' Fiorenza, *Jesus*, 24f..

<sup>33</sup>For an example of a lesbian critique of theology see Grace Jantzen, 'Off the Straight and Narrow. Toward a Lesbian Theology' *Theology and Sexuality* 3 (1995), 58-76.

how can the church be the church without the voices of those who find themselves outside such an essentially heterosexual discourse?

Miller works within an understanding of heterosexuality as compulsory and as indicating the only possible form of human and divine relationships. This, in its way, is just as damaging as Daphne Hampson's criticism of the way in which Christianity makes one particular relationship, that of father and son, its foundation.<sup>34</sup> Both Hampson and Miller are making the same mistake, though the mistake is expressed differently. What they have in common is the priority they give to 'male' identity/gender, one does it by way of 'marriage', the other by means of father-son, not even here do 'women' or the 'feminine' get a look-in. Lesbian feminists like Mary Hunt and Elizabeth Stuart have pointed out the theological significance of friendship and the obvious neglect of friendship as an essential form of human relationships within the Christian tradition.<sup>35</sup> By using the analogy of Christ and the church as the fundamental model of human sexual relationships, Miller restricts the possibility of the multiplicity of forms human relationships could take. One of the tasks for theological anthropology in the context of ecclesiology would therefore be, along with the dismantling of the ontological concept of gender construction which Miller and others use, to provide the presuppositions which enable us to perceive a multiplicity of human relationships as sacramental space for an encounter with the divine.

Miller essentially blurs the categories of biological sex and gender by using the two indiscriminately. Even though she uses the categories of 'male' and 'female' authority, such terminology is actually a contradiction in terms, as authority as a

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<sup>34</sup>Hampson, Theology and Feminism, 154.

<sup>35</sup>See Mary E. Hunt, Fierce Tenderness. A Feminist Theology of Friendship (New York: Crossroad, 1991) and Elizabeth Stuart, Just Good Friends. Toward A Lesbian and Gay Theology of Relationships (London: Mowbray, 1995). John Inge argues that the neglect of the dimension of friendship within the Christian tradition is due to its distorted emphasis on agape as self-denying love which exceeds all other forms of love. See John Inge, 'Friendship. Friendship and Love, Divine and Human' M.A.T.R. Dissertation Durham 1995.

matter of fact cannot be derived from biological sex, but at best from a particular way of constructing categories of gender. Miller tries to subvert this by using categories of biological sex as the foundation of her understanding of authority in the church as the basis for ontological truth claims. These in effect support a particular patriarchal power system rather than the lives of women and men in the church.

The most central and important criticism to be made about Miller's theology is that of her attitude towards women. Interestingly enough both John Paul II and Miller refer to the lives of 'real women'. But what they do refer to are not women's lives, but rather women as long as they perform particular roles, roles which are defined within a strict and exclusively heterosexual and culturally contingent pattern of gender relationships. Women, as Miller describes them, embody the motherhood of the church, but Miller's description of ecclesial motherhood does not bear much resemblance to the reality of being a mother in different cultures. 'Motherhood' remains an abstract and therefore a disembodied concept. Furthermore, even though Miller refers to the femininity of the church as embodied in the lives of women, in effect of women when they are mothers, brides or virgins, the femininity of the church appears as the exaltation of a disembodied sexuality. The roles chosen for women who embody the church are essentially asexual roles even though they are only described in relation to the absence or presence of a sexual relationship with a man. As such the concept of the feminine church appears to be fundamentally alienating for women who are church as they have either to deny their sexuality, their sexuate being, before they can be part of the 'embodied' church, or attend to their relationship to other males, not to other females.

The exaltation of disembodied female sexuality, in effect its denial, creates boundaries between women in the church rather than enabling them to celebrate the diversity of women's lives and different ways of being woman as the embodiment of the church. It creates a hierarchy between those women who according to Miller embody the church and those who might attend the church, but may never live up to

being counted into the patriarchal gender-power structure which is established in systems like this one.

Parallel to the denial of women's sexuality is the way in which male masculine sexuality relates to the authority of the priesthood which, according to Miller, is essentially 'masculine authority'. The theological concept of the 'nuptial mystery' and the femininity of the church support and exalt one particular form of disembodied masculinity. We could in fact speak of the exaltation of 'sexuality without sex', for the masculine priestly authority is exercised through a celibate male who is essentially 'married' to the church, the disembodied bride.<sup>36</sup> The concepts of ecclesial maternity and priestly paternity seem to substitute fathering or mothering with the exaltation of parenthood without pregnancy, childbirth and without children.

It is an essentially patriarchal concept of masculinity which Miller and others employ here. As such it not only bears not much resemblance to the reality of men's lives, especially those who do not fit into the pattern of compulsory disembodied heterosexuality, but it also exalts those men who do. It acknowledges some men, the bearers of Christ's priestly authority as being male/masculine while it, renders all other men, participating in the church on the side of the 'feminine'.<sup>37</sup>

Such disembodiment of sexuality, the exaltation of the absence of sex, is not a subversion of established gender categories, but the affirmation of a patriarchal system which is oppressive and confusing for everyone, men and women. It is not the affirmation of sexuality as such or of human sexuality as a form by means of which ecclesial authority is exercised, but the sanctioning of a patriarchal ecclesial order

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<sup>36</sup>Being a mother is but one possible mode of woman's service to Jesus; he lacks a wife. Defining her as the Church, as Israel is defined as the bride of Yahweh, is tantamount to saying that Christ is wed to his work alone, which is not the fulfilment of humanity but a model of the patriarchal and the phallogocentric.' Luce Irigaray, 'Equal to Whom?' Trans. Robert L. Mazolla *Differences* 1:2 (1988), 62.

<sup>37</sup>James Nelson, *The Intimate Connection. Male Sexuality, Masculine Spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 45.

which renders women, their lives and their discourses of faith non-existent outside the patriarchal order and restricts men to either fitting into a particular patriarchal construction of 'masculinity' or else to be rendered 'feminine'.

The disembodied gender binary lends itself to the analogy of Christ and the church, the human and the divine. While the male, as Irigaray observes, can model itself on the divine<sup>38</sup>, woman has got nothing on which to model herself, at least not outside what patriarchy has created for her.<sup>39</sup> Her authority exists only as complementary to and as derivative from that of the male. Her whole existence is aptly placed on the side of the human, the created, the contingent, as derivative existence, as though that of males was not to be so understood. But it is not even humanity which is granted to her by the doctrine of the femininity of the church, as a full sexuate identity, embodiment and human relationships of multiple forms, not their absence, are constitutive of the humanity which is denied to women within the nuptial order of ecclesial authority.

Miller leaves no means unattended to support the patriarchal power structure of the church. That the purpose of her study appears to be that and only that is obvious from two more observations we have to make before outlining my own proposal for a possible feminist reconstruction of ecclesiology.

The first is her very pointed and essentially narrow doctrine of the Eucharist. The Eucharist, according to Miller, is the celebration of the sacrifice of the nuptial covenant. The way Miller describes it, it becomes the sublimation of disembodied heterosexual intercourse. It is enacted by the coming together of male priestly

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<sup>38</sup>See Luce Irigaray, 'Divine Women' Local Consumption Occasional Paper 8 Sydney 1989, 3-5.

<sup>39</sup>In many traditions, the goal is engendered by means of a woman, means that are not simply the practical ones of procreation. Women take part in the divine becoming, the engendering of "God." But that mediation is often forgotten. Women serve the apparition of the goal but do not appear themselves as divine. As mothers of God, as servants of the Lord, yes. As consorts of the god, as incarnations of the divinity, no.' Irigaray, An Ethics of Sexual Difference, 106.

authority which makes the kenotic sacrifice of Christ, while the female/feminine side of the church is restricted to the 'sacrifice of praise', an essentially disembodied sacrifice. Such an understanding of the Eucharist which distinguishes between male and female sacrifice, the side of the masculine priest representing Christ and the feminine church, as David Power points out, separates the action in persona Christi and in persona ecclesiae in a way that is essentially uncatholic.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to that, it represents an understanding of sacrifice which excludes women, and especially women's blood shed in menstruation and childbirth (a potential source of defilement).<sup>41</sup> Miller in her understanding of the Eucharist as the dynamic centre of ecclesial life and sacrifice as enactment of the nuptial covenant restricts the Eucharist to being a means of sanctioning the patriarchal order she is seeking to defend by excluding vital aspects of the Eucharistic piety of her own Roman Catholic tradition, such as the whole aspect of food and nourishment which has proved so vital especially in women's Eucharistic spirituality.<sup>42</sup>

It is interesting to see that Miller's sacramental theology does not mention any other sacrament except her narrow understanding of the Eucharist as sacrifice. The omission of baptism which can be performed by any Christian, or of marriage where one of the ministers is a woman, is itself telling in relation to the purpose of her study: to justify and sustain the existing male power structures in the church.

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<sup>40</sup>For an extensive critique of the gendered use of the Thomistic distinction between action in persona Christi and in persona ecclesiae and its use in the debate about the ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church see David Power, 'Representing Christ in Community and Sacrament' in: Being a Priest Today ed. Donald Goergen (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 97-123.

<sup>41</sup>See Nancy Jay, Throughout Your Generations Forever. Sacrifice, Religion and Paternity (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) and Nancy Jay, 'Sacrifice as Remedy for Having Been Born of Woman' in Immaculate and Powerful. The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan and Margaret R. Miles (Boston: Beacon, 1985), 283-309.

<sup>42</sup>See Joy A. Schroeder, 'Towards a feminist eucharistic theology and piety' Dialog 30 (1991), 221-226 and Caroline Walker Bynum, Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the religious significance of food to medieval women (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1987).

The other aspect is closely connected to the first one. While Miller criticises theological feminism, or the limited understanding she has of it, as the demand for ecclesial power, in other words: the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood, her own argument boils down to a discussion of why women can by no means be admitted to the ministerial priesthood. She shows how female authority is essential for the church to be the church and how women can be present in the church, in fact are a necessary part of the nature of the church, outside the ministerial priesthood. Even though she maintains that the question of priestly authority is not one of political power within the church, the way she goes out of her way to argue for the exclusion of women from the priesthood makes her an exponent of just the power struggle she denies. That makes her gendered ecclesiology an example of a phenomenon which is not so explicit in Miller's own work, but in that of related theologians like Joseph Ratzinger<sup>43</sup> and the conservative Lutheran Mark Chapman.<sup>44</sup> It has been argued that the understanding of the church as a feminine collective person is a healthy counterbalance to the male/masculine understanding of the church as structure. As Chapman maintains:

The advantage of a mariological ecclesiology is that it removes the discussion of the Church from questions of institutional and bureaucratic organisation and focuses the ministry and mission of the church on persons whose lives serve as parables to be pondered and then acted upon.<sup>45</sup>

In other words, the femininity of the church is said to be employed to counterbalance the institutional power structures of the church with a concept of the personal embodied character of the church, embodied in the majority of those who attend: women. But in a theological concept of gendered ecclesiology like that of Miller, the pope and others the femininity, the maternal, virginal, spousal character of the church

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<sup>43</sup>Joseph Ratzinger, 'On the Position of Mariology within the Totality of Faith and Theology' in *The Church and Women. A Compendium* Ed. Helmut Moll (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 72.

<sup>44</sup>See Mark Chapman, 'Sancta Maria, Sancta Ecclesia: A Lutheran Possibility for a Marian Ecclesiology' *One in Christ* 2 (1995), 146-163.

<sup>45</sup>Chapman, 'Sancta Maria', 162.

becomes no more than a rhetorical device in the sanctioning of that very institutional patriarchal order.

It is a binary structure supported by arguments like that of Miller and other contemporary Roman Catholic theologians mentioned in this paper. This binary is essentially hierarchical and is repeated over and over again in Christian theology, the male/female or masculine/feminine binary is sanctioned by being analogous to the divine/human binary or, within the church, the essentially dualistic relationship between hierarchy and laity. Concepts of sex complementarity and nuptial order, developed to affirm the dignity of women, in fact put women into the permanent 'object' position attributed to her by the patriarchal system which rather defends itself than her alleged 'dignity'<sup>46</sup>. But a critique of examples such as the theology of Monica Migliorino Miller and the present pope is a valuable means to show the problems central Christian imagery can have for women and for the process of re-writing Christian theology in a non-patriarchal, feminist way. While Miller pays sufficient rhetorical lip service to the feminism she denies, her theology is an example of just how destructive particular aspects of central Christian imagery can be for women and how they can in fact become tools for the denial of women's claim to be church if that claim invites access to certain roles.

## 5.2 Towards a Sexuate Ecclesiology

The reason I have analysed Miller's book at such great length is not only to show the dangers and limitations of the use of gendered metaphors in ecclesiology,

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<sup>46</sup>Suffice to say that from a feminist perspective, complementarity conceived of in this way is far from beautiful. It is a mask for an ideology which places women in a stereotyped role on account of her gender, a role where she is praised for living in less than full capacity.' Elizabeth Johnson, 'The Marian Tradition and the Reality of Women' *Horizons* 12:1 (1985), 125.

but also to show the significance of the fact that in some aspects of traditional ecclesiology gender has always been an issue that matters, irrespective of its abuse as an instrument to establish and retain patriarchal power. Of course, the use of gender categories has never been separable from the problem of their use for women, but it can after all be helpful in demonstrating that ecclesiological discourse can rarely be gender neutral. In both the ecclesiology of the Reformation and the Second Vatican Council, as well as the 'ecclesiology from below' developed by liberation theologians and used as the primary ecclesiological model in feminist theology up to the present day, we see that the abolition of female imagery, despite its potential for abuse, has not actually improved the situation of women in the church. Even though the predominant images used in the Second Vatican Council such as the church as 'the people of God', the church as 'sacrament of salvation' and the church as 'communion' are supposedly gender neutral, they have not exactly been the means of making visible the presence of women and their discourses of faith in the church. In other words, the denial of binary structures of gender as the fundamental model of ecclesiology does not mean that a reconstructed ecclesiology must be gender neutral or one that denies discursively constructed sexual identity as a fundamental aspect of our understanding of the world. Feminist theologians like Rosemary Radford Ruether have criticised the alienation women feel from patriarchal church structures in which they are not represented. But a gender-neutral ecclesiology which denies women the status of subjects of discourses of faith could be just as alienating. Patriarchal nuptial ecclesiology is alienating for women because it operates with a concept of femininity which bears little resemblance to the lives of women and is used to put them into an essentially inferior position. It also restricts the potential of femininity to one particular femininity which is constructed in such a way that it does not threaten the order of patriarchy. What has been seen as threatening the order of patriarchy is in fact women's sexuality, the close connection between women's sexuality and matters of life and death, expressed for example in the issue of blood in menstruation and childbirth. Christine Gudorf argues that men saw the need to create sacrifice as a

substitutionary rite for women's close involvement in giving birth.<sup>47</sup> Women's sexuality has in the Christian tradition to a large extent been discussed as a matter of potential danger which needs to be avoided, rather than as a part of God's good creation which is to be represented and celebrated in the life of the church. In the following I argue that by maintaining that it is in fact women, particular embodied sexuate human beings, who are church, then we reach the limits of concepts of gender for our ecclesiological discourse<sup>48</sup>. Thus liberation theology's insistence on the importance of praxis and experience compels us to investigate the significance of sexuality for ecclesiology. The first step therefore is to attribute to women the status of a subject, an agent of enunciation in the multiple forms ecclesial discourse can take and from there to redefine women's sexual identity. We must find a way of advocating women's presence in the church, which is neither part of a biologically essentialist argument nor renders the diversity of women's being, women's difference and women's differences insignificant. It is women we must talk about, even women in the church before we move on to affirming women as being church, but we must keep in mind that what we talk about is in fact 'this sex which is not one'.<sup>49</sup> While gender has proved a useful concept for the deconstruction and analysis of ecclesiological

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<sup>47</sup>Christine Gudorf, 'The Power to Create: Sacraments and Men's Need to Birth' Horizons 14.2 (1987), 296-309.

<sup>48</sup>Jacques Pohier hints at the importance of the connection between dogmatic theology and sexuality. Jacques Pohier, God in Fragments Trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1985), 174.

<sup>49</sup>Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which is Not One (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). Julia Kristeva argues: 'I am in favour of a concept of femininity which would take as many forms as there are women. That does not at all produce a 'group'-effect, and I am convinced that those who engage in issues concerning woman not in order to examine their own singularity but in order to be reunited with "all women" do so primarily in order to avoid looking at their own particular situation and end up feeling disillusioned or becoming dogmatic.' Julia Kristeva, 'Talking about *Polylogue*' Transl. Seán Hand In: French Feminist Thought. A Reader Ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 114. Kristeva critiques a collective understanding of the 'feminine' even if used by women themselves as not representative because it remains constructed within a masculine mindset: 'A large community of "women" therefore sets itself up as the keeper of the subtle truth about sex, language and the psyche, betrayed by a knowledge that's neutral or masculine.' (ibidem, 115).

concepts of the past, sexuality can be seen as more viable for our endeavour of construction and reconstruction. James Nelson notes that there 'has been a shift from understanding the church as asexual to understanding it as a sexual community'<sup>50</sup>. Extending Nelson's concept of the church as a sexual community, I argue that a feminist ecclesiology has to recover dimensions of sexuality in reclaiming all aspects of theology pertaining to ecclesiology. Recovering dimensions of sexuality means reclaiming the body, in fact human bodies, men's and women's bodies who embody the body of Christ. A sexual ecclesiology is one which understands both femininity and masculinity<sup>51</sup> as women and men having positive identities, identities connected to embodiment as a positive category of ecclesial life. It means to gain an understanding of human bodies, and women's bodies in particular, as sacred<sup>52</sup>. The incarnation, happening in the body of a woman and being celebrated sacramentally by men's and women's bodies in the church, is the starting point of women's reclaiming

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<sup>50</sup>James Nelson, 'Reuniting Sexuality and Spirituality' In: Christian Perspectives on Sexuality and Gender Ed. Adrian Thatcher and Elizabeth Stuart (Leominster: Gracewing, 1996) 217. See also Nelson, The Intimate Connection, 128: 'When we forget that the church is a sexual community, we only allow unreflective, uncriticized, and often unjust expressions of our sexuality to shape its life. When we remember, however, we have fresh awareness of the transformative power and presence of the body of Christ.'

It is interesting to note that much literature on sexual theology does not address the issue of the Christian community or the church. See for example Adrian Thatcher, Liberating Sex. A Christian Sexual Theology (London: SPCK, 1993). Thatcher declares that what he writes is theology, not ethics, but despite that his Trinitarian framework does not provide a theology of the church. Feminist theologian Susan Ross sees the importance of the dimension of living in community for a feminist theology of sexuality, but discusses it rather with regard to ethical issues of the wider society than with regard to the church. Susan A. Ross, 'Extravagant Affections. Women's Sexuality and Theological Anthropology' In the Embrace of God. Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology Ed. Ann O'Hara Graff (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 105-121.

<sup>51</sup>That this aspect of reclaiming positive sexual identity is important for men as well is pointed out clearly by James Nelson: 'Current masculinity is too largely a negative identity because it is grounded in male body alienation, for to heterosexual men it is women and gay men who most clearly symbolize the body.' Nelson, The Intimate Connection, 7.

<sup>52</sup>Ross, 'Extravagant Affections', 106: 'First, the incarnational, sacramental dimension of the Christian tradition has the potential, as yet far from developed, for a theology that holds the body and sexuality of women as sacred.'

the embodied and therefore sexual dimensions of being church. These are: the church as the communion of saints, Mary as the type of the church and finally the church as the body of Christ. I argue that categories of gender and as a consequence of human sexuality are not insignificant for the theological understanding of the saints, Mary or Christ. In fact only an ecclesiology that frees the saints, Mary and Christ from being at best theological concepts ridden with oppressive gender constructions to particular sexuate beings can claim to speak about the church as a sexual community.

### 5.2.1 Reclaiming the Communion of Saints

In her entry on 'Saints' in the A to Z of Feminist Theology Sarah Jane Boss argues that 'feminist theology is deeply suspicious of the concept of sainthood'<sup>53</sup>. She argues that the concept of sainthood favours a negative view of women's behaviour, such as the voluntary suffering of violence at the hand of men or self-starvation as rebellion against women's bodiliness. She also criticises that the concept of sainthood implies the existence of a 'hierarchy of worth' as well as a complicated bureaucratic process to become part of this hierarchy. I do not share Boss' unilaterally negative perception of the significance of saints for feminist theology. Saints have played an important part in feminist theologians' attempt to recover aspects of the Christian tradition in which women are represented. The church, portrayed as the communion of saints, not only serves to affirm the timeless and continuing nature which even goes beyond the limitations of life on earth and death, but also provides a multifaceted collection of role models for the Christian life. An additional advantage of the concepts of saints is that there are male and female saints, models of a diversity of ways of living a Christian life, be they historical figures or constructions of moral theologians. What is important about saints is their humanness, the emphasis on

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<sup>53</sup>Sarah Jane Boss, 'Saints' An A to Z of Feminist Theology Ed. Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 212.

common experience which enables saints to speak on the believer's behalf. The idea of the church as the 'communion of saints' enables us to replace the personification of the church through a choice of many. An additional advantage of the personification of the church in a choice of many saints rather than one symbolic figure, be it Mary or Mary Magdalene, is that the canon of saints is essentially open-ended and many more models of faith past and present could be added. Recovering the concept of saints by finding models of faith both historical and present, as well as by celebrating the common sainthood of all members of the church, must therefore be seen as an important step towards a church in which women in their present discourses of faith and their historical existence are represented. This recovery of sainthood and the communion of saints can, however, only be a first step in our feminist project of reclaiming the church as sacramental space where women's sexual and sexuate lives are not only represented but celebrated. Elizabeth Stuart extends her theology of friendship to a theology of sainthood in which she describes saints, and female saints in particular, as sources of the embodied energy of our ancestors in faith<sup>54</sup>. In denying a heroic concept of sainthood, she encourages women to a friendship with saints. Saints become helpers, sources of encouragement rather than unattainable ideals of faith. This for her is an ongoing process which does not necessarily require the official bureaucratic affirmation of the sainthood of a person. The body of Christ is embodied in the multitude of saints present and past, a body from which women are not excluded, but of which they are an integral part. Even though my own insistence on the importance of saints for the development of a feminist ecclesiology is closer to Stuart's approach than to that of Sarah Boss, the latter may be right in her suspicion of the bureaucratic process involved in the canonisation of saints. Despite the importance

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<sup>54</sup>Elizabeth Stuart, Spitting at Dragons: Towards a Feminist Theology of Sainthood (London: Mowbray, 1996). On 'saints' see Elizabeth Johnson, 'Saints and Mary' Systematic Theology. Roman Catholic Perspectives Ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John Galvin (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) Vol. II, : 143-177; Peter Brown, The Cult of Saints. Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity (London: SCM, 1981) and David M. Matzko, 'Postmodernism, Saints and Scoundrels' Modern Theology 9.1 (1993), 19-36.

of women saints as a source of women's church history, women are after all not involved in the formal process of deciding who is canonised and who is not, and their involvement in constructing the identity of saints is limited. Therefore women being conscious of their being church and claiming their participation in the continuing history of the church have to challenge the conventional categories of sainthood continuously in order to make them usable for women being church<sup>55</sup>. The significance of women's sexuality and the frequency of its denial in conventional hagiography is of importance for this process of challenging and reframing sainthood in a feminist paradigm. Many examples of women saints have been constructed as examples of piety and sainthood because of actions which deny their sexual identity as women<sup>56</sup>. Among those are medieval mystics who starved themselves and as a result of this extreme starvation stopped menstruating. Another much quoted example is Maria Goretti who was killed because she resisted being raped and is venerated as an example of purity. Examples of these are dangerous and destructive for women to find a positive identity as being church. Women-church is in need of saints who positively embrace their female sexuality and become models of faith by viewing their being women as celebrating God's creation. Yet the official and bureaucratic process of canonisation in which women have in fact not been involved is only one aspect of the veneration of saints as it is practised in the Christian church. It is accompanied and often subverted by popular cults of saints which respond to the needs of those who are church. One example may be the veneration of saints invoked in the context of childbirth, such as Margaret of Antioch or St. Anne, the mother of the virgin Mary.

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<sup>55</sup>An example of the construction and manipulation of a saint, but also of her reclamation by feminist theologians, is Mary Magdalene. See Susan Haskins, Mary Magdalen. Myth and Metaphor (London: HarperCollins, 1993). For an example of a feminist reclamation of a saint see for example Joann W. Conn, 'Thérèse of Lisieux from a Feminist Perspective' Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development Ed. Joann W. Conn (New York: Paulist, 1986), 317-325.

<sup>56</sup>See for example: Sara Maitland, 'Passionate Prayer: Masochistic Images in Women's Experience' In: Sex and God. Some Varieties of Women's Religious Experience Ed. Linda Hurcombe (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), 125-140.

They are early signs of female solidarity, sisterhood and friendship across the ages of which Elizabeth Stuart speaks. The identity of a saint is in any case a theological and hagiographic construction which invites the reader to respond and live a life modelled on the character of the saint. These constructions are gendered and as such part of gendered ecclesiology. But because they are, they can provide one possible starting point of women reclaiming gendered ecclesiology in order to transform it into an ecclesiology which sees sexuality and sexuate identities as one of its vital features.

### 5.2.2 Reclaiming Mary

Mariology and ecclesiology have traditionally been two closely connected aspects of Roman Catholic theology. Mary has often been seen as the supreme personification of the church, the ideal disciple, in the church and yet its mother. Otto Semmelroth, following the tradition of church fathers such as Ambrose and Augustine, sees Mary as the 'type of the church'<sup>57</sup>. Both Mary and the church are seen as the 'new Eve'. Standing under the cross, Mary becomes not only the mother of Christ, but also gives birth to his body, the church. The medieval theologian Hermann of Tournai describes Mary as the neck of the body of Christ, the mediatrix between Christ the head and his body the church and yet a full member of the body<sup>58</sup>. For Semmelroth Mary contains the 'united multiplicity of the Church'<sup>59</sup>. He attempts to make both Mary and the church accessible to Christians, one of the central features of the Second Vatican Council.

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<sup>57</sup>See Otto Semmelroth, Mary, Archetype of the Church Transl. Maria von Eros and John Devlin (Dublin: Gill & Son, 1963). Caroline Anne Renehan provides an extensive summary of Semmelroth's argument as well as other authors proposing an 'ecclesiatypical Mariology'. See Caroline Anne Renehan, 'The Church, Mary and Womanhood: Emerging Roman Catholic Typologies' PhD thesis University of Edinburgh, 1993.

<sup>58</sup>Hilda Graef, Mary. A History of Doctrine and Devotion (London: Sheed & Ward, 1963) vol. 1, 234.

<sup>59</sup>Semmelroth, Mary Archetype of the Church, 32.

For women, however, Mary and her connection with the church remains a symbol which is not without ambivalence<sup>60</sup>, but it is this ambivalence which makes Marian symbolism even more important. Mary on the one hand appears as the product of male theologians' inability to cope with female sexuality. Therefore Mary becomes the personification of disembodied femininity, the woman who is what no woman can ever be: virgin and mother at once. As such Marian symbolism is abusable as an instrument of male power over women, as a means of disciplining women through an unattainable ideal. Such a form of Marian theology allows Mary to be church, but not women. Some male theologians see the personification of the church in Mary as a counterbalance to a concept of church which is dominated by an emphasis on structures, hierarchy and institution<sup>61</sup>. These of course are goals also pursued by feminist theologians working on the transformation of the theological understanding of the church. Yet we have to ask whether an understanding of Marian symbolism which essentially serves to deny women's sexuality and to support the existing male

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<sup>60</sup>To claim, as official rhetoric does, that the dignity of woman is raised in Mary is at best a half truth. In its root dynamic, the Marian tradition has persisted in idealizing the one to the detriment of the many. Instead of seeing Mary as a type, a symbol of the capacity of women, it has exalted Mary as the great exception in comparison to whom all other women are denigrated.... The same is true of those churches which have the strongest official attachment to Mary: they are the least likely to be open to full participation of women in ecclesial public life and ministries.' Johnson, 'The Marian Tradition and the Reality of Women', 124. See also James P. Mackey, 'The use and abuse of Mary in Roman Catholicism' Who Needs Feminism? Male Responses to Sexism in the Church Ed. Richard Holloway (London: SPCK, 1991) 99-116.

<sup>61</sup>See for example Leo Scheffczyk, 'Mary as a Model of Catholic Faith' In The Church and Women. A Compendium Ed. Helmut Moll (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 100: Scheffczyk points out that the "'Marian principle", the principle of serving devotion and humble receptivity, provides a genuine balance and enlargement of the hierarchical principle that tends to be onesided. The inclusion of Mary as Virgin and Mother in the order of salvation imparts on the church, which is the outstanding place of continuing salvation, in a totally special way, profoundly sensitive, deeper human maternal and even mystical characteristics. Arrayed with such characteristics, the Church can provide to men of all states and dispositions the protection, the security and the familiarity which flows from a maternal virginal being.' Cf also Ratzinger, 'On the Position of Mariology within the Totality of Faith and Theology', 71: Ratzinger states that 'against the masculine, activist, and sociological approach of the "People of God" there is the fact that the Church -Ecclesia- is feminine.'

dominated hierarchical structures can really be a means of transforming structures which would allow women full participation in the life of the church. The status of Mary as the supreme personification of the church and its most honoured member is for example used as an argument against women's admission to the ministerial priesthood. Mary herself, though the highest of all human beings and the supreme personification of the church, never participated in the hierarchy or demanded to be ordained priest. So if Mary was not granted admission to the priesthood, why should women? Yet, Miller in fact argues that 'the Marian principle' is one of the foundations of a truly sacramental and masculine priesthood<sup>62</sup>. Such an understanding of the significance of Mary in the church transforms a female symbol into a means of women's alienation from being church. Mary being understood as the type of the church and indeed its most prominent member can on the one hand be understood as a theological way of honouring women and affirming the significance of women in the church, but on the other hand Mary being totally church, means that she is not Christ. As a woman she cannot be divine although her supreme qualities are described such that she is what no woman can ever attain to be<sup>63</sup>. Therefore she can only serve for women to take their place in what patriarchal ecclesiology wants them to be within a church with which they cannot identify on their own grounds.

On the other hand the significant role Marian spirituality has in fact played for women compels us to see Mary as an important symbol which has been claimed and

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<sup>62</sup>Miller, *Sexuality and Authority*, 121.

<sup>63</sup>Cf. for example Kari Børresen's comment on the typology of Christ as the new Adam and the church/Mary as the new Eve: 'What this typology does, therefore, is to transpose the androcentric system from the order of creation into the order of redemption. It presupposes the socio-cultural patriarchal distinction between male and female roles, and then, within the typological couple, casts the human partner — Mary or the Church — in the instrumentally childbearing, i.e., specifically female role, and the divine partner, Christ, because of his pre-eminence, in the specifically male role....I would argue that the theme of the new Eve, a historically conditioned human formulation, is now an anachronism, and that to go on using this anachronism is pernicious, because it helps to perpetuate ecclesial androcentrism.' Kari Børresen, 'Mary in Catholic Theology' *Concilium* 168 (1983), 50.

reclaimed by women as the presence of the female at a vital position in Christian theological symbolism. Mary is after all a woman who reminds us of and affirms the necessarily inevitable presence of women in the church. As a number of feminist theological discussions on Mary have shown, it is possible to apply a method of deconstruction and re-reading to Marian symbolism in order not to discard what is after all a vital symbol for women<sup>64</sup>. Caroline Anne Renehan maintains:

For Christian feminist theologians Mary can be proposed as a model for women who choose to stay within the patriarchal tradition. They should reclaim and reinterpret Mary as a sister who consciously and actively decided to participate in God's redemptive work even although she found herself within a patriarchal structure.<sup>65</sup>

and furthermore:

Ecclesiatypology takes seriously the female personification of the Church making it a very different establishment from the one it has become in time and history. Here we are moving beyond the typology of Christ and the Church as dominant male and submissive female. Since woman has been despised or second class in the Church for so long it is woman for whom the preferential option is most pertinent. She has symbolic priority in the ecclesiatypical Church with a model in Mary whom she can follow. Now women can also represent the Church and help to lead it out from patriarchy and hierarchy to community. With Mary as model women can see a reflection of their own sex. She is a model of encouragement and liberation.<sup>66</sup>

The importance of Mary as both a person and a symbol for both ecclesiology and women shows that it is not possible to think of a sexual ecclesiology without reclaiming Mary for women in the church. Feminist ecclesiology has to recover the

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<sup>64</sup>See for example Els Maeckelberghe, "'Mary': Maternal Friend or Virgin Mother' Concilium 206 (1989), 120-127 and Catharina Halkes, 'Mary and Women' Concilium 168 (1983), 66-73.

<sup>65</sup>Renehan, 'The Church, Mary and Womanhood', 307f.

<sup>66</sup>Renehan, 'The Church, Mary and Womanhood', 322. It is important to see that Renehan is not only enthusiastic about the 'ecclesiatypical approach', but indeed sees the limitations of its potential: 'Can this woman who has been so highly objectivised and who has had to carry so much idealised weight really represent women who are trying to affirm themselves within the structure? Yes, she can, provided we are aware that the ecclesiatypical approach is only a starting point. The very essence of this approach is that it attempts to be a point of contact between the authorities of the Church and its feminists within.'

history of women's subversive Mariologies for itself. Yet the fundamental ambivalence of Mary as both an important aspect of women's devotional praxis and at the same time an instrument of patriarchal oppression and suppression of women's sexuality shows that a feminist sexual ecclesiology cannot stop with having reclaimed a transformed Marian symbolism.

### 5.2.3 Reclaiming Christ

Luce Irigaray points out that women must indeed claim participation not only in the human, but in fact in the divine<sup>67</sup>. With regard to our ecclesiological context that means that the transformation of the church and its theological self-reflection cannot merely mean the application of different sociological and political structures within the church. These are in fact, as Ruether and others have pointed out, contingent and of secondary importance when something more fundamentally theological is at stake. Christian feminist ecclesiology is incomplete without the conscious effort to reclaim both sides of the relationship between the human and the divine, the church and Christ. It must be seen as one of the shortcomings of Ruether and other feminist theologians concerned with ecclesiology that they have not even made the attempt. Only if women reclaim both sides, Christ and the church, it is possible to disrupt the structures of patriarchal ecclesiological discourse in order to reconsider the church as vital space for women's spiritual development rather than pre-determine women's lives in the use of role models attributed to them by 'nature'.

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<sup>67</sup>The denegation of Christ's incarnation as a sexual being and the use to which that denial is put in the service of sexual hierarchization and exploitation seem to have blocked an understanding of that sexual nature and confined it to the province of the patriarchs and Pharisees....But, having said that, I think it is something else that interests me in part, namely the fact that a theology of women's liberation establishes as its priority not equal access to the priesthood, but rather an equal share in the divine.' Irigaray, 'Equal to Whom?', 69. For a critical view of this position see Morny Joy, 'Equality or Divinity. A False Dichotomy' Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 6.1 (1990), 9-24.

Having discussed the significance of both the communion of saints and Mary as possibilities of an ecclesiology which allows for women to be represented, we finally have to consider the significance of Christology as the counterpart of ecclesiology in the symbolism of a male/masculine Christ and a feminine church as the most powerful model of gendered ecclesiology on which all others depend. After our discussion of the concepts of femininity and their impact on women's lives in the church, our argument is incomplete without taking into consideration the kind of masculinity ascribed to the male Christ in relation to a feminine Church. The Christ-event as the enabling of the ecclesial narrative, perceived in many different ways, functions then as a common identifier for many different discourses of women's faith. I want to do this by looking at four different gender-critical approaches to the christological question: two by feminist theologians and two by male authors searching for a 'theology of masculinity'.

### 5.2.3.1 Rosemary Radford Ruether

Rosemary Radford Ruether first challenged Christology as perhaps the most oppressive aspect of Christian theology by asking the question: 'Can a male saviour save women?'<sup>68</sup> Ruether has queried the way the masculinity of Christ had been used as an argument to 'keep women in place' in the church and in particular exclude them from ordained ministry. The model she offers as an alternative is that of going back to the Jesus of the synoptic gospels whose ministry was open to women. Ruether disconnects Christology and ecclesiology in her theology as a supposed attempt to overcome the gender binary inherent in both of them. Christ in her theology becomes

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<sup>68</sup>Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, chapter 5; 'The Liberation of Christology from Patriarchy' Religion and Intellectual Life 2 (1985), 116-128; To Change the World. Christology and Cultural Criticism (London: SCM, 1981) and Mary Hembrow Snyder, The Christology of Rosemary Radford Ruether. A Critical Introduction. (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1988).

a human being whose characteristic is his ministry which is open to women and all those marginalised by society. But we cannot say that the Jesus of Ruether's alternative Christology appears as a human being conscious of his own sexuality and we must therefore question the value of such a christological model for recovering women's sexual being as an essential dimension of being church. Ruether's Christology addresses the question of justice but not that of sexuality and therefore remains theologically unsatisfactory.

### 5.2.3.2 Rita Nakashima Brock

In her concept of a 'Christology of erotic power', which is strongly influenced by process philosophers like Hawthorne and Whitehead Rita Nakashima Brock speaks about Christa/Community. Brock develops an essentially relational Christology which is no longer focused on the person of Jesus:

Jesus participates centrally in this Christa/Community, but he neither brings erotic power into being nor controls it. He is brought into being through it and participates in the cocreation of it....Hence what is truly christological, that is, truly revealing of divine incarnation and salvific power in human life, must reside in connectedness and not in single individuals.<sup>69</sup>

Despite all attempts to talk about relationality and the abolition of unilateral power, Brock's Christology is unable to solve our ecclesiological question of particular sexual being in the church. In attempting to abandon the focus on male power embodied in a particular patriarchal understanding of Christ, Brock depersonalises

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<sup>69</sup>Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart. A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 52.

Christology<sup>70</sup> so that , in my opinion, it no longer empowers women's being as sexuate human beings and as persons either. Brock also argues for the importance of reclaiming Christ from patriarchy, but she does not achieve it in any way that is suitable to serve our ecclesiological task of reconsidering and reclaiming gendered ecclesiology. A statement like 'Erotic power exists as the vast process of human life itself, constantly flowing and growing in relationships; as the heart of Christianity, so, too, does Christ as Christa/Community.'<sup>71</sup> remains too vague to express the church as the reality of embodied lives embodying the continuity of Christ's presence.

### 5.2.3.3 James Nelson

Using the two examples of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rita Nakashima Brock, I have shown that the way feminist theologians have approached the christological question has disconnected it from the question of ecclesiology and therefore proves unsatisfactory for the development of a feminist critical and constructive ecclesiology. Their main fault, however, is that they have not managed to address the question of Jesus as a sexual human being. I therefore want to look at two male authors and their search for a Christology which is conscious of its sexual dimension.

James Nelson explains how the kind of gendered imagery used in the theological concept of masculine Christ and feminine church is not only oppressive for women, but also confusing and alienating for men:

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<sup>70</sup>Brock denies all exclusive focus on the person of Jesus. She argues: 'Rather, the community sustains life-giving power by its memory of its own brokenheartedness and of those who have suffered and gone before and by its members being courageously and redemptively present to all. In doing so, the community remains Christa/Community and participates in the life-giving flow of erotic power. No one person or group exclusively reveals it or incarnates it. In thinking that a single person, a savior, or even one group can save us, we mistake the crest of a wave for the vast sea churning beneath it?' Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 105.

<sup>71</sup>Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 53.

When God became male males were divinized, and patriarchy had a cosmic blessing. At the same time, we have resisted that one-sided masculinized deity, for a male God suggests to men their feminization. Language referring to the church has long been feminized: "She is his new creation by water and the word." All of us, men as well as women, are "she's" when it comes to being the church. That feels uncomfortable.<sup>72</sup>

Identification with Christ as a male sexual being for Nelson means the fullness of male humanity, men's becoming aware of their own bodily reality<sup>73</sup>. For our particular study, however, it is important to find out the implications of Jesus as a sexual being for women who are not male like Jesus. An asexual Christ who is human in every respect, but whose sexuality is ignored, must be alienating for both men and women, and cannot be more than a construct which does not exist for Christ's sake, but in order to retain the power of some men over both women and men. If such imagery is confusing and unsatisfactory for men, who are supposed to benefit from the kind of power structures created by it, how can it then be valid and relevant, let alone helpful, for women?

#### 5.2.3.4 Robert Beckford

The second male author whose work may be helpful in pointing to the necessity of a Christology conscious of sexuality for our ecclesiological reconsiderations is the British black male theologian Robert Beckford. Beckford argues that

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<sup>72</sup>Nelson, The Intimate Connection, 45.

<sup>73</sup>See Nelson, The Intimate Connection, 105-111. Joan Timmermann argues that the humanity of Jesus remains incomplete as a symbol 'to the point of uselessness for human life without its fully developed sexuality'. Jesus for her is the point at which God and sexuality are to be discussed together. Joan Timmermann, 'The Sexuality of Jesus and the Human Vocation' In: Sexuality and the Sacred. Sources for Theological Reflection Ed. James Nelson and Sandra Longfellow (London: Mowbray, 1994) 95. Cf. also James Nelson 'Embracing Masculinity' In: Sexuality and the Sacred. Sources for Theological Reflection Ed. James Nelson and Sandra Longfellow (London: Mowbray, 1994) 195-215, esp. 209.

black theologians must engage in the production of images of Jesus that symbolize the quest for a black socio-political sexual wholeness. On one level, images of black socio-political sexual wholeness must reflect the diversity and plurality of sexuality in black communities. We must take into consideration the fact that sexuality is broader than sexual orientation or genital activity and encompasses our affections, physiological arousal and the capacity for the erotic and sensuous. On another level, a sociopolitical sexual wholeness must confront the sources of oppression both inside and outside the black community. We must be conscious of how race, gender, class and sexual orientation interact in the oppression of black men and women seeking sexual wholeness in their concrete social worlds.<sup>74</sup>

Beckford argues that representations of Jesus and, given his particular context, the black Jesus, ought to be conscious of sexuality. Beckford's argument is significant for my own as it shows the interconnectedness between sexuality, sexual representation and Christology as the central aspect of Christian theological discourse. In order to reclaim the church or ecclesiological discourses, women have to reclaim Christ and to argue for representations of Christ which are representations of women's 'socio-political sexual wholeness'. Such images of women's wholeness will render unintelligible the opposition of a masculine disembodied Christ and a feminine submissive church ashamed of her sexuality. They will enable us to write sexuality into ecclesiology in order to recover the church as sacred space of sacramental embodiment for both women and men.

### **5.3 Breaking the Binary: Reclaiming Christ as a Sexual Human Being as the Basis for a Sexuate Ecclesiology**

Both Nelson and Beckford challenge us to see Christ as a sexual being, in other words, to view sexuality as a necessary and vital aspect of the incarnation. Such a Christology understands the incarnation as the divine affirmation of (sexual) particularity. So incarnation into particularity is an essential aspect of the narrative of

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<sup>74</sup>Robert Beckford, 'Does Jesus Have a Penis? Black Male Sexual Representation and Christology' Theology and Sexuality 5 (1996), 10f.

redemption<sup>75</sup> and enables human particularity as transformed existence not into a general paradigm of humanity, but into particularity, constructed performed sexuate particularity as an essential feature of women being church. So the attention shifts from the concept of essentially disembodied and symbolic sexuality to sexuate existence, the consciousness of sexual difference, the awareness that the feminine, woman is neither what male construction makes her nor simply the Other, the non-male, but woman, a human being in her own right.

Such an understanding of incarnational Christology as the divine affirmation of particularity is accompanied by a Trinitarian understanding of Christology. Christ is present in the church, the performance of his story in our stories, through the Holy Spirit who enables the interaction of plurality and mutuality in the church. The emphasis of our understanding of the relationship between Christ and the church would then shift from a subject-object structure to one of incarnate presence, sacramental presence. This sacramental presence of Christ in the sister or the brother not only takes place in the Eucharist, but in all sacramental acts. Christ incarnate is present in the particular other, the sister, through the Holy Spirit which enables a creative plurality of human relationships and of being church.

Reclaiming not only the saints and Mary, but most vitally Christ is an essential part of women becoming subjects, rather than merely objects, of the institutional and spiritual discourse called church. Melissa Raphael in her work on 'women's sacrality' points out that

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<sup>75</sup>Thus redemption is not a general state of affairs, something which could be described without mentioning the particular person of the redeemer; redemption is what happens in the story of Jesus, impossible to characterize without constitutive reference to "the things that have come to pass" in that particular narrative.' David S. Yeago, 'Jesus of Nazareth and Cosmic Redemption: The Relevance of St. Maximus the Confessor' Modern Theology 12:2 (1996), 177.

[w]omen have not been, and by and large are still not, the subjects of their own religious experience. Patriarchal Western religion has owned women's bodies but disowned the sacrality of those bodies.<sup>76</sup>

It is part of the reclaiming and voicing of women's religious experience, closely linked and inseparable from their sexuality as women. This implies an understanding of Christology as a discourse not of alienation, but of coming into one's own. Such an understanding of Christology facilitates a true ecclesiology of liberation. Two aspects must be borne in mind regarding the reclaiming of the Christ symbol for feminist ecclesiology. First, we have to take into account that becoming aware of Jesus Christ as a sexual being has different implications for men and for women, as male and female sexualities have been denied by the Christian tradition in different ways. Female sexuality has been branded as an evil, as filthy and defiling, as unworthy of the sacred, while male sexuality has been equated with a non-existing bodiliness which needs to be overcome by focusing on Christ the head of the body. A Christology that aims to overcome the dualistic opposition inherent in gendered ecclesiology must address both of these adequately. Second, the reclaiming of the Christ symbol is necessary in order to refocus our ecclesiology as theological discourse about being church rather than about the nature of the feminine church subjected to the male/masculine Christ.

The deconstruction and reconstruction of gendered concepts is vital as a first step in our rethinking ecclesiology as women being church. But 'women being church' implies the notion of women as sexual beings celebrating their distinct sexual experiences in the church as the realm of the holy. This corrects an understanding of 'gender neutral' concepts of the sacred as well as those notions of sacrality which deny

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<sup>76</sup>Melissa Raphael, Theology and Embodiment. The Post-Patriarchal Reconstruction of Female Sacrality (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 20.

women any access to the dynamic centres of ecclesial life<sup>77</sup>. Melissa Raphael distinguishes between 'female' and 'feminine' sacrality:

The word "female" has a feminist intention of ridding sacrality of its delimitation by men to the secondary, non-political, private sphere of the profane or the semi-profane. To celebrate the female instead of the feminine is to rid the sacred/profane distinction of the false polarities that have dogged the history of its application to women — namely, casting domestic feminine sacrality as safe and public female sacrality as dangerous.<sup>78</sup>

A feminist ecclesiology which reclaims Christology as one of its fundamental dimensions has to move beyond the category of gendered concepts that distinguish between a masculine Christ and a feminine church, as these categories are merely useful to establish and maintain structures which restrict women's participation within the church to the realm of the non-public and non-political. Likewise a feminist ecclesiology cannot be 'neutral'; it has to connect women's sexuality, the multiplicity of women's sexual experiences, to both Christology and ecclesiology. Rosi Braidotti argues that

only a man would idealize sexual neutrality, for he has by right - belonging as he does to the masculine gender - the prerogative of expressing his sexuality, the syntax of his desire; he has his own place of enunciation as the subject. This fundamental opportunity has always been refused women, who are still at the stage of trying to assert themselves as subjects of enunciation, sexed bodies, and still trying to assert their entitlement to the position of subjects.<sup>79</sup>

Women must claim to be represented in Christology by a Christ who is a human being embracing particular sexuate existence, be it male or female, and therefore frees all other sexuate existence from being restricted to the state of an 'object'. Only then can

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<sup>77</sup>Raphael, *Theology and Embodiment*, 23: 'In other words, a revived concept of female sacrality would do much to correct and balance scholarly conceptions of the sacred, which until now have worked on the assumption that female sacral experience is either unworthy of note or the same as men's.

<sup>78</sup>Raphael, *Theology and Embodiment*, 263f.

<sup>79</sup>Rosi Braidotti *Patterns of Dissonance: A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 121. See also Rosi Braidotti, 'What's Wrong With Gender' *Reflections on Theology and Gender* Ed. Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes and Athalya Brenner (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994), 49-70.

women become subjects of ecclesial and ecclesiological discourse (the two are in fact inseparable).

Our discussion of the importance of not isolating ecclesiology, but rather connecting it to discourses of the lives of saints, of Mariology and most essentially of Christology, points to the importance of embodiment, the importance of women's and men's bodies, for the concept of sexuality which I see as fundamental for a feminist reconsideration of ecclesiology. Only an understanding of sexuality as embodied discourse which can take many different forms of possible relationships, can avoid the fixation on one particular concept of sexuality, disembodied heterosexual discourse, as the foundation of ecclesiology<sup>80</sup>.

Reclaiming not only Mary and the saints, but also Christ and Christology, as vital for the development of a feminist ecclesiology enables us to move away from understanding the church as a feminine collective person whose being is defined by her relation to her male counterpart. We can move on to understanding the church as the sacramental materialisation of Christ's presence in multiple and varied human relationships and, most importantly for our present purpose, in the presence of women in the church. It enables us to replace concepts of the ecclesial feminine with an ecclesiology of the constructive representation of women's presence in the church. Such a representation is by its nature multiple and varied, and can no longer rely on a single concept of the feminine as Miller and the present pope attempt to construct it in line with their own purposes. It can no longer be based on a model of 'gender complementarity'. What is at issue are no longer merely relationships between men and women. Binary structures of male/female, human/divine, Christ/church can no

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<sup>80</sup>See also Mary McClintock Fulkerson, 'Gender - Being it or Doing it?: The Church, Homosexuality, and the Politics of Identity' Union Seminary Quarterly Review 47:1-2 (1994), 40: 'Given the judgement that constructions of subject-identities are themselves subject to the ordering of a theological grammar, we might conclude, however, that definitions of sexuality as well as our behaviors are characterized by fallibility, impermanence and finitude and are not essential to the community's ongoing identity.'

longer be seen as satisfactory models for constructing the life of the church and women's presence as an essential reality in it. The double task of reconsidering gendered ecclesiology is to overcome the alleged gender neutrality of liberation theology as well as to break the binary by 'reclaiming both sides' of it<sup>81</sup>. We can only speak of an ecclesiology which expresses women being church if that ecclesiology has a Christology in which women represent Christ as its basis and an anthropology of multiple sexuate beings, multiple femininities as its consequence. This means that, while the Christ/church binary has so far been a means of establishing theologically that there is one way of being created as male and female, the balance between women being church as women, and women performing Christ's being as church, points to the multiplicity of femininities and masculinities embodied in the church and in fact in the world as a whole. The breaking of binaries has always been an important aspect on the agenda of critical feminist theologies, but it has often not gone much further than stating the cultural contingency of gender binaries expressed in theological constructions such as Christ as the bridegroom and the church as his bride. A feminist ecclesiology that seeks to reclaim the Christian tradition, however, has to move beyond this important discovery and provide constructive models of embracing Christology, ecclesiology and anthropology, and constructing their respective

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<sup>81</sup>Cf. Irigaray's argument that women are to reclaim their participation in the divine in order to transform the social symbolic order. She points out that the divine exists as the mirror and model for the male/masculine while women have nothing to model themselves on other than a male imposed idea of feminine human nature. 'Without the possibility, and indeed, the necessity, of a God incarnated in the feminine, through the mother and daughter and in their relation with one another, no substantial help can be given to a woman. The absence of the divine in her, between them, takes away from her the path towards transmutation, a conversion from her first affects....They only position her from the outside and in relation to a social function and not in relation to feminine identity and autonomy. With this function as a starting point, how can a woman keep for herself a margin of singularity, of non-determinism which would permit her to become and remain herself? Only a God in the feminine can look after and hold for us the margin of liberty and power which would allow us to grow more, to affirm ourselves and to come to self-realisation for each of us and in community.' Irigaray, 'Divine Women', 13.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion: What is Feminist Ecclesiology?

#### 6.0 Introduction

In the course of the previous chapters I have described the 'women-church' as the dominant approach to ecclesiology as it has been pursued by feminist theologians so far. I identified their lack of engagement with the ecclesiological traditions of the denominations of their origins and showed that by opting for the use of liberation theology as its dominant theological paradigm feminist theologians do not deal adequately with the question of what it means that women are church. I then proceeded to evaluate some examples of ecclesiological traditions from a feminist point of view and discussed the value and the limits of the base community model for feminist ecclesiology. I pointed out that even though liberation theology had its strength in its emphasis on praxis and on the people who are church, it did not manage to address the question of sexual difference and sexual identity in a way that could provide an adequate response to the challenges of a highly gendered ecclesial system. I then returned to a discussion of the most gendered symbol within the ecclesiological tradition, that of the 'nuptial relationship' between the male Christ and the feminine church and discussed both its repercussions on the lives of women in the church and its potential for being re-read and re-claimed as being read as pointing to the importance of gender and sexuality for ecclesiology. In this final chapter I want to conclude by discussing what makes feminist ecclesiology distinctly feminist and why a new approach to ecclesiology from a feminist perspective is in fact necessary and important in dialogue with both the work of the theologians of women-church and various ecclesiological traditions as part of the mainstream theological debate.

The argument in this concluding chapter proceeds in four steps: first I want to set the starting point by discussing further the significance of the relationship between ecclesiology and ecclesial praxis with which the previous chapter concluded by

arguing that feminist ecclesiology points to a more complex understanding of theological reflection on what the church is. Feminist theologians are claiming their place in ecclesiological debate. In order to do that it is necessary to take the second step, to identify the power centres which enable male-dominated ecclesiological discourses to exclude women from the theology and praxis of the church and to redefine both from a feminist theological point of view. Third, I want to discuss whether what feminist ecclesiology proposes is actually a new way of being church, leading up to the question of how feminist ecclesiology relates to other ecclesiological debates. In the fourth and final step I want to propose that feminist ecclesiology can in fact not be tied to one particular model. Rather, a feminist critique of ecclesiology develops criteria by which different models of being church can be evaluated as to whether they express and embody women's being church.

### **6.1 Redefining the Ecclesiological Debate**

I began this thesis by pointing to the fundamental ambiguity regarding women and being church. Even though the ecclesiological debate, like most other theological discourses, has so far been carried out almost exclusively by men, that does not mean that women have not been very present in the church. It means that women have been church and must have reflected on their participation in the church. In her study of the religious praxis of elderly Kurdish Jewish women in Jerusalem, the anthropologist Susan Starr Sered describes their Jewish cultural context as consisting of two essentially different foci: These are a male literate religious praxis which is centred around the law and ritual observance, and an essentially illiterate religious praxis, centred around the everyday aspects of religious praxis such as the preparation of food, which is followed by the women of the community. The latter is regarded inferior by the former, yet Sered's study shows that in reality one could not function

without the other.<sup>1</sup> In an analogous way I suggest that the church's theological reflection on its own nature can be understood similarly. On the one hand we find the 'literate', theological debate of traditional ecclesiological discourse which has in fact been dominated by generations of male theologians. This aspect of ecclesial self-reflection centres around aspects such as liturgical praxis and theological scholarship. The other side can be called the 'pre-literate'. To describe women's participation in ecclesial self-reflection as pre-literate is not to suggest that women as authors of religious texts are not an important aspect of the Christian tradition, nor is it to omit the often forgotten contributions of women to scholarship attributed to men<sup>2</sup>. It rather means that their participation in ecclesial life is not so much centred around theological scholarship as around a making space in all other aspects of the life of the church, in participation and subversion of aspects of ecclesial life, such as female forms of Eucharistic piety as they are expressed by medieval mystics or specifically female forms of the veneration of saints. These are aspects of being church which are not covered by 'literate' ecclesiological discourses, yet they are aspects of participating in the life of the same church, not least since they are connected to male expressions of being church, such as the celebration of the Eucharist and the canonisation of saints. If women are to claim full participation in the ecclesiological debate on the grounds of being part of the church that reflects on itself, this redefining has to do two things: it has to claim women's participation in the literate ecclesiological discourse in ways similar to the feminist reader-response critique I have outlined in chapter three of this thesis. But it has to go further than claiming participation in the male-dominated aspect of ecclesiological debate. If the subject of ecclesiology is any aspect of what happens in the church, women are to claim that their discourses of faith in

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<sup>1</sup>Susan Starr Sered, Women as Ritual Experts. The Religious Lives of Elderly Jewish Women in Jerusalem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup>Examples here range from St. Eustochium, who worked with Jerome on the translation of the Bible into Latin, to Charlotte von Kirschbaum, Karl Barth's invaluable assistant whose contribution to the writing of the Church Dogmatics has only recently been acknowledged. See chapter three of this thesis.

whichever form they occur, be it as participation, subversion or alternatives to male dominated religious discourses, become subject of ecclesiological discourses. This means bringing 'pre-literate' forms of being church into the ecclesiological debate, and thereby essentially redefining the subject of ecclesiology as much more complex than male theological scholarship has anticipated. This means that women are not only claiming to participate in discourses of theology from which they have hitherto been excluded; they are also valuing the importance of what women have in fact been doing as part of their being church. The two are essentially inseparable aspects of the same process of redefining the feminist debate and freeing it from the agenda of patriarchal scholarship. This also means expanding the agenda feminist theologians have so far set for themselves. One of the most important contributions towards a self-critical assessment of feminist theology has been Mary McClintock Fulkerson's poststructuralist critique of feminist theology Changing the Subject. Women's Discourses and Feminist Theology<sup>3</sup>. Fulkerson criticises feminist theologians for employing what they themselves deny to be a dominant discourse. She argues that feminist theologians themselves have only a very limited view of what 'women's discourses of faith' are and do not take into account any of those discourses which do not fit into a particular liberal academic framework of theology. Such discourses are ignored as they seem to affirm what is accused of being patriarchal structures. Fulkerson illustrates her argument with two case studies; one is of a group of Presbyterian housewives and the other of female black Pentecostal preachers. Both groups of women do in fact consciously submit to male leadership and accept the limitation of their roles, but at the same time manage to create their own specific women's discourses of faith within inherently patriarchal structures. Following Fulkerson, it can be said that feminist theologians have so far neglected women's discourses of faith in non-conformist or dissenting traditions, Quakers apart, in other

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<sup>3</sup>Mary McClintock Fulkerson, Changing the Subject. Women's Discourses and Feminist Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994). See also Mary McClintock Fulkerson, 'Changing the Subject: Feminist Theology and Discourse' Literature and Theology 10.2 (1996): 131-147.

words in contexts outside the mainstream denominations. So far there are very few feminist theologians coming from dissenting traditions. We could also say that there is very limited mutual recognition of sharing a common cause between feminist theology and forms of dissent, in fact on the part of dissenting traditions there is mainly open hostility towards feminist theology. But feminist theology as a form of theology which advocates the full humanity of women, has to take into account and assess critically all women's discourses of faith as the critical presence of women in a men's church if it wants to reconstruct the church as a space where women's liberation is possible.

This redefining of the debate is in fact part of what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza describes as women-church moving from the margin to the centre. If women-church is to claim the centre for itself and essentially to do away with the distinction between margin and centre, that also means that feminist ecclesiology cannot marginalise any form of women being church, but has to theologically reflect on the complex ways of women being church.

Redefining the ecclesiological debate means not only arguing for and taking account of women's presence in the church, but asking how women's presence not only in the church but also in its theological self-reflection transforms the debate. Feminist ecclesiology shows that the ecclesiological debate has so far been dominated by men, but it goes further than that in dismissing the denial of the importance of any ecclesiological debate. Feminist ecclesiology shows that ecclesiological discourse is vital for women because of the significance the church has had for women's lives, and that the discovery of sexual difference does not lead to discarding ecclesiology altogether, but rather to reframing what it means to be church.

## **6.2 Reclaiming the Power-Centres of Patriarchal Ecclesiology**

Another important aspect of the feminist redefinition of ecclesiological discourses lies in identifying, deconstructing and essentially reclaiming those aspects of ecclesiology which have become theological means of excluding women from discourses of ecclesial praxis. These can be seen as the locations of patriarchal power which has been dominating ecclesiological discourses so far. We can say that these are at the same time among those aspects which have been subverted by women's discourses of faith as a means of reclaiming them from patriarchy. The centres of patriarchal power in the church are the Word of God (churches which identify themselves as 'churches of the Word' are often those which do not allow women to preach), sacramental celebration as the dynamic centre of ecclesial life, and most essentially, Christ and Christology, which in their relation to what I have called 'gendered ecclesiology' are not only at the heart of Christian theology, but have also possibly been most harmful to women as centuries of Christian tradition and developments in more recent Roman Catholic moral theology show.

### **6.2.1 Reclaiming the Church of the Word**

We can detect a parallel ambiguity between women's experience with the church and women's experience related to scripture. On the one hand women have throughout the history of the Christian church experienced the use of scripture as a tool for excluding women from certain aspects of the life of the church and thereby establishing a patriarchal order of church and society which is harmful for women. But at the same time women have also been readers and interpreters of scripture who have not only become aware of the importance and centrality of scripture for the

church, but also realised the potential of scripture as a source of empowerment for women against patriarchal oppression<sup>4</sup>.

The church essentially identifies itself as a reading community, the community of those who read and interpret scripture as the source of their own spiritual lives, as the narrative in which the church as a community essentially lives. For women to be church therefore means to claim that their readings of scripture as both patriarchal and liberating become recognised as readings of the church. This means to go beyond including women as readers to denying the value of patriarchal forms of scholarship as normative. The church is a reading community only if the multiplicity of readings within this community are recognised. This means that women are to participate in the definition of criteria and creeds according to which scripture and tradition are read.

### 6.2.2 Reclaiming Sacramental Celebration

The life of the church centres around both word and sacramental praxis. Christ is present in the church in both word and sacrament and the church manifests itself where the word of scripture is read and the sacraments are celebrated. For a feminist re-reading of ecclesiology and of the life of the church, it is therefore necessary to focus on both word and sacramental praxis as essential for the nature of the church. Sacramentality is of particular importance for our feminist project of re-interpretation, as the reality of sacramental praxis points to the fact that the experience of being church and essentially the experience of Christ in the church is an experience which is the embodiment of the word, but goes beyond the word and includes all aspects of

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<sup>4</sup>See for example Elisabeth Gössmann, History of Biblical Interpretation by European Women' In: Searching the Scriptures Volume 1 A Feminist Introduction ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 27-40 and Karen Baker-Fletcher, 'Anna Julia Cooper and Sojourner Truth: Two Nineteenth-Century Black Feminist Interpreters of Scripture' In: Searching the Scriptures Vol. 1 A Feminist Introduction ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 41-51.

human life and human bodily experience. In addition, the reality of women being confined to being mere recipients of the sacraments by their exclusion from the celebration of the Eucharist can still be seen as one of the most powerful manifestations of the attitude the patriarchal church has to women<sup>5</sup>. Denise Lardner Carmody urges feminist theologians to affirm to reconsider the centrality of the sacraments and sacramentality. She accuses the church of living in permanent sin against women if it continues to exclude women from large parts of its sacramental praxis and thereby from the dynamic centre of its life:

To say the least, it is a great irony that women have seldom been ordained as priests, asked to officiate ministerially at the altar to confect the sacraments, administer the liturgical rites that materialize grace. To say what is necessary, it is a scandal, a great revelation of sin. Without becoming anachronistic, and so asking earlier times to display later sensitivities, we still have to say that so to exclude from priestly ministry women, the sex who carry physical life, incarnate spirituality, directly within them, the sex whose hands have often patted and poked new life into its first squalling overture, betrays a stunning ignorance of the Incarnation.<sup>6</sup>

She therefore urges women not to miss out on the materialisation of divine grace in the form of the sacraments: 'Until we have figured out how the sacraments are acts of Christ fully appropriate to our cause of realizing in all ways the equality of women with men in the possession of humanity, we feminists have missed a great opportunity, overlooked a key citadel or territory we must gain.'<sup>7</sup> In her work on the sacramental and especially the eucharistic piety of medieval women as a possible source for the construction of a feminist theology of the Eucharist, Joy A. Schroeder writes: 'I would contend, however, that to abandon the richness of the sacramental life

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<sup>5</sup>Ruether, Women-Church, 77: 'In sacramental life, all the symbols of the life of the community, as a life grounded in the divine and experienced together, are alienated from the people and made into magic tools possessed by the clergy through an ordination that comes from "above".'

<sup>6</sup>Denise Lardner Carmody, Christian Feminist Theology. A Constructive Interpretation (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 126.

<sup>7</sup>Carmody, Christian Feminist Theology, 126.

to the "men's church" is to deny oneself the same sacraments that our foremothers fought to receive.<sup>8</sup> On a similar line Mary Collins argues:

The Roman Catholic eucharistic heritage is a rich, dense source of meaning and power for women. That meaning and power does not all lie in the past; it has a present and future for those who trust themselves to eucharistic action in troubled times. To insist upon construing eucharist solely as a symbol of male power is to squander a known source of spiritual vitality in the Catholic community.<sup>9</sup>

Susan A. Ross hopes to bring feminist and sacramental theology, so vital to Roman Catholic theology and ecclesiology, into a dialogue which could be fruitful for both. Feminism and especially feminist theology poses a 'sacramental critique' to the tradition of Roman Catholic sacramental theology by challenging some of its main presuppositions.<sup>10</sup> She criticises sacramental theologians, even though an interest in the equality of women can be noted in at least some of them, for not taking into account the experiences of women. These can only be detected by a theological anthropology which lays bare the ambivalence attributed to the body in traditional theology. Feminist theology needs to reconsider the sacraments even though they have in the past represented the alienation of women from the church. In addition, some of the central symbolism which is important for sacramental theology not only does not take into account the experience of women, but also assigns women a particular, essentially subordinate place within the church. The connection between feminist theology and sacramental theology is the significance the body and embodiment has

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<sup>8</sup>Schroeder, 'Toward a Feminist Eucharistic Theology and Piety', 226.

<sup>9</sup>Mary Collins, 'Women in Relation to the Institutional Church' unpublished paper LCWR National Assembly, Albuquerque, New Mexico August 1991. I am grateful to Prof. Susan A. Ross for making this paper accessible to me.

<sup>10</sup>Feminist theory has challenged some of the most widely held assumptions about human activity and thought by pointing out how many theories rely only upon the experience of men. So too a feminist sacramental theology cannot simply assume that the predominant understandings of human experience on which sacramental theology has drawn provide an adequate basis for a sacramental theology for women.' Susan A. Ross, 'God's Embodiment and Women' In: Freeing Theology. The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 194. See also Susan A. Ross, Extravagant Affections: Feminist Perspectives on Sacramental Theology (New York: Continuum, forthcoming 1998).

for both of them. Ross sees it as the purpose of her work on sacraments to show 'how the implications of embodiment inform sacramental theology both critically and constructively.'<sup>11</sup> Ross uses a re-established sacramental theology as the theological means by which women's bodies can be affirmed as sacred. This, according to Ross, is only possible if our theology of the body is closely connected with theological anthropology. The most important aspect of Ross' theological anthropology of the body is her re-interpretation of sexual difference. For Ross the difference between sacramental theology and feminist theology lies on the side of traditional sacramental theology in its interpretation of sexual difference as an essentialist and dichotomist gender binary, and on the side of feminism, in an understanding of sexual difference as 'differentiation'. Such an understanding of differentiation enables a multiplicity of sacramental experiences and as a consequence of that a multivalence of the symbols involved which is vital for a project like the feminist ecclesiology I advocate in this thesis. Ross calls for an increased sensitivity to the symbols used in sacramental theology, and for the exploration of gender as an 'unacknowledged dimension' of that symbolic expression. In addition, Ross, like Ruether, calls for the sacramental praxis of the church to be rooted in the practice of social justice, unlike a sacramental theology and praxis which neither involves nor represents women and their experience. The most important contribution Ross makes is to reestablish the essential connection between sacramental theology and the incarnation as the central Christological point. According to Ross, our understanding of the incarnation cannot be based on an essentialist understanding of the maleness of Christ, but has to affirm that it was in fact humanity which the divine assumed. This renders invalid the notion of sex complementarity as the gender construction which is inherent to traditional sacramental theology, and enables a multiplicity of understandings to be represented in sacramental theology.

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<sup>11</sup>Susan A. Ross, "'Then Honor God in Your Body" (1Cor. 6: 20): Feminist and Sacramental Theology on the Body' *Horizons* 16/1 (1989), 9f. See also Susan A. Ross, 'The Bride of Christ and the Body Politic: Body and Gender in Pre-Vatican II Marriage Theology' *Journal of Religion* 71 (1991), 345-361.

Susan Ross' primary theological interest lies in the spelling out of the significance and inevitability of the connection between theological anthropology and sacramental theology of which feminist theology makes aware. In the previous chapter of this thesis, I have shown that this connection with anthropology is also vital for the interpretation of ecclesiology and especially the symbolism involved in ecclesiology. Ross, however, does not make the connection between anthropology, sacramental theology and ecclesiology. Her understanding of theological anthropology as vital for the interpretation of sacraments remains at the level of the individual human being. As important as her re-conception of the body as the self, the subject, is for her critique of the sacramental theology and praxis of the church, she does not go as far as re-establishing sacraments as symbols which are experienced in the community and in fact provide the vital connection between the individual and the community. The significance of sacraments and sacramentality for my reconstruction of ecclesiology lies in my understanding of sacramental celebration as the embodied interaction between the individual, the divine and the community. Such interaction cannot be without the sexual dimension inherent to being human. It is here, at this dynamic centre of ecclesial life, that women manifest themselves as church. Sacramental celebration is the enactment of Christ's presence in the church as the body of Christ manifested in women's and men's bodies. They connect the major stages of human lives with the life of the church as the body of Christ and are celebrations of Christ's presence in the lives of human beings. If feminist ecclesiology is the theological description of women being church, women have to reconsider not only the significance, but also the contents of sacramental celebration within the church. If sacraments are enactments of Christ's presence at crucial stages in the course of life, then we have to ask whether the inherited sacramental canon of the church fits the crucial events in a woman's life or if it is based on the assumption of a church dominated by male human beings. In sacramental celebration, the mutual administration of Christ's presence in which being church is realised, women who are church become Christ-like for each other. This means to deny the argument that the

male priest has to resemble Christ physically, and to deny the nuptial structure of reality between Christ and the church and replace it with a feminist sacramental ecclesiology in which the church is the space where human beings, as particular sexuate beings, make Christ's presence real for each other. Such Christ-likeness can no longer be gendered, in other words: we cannot restrict ourselves to attributing some aspects of Christ-likeness to men and others to women, such as attributing Christ-like authority to men and Christ-like submission to women. Being Christ-like to each other means that both men and women represent Christ's presence to each other in each and every aspect of the embodied reality of the church.

### **6.2.3 Reclaiming the Presence of Christ**

It has been one of the major arguments of this thesis to reinstate the importance of a strong christological dimension for a feminist reconstruction of ecclesiology. It is with respect to Christology that the denominational differences between Roman Catholic and Protestant authors are most obvious: while Letty Russell, in an ecclesiological concept that is much indebted to her experience as a minister in the Presbyterian church, argues for a strongly christocentric ecclesiology but does not answer the question of the dimension of sexuality and gender, the Roman Catholic authors almost avoid any connection between Christology and ecclesiology. For them, this connection is ridden with the gendered arguments which have excluded women from the dynamic centres of ecclesial life such as the celebration of the sacraments. I have argued that the christological dimension is in fact crucial for a feminist ecclesiology, but that a significant re-reading is necessary in order to reclaim this power centre of male dominated ecclesiology. Feminist ecclesiology has to seek to break the binary structure that patriarchal theology has established in order to use the relationship between Christ and the church as a means of maintaining its own power structures. Feminist ecclesiology has to claim women's presence on both sides

of the binary, in both the human and the divine. The church is the embodiment of Christ, the realisation of Christ's presence in human beings. So long as women are unaware that they represent the presence of Christ for each other, their claim to be present in any aspect of the church would merely be a claim to a token presence.

### **6.3 Does feminist ecclesiology develop a new church?**

The question I want to answer in this section is that of the relationship between feminist ecclesiology and traditional forms of ecclesiology. Does feminist ecclesiology seek to establish a new church, or does it provide a critique of existing structures from the point of view of women? Does feminist ecclesiology argue for leaving the church behind, or does it develop a new form of critical engagement with the ecclesiological tradition?

#### **6.3.1 Sisterhood as Anti-Church?**

Not all feminist theologians have stayed within the church or even within Christianity itself. Some have deemed Christianity irredeemably patriarchal and left it behind, along with the church as the embodiment of patriarchy moving on to other post-Christian forms of spirituality or philosophy. The most prominent post-Christian philosopher to be named in this context is the American post-Catholic<sup>12</sup> Mary Daly. Her first book after she left Catholicism was in fact modelled after a Tillichian systematic theology, and she openly acknowledges her methodological indebtedness to Tillich's 'method of correlation'. In *Beyond God the Father* Daly describes 'sisterhood' as 'cosmic antichurch', the ultimate denial of patriarchal religion which is

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<sup>12</sup>I deliberately use the term post-Catholic rather than ex-Catholic here, as it is very obvious from her work that she is very much influenced by the Catholic theology and philosophy in which she was trained, but which she most vehemently denies.

in fact all religion. She writes: 'As the victims of a planetary caste system whose very existence has been made invisible to us, women have been divided from each other by pseudo-identification with groupings which are androcentric and male-dominated.'<sup>13</sup> Daly denies patriarchal religion all potential for transformation and denies that women have the potential to create liberated zones within it. According to Daly, religion in all its forms and aspects, and religious institutions such as churches in particular, are intrinsically connected with patriarchy and cannot be understood as anything but its most powerful means of self-justification. Therefore women must leave behind all religious institutions and religion itself, and enter the cosmic covenant of sisterhood. Daly sees this leaving behind as not only necessary, but as essentially positive: 'It is the bringing forth into the world of New Being, which by its very coming annihilates the credibility of myths contrived to support the structures of alienation.'<sup>14</sup> The only way women can be saved from patriarchy is by entering into the radically new Being of sisterhood which replaces the silence, the non-being, imposed on women by patriarchal religion.<sup>15</sup> Daly's feminist philosophy can be seen as strongly influenced by the form of Christianity she denies. She 'embodied' her arguing for the necessity of women leaving the church by initiating a symbolic exodus out of Harvard Memorial Church on the occasion of her being the first woman to preach in it. Yet we must ask whether Daly's position regarding the church is inevitable for feminist theologians or whether feminist theology does not have to move beyond Daly. Daly denies the church all empowering potential for women, and views the church as mainly an

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<sup>13</sup>Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father. Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation (London: The Women's Press, 1993), 132. See also Ann Loades, 'Beyond God the Father: an Introduction to Mary Daly's View of Christian Tradition' In: Fundamentalism and Tolerance, an agenda for theology and society Ed. Andrew Linzey and Peter Wexler (Bellew, 1991) 113-122.

<sup>14</sup>Daly, Beyond God the Father, 1993), 139.

<sup>15</sup>'The New Being of Antichurch is a rising up of Mother and Daughter together, beyond the Madonna's image and beyond the ambivalent Warrior Maiden's image. The togetherness comes from nonimmersion in either role and it comes from our desperation which has made us remember and look forward to the Golden Age.' Daly, Beyond God the Father, 150.

institution the main purpose of which is to destroy women and to jeopardise women's liberation. That essentially denies centuries of women's history within the church and attempts to replace women's existing traditions within the church with a ideal of women's sisterhood which bears the same potential to be transformed into either destructive anarchy or a restrictive institution like the patriarchal church. Daly's concept of 'sisterhood' remains essentially disembodied and obsessed with the destructive forces of patriarchy which attack women's bodies, so that it overlooks the transformative presence of women's bodies embodying the body of Christ. Therefore her project of sisterhood as the postpatriarchal anti-church cannot be of use to the feminist transformation of ecclesiology, as it essentially remains at the stage of deconstruction without taking account of the constructive power already present in women's being church.

In her discussion of Daly's approach, the feminist philosopher of religion Pamela S. Anderson criticises Daly for substituting one oppressive social symbolic order with another. Therefore Daly's disruption of the patriarchal system, including its institutional religious structures, cannot be an adequate way of representing women in religion, philosophy and theology. Anderson writes:

There can be no facile end to the present social-symbolic order, to philosophy, to history or to the dominant religious myth of patriarchy. The inadequacies of merely proposing a new religion over and against the old are everywhere apparent. For example, Mary Daly replaces the Virgin Mary with a new female Christ-figure, creating a new form of power, and possibly, of terror. A mere reversal of power cannot confront the mythical configurations of a divine reality, especially patriarchal myths of our desires, loves and fears, which remain part of our personal and corporate histories. Myths are not easily erased, and histories are not wisely forgotten. The goal, in one sense, needs to refigure the present and future; but in another sense, the past needs to be dealt with: the past can be transfigured from a history of oppression into a history of remembering, especially remembering the suffering of innocent women and marginalized others.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Pamela Sue Anderson, A Feminist Philosophy of Religion. The Rationality and Myth of Religious Belief (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 200. I am grateful to the author for making the manuscript available to me prior to publication.

Daly only represents one particular aspect of feminist critique of religious institutions. Other feminists have indeed made constructive use of women's presence, and of the vision of equality between men and women within the Christian tradition. It is to these forms of constructive use of the Christian tradition that I now turn.

### 6.3.2 Restoring the Vision of Christian Origins ?

Even though Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza sees herself within the Roman Catholic tradition, one aspect of her feminist theology resembles the work of Protestant theologians of very different kinds. Fiorenza's first major contribution to the development of feminist critical theology and hermeneutics was her classic In Memory of Her. A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins<sup>17</sup>. In this book, first published in 1983, Fiorenza challenges previous conceptions of early Christianity as distorted by the patriarchal agenda behind conventional historiography<sup>18</sup>. She describes the earliest Christian communities as followers of the vision of Jesus which was one of social justice and equality. Women participated equally in all aspects of ecclesial life. Even though this vision has been distorted by the increasing influence of patriarchy in the church, it has never entirely vanished and can therefore be revisited for the restoration of the contemporary church. The theme of the reconstruction of the church of the New Testament has, however, not only been used by feminist theologians, but even more so by Protestant groups of dissenting or non-conformist traditions. Two examples here are the Brethren church, which separated from the Church of England in the nineteenth century over an increasing

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<sup>17</sup>Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her. A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins Second Ed. (London: SCM, 1993).

<sup>18</sup>For a critique of the use of models of early Christianity by feminist theologians see Susanne Heine, Women and Early Christianity. Are the feminist scholars right? (London: SCM, 1986).

awareness of decline in the latter<sup>19</sup>, and the housechurch movement in contemporary Britain which sees its task in the eschatological reconstruction of the reality of the churches of the New Testament and essentially the restoration of the kingdom of God<sup>20</sup>. Andrew Walker describes the concept of the return to the reality of the early church as 'restorationism':

Restorationists wish to restore or return to the New Testament pattern (as they see it) of the Early Church. The restoring of the Church as it was in its pristine form is to restore a charismatically ordained church, and one which Christians are seen as living in a kingdom run according to God's order and rules.<sup>21</sup>

Walker's description shows that 'restorationists' are in fact not doing what is historically impossible, to reenact the pure reality of the early churches, but that their understanding of the early church in fact provides a political agenda for what is to be enacted in the present. Yet to claim historicity for this concept becomes a means of justifying particular ways of acting in the present. As I mentioned before, Fiorenza, being a New Testament scholar by training, also uses recourse to Christian origins. Yet her approach fundamentally differs from that of the restorationist or the Brethren movement. While both Brethren and house churches assume the objective reality of an early Christian non-institutional church which proclaimed the authentic gospel and can be found by a literal reading of the Acts of the Apostles as well as the Pauline and deuteropauline epistles, Fiorenza and others engage in a consciously feminist reconstruction of Christian origins. She understands her reconstruction of Christian origins as not so much that of an archetype which needs to be re-established to the

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<sup>19</sup>For an extensive study of the ecclesiology of the founder of the Brethren, John Nelson Darby, see Erich Geldbach, Christliche Versammlung und Heilsgeschichte bei John Nelson Darby (Wuppertal: Theologischer Verlag R. Brockhaus, 1971). See also Roy Coad, A History of the Brethren Movement (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1976)

<sup>20</sup>See Andrew Walker, Restoring the Kingdom. The Radical Christianity of the House Church Movement (London: Hodder & Stroughton, 1985) and Brian Hewitt, Doing a New Thing? Seven Leaders Reflect on the Past, Present and Future of the House Church Movement (London: Hodder&Stroughton, 1995).

<sup>21</sup>Walker, Restoring the Kingdom, 22f.

letter, but rather as the prototype of a vision which needs to be re-visioned in order to be embodied in a future Roman Catholicism.<sup>22</sup> In other words Fiorenza is conscious of feminism as her political agenda in reconstructing Christian origins. While Brethren and housechurches model themselves on the hierarchical structures described in the household codes of the New Testament as their archetype, feminist authors like Fiorenza, value the equality exhibited in what she reconstructs as Christian origins. And here it is important to note both that she reconstructs something called the 'Jesus-movement' and that she does not remain limited within canonical boundaries. Her prototype needs to be built and modelled in each particular historical situation and can therefore never be embodied by just one particular historical institution. While the non-conformist groups taken as examples here build their understanding of 'reconstruction' on trust in their interpreting the canonical sources as describing historical reality 'as it was', which equals 'as it ought to be', Fiorenza fosters a fundamental mistrust in androcentric historiography which denies the presence of women as active participants in early Christian communities.<sup>23</sup> She describes her understanding of historical reconstruction connected with 'social interaction and religious transformation of the Christian "vision" and historical realization, of struggle for equality and against patriarchal domination.'<sup>24</sup> The recourse to early Christianity as it is practised by groups like the Brethren or the housechurch movement could also be understood as the search for 'authenticity', the search for a way of being church which resembles that of the earliest followers of Jesus more closely than that of the

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<sup>22</sup>For Fiorenza's distinction between archetype and prototype, see Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, 33.

<sup>23</sup>'An intellectual re-creation of early Christian beginnings seeking to make the past intelligible must depart from an androcentric historiography that cannot do justice to the information of our sources, namely that women were participatory actors in the early Christian churches. Finally, such theoretical frameworks adequate to a feminist historiography must not only elucidate what it meant for women to become active members and leaders in early Christianity but also highlight the historical significance of women's active involvement in early Christian beginnings.' Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, 70.

<sup>24</sup>Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, 92.

mainstream church. From a feminist perspective such a search for authenticity as to a model, be it historical reality or a social construct, must essentially fail as it does not take into account the reality or the particularity of the lives of those who are church now. They, and this applies to women in particular as they have not been included in the process of construction which is often rather to their detriment than to their gain, become degraded to mere actors rather than those who embody Christ through their particular embodied sexuate being. Fiorenza is aware of this danger and tries to achieve greater flexibility and awareness of the context by her concept of the life and vision of the early church as prototype, a vision which is continuously being embodied in many different ways throughout the history of the church. For her, the life of the early church is a political agenda rather than a selective reconstruction of reality which makes this reality appear in a light that is to the advantage of those who construct it. Becoming aware of the reality of the continuing vision of alternative ways of being church and women's constructive presence in them is a first important step towards a feminist reconstruction of ecclesiology which takes account of, and essentially reclaims, the Christian tradition and the ecclesiological debate within it.

### **6.3.3 Feminist Ecclesiology: Dissent or Authenticity?**

Within the ecclesiological debate we can note two different strands, those who understand their ecclesiological reflections as considerations of what the church is by reality, promise and commandment, meaning the mainstream churches, and those who understand their being church as a critique of a declining ecclesial mainstream. Ecclesiology is a critical theological discipline which does not primarily seek to describe what the church is, but what the church ought to be if it lives up to its divine promise. Feminist critiques of ecclesiology are to be understood in the same context. Yet any feminist critique must go beyond the scheme of mainstream and dissent as it brings into play a third and vital factor, the lives of those who are church and

primarily women. The awareness of this perspective as vital and constructive for our theological understanding of what it means to be church has been the merit of feminist theologians employing the methodologies of liberation theology. Feminist ecclesiology can therefore not be based on the 'objective reality' of an ecclesiological model or the constructed 'reality' of the life of the church at a particular time in history, the purity of Christian origins. It goes beyond the question of 'authentic to what' by replacing it with the more vital question 'authentic to whom?'. In reclaiming both sides of the binary of Christ and the church women discover and develop ways of being church which are 'authentic' not to an objective constructed reality, but rather to the reality of their particular sexuate lives representing and essentially embodying the body of Christ.

#### **6.4 Embodying Christ's Story: An Ecclesiology, Feminist, Sexuate and Sacramental**

In his book Telling God's Story. Bible, Church and narrative theology Gerard Loughlin uses another definition of what the church is : 'The Church is the community that tells Christ's story by being itself the continuing story of Christ; embodying the story of Christ in the circumstances of its day.'<sup>25</sup> So, following Loughlin, we could understand the church as a storytelling community or as a community which performs the story of Christ as that expresses the complexity of ecclesial life in theology, worship and ethics. Employing this metaphor in an extended feminist context, what does it mean that women are part of the story of Christ being told by a community called the church? It is first important to note that it is a significant aspect of the Christian narrative, that God does not merely tell God's story, but that an embodied performance of God's being is the foundational event of that narrative. So the telling of God's story can take place in no other way but an embodied one. The questions

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<sup>25</sup>Gerard Loughlin, Telling God's Story. Bible, Church and narrative theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 84.

remain: whose story is it and who is it that tells it? It is commonplace that in the past women have often neither been those who tell Christ's story in an authoritative way, nor have they had more than a walk-on part in it. But as I have shown in chapters three and five of this thesis, even though women have often had merely a walk-on part rather than a main part in the life of the church, their lives have been constructed and shaped by ecclesiological doctrines. My feminist analysis of a number of different approaches to ecclesiology has shown that ecclesiology has in the past often either been constructed on the assumption of a normative generic male subject, or it has become a means of legitimising women's position in church, family and society as an essentially subordinate one. And in addition to that the institutional church has often almost invariably been instrumental in keeping women in that subordinate position.

In our conception of the church as a story-telling community we would have to ask what difference it would make to the way Christ's story is told if it was told by women, or perhaps even told as the story of their exclusion from recognition as being church so far. We would have to take into account that only part of the story is told if some of those who claim to be part of it, begin to see their story as Christ's story rather than being told that their account is irrelevant or not authentic. Telling Christ's story, performing it as being church, does not take place in a vacuum and the actors in the play are not neutral robots who are programmed anew each time. We come to telling Christ's story as the people we are, but who we are is in turn shaped by being part of this story which is Christ's story and which is that of women. Gender, being male or female, as it is shaped by the particular context in which we live, is an important aspect of being human, being an actor in the performance of Christ's story. In his discussion of sacramental anthropology as the foundation for theology in a postmodern context, the French theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet argues that the Christian faith is not intelligible unless it is inscribed into a human body, as corporeality is the fundamental feature of being human. Chauvet therefore understands the whole of Christian existence as fundamentally sacramental.

According to Chauvet, 'the sacraments teach us that the truest things in our faith occur in no other way than through the concreteness of the body'<sup>26</sup>. This 'concreteness', or particularity, of human lives is that of sexuate existence. But women have been trained by traditional Christianity to despise their bodies as impure rather than to see them as bodies which can perform Christ's body. They have understood their bodies as defiling the body of Christ rather than as embodying the body of Christ. So a feminist critique of ecclesiology would take its starting point from the assumption that it is our bodies, women's bodies, into which the story of Christ is inscribed and which perform it, without which the story of Christ can in fact not be performed. But how this story is told can take many different forms, the number of which cannot be restricted. The church is formed, per-formed, by the multiplicity of those who perform Christ's story in it, as it, and there can no longer be the assumption that there might be one way which is more authentic than others. What is important is that it is sexuate human beings, human beings for whom their sexuateness matters, who embody Christ's being in the world. The particularity of our sexuate existence as the location where being church takes place is affirmed by an incarnational Christology, God performing God's own being as sexuate. This emphasis on the particularity of sexuate existence enables the church to reinvent itself in many different forms, some resembling traditional forms of being church and others being new and different, for the 'performance of the church should be understood as creative invention rather than as respectful mimesis'<sup>27</sup>. An example of such a creative way of being church, invented by women is a women-church community founded as an electronic mail discussion group.

Though it has been around for more than 25 years, it is only in the last few years that the Internet has started to make its omnipresence felt. Having access to a computer, 'being connected' to 'the Net', means having access to a whole new world of information and communication.

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<sup>26</sup>Louis-Marie Chauvet, Symbol and Sacrament. A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence (Collegeville: Minneapolis, 1995), 141.

<sup>27</sup>Gerard Loughlin, 'Writing the Trinity' Theology 97 (1994), 87.

'Making connections' is also one of the aspects feminist theologians emphasise in their enterprise of a creative reconstruction of theology. What the church and cyberspace have in common is that they are largely dominated by men who make the rules of conduct and hardly leave any space for women and their discourses. But, as the history of the church - and to a lesser extent - the more recent history of the Internet shows, that has never stopped women from creating their own spaces.

Though the Internet started out as a forum mainly geared towards the exchange of information between academics, women have now especially taken to exploring the Internet as a means of networking between human beings, as an invaluable tool for communication. In summer 1995 a North American church member attended a summer course on feminist theology. This course gave her a whole new perspective on her life as a Christian woman. It was a life-changing experience, put into practice by the founding of 'Womengathering', an electronic base community<sup>28</sup>. With the help of friends she and others founded a Christian women's community on the Internet. 'Womengathering' understands itself as a safe space for women where they can communicate with each other without being interrupted by men and explore new ways of spirituality.

Though on the outside this community seems to lack all the 'marks' attributed to the church by the Christian tradition, on the other hand it emphasises those values promoted by feminist theologians as being the important features of the 'ekklesia of women'. Through that it contributes to a new understanding of 'being church', relevant to the whole of the Christian community.

Another important aspect of feminist theological reconstruction of the church is the critique of ordained ministry as the sole means of mediation between God and the church. The women of 'Womengathering' minister to each other in sharing their

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<sup>28</sup>'Womengathering' is a pseudonym used at the request of the group which wishes to maintain its anonymity. The real name and particular circumstances are known to the author.

experiences, in the mutual assurance of prayer support, in coordinating the reading of a book, in providing a daily calendar of notable women and in numerous other ways yet to be discovered.

Most of the members of 'Womengathering' have only met each other through electronic mail. Their sole connection is through being connected on the Internet and yet the lack of physical presence, the absence of bodies otherwise so important to feminist theologians has been expressed as a weakness of cybercommunities. But in a different way the virtually real presence of 'the sister' in the safety of cyberspace, the opportunity to have access to laughter and crying, speaking and listening, at any time, accessible via login and password, develops a new way of sacramentality, the sacramentality of connectedness without boundaries, of choosing to be connected to the world and to each other.

'Womengathering' shows that the life of a Christian community is not restricted to special occasions, not even to religious rituals like church services or liturgies. In that sense it is the expression of the sacramentality of everyday life. For feminist theologians the boundary between the sacred and the profane as a symbol of the inability of women to access the sphere of the sacred, the truly relevant, ceased to exist. The sacred presence of the other, the cybersister is accessible at any time, anywhere and there are no limits to what can be shared with the other members of the community. Topics have so far included reasons to be a Christian and coping with church problems as well as cure for back pains. In this sense, every-day life, whatever women choose to be relevant, is the sphere of the Holy, conveyed through the 'profane' means of a computer and a modem.

'Womengathering' is a community of choice. No-one is born into it and there is no initiation rite. It is the community of women who need to experience of being given a choice, the essential choice of when and how to participate in the life of their communities or not. In the history of the church small communities have always

developed as a response to the particular needs of individuals and the whole church. 'Womengathering' shows a radically contingent way of being a Christian community. Despite the importance of connectedness removing the boundaries between academics and non-academics, the Internet remains the space of those privileged enough to own the technology required.

Though cyberspace is not restricted to geographical boundaries, the Internet largely remains dominated by those living in the rich countries of the Western hemisphere. That does not necessarily have to be a weakness, but can be interpreted as a sign of the fact that the Christian faith has the creative potential to develop models of being church relevant for each and every context in their own way. Few of these models are intended to replace the church as such, but all of them sought to develop new and creative ways of being Christian, often making use of the means of the particular time. Women were often restricted to these small communities and could not participate in each and every aspect of the mainstream church, but the history of the church is full of women making creative use of their space and thereby expanding it. The creation of a 'cyberparish' as safe space, as space for connection rather than hierarchy, is one way of women seeking to transform their own lives and the life of the church by participating in it as transformed individuals empowered to speak out.

Another choice made by the members of 'Womengathering' is that of maintaining their own form of 'arcane discipline'. In the time of much discussion about security on the Internet the women of 'Womengathering' chose to let their community grow organically rather than to advertise it. They also chose to let it be a community for women only, a safe space where women may flourish without men being able to inhibit them.

'Womengathering' cannot and does not seek to replace the church as such. There are important aspects of church life not cared for by 'Womengathering'. There is no equivalent of liturgy, of ritual life, of a more complex celebration which involves

all human senses and is not restricted to words alone. This only form close to ritual is performed by each member herself every time she logs on to the system to connect to her cybersisters. But this is an expression of 'Womengathering' being a radical way of living the values of feminist theology: to be a church which is not perfect, which is radically contingent in all its aspects, but in that contingency remains creative in exploring new ways to live the Christian faith<sup>29</sup>. And it provides a temporary alternative for those seeking a break from being disillusioned by traditional religion and parish life, but yet seeking spiritual connection with others and especially exploring space for women. Perhaps because the idea of a 'virtual community' is so unusual, it has the potential of contributing to the life of 'the church' as a space of vision, as creative connecting space. And perhaps this is one way of women stepping in, claiming their space as those who participate in shaping the reality of both cyberspace and the church.

The group described in the previous paragraphs is but one example of women's creative being church. The development of a feminist critical ecclesiology is, as the previous chapters and this concluding one in particular have shown, a multilayered process, as women are redefining ecclesiological discourse by becoming aware and even more importantly making others aware of their presence in it. Among its most important components to be pursued beyond this thesis is the recovery of the ambiguity of history and tradition of the church as not only the history of women's oppression to be remembered and transformed, but also as the history of women's transformative presence to be made available to the church as a whole. A feminist ecclesiology works with three fundamental assumptions:

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<sup>29</sup>The identity of the Church – like that of an agent in a realistic narrative – is constituted through the engagement of character and circumstance, and given in the narratives of that engagement. In the case of the Church, the character is that of a community or communities; the circumstance anything and everything that life has to offer. The Church does not escape the circumstantial, for it is first and foremost groups of people struggling with the contingencies and vicissitudes of earthly existence, in all its messiness.' Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*, 85.

1. That women are church and have always been church.
2. That those who are church, and women's being church, matters to the Gestalt of ecclesiological discourse. To point to this reality is the achievement of feminist theologians initially using and adapting the liberation theological paradigm.
3. That ecclesiological discourse like any other theological or religious discourse takes place in a framework of sexual difference. The symbolism of gendered ecclesiology as one of the most fundamental threads of Christian theology shows the importance of this point for the reconsideration of what ecclesiological discourse means if it is done by women.

In this thesis I have outlined a framework for reconceiving ecclesiology as a central aspect of a reconsideration of Christianity as a whole. Such a reconception must be understood as the starting point of a much wider process of rethinking the framework of belief and the theoretical and institutional structures in which it is conceived. Feminist theologians urge such a reconception by rendering incomplete previous understandings of the church and its significance as they are perceived from a male (and therefore consciously non-female) perspective. The dimensions in which such a feminist reconception takes place are: to reconceive ecclesiology from the perspective of those who are church, to reconceive the relationship between ecclesiology and other aspects of theology and to retrieve women's presence throughout the history of the church. While women have not consciously participated in the writing of ecclesiology, women have always been church. The impact of this fact on the life of the church and its self-understanding is yet to be evaluated. The reclaiming of being church which is at the heart of all I have argued in this thesis has to find its expression in the writing and re-writing of the history of the church as the history of women being church. This perspective puts the task of feminists' reclaiming of being church in the frame of interaction between the work of an historian and that of a theologian. Such a dialogical framework enables a much wider perspective of feminist ecclesiology than the discussion of the adequacy of one model or another

would be able to do. The work of women's church history points to the fact that women have throughout the history of the church and in a variety of institutional frameworks been church. It also shows how the church has been an important context of life which had repercussions on women's perceptions on life in general. It is then the task of a theologian to discuss the significance of women's being church in this multitude of contexts for the reconception of the respective frameworks.

Rebecca Chopp points out the importance of understanding American feminist theology, and I want to understand the women-church movement and the feminist theologians I analysed in chapter two of this thesis within this context, within the context of the pragmatic tradition of American feminism and American public theology. It is important for my understanding of the argument of this thesis, the development from women-church to feminist ecclesiology, to bear this particular context and its influence on the ecclesiology of women-church in mind. The concept of women-church addressed and responded to a number of needs and questions relevant to its particular political context, and had significant historical and strategic value in doing so, but it cannot and must not be understood as a model which enables the development of many other 'women-churches', as it lacks and consciously avoids the development of a framework which goes beyond its own pragmatic and political context of American culture<sup>30</sup>. Chopp describes this tradition of public and pragmatic theology as follows:

American public theology begins not in distinguishing Christian tradition from common human experience, but in the movement of Christian practice speaking to the problems, doubts, and desires within the American situation.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Rebecca Chopp, 'From Patriarchy into Freedom. A Conversation between American Feminist Theology and French Feminism' *Transfigurations. Theology and the French Feminists* Ed. C.W. Maggie Kim; Susan M. St. Ville; Susan M. Simonaitis (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 35.

<sup>31</sup>Chopp, 'From Patriarchy into Freedom', 37.

It is therefore important to be aware not only of what women-church as a model does achieve, but also of the questions it does not answer. It has been the purpose of this thesis to show how such a theological framework, which situates feminist ecclesiology within the context of the christological question, the anthropological question of sexuality and creative feminist dialogue with particular ecclesial and ecclesiological traditions, can be developed.

In the opening chapter I have described women-church as a paradigm shift from concentrating on one particular ecclesiological issue, the question of ordination, to the wider claim of the transformation of church structures and of women historically embracing their own being church. At the end of this thesis, its argument could be described as challenging a further step forward in this development of women reclaiming the church from patriarchy, that of naming church, a feminist ecclesiology, which is both a feminist creative and constructive re-reading of the ecclesial and ecclesiological tradition in which women live, and an ecclesiological écriture féminine which makes women authors, human beings of authority, in being church.

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