Feminist Christian Theological Engagement with Symbol, Myth and Ritual

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The intention of my thesis "Feminist Encounters With Symbol, Myth, and Ritual: Mary Daly, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Rosemary Radford Ruether" (defended in 1998) was to examine how three significant and influential feminists in the area of Christian theology have dealt with the sub-genres of symbol, myth, and ritual. Their work in regard to each of these three fields of study requires theorizing on the level of their engagement with, and development of, feminist epistemology methodology.

All three of these feminists sit most comfortably in the epistemological location of standpoint feminism, albeit Schüssler Fiorenza does take into account issues raised by postmodern feminism in her work dated from 1990 and forward. The primary building blocks of feminist standpoint theory that are shared by feminists working in a variety of pedagogical locations are: 1) a distinct feminist epistemology grounded in a theory of gender activity and social experience; 2) women, as an oppressed group, are in a position to have a clearer and less distorted picture of reality as they are outside of, or are marginalized to, hegemony and therefore considerably less invested in maintaining it; 3) an insistence upon an interested or engaged social location "the conditions which bestow upon its occupants scientific and epistemic advantage" (Harding 1986, 148) in that they will construct a narrative that reflects their resistance to oppression; 4) an opposition to Cartesian

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dualism which continued into Enlightenment epistemology, a dualism that separates and places in opposition mind/body, subject/object, reason/emotion; and 5) knowledge generated from everyday life and not a rarified position of abstraction wherein everyday life is removed from reality (Collins 1990 and Harding 1986). It is this position that shapes the analysis of the three significant Western feminists examined below and ultimately is a significant problem in their analyses. The epistemic position of number 2, "a clear and less distorted picture of reality," in light of the insights of post-structuralist and postmodernist critiques remains a weakness in their theorizing.

In terms of feminist methods, Daly, Schüssler Fiorenza and Radford Ruether make use of a number of central feminist methods such as maintaining women at the centre of the analysis, reading against the androcentric and sometimes misogynistic grain of a text, calling into question narrative strategies, rejecting an androcentric reading of the text, critically engaging the absence of, and prescriptions in regard to, women and calling into question such structures as historical periodization and great man narratives in terms of history, philosophy, science and so forth. In some cases they develop a method and in other cases undercut a method. But in large measure, the theo(a)logical impulses of each will mean a rationalization of some of feminism's sharpest tools and leave one to wonder if it might be more useful to bring the study of religion to feminism rather than the reverse.

Mary Daly and the Symbolic

Mary Daly, recognizing the power that resides in language, in the naming game, and women's lack of access to power, introduced discursive strategies that she believed would empower women. Mary Daly's language strategies consist of: reversing the reversals; naming and renaming; and pirating patriarchal metaphors and symbols, stripping them of their patriarchal encrustation and then asserting their "true" meaning. In the use of these strategies Daly asserts that language, and symbols therein, is under control of patriarchy, but with the help of feminist theorizing language can be wrenched from patriarchal control and be used as a tool for feminists.

According to Daly, patriarchy as vampiric, necrophilic, and gynocidal seeks to enslave women, usurping and in the same moment draining women's "elemental" powers. In order to do such, patriarchy has reversed the truth, telling women they are evil, e.g., Jerome's "the devil's gateway," that women are the cause for human suffering and pain (Pandora or Eve), or that ultimately women are the source of everything deemed odious in existence. Women are also told that they sprang from men or male gods, as in the Genesis myth, that they are weaker, less intelligent (e.g., Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, *On The History of Animals* or *On the Parts of Animals*), and less moral than men (e.g., Augustine, Aquinas, Kant, and so forth). Daly flips all these notions on their heads. She demonstrates the lack of logic in patriarchal gender ideology, critiques patriarchy for its oppressive power, for its intent toward the legitimation of its perspective, and argues that patriarchal reversals conceal the essence of female power, which is ultimately and essentially good.

Daly reinterprets language and symbols in order to demonstrates that patriarchy, or the Foreground as she names it, is a reversal of reality, a reality that can be found in the Background, the place where women, who are in essence related to the good, find their true homes. In Daly's Background, nature, the cosmic universe and all "elemental life" perceived in the Foreground as chaotic, which is understood in patriarchy as the nature of evil, find their true existence and definition. According to Daly's development of the symbolism of good and evil, for example, it is only in the Foreground that nature, women, and other elemental life are defined as evil, but she argues this is a reversal of the true nature of existence. The Foreground, she argues, is an inverted mirror image of reality, an illusion and ultimately a distortion of the Background, which is the truth of existence.

Daly not only flips social, religious, and cultural myths, or symbolic discourse, but also engages language directly so that, for example, a hag, who is defined within patriarchal dictionaries as an ugly old woman especially a vicious or malicious one, is understood within her system of "reversal of the reversals" as "a Witch, Fury, Harpy who haunts the Hedges/Boundaries of patriarchy, frightening fools and summoning Weird Wandering Women into the Wild" (1987, 137). In

her system, words are redefined, a process that frequently is done by drawing upon archaic meanings so that, for example, hag or hagazussa in earlier usage of the word (Western Middle Ages) meant an old woman who sat on the fence (hag) or at the boundary between civilization and the wilderness. In other instances, rather than drawing upon archaic meanings for words, she defines words in an oblique fashion and works with the current meaning but draws upon the polysemy of the word to broaden the meaning of words in order to make them amendable to feminist epistemology. Therefore, for example, virgin as it functions in current usage means untouched, pristine, and lacking heterosexual experience. Drawing upon these meanings Daly equates untouched with never captured, pristine with wild and untamed, and void of heterosexual experience as a marriage resister (1987, 176).

In another move to shape different meanings for words, Daly will strategically partition words so that "Re-membering" means to defragment and in that moment to recall, while recover hyphenated, "recover," can be seen to mean to cover again. Or Daly will use partition in order to emphasize root words so that, for example, the word archetype (1984, 78–79) is separated into two root words, "arche" which means original and "typos" which means an impression of a seal, mould, or replica. Daly does this in order to underscore the inherent contradiction in the word itself.[1] Daly's word play can take the form of alliteration as in "father's flatland Foreground," "token torturers," "plastic passions," or "realizing reason," the substitution of letters so that bureaucracy is teased out and "bore-ocracy" revealed and defined as a patriarchal obsession with boring, self-fixated details–something she equates with bureaucracy. At other times in her writing she will substitute the root of a word with another so that bureaucracy becomes clockocracy (obsession with linear time) or cockocracy (fixation on male genitalia). Daly equally employs the language strategy of polyptoton wherein her play on words brings attention to other meanings, for example, "papal bull" wherein the word play focuses upon the meanings of the word bull so that both the animal bull with its irrational rage generated by overabundant testosterone and bull referring to the manufacturing of lies are teased out. Daly also uses the language strategy of prosonomasia wherein words already employed have their mean-

ings metaphorically extended so that, for example, the Godfather remains connected to the concept of a crime lord, but now metaphorically takes within its meaning God the father.[2] And finally, Daly introduces new words in order to allow, she argues, for the expression of women's experiences, experiences she argues that are markedly different from men's. So that one finds words such as "Archimage *n* [derived fr. GK. *archi-* original, primary + *magos* wizard—*Webster's*] 1: the Original Witch within 2: Power/Powers of Be-ing within all women and all Biophilic creatures 3: Active Potency of hags 4: Metaphor pointing toward Metabeing, in which all elemental life participates" (1987, 63) or Biophilia "the Original Lust for Life that is at the core of all Elemental E-motion and Pure Lust, which is the Nemesis of patriarchy, the Necrophilic State" in her *Wickedary* (1987, 67). Daly's use of the above rhetorical strategies depends upon the fluidity of language. Language's fluidity means for Daly that language is something that cannot be owned, controlled, or ordered. Language slips through the grip of the most iron fisted of patriarchs while only those who understand the fluid nature of language can spiral with it.

Feminists working in the area of linguistics have commented upon Daly's creative use of language. Julia Penelope (1990, 218) suggests that feminist approaches to language can change language, and this then serves a political purpose for feminisms. She cites Daly's *Wickedary* (1987) as illustrative of "how some women are rethinking the vocabulary of English and how we can introduce our own meanings into language" (1990, 218).[3] Daly's creative and humorous feminist language play makes visible the entrenchment of patriarchal values in language and in this she has contributed much to feminist discourses. However, there are risks when using the language strategy of reversing the reversals. Reversing the reversals is an excellent rhetorical strategy in order to reveal ideological mystification of social systems through language, but this strategy runs the risk of ideological re-mystification if it is used, as Daly has done, as an end in itself. As an initial strategy, reversing the reversals brings the fluidity of language into focus while it demystifies language as something fixed and immutable. But to imagine that the definitions one introduces to language are more authentic than other meanings or that the archaic meanings of the words are

more authentic than current meanings is to fall prey to the same logic Daly sought to undo.

Daly's reversing the reversals strategy, a strategy in line with her feminist philosophy and thealogy, leaves structures of oppression in place and simply reverses interpretations. Instead of questioning *how* and *why* we locate value (i.e., gender ideology and power) only *what* we value (i.e., female, male) is questioned. What is assumed then in this kind of theorizing of language is the illusion that a choice unencumbered by social and historical situatedness is available to women. Therefore, one can freely chose to value the male or female regardless of the culture and society one lives in. Further, if one does not question how and why value is arrived at, one does not deal with the problem that "choice" has, particularly linguistically, already been determined which means that resistence is then ruled out. In other words, would choose either female or male but never anything else: the structure that declares all things as necessarily defined as either male or female (gender ideology, female/male, woman/man, feminine/masculine) remains fully intact. And, of course, the basis for how and why we give value to kinds of people, objects, life choices, and so forth are never questioned and this too ultimately limits choice.[4]

Associated with the above problem is Daly's intent to claim authenticity for her language usage. Meaghan Morris notes that (1988, 34, author's italics) "Daly...treats the usages she mentions as isolated *'features'* of a thing called language (and not part of a process of discourse).[5] The 'usages' are further items in the repertoire of the universal code of patriarchy. The consequence of this is that 'meanings' are regarded as inherent in the sign—frozen in there waiting to be unpicked and unpacked, and the 'false' replaced by the 'true'." When Daly plays with language and uses the above mentioned rhetorical strategies she is pushing at the boundaries that have been established for language usage. She demonstrates the openness and fluidity of language, but when she employs the strategy of using etymologies and arguing that archaic meanings are the true meanings of the words, she risks not only freezing language, but employing a language strategy that denies the fluidity of language. Because of Daly's investment to reclaim language for women she postulates that the definitions she has

mined have an authentic connection with the words, a connection that current definitions lack. Her meanings and development of language she argues are part of the Background and language too, like society and culture, is distorted or falsified by the patriarchal desires that operate in the Foreground. In her philosophy of language Daly desires the fluidity in order to assert her strategies, but then fixes language to claim authenticity and truth. In this second aspect she denies the fluidity of language and this denial puts her own feminist project of language reclamation at risk.[6]

Schüssler Fiorenza and Myth Making

When attempting to develop a history of early Christianity, the historical enterprise of holding to the foundational myth of a founding figure is implicitly an ideological endeavour that legitimates both the historical continuity of, and an originary moment for, Christianity. In this approach there is a desire to anchor the corpus of the New Testament and the *oeuvre* of Jesus, Jesus as an originating subject—an identifiable "I"—to a historical moment, but a moment which will emerge from nowhere. In the argumentation of the historical Jesus and his genuine words (and works) one sees both an impetus to anchor these words and an impetus to anchor the figure of Jesus. The Christian corpus (New Testament texts), without a great founding figure to hold it together, shatters into mere fragments written by unknown authors while Jesus without a corpus fades into the realm of myth or the mundane. The Christian corpus without a founding figure and a founding figure without a corpus are historically undefinable:

> These differences may result from the fact that an author's name is not simply an element in a discourse (capable of being either a subject or object, of being replaced by a pronoun, and the like); it performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function. Such a name permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from, and contrast them with, other texts. In addition it establishes a relationship among the texts. Hermes Trismegistus did not exist, nor did Hippocrates—in the sense that Balzac existed—but the fact that several texts have been placed under the same name indicates that there has been established

> among them a relationship of homogeneity, filiation, authentication of some texts by the use of others, reciprocal explication, or concomitant utilization. (Foucault 1984, 107)

The phantom of Jesus and the unity of the Christian corpus continue to act as a rhetorical device wherein Christianity has a legitimate historical foundation, while the figure of Jesus acts as a standard for the truth. The notion of tradition and continuity founded upon an originating "I" and a concomitantly unified Christian corpus became the means, in the centuries that followed, by which Christianity dominated Western discourse. But the Christianity that dominates Western discourse is one manufactured by the winners of the historical endeavour as Schüssler Fiorenza has argued. In order to engage seriously the androcentrism and elitist history produced, she engages the theoretical imperatives of New Historicism, of Hayden White, and feminist history. To the extent that Schüssler Fiorenza focuses on women in these texts as a marginal group she will fulfil these imperatives, but to the extent that she resists challenging the narrative structures of founding figure as proof of an originary moment, and the historical continuity of Christianity that begins with this originary moment she will be less successful.

It is the repressed of history, fiction, that Schüssler Fiorenza attempts to bring to conscious through what she calls a hermeneutics of liberative vision and imagination. In this hermeneutical endeavour she seeks to "actualize and dramatize biblical texts differently" (1992, 54–55). One sees, then, in her text *In Memory of Her* (1990) that she incorporates the methods of Hayden White (1984, 100–101), of new historicism (1992, 31), and the methodological demands of feminist historiography in order to rewrite early Christian women into Christian history.

According to Schüssler Fiorenza, the biblical texts and subsequent interpretations are "histories for" and not "histories of." In feminist terms, then, this means that "histories for" have ideological intentions in that "histories for" seek to metaphysically legitimate and preserve the patriarchal ethos significant to both the original historical text and those analysing the text. The ideological intentions, she argues, are concealed by what has been termed objective value-neutral history.

Therefore, she argues, it is necessary to lay bare these intentions and the process, then, is to call into question the perceived disengagement of the writer and interpreter of the text. In terms of Hayden White's work, Schüssler Fiorenza argues that the writer of the text and the subsequent historian will both draw upon current narrative forms (generic story types)[7] in order to communicate meaning in their specific social locations. Important to this realization, is the further realization that there cannot be a separation between historical facts and their interpretation.

Schüssler Fiorenza, like the scholars of new historicism, writes a history from the ground up and focuses upon those in the Jesus movements who often remain unnamed. The possibility of objective value-neutral history, or a historiography that ignores its own interpretive position while it examines facts and data that have "presented" themselves to the historian, is questioned by Schüssler Fiorenza. She insists upon understanding the texts in their *Sitz im Leben* or life setting, and although this is not new to historical criticism of biblical texts, Schüssler Fiorenza pays attention to the *Sitz im Leben* which means, according to her, rejecting an idealized Christianity and a genderless world (1990, xv).

Schüssler Fiorenza's first step is to critically examine the kinds of models employed by scholars in order to interpret the biblical texts. She problematizes and challenges different models of biblical interpretation, for example both the doctrinal approach, an approach that takes literally the texts of the Bible understanding that they are divine revelation and canonically authoritative, and positive historical exegesis, an approach that challenges the doctrinal interpretation but insists upon value neutral, objective inquiry as the necessary method for analysing biblical texts. And although the realization of the impossibility of objectivity has made its way into this last model of biblical interpretation, value-neutral interpretation continues to be considered good history (Schüssler Fiorenza 1990, 4–6).

The models used by biblical scholars, she argues, are products of social-historical contexts and ultimately reflect the exegete's historical program, a program that will often determine the results of the inquiry. She insists that the kind of model chosen reflects how one perceives

the world. As George Lakoff (1987) has clearly demonstrated, models are not objects in existence, rather, they are cultural constructions developed to make sense of the world so that in the instance of biblical interpretation, models that best express group ideology and social-historical location will be employed in order to understand the texts meaningfully. If these texts are important to the dominant ideology, as certainly biblical texts have been and continue to be in the West, then they will be understood within the paradigm most preferred by the dominant group. Currently, in the West, this has meant that the model known as positivist-historical exegesis has been the preferred model as it is understood to best *re-present* the "truth" of the text. This model has come under scrutiny in the modern era by both postmodern and feminist theorists.[8]

Schüssler Fiorenza names her model a feminist critical hermeneutics of liberation. In this model she hopes to be able to reclaim Christian history without engaging in Christian apologetics. She locates herself within the hermeneutical circle as a Catholic Christian feminist theologian who is seeking to reclaim the history of early Christianity for invested women of today. She rejects the possibility of a value neutral history and understands that she is politically engaged in her historical project. The model she incorporates is located in the contemporary project of emancipation. Its epistemic implications are generated from a position in the present world of social praxis and theologically intent upon changing the world. Schüssler Fiorenza desires to dislodge and unseat patriarchy (Schüssler Fiorenza 1990, 30).

One of the main subjects in her historical inquiry are the unnamed, or women, and in this then, Schüssler Fiorenza writes both a feminist history and a history from the ground up. The history she compiles is largely focussed on those in the early Christian movements who have been ignored, or whose individuality has been erased (e.g., since women are all the same, naming women is unnecessary). She looks at everyday men and women who joined the Christian movements in their earliest years. For example, she will point out the often, but strangely overlooked, detail that Paul was not the sole founder of the Christian movements located outside of Palestine, but rather joined one. Paul certainly became important within the group, but he was

neither its initiator nor its sole leader (Schüssler Fiorenza 1990, 101). In this move in regard to Paul, Schüssler Fiorenza resists the great man narrative, a narrative that is prevalent in the majority of patriarchal cultures and dominates Western epistemology.

In her model she also insists upon a social historical setting for the texts, but she will push this a little further and include the intentions behind the historical data itself so that biblical texts are seen to represent the ideological intentions of their authors, e.g., the legitimation of patriarchal rule or the separation of Christianity from Judaism. She will include these and other such intentions in her analysis as aspects of their *Sitz im Leben*. For example, in the instance of the "Christian missionary movement" associated with Paul, she will follow traditional scholarship and situate it in the large urban centres of Syrian Antioch and in Asia Minor, but will again extend its *Sitz im Leben* to include an understanding of the Christian missionary movement as consciously functioning to embrace a variety of different peoples who had different cultural experiences, national origins, social statuses, and religious practices. Schüssler Fiorenza's position that life setting and not just geographical setting influences how movements take form allows her to differentiate movements according to their functions (as opposed to simply perspectives) and the challenges they faced (Schüssler Fiorenza 1990, 100–101).[9]

Schüssler Fiorenza's strategies for a reinterpretation of early Christian history are multiple. She ties together the different strands of Christianity and rather than interpret any one of them as heretical, such as Gnosticism has been understood in the past, she engages each in terms of their political, social, and theological intentions. Further, in her attempt to make visible the erased, she will underscore and give significance to different but equally important female characters in the gospels and letters. Figures such as Mary Magdalene, who she places at the head of a Jewish renewal movement in Jerusalem and in direct competition with Peter as an apostolic witness and authority, are investigated and in doing this Schüssler Fiorenza allows for a Christianity as multivalent in her historiography of early Christianity: Christianity becomes Christianities or geographically and culturally diverse social movements.[10]

However, as Schüssler Fiorenza develops a narrative structure by which to historically locate the Jesus movements in Galilee and Palestine, her narrative structure continues to incorporate the Romantic narrative which locates Jesus as a heroic figure at the centre of the history and not, for example, those people who wrote the texts of the New Testament and employed a narrative style that best accommodated their ideological intentions.[11] According to Hayden White (1973, 8–9) "[r]omance is fundamentally a drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero's transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it and his final liberation from it...it is a drama of the triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice, of light over darkness, and the ultimate transcendence of man over the world in which he was imprisoned by the Fall." When Jesus is placed at the centre of all movements, when the great man is given all the good lines, all those "other" actors are erased from the historical record. The intentions she aspires to, that of a history from the ground up, feminist historicism, and an awareness of narrative strategies (all of which are related in her lengthy delineation of her methods and theories in the first chapters of *In Memory of Her*) are not fully realized in her treatment of those texts most closely associated with the Jesus movements in Palestine. In large part this is due to her holding to feminist standpoint epistemology wherein fundamental historical events are not challenged, but rather explored as to "how" they mean. In other words, Schüssler Fiorenza, following standpoint epistemology, does not question the ideological implications of a founding of Christian movements, but simply who acted in them. The founding figure of Jesus, then, is left intact and never questioned as to its ideological imperatives.

Rosemary Radford Ruether and Ritual

The second half of Radford Ruether's text, *Women-Church,* consists of both liturgies and rituals, the intention of which are to bring about the *conscientización* of women in women-church. The process of raising consciousness is connected to the development of a critical culture for women that can provide "an autonomous ground from which to critique patriarchy." Her purpose of proposing women-church is so that

groups of women can come together in order to conceptualize the world from their own experiences. She argues that

> [i]t is not enough to hold an ideology of criticism and social analysis as an interpretative base...one needs communities of nurture to guide one through death to the old symbolic order of patriarchy to rebirth into a new community of being and living. One needs not only to engage in rational and theoretical discourse about this journey; one also needs deep symbols and symbolic action to guide and interpret the actual experience of the journey from sexism to liberated humanity. (Radford Ruether 1985, 3)

In the process of creating separatist communities a new kind of consciousness must be formed. Within women-church, at least at its centre, this new kind of consciousness, a feminist consciousness, can be, she believes, developed and then shared with other women. This new kind of consciousness, a feminist consciousness, is grounded in rituals that relate to "women's experience."[12] In the development of Radford Ruether's rituals and liturgies one notes that ritual is understood as both the praxis, i.e., symbolic action, and the embodiment of belief that will effect a change in consciousness.

The liturgies and rituals laid out in Radford Ruether's text are divided into four chapters, which are reflective of four different sequences of observance. The first focuses on the formation of the group (understood in her work as church) as "a community of liberation from patriarchy and oppression" (1985, 107). The second series of liturgies and rites focuses upon healing in regard to experiences of either violence or crisis. The third series focuses upon those rites related to a life cycle, while the forth focuses upon seasonal celebrations. Radford Ruether indicates that the symbolic text of these rituals will be drawn from "layers of Mediterranean and Western religious traditions: non-biblical Ancient Near Eastern tradition, Jewish tradition, and Christian tradition" (1985, 99). These rites and liturgies, she indicates, affirm pagan or folkloric beliefs, but she insists this paganism is different from that used by the pagan feminist movement of recent years.[13] Having established her sources, then, Radford Ruether develops a series of rituals that she believes empower women as feminists. These rituals are

intended to effect and affect feminist consciousness in feminist basic communities.

Elaborated in chapter seven of Radford Ruether's text, are the liturgies and rites which are meant to demarcate the group or mark a group's formation. At the outset the group should define what they see the group as, i.e., a discussion group, consciousness raising group, and so forth, and how this will be realized, i.e., worship community, a theological study group, and so forth. Having determined the nature of the group, a covenant book is written (this should be, according to Radford Ruether, regularly rewritten) wherein "...the basic creedal statement and description of the theological vision of the community" are set down (1985, 124). This statement should represent the group's basic theological affirmations, which are then rewritten at each reconvenanting (1985, 143).

The covenant celebration marks the boundaries of the group. The covenant book will act as core for the group's self-definition. The covenant celebration, as Radford Ruether envisions it, begins with a rite of baptism. At the outset of the group's formation baptism will be used to initiate all the members and thereafter it will be used to initiate new members to the group. Radford Ruether (1985, 125) indicates that this rite marks a turning away from an old way of being—a "*metanoia* from the powers and principalities of personal and systematic oppression" toward a new way of being, that of a feminist. The rite, then, marks a shift in consciousness. She advises that the person seeking baptism should reflect on the meaning of "this turning point in their consciousness and life commitments" (1985, 128). The process of this reflection can be guided by those people skilled in theological and social analysis: those women of the group who have developed a feminist consciousness marked by this same rite of passage. The process of the rite requires that the individual seeking baptism develop a life history that incorporates and makes sense of this turning away from and a turning toward. The initiate can also choose a new name to represent this shift in being. The rite of baptism, then, both marks development of a *conscientización* that would allow the individual to join the group, and determines the form this *conscientización* ought to take.[14]

When reading Radford Ruether's rituals and her interpretations of them, it becomes apparent that Radford Ruether has a rather romantic conception of ritual. Ritual can serve to reconnect women to the rhythm of the world, the rhythm of their bodies as part of this natural world, and ultimately to a truer self that lies beneath the social self. Women's true selves (and also men's) have been lost in patriarchy, and ritual becomes one of the means by which to reclaim this self.[15] This romantic approach to ritual interprets both ritual and the ritual process as a universal phenomenon. There can be only one understanding of the process and efficacy of ritual regardless of culture, location, or time, and although the specificities of rites may vary and change, the ontological roots and teleological projections of ritual as a category does not. As Catherine Bell notes " ...the emergence and subsequent understandings of the category of ritual have been fundamental to the modernist enterprise of establishing objective, universal knowledge that, as the flip side of its explanative power, nostalgically rues the loss of enchantment" (1997, xi).

The loss of enchantment, in Radford Ruether's work, is encountered in the socialization process wherein we, as pure humans, are ideologized into systems of oppression that distort our humanity and cause us to "sin." Social sin, as Radford Ruether argues, "continues across generations. It is historically inherited, individuals are socialized into roles of domination and oppression and taught that these are normal and right" (1981, 46). Although I certainly do not disagree with the analysis that systems of oppression are historical and social, or concerning how we are made subjects within oppressive systems so that we accept our inferiorized positions or participate in the oppression of "others," in other words the objectification of human beings,[16] I would question an analysis that assumes that the social can be scraped off to find the genuine human underneath. There is an underlying assumption in Radford Ruether's rituals that sets the natural in a dichotomous relationship with the social. In Radford Ruether's romanticizing of ritual and what it can do, there appears to be a project of bringing about a transcendency of culture, one that allows an access to an idealized and pristine humanity.

The dichotomy of the social human and the natural human surfaces in Radford Ruether's understanding of the human as a being born *into* history rather than a being *of* history. If one is born into history, one can shed it, remove the historical skin, and place it in a box as memorabilia. If one is a historical being—both a producer of history and historical production of history—constituted by her personal history, family history, cultural and societal history, and so forth, there is no possibility of shedding it for it is what one is as a human being.

Religion in the Study of Feminism

The feminist analyses of Mary Daly, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Rosemary Radford Ruether engage in ideology critiques. In all instances, these three feminist theorists critically engaged Western epistemology and argued that it is situated in, and produced by, current social and historical conditions. These conditions amount to the legitimation of the male over and against the female. All women, as the female, are historically, biologically, socially, metaphysically, semiologically, philosophically, and so forth, inferior to the male. History has demonstrated the knowledge of the inferiority of the female, and current social conditions continue to reinforce this knowledge. Feminists like Daly, Radford Ruether, and Schüssler Fiorenza stand against this kind of knowledge production and argue that it is distorted, that this knowledge is not a given, that it is not found in nature, and is, rather, produced within practices of masculine hegemony. Masculine hegemony mystifies current social relations of oppressive practices in order to propound and secure the knowledge that all women, as singularly female, are inferior.

Each of these feminist theologians contests patriarchal knowledge on a number of grounds, but each also locates herself within a theoretical paradigm in order to contest current masculine hegemony. Daly establishes a project of reclaiming language for women, Schüssler Fiorenza establishes a project of reclaiming early Christian myth for women, and Radford Ruether establishes a project of reclaiming the encounter (ritual) between the human and the sacred for women. Each frames their contestations within an historical and deconstructive

framework, and challenges the knowledge produced arguing that it is invested knowledge, knowledge invested in the maintenance and security of the dominant group's hegemonic practices, and in order to secure its investment epistemology is itself mystified so that the real intentions of masculine hegemony is obscured: the procurement and continuance of masculine power.

However, when each of these feminists contests the hegemonic practices of patriarchy, each seeks a sure foundation upon which to stand. They seek a foundation from which to level their critique against patriarchy, a foundation that will ensure the certitude of their positions, and in every instance the ground they claim is located outside of social and historical considerations, and in the realm of some "other" that is located in nature or a naturalized form of knowledge. The epistemological certitude (the factuality of their truth) located in a divine is claimed by these feminists regardless that each of their critiques levelled against masculine hegemony was a contestation of patriarchy's recourse to the divine or nature in order to legitimate its social practices. These feminists likewise, however, make recourse to the divine and/or nature (Schüssler Fiorenza is one of the three who resists engaging nature in order to provide sure foundations for her feminist project) in order to guarantee the truth of their analyses. They too mystify the social when they locate gender in nature, and authentic "humanity" outside of social and historical conditions. In their analyses all three locate women as the subject of their studies but women, or at least feminist women, are both contextualized is their social and historical contingencies—they are subjected to patriarchy, but they are also exterior to social and historical contingencies in that they as the oppressed are unaffected by these social and historical contingencies in their own epistemological endeavours.

The resistance to historical contingencies for the subject of their study, women, is intimately connected, in the works of all three feminists, on one hand with their theological concerns and on the other with feminist standpoint epistemology. In the latter, feminist standpoint, one of the basic premises is that the oppressed, because they are not invested in maintaining systems of oppression, have a clearer view of reality than the oppressors. Therefore, women are subject to social

and historical contingencies differently than men who, by virtue of their gender, are part of the ruling elite. As feminists who draw upon poststructuralist and postmodern theories have argued, standpoint epistemology assumes that there is a reality out there that can be found by those with the right eyes to see and further it assumes that the oppressed are somehow resistant to ideology in a way that the oppressors are not. In the second, theological concerns, their desire to ascertain deity for women, be it in old traditions or newly found traditions, means that each has left unanalysed her own assumptions regarding the nature of existence. They appear certain, at least in the texts referred to, that their beliefs are free from an engagement with ideology, that their beliefs have captured the truth of existence, even if it is only for this historical moment, and that their epistemic positions (although each heartily disagrees with the epistemic position assumed by the other) are grounded in truth. It is this engagement with truth, located in a realm outside of the social and historical reality of human existence that undercuts their critical analyses and immerses their work in ideology production.

That we are social and historical beings demands that we, of necessity, engage in ideology. As Louis Althusser has argued, we recognize ourselves as subjects when we are interpellated by ideology. However, that we are in ideology does not negate the possibility of ideology critique, or imply that our contestations will produce more ideology. In order to do ideology critique, something all three of these theorists engage in, there is a necessity to locate oneself in "class struggle" (i.e., women as an oppressed class) in order to recognize that different views have come into conflict with each other, and, therefore, that it is epistemic ground that is under contestation. Further to this, the epistemic ground that is contested is a product of social and historical conditions, and therefore its contestation should be argued from within a social and historical framework. Recourse to deity, to a reality given certitude by its recourse to truth and human authenticity as decreed by deity or nature is simply another instance of recourse to ideology: *Truth* as an idealized category cannot act as criterion for the adequacy of discourse, but *a* truth generated from, and located in, current social conditions can act as such.

The social, historical, and political actions generated from feminist concerns are current epistemological positions that have emerged from social and historical conditions. The referent of feminist contestations is not located outside of the social and historical, but firmly located inside so that its critique of current social systems is a critique generated from within current epistemological understandings of morality, ethics, freedom, liberation, and so forth. Where these last terms signify is in the social and historical realm and as part of human language, human thought, and human contestations: their meanings belong to the social and historical realm of human action. Freedom, morality, ethics, liberation and the like are not ideal types located outside of the lived lives of human beings, male or female.

Engaging current ideology through a recourse to social and historical conditions is not, I believe, an engagement with radical relativism. By arguing from within the framework of ideology, and utilizing in the argumentative framework current epistemic positions, knowledge itself as a reified commodity can be challenged, and can be shown to be relative to its social and historical location. These differing positions, feminist and patriarchal, in contestation for epistemic ground, then, are relative to each other, and in being relative to each other they are equally recognizable as social and historical discourses, and are equally subject to critique generated from within current social and historical conditions. That there is a contestation between these two positions is the "real" of the situation, and any veracity of the situation is only ascertainable within the frame of the social and historical, and not in an extra-ideological referent. The risk here is not radical relativism, but a risk of recognizing that there is no epistemological certitude, and that there are no guarantees that we have got it right. There is only the social and historical realm (at least as far as we know now) wherein we attempt to explicate what it means to be human.

Symbol, myth, and ritual are three categorical formations wherein the activity to define existence has taken place. How life means and how we mean that life to mean are evinced in symbol, myth, and ritual. That these three sub-genres of religious studies are approached as kernels of truth in the analyses of Daly, Schüssler Fiorenza, and Radford Ruether attests to the incompleteness of their social and historical

endeavour. For Daly language, and symbols therein, is the phenomenal ground that deity erupts from, for Schüssler Fiorenza narrative is the historical ground that deity speaks through, while for Radford Ruether signifying praxis (ritual) is the place wherein deity enters the social and historical circle. Although all three recognize that hegemonic practices past and present have utilized symbol, myth, and ritual in order to legitimate their own practices, they assume that these categories are themselves extra-ideological. Symbol, myth, and ritual, as represented in their work, are instantiations of the divine and not social and historical categories that describe and prescribe human relations. The contents of symbol, myth, and ritual are emptied out in their feminist analyses, but that which holds the contents, the form, is left intact and unchallenged. The structures of symbol, myth, and ritual remain unquestioned, and instead symbol, myth, and ritual are dealt with as natural categories, categories that are produced in nature and because of their naturalness are capable of containing the divine. Rhetorically speaking, then, the previous contents of myth, symbol and ritual are shown to be poisonous draughts formulated by a recalcitrant and ultimately "disobedient"(fallen?) patriarchy, but the new contents are seen to be the refreshing and cool draughts of the divine. This new nectar of the gods is not made and poured into the containers of myth, symbol, and ritual by these feminists, rather myth, symbol and ritual are filled up by their actions of "emptying out" the poison. This emptying out is what allowed for a "filling up" of myth, symbol, and ritual by the divine. Myth, symbol, and ritual, then, remain idealized categories in the works of these feminists.

Although my analyses of Mary Daly, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Rosemary Radford Ruether may seem harsh at times, my point is not to invalidate the whole of their work. I take very seriously the work these women engender, and part of this "taking seriously" is my desire to push at the boundaries of their analyses in order to extend their work. As a feminist I believe these women have contributed much to feminist discourses, and provoked a sitting up and taking notice by those groups they have challenged. At many times their analyses are insightful and incisive, and because of the critical acumen evident in their work, I chose to analyse their work and not to approach their

work apologetically in order to take their work across a threshold toward augmenting feminist epistemology.

As my above analysis might suggest, the feminist encounter with religions requires that feminist theorists in religious studies begin to develop a clearer idea of just what "religion" as a conceptual apparatus or a heuristic device is, as well as its particular manifestations such as Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism and so forth. Feminism as it engages with religious studies and religions must at the outset resist the idealism inherent in the belief in (e.g., the soul and deity), and the study of (e.g., that this behaviour is different from other cultural behaviour) religion. In other words, religious studies must be brought into feminism and not feminism into religious studies. If this is done, then, it occurs to me, we are in a better position to avoid a topographical study of religion (what the land looks like) and engage in an environmental study of religion (what are the implications and the potentials/problematics of the land).

Notes

[1] Daly's use of archetype is to develop a universal movement that describes the act of stereotyping. Since patriarchy is universal its obfuscating machinations operate on a universal scale. Further, stereotyping, as both a term and action, has been diminished by overuse and does not capture the internalization of stereotypes. Daly's juxtaposing of the two contradictory ideas of originary and copy allows her to redefine the term and incorporate both the society's stereotyped moulds, i.e., blonds are dumb, and the internalization of stereotypes by women, i.e., dumb blond.

[2] See also Ratcliffe (1995, 65–106) for a discussion of Daly's use of language. I am indebted to Ratcliffe for confirming some of my own thoughts on Daly's use of language and for extending these thoughts with her own analysis which incorporated the language strategies of "polyptoton" and "prosonomasia."

[3] Because language has a natural fluidity it can escape patriarchal control so that *others* may utilize it and reclaim the power associated with language. Because language reflects society there will be instances where language is subverted and used to resist that self same society. And because language is amendable to change, in fact can promote change, women like Daly can make use of language strategies to make apparent the sexism that has been naturalized in language.

[4] Another problem one can encounter when reversing the reversals is the re-entrenchment of systems of oppression. Therefore the belief in the idea of good and evil, something that has been utilized in order to annihilate large groups of people, is never deconstructed. Rather, the content is tampered with so that the female is understood to be good, while the male is understood to be evil. By simply reversing the reversals one does not demystify systems of oppression, one simply flips the categories so that what was negatively valuated is now positively valuated.

[5] Jane Hedley (1999) makes a similar kind of critique in regard to Daly's language strategies.

[6] The logic underlying Daly's reversing the reversals understands that the origin, or the first primary moment or meaning, is the authentic and true. Consequently, as in her understanding of a matriarchy prior to a patriarchy, she assumes that what came before in language, what was the initial or original meaning, is primary and the way the word ought to be understood. The rhetorical strategy of reversing reversals allows Daly to argumentatively employ an enthymeme, in other words, she relies on an *a priori* assumption in her argument, an assumption that does not require explanation because its assumption is simply common sense. Therefore, in Daly's reversing of the "reversals" as she names them, the assumption is that what was initially reversed is originary and real and therefore both pure and authentic. Patriarchy simply reversed reality and produced a non-reality, the non-reality being that of the Foreground and its language. Daly does not need to argue that patriarchal interpretation is incorrect or that her interpretation of words is correct. By naming patriarchal definitions as reversals, it can simply be assumed that they are incorrect. Patriarchy has things turned around, and all she needs to do is right them.

[7] Hayden White's theory of historiography argues that history has an explanatory structure. It seeks to provide a meaning—a "kind" of story, e.g., Romance, Comedy, Tragedy, or Satire, or to form an argument—the point of it all, what it adds up to, or the ideological implications—"a set of prescriptions for taking a position in the present world of social praxis and acting upon it (either to change the world or to maintain it in its current state)" (White 1973, 7–29). These forms of explanation are extrapolated within narrative structures that create the form and define of the meaning of history, and are dependant upon generic story types that are meaningful to the historical period of the interpreter (historian).

[8] This is not to say that this challenge has not emerged elsewhere in Western epistemology. Certainly the field of philosophical hermeneutics, since its rise in early modernity has been engaged with the problem of the situatedness of text and exegete.

[9] As I have indicated there is a basic problem with separating into two large homogenous groups the various groups of people who participated, in whole or in part, in Jesus worship. However bracketing this concern, one notes that Schüssler Fiorenza will extend the boundaries of this theoretical position.

[10] In an effort to demonstrate the possible discrediting of Mary Magdalene in biblical texts and by later historians Schüssler Fiorenza utilizes biblical texts such as *Pistis Sophia*, the *Gospel of Thomas*, and the *Gospel of Mary*, biblical texts outside of the canon, to strengthen her argument. The tension between Mary and Peter is explicitly focused on in these texts, and Peter's resistance to Mary as an apostolic witness and authority is understood to be located in his misogyny: "My Lord, we shall not be able to endure this woman, for she takes our opportunity and has not let any of us speak, but talks all the time herself" (*Pistis Sophia* cited in Schüssler Fiorenza 1979, 53). Utilizing non-canonical sources in order to challenge the early Christian social history which was developed primarily through the use of canonical texts that assumed little or no contestation or competition in regard to the authority allocated in Peter means that Schüssler Fiorenza has been able to problematize the traditional perception of early Christian communities, and demonstrate that Christianity rather than a monolithic movement, consisted of diverse movements which were, at times, in contention with each other. Further, she will push the analysis beyond this and focus on the political intention expressed in gender ideology and suggest that "[w]hereas egalitarian groups trace their apostolic authority to Mary Magdalene and emphasize that women as well as men have received the revelations of the resurrected Christ, patristic authors pit the authority of Peter against Mary Magdalene" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1990, 54).

[11] I say this even in light of Schüssler Fiorenza's awareness that frequently Christologies take this form. She refers to these kinds of Christologies as "liberal enlightenment" and notes that they often depict Jesus as an "exceptional, individual hero, or true religious genius to be imitated [and] in turn have resurrected the "divine man" of ancient Greece who is always male, autonomous, and defiant, and stands beyond all human limitations" (1995, 18). Although she has no desire to depict Jesus in such a fashion—always male, autonomous etc.—she does locate the origin of egalitarian praxis in him. It is Jesus whom she sees as evincing this model of behaviour (therefore transcending the culture around him), a model that his followers were then to emulate.

[12] For a problemization of the category of women's experience see in particular the work of Joan W. Scott 1992 and 1995.

[13] The feminist goddess movement, Radford Ruether argues, lacks a grounding in history, or real historical rootedness (1985, 105) and tends toward a romanticization of the human and the natural world. But I am unsure how Radford Ruether feels that she has historical rootedness when she gleans rituals from Ancient Near Eastern texts. We only have fragmented Near Eastern texts that

relate ritual either indirectly, e.g., "Innana and the King: Blessing on the Wedding Night" or incompletely, e.g., Akkadian New Year's Festival. One does wonder just how much "history" we can glean from the fragmented and obscure ancient Near Eastern archaeological remains. And if goddess spirituality is taking rites and liturgies from patriarchal historical periods, e.g., Classical Greece, Hellenistic, Greco Roman, and Celtic, and attempting to glean information useful to their religious practices, what make the project so much different from Radford Ruether's gleaning of tidbits from this patriarchal history of the Bible and related texts? She argues that those feminists attempting to reread, reconceive, and reconstruct ancient religious traditions related to goddess worship fail because goddess worship was androcentric. Agreed, it was but so too the Bible as she has argued. It would seem to me that the issue of paganism itself is more problematic for Radford Ruether than she might admit. Further, when Radford Ruether refers to historical rites noted in ancient texts she is approaching ritual as static and unchanging once it has been set down. I also question her conception of history, most especially, in relation to religious beliefs and practices. Her approach suggests that the rites she will glean from history are ascertained because they are located in history as if history is a factual recording of events rather than narratives written in order to express a particular group's vision of the world.

[14] In the rite the community forms a semicircle around the initiate, they request to know the initiate's new name, and welcome her to the group. The initiate then proceeds to relate her history and statement of faith. Thereafter both the community and the initiate recite a "litany of exorcism" from the powers and principalities of patriarchy. During this recitation one person holds a candle while another rings a bell at the conclusion of each statement of exorcism. Radford Ruether provides an example of such a litany in her text. The powers of the corruption of humanity which "turn males into instruments of domination and shape women to be tools of submission are exorcised, powers of militarism, of domestic violence, of violence in society, of racism, and of wealth and exploitation are exorcised" (1985, 128–129). Thereafter salt is placed on the initiate's tongue with the words "let your eyes always see the truth and your lips always speak the truth" (1985, 129). Following this, the initiate descends unrobed into a pool of water and submerges three times, or water is poured on her head three times. During the ablutions the initiator(s) speaks an incantation that utilizes the power of water to further the exorcism and bring the initiate into the community: "Through the power of the Source, the liberating Spirit, and the forerunners of our hope, be freed from the power of evil. May the forces of violence, of militarism, of sexism, of racism, of injustice, and of all that diminishes human life lose their power over your life....may you enter the promised land of milk and honey and grow in virtue..." (1985, 130). The initiate then rises from the water and is clothed in a white garment. Her forehead is anointed with oil, a candle is placed in her hands while an em-

broidered stole wrapped around her shoulders. The initiate, now part of the community, shares with them a Eucharist of milk and honey. In the Eucharist ceremony a cup of milk and honey and sweet cakes are blessed: "this is the loaf of the beloved community, which had been scattered in the world of patriarchy and now gathers together into a new people to anticipate a new world liberated from oppression..." (1985, 130). The newly baptized eats and drinks first then the entire community follows. A kiss of peace and a song shared among the community, who are holding hands, ends the baptism.

[15] She states that "[t]he first sequence of liturgies in Chapter 7 focuses on the formation of church as a community of liberation from patriarchy.... In rejecting ideologies and social systems of oppression, we also reclaim our true relationship with somatic reality, with body and earth, and with the Great Goddess that sustains our life in nature. For Women-Church, entry into messianic community means, particularly, conversion from patriarchy as ideology and social system. It means the formation of a critical culture and community of liberation from patriarchy. It means our nurture and growth in our new and *true humanity* as women, and as men and women together" (1985, 107–108, italics mine).

[16] Michel Foucault (1984, 3–27) maps out a three fold process wherein we become "subjects" in the world. The first is a set of dividing practices, whereby the subject is objectified by a process of binary polarization, e.g. male/female. The second mode is scientific classification, e.g., biology, while the third mode of objectification focuses on the mediation of subjects by an external authority figure, e.g., nature, god.

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