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Feminist Spirituality: Christian Alternative or Alternative to Christianity?

Sandra M. Schneiders

Let us consider the issue of feminism in relation to Christian spirituality, i.e. to the area of lived experience of the faith. It must be noted, however, that the term “spirituality” is no longer an exclusively Christian, nor even an exclusively religious, term. Not surprisingly, therefore, feminist spirituality is not necessarily a Christian or even a religious phenomenon. In fact, however, as we shall see, feminist spirituality whether Christian or not tends to be deeply religious. Consequently, our first task is to define spirituality and specify the meaning of Christian spirituality so that we can then raise the question of how feminism is related to spirituality and finally how feminist spirituality is related to Christian spirituality.

Elsewhere I have traced the history of the term spirituality from its Christian biblical roots as a designation of that which is brought about by the influence of the Holy Spirit, through its development in Christian history to designate primarily the inner life of the Christian striving for more than ordinary holiness, to its contemporary usage not only for religious experience but also for non-religious and even anti-religious life-organizations such as secular feminism and atheistic Marxism.¹ I defined spirituality, as the term is being used today, as “the experience of consciously striving to integrate one’s life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.”² This definition is open enough to include both religious and non-religious life projects but specific enough to
exclude aimless spontaneity, partial projects, or religious dilettantism. Its essential elements are conscious effort, the goal of life integration through self-transcendence, and the finalization of the project by ultimate value. Its marked difference from the traditional Christian definition lies in its openness concerning the nature of “ultimate value.”

Christian spirituality involves a specification of this definition in terms of the participation of the person in the paschal mystery of Jesus the Christ. For the Christian the horizon of ultimate concern is the holy mystery of God revealed in Jesus Christ and experienced through the gift of the Holy Spirit within the life of the church. Thus, Christian spirituality, as Christian, is essentially trinitarian, christocentric, and ecclesial. Given the way in which the tradition has presented the trinitarian God, viz. as three male “persons,” the recent presentation of the theological significance of the maleness of Jesus by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and the church as a hierarchical (i.e. sacralized patriarchal) structure within which women, on the basis of their sex, are excluded from full participation, it is not surprising that women, once their consciousness has been raised, have problems with the living of their faith in terms of the principal coordinates of traditional Christian spirituality. In other words, Christian spirituality will become problematic for any woman who becomes a feminist in the sense in which we have been using the term.

II. FEMINISM AND SPIRITUALITY

A. The Background and Development of Feminist Spirituality

The term “feminist spirituality” began to be used very early in the “second wave” of the modern feminist movement, arising in the United States in the 1970s and appearing in Europe in the 1980s. It was mainstreamed in the feminist movement in this country with the publication in 1979 of the groundbreaking work Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion, which was followed ten years later by its sequel, Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality. While some of the feminists
using the term spirituality were practicing members of one or another recognized religious tradition, and religion and/or theology was central to the academic feminist interests of most of them, feminist spirituality did not arise within or in terms of any particular institutional church or recognized religion.

Catherina Halkes is probably correct in locating the origin of feminist spirituality not in religion or even in the critique of religion but in the realization by feminists that women's estrangement and oppression are fueled not primarily by sex role polarization but by the dichotomy between spirit and body, with the former assigned to the male and the latter to the female, which is intrinsic to patriarchy. In other words, male control of female sexuality, as it developed over the centuries, led eventually to the identification of women with their sexual/reproductive function and their consequent identification with the realm of the body which led to their gradual exclusion from the realm of the spirit. This spiritual realm, presided over by the male God who reigns in heaven, was opposed to the realm of nature which was relegated to the once universally powerful but now discredited Mother Goddess, the feminine divinity who was finally dethroned and definitively banished by the triumph of patriarchal monotheism.

Feminist spirituality is the reclaiming by women of the reality and power designated by the term “spirit” and the effort to reintegrate spirit and body, heaven and earth, culture and nature, eternity and time, public and private, political and personal, in short, all those hierarchized dichotomous dualisms whose root is the split between spirit and body and whose primary incarnation is the split between male and female.

It is well beyond the scope of this work to enter into the complex and much disputed discussion of how a single, all-powerful male God came to take the place of the Great Goddess and the pantheon of lesser gods and goddesses who were worshiped everywhere in the ancient world before the relatively late advent of patriarchal monotheism in the west. However, certain conclusions from the immense amount of research which has been done on this subject can be accepted as established.

As far back into antiquity as western religion can be traced the supreme deity was female. The Great Goddess was not merely an earth mother, a mate for a male god, or a fertility
goddess whose cult justified sexual license. She was the all-powerful Creator, Source of life and of destruction, the Queen of Heaven, the Ruler of the universe. As a number of scholars have argued, this does not prove that there was ever a matriarchal society, a theory for which there is no hard evidence. But even in patriarchal societies in which men controlled the myth and symbol systems, the supreme deity was female and the mediators between the Great Goddess and humans were usually female priests.

Patriarchy, however, was compatible with matrilocal and matrilineal kinship patterns, and strong patriarchal monarchies did not develop until the economic, social, and military conditions for this type of political organization arose. The Israelite monarchy, for example, did not emerge until centuries after the tribes arrived in Canaan, and a major political and military project of the first kings, Saul and David, was to centralize political power. An important aspect of this effort was the unification and centralization of the cult in Jerusalem. David’s son Solomon was unable to maintain the fragile unity, and part of his failure to do so was his inability and/or unwillingness to stamp out the religion of the Great Goddess which, in many forms, was alive and well in his kingdom despite the official sanction of Yahwistic monotheism (cf. 1 Kgs 11:1–14).

Gerda Lerner in her very important study The Creation of Patriarchy describes the pattern observable in archaic societies which developed strong male monarchies.

In other words, the source of the power of the Goddess, her originating relation to all life, must become the sole possession of the male God if he is to assume unique divinity. This is precisely the pattern which can be observed in the
development of Yahwism. The consolidation of the collection of Hebrew tribes into a single patriarchal monarchy required, as legitimation, patriarchal monotheism. As Elizabeth Dodson Gray says, with compelling clarity:

> When the holy space of a religion is sacred for male sexuality (as in the marking of the covenant upon the male phallus in circumcision), and sacred for blood-sacrifice presided over by males; and when that same holy space is contaminated by female blood and female fertility (as in menstruating and in giving birth), we are dealing with a male fertility cult, no matter what its other lofty spiritual insights may be.\(^\text{16}\)

It is not surprising, furthermore, that the second version of the creation myth, the Jahwistic (the so-called J) account in Genesis 2:4b–25 which dates from the early days of the monarchy, presents the creator as a male deity, creating a male human being, from whose side a woman is “born” even though, as everyone knows, all men are actually born from a woman’s womb. What is accomplished by the story is the mythical transference of the power of creation and of fertility from Goddess to God and from woman to man. And to put the final seal on the process the woman is then made responsible for the man’s moral fall, thus legitimating his dominion over her even though, from creation, she is his equal, “bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh.”

The Great Goddess, however, did not die easily in the Hebrew tradition. In fact, she never died completely. In the Old Testament we find not only continual prophetic denunciations of goddess worship (which would not have been necessary if such worship were not prevalent) but also, even in the canonical literature speaking of the one true God of Israel, occasional feminine images of God. In the figure of Holy Wisdom, we have a well-developed feminine personification of God (cf. Wis 8:1–9:6; Wis 6:12–11:1; Prov 8:1–9:12).\(^\text{17}\) Nevertheless, there is no question that the Yahwistic commitment to monotheism involved, at least at the human level, a political commitment to patriarchal religion.

To expose the patriarchal political agenda involved in the development of the Jewish religion is not to deny the divinity of
the Judaeo-Christian God, the theological truth and importance of monotheism, nor the revelatory character of the biblical text. As Matthew Lamb says in discussing the relation of hermeneutics to dialectics:

To acknowledge ideological distortions does not imply a total rejection of either faith or science [in our case, feminist historical analysis] in order to find some other 'pure' realm of meaning, nor any lapse into anarchistic incoherence; instead it demands attention to an interpretative heuristics open to dialectical criticism.\textsuperscript{18}

But it is to call for a demythologizing of the biblical account for the purpose of distinguishing its patriarchal overlay from its theology of God, its androcentrism from its theology of humanity, and its sexist ideology from its revelatory content just as we must distinguish its scientifically untenable three-tiered cosmology from its doctrine of creation. Monotheism is not necessarily patriarchal any more than Judaism or Christianity is necessarily monarchical. In fact, just as the God of mercy and justice is distorted by the vindictive warrior persona assigned to God in some parts of the Old Testament, so the Spirit God who is utterly beyond sex is often deformed by the patriarchal mythology in which the biblical God is usually presented.

The foregoing discussion provides the necessary background for understanding the emergence of contemporary feminist spirituality. Western religion and, in particular, the Judaeo-Christian tradition is deeply patriarchal, not only in its institutional organization but in its theology of God and of humanity. God is presented, not exclusively but overwhelmingy, as a male being. Males, who are perceived to be unequivocally in God's image, are God’s representatives and ministers. Women, by virtue of their female sex which is unlike the sex attributed to God, are regarded as deficient images of the divine, unfit to represent God to the worshipping community or minister to him in official cult. Women are subordinate to men, helpers to men in the work of procreation, and thus defined primarily in terms of their sexuality, i.e. their relation to men as wives and mothers, and their participation in the natural processes by which human beings
come into existence and thus become subjects of the spiritualization processes over which men preside.

The dichotomous dualism between male divine creator and female natural creation within which the male human is assimilated to the divine sphere and the female human to the natural sphere is the paradigm for the endless series of superior/inferior dichotomies that is characterized as masculine/feminine. Thus, at the male pole are divine creativity, power, intelligence, initiative, activity, goodness, independence, and at the female pole are natural passivity, weakness, instinct and emotionality, receptivity, evil, dependence. The short-hand cipher for this pervasive dualism is the spirit/body dichotomy, spirit representing everything divine and body representing everything natural. The spirit is male; the body is female. Culture is the triumph of male spirit over female nature.

Feminist spirituality, as we have already noted, began as women reclaiming spirit, refusing to be reduced to body. However, it virtually immediately expanded and deepened to include a reevaluation of body. What feminists in the spirituality movement realized was that the root disorder was not women’s confinement to the realm of body but the dichotomy itself which split reality along the spirit/body axis creating an unending and unwinnable war between a supposedly superior spiritual (i.e. male) half of reality and a supposedly inferior bodily (i.e. female) half of reality. They realized that this leads not only to male oppression of females, their exclusion from the realms of “spirit” such as religion, education, politics, and culture, but also to wars between nations struggling to prove their superiority to one another by reducing their enemies to subhuman status, to racial and colonial oppressions of people viewed as intrinsically inferior, and to the mindless rape of the natural environment by man who sees himself as having absolute dominion over nature.

The essence of feminist spirituality, then, is a reclaiming of female power beginning with the likeness of women to the divine, the rehabilitation of the bodily as the very locus of that divine likeness, and the right of women to participate in the shaping of religion and culture, i.e. of the realm of “spirit.” This explains the generally religious character of feminist spirituality and, at the same time, its marginality to the mainstream religious traditions.
which are the principal sources of women’s exclusion from the world of “spirit.” Against this background we can examine some of the main features of feminist spirituality before looking at the specifically Christian form of the movement.

B. Main Features of Feminist Spirituality

1. Outside the Institutional Context

Feminist spirituality has tended to develop outside the institutional context of either church or academy. This is easily understandable since both these institutions were developed as cultural shrines of the life of the spirit, a life from which women have been excluded, in which they are supposed not to be interested, and for which they have been deemed unequipped. Thus the rituals and texts of religion as well as the research techniques, the canon of classical texts, and the teaching methods of the academy include very little of women’s experience or history and even less that would be empowering of women. There is little place for women or for the experience or exercise of feminine power in either church or academy. In fact, a major function of both institutions has been to restrict women to the private sphere, the domestic environment, the ancillary roles, while power was possessed and exercised by men. The economic arrangements which support both church and academy are such that funding is usually not available for so-called “alternative” projects, i.e. for projects that fall outside the patriarchal interests already in place.

Consequently, feminist spirituality both in theory and in practice has developed on the fringes of institutional culture. This allows feminists a certain freedom to tell their individual and corporate stories which are mutually empowering and to experiment with new theories that are anathema in the academy and new rituals which seem frivolous or shocking to mainstream religion. However, it has also kept scholars in feminist spirituality both from the variety and scope of critical exchange in the academy that would profit both women feminist scholars and their non-feminist dialogue partners and from full participation in their respective religious traditions which would be empowering for feminists and purifying and enriching for their churches.
2. The Discovery of Goddess

An aspect of feminist spirituality which is most disturbing to mainline religion is discourse about Goddess. No doubt there is a deep, visceral awareness, especially among the guardians of patriarchal religion, that the reemergence of the goddess is potentially the greatest conceivable threat to the religious status quo. However, because of the importance of the Goddess theme, no discussion of feminist spirituality which avoids this issue can be even minimally adequate.

Basically, Goddess is the symbol of female divinity, i.e. of feminine sacred power, just as God is the symbol of male divinity or masculine sacred power. There are two main questions about the symbol for divinity: Is the divinity symbolized in masculine or feminine form actually male or female? How are real males and females related to the divinity? Various strands of feminist spirituality answer these questions differently. Three of these strands are of major significance for an understanding of feminist spirituality.

Thealogy: The most radical form of feminist spirituality involves the worship of the Great Mother Goddess who is conceived of as the one, true, ultimate divinity. The study of her nature and her relations with creation and humanity is called theology, i.e. discourse about Goddess, rather than theology or discourse about God. However, a major difference between the understanding of Goddess is conceived as ultimately immanent rather than ultimately transcendent. More exactly, her transcendence is her all-embracing, all-empowering immanence. She is transcendentally immanent. Thus, Goddess not only divinizes the feminine and its life-giving mysteries but also negates the ruinous split between transcendent and immanent, spirit and body, divinity and nature, heaven and earth with all their Manichean progeny in the realms of thought and action. A feminine deity allows women to experience themselves as truly “like Goddess,” as imaging divinity in their very life-giving powers. Rather than being unclean because of their bodily capacity to give life, they are divine because of it. Women are rehabilitated in the rehabilitation of the body which is not the opposite of spirit but the enspirited vessel of divine creativity.

Closely related to Goddess religion and spirituality but not
necessarily identical with it is the revitalization of Wicca, or pre-Christian, European traditions of pagan religion. The deity of these nature religions is female and her devotees are predominantly although not exclusively women. They come together in "coven"s and often call themselves "witches," a deliberately provocative practice which not only intends to unmask the irrational male fear of female religious power but also to expiate the murder of millions of women throughout Christian history who have been executed on the charge of witchcraft.

Witchcraft is not the "black magic" or nocturnal sexual orgies feared by the religious establishment but a ritual participation in the life-giving and healing powers of nature which are seen as divine. For Wicca, which means "wisdom" or the "wise ones," the universe is not an inert thing but a living reality in which everything is intimately interconnected. Human beings are the priestesses of creation, not its lords. Spirituality includes sexuality without being either reduced to it or dominant over it. Life and love are supreme values which are not at odds with truth. Ritual plays a very important role in witchcraft because it is the place where spirit and nature meet and interact, sacramentalizing all of reality and uniting us to ourselves, to one another, and to the universe.

**God/dess:** A less radical form of feminist spirituality, and one with whose approach to divinity many Christian feminists are much more comfortable, is well symbolized by respelling the verbal symbol of divinity as G-o-d / d-e-s-s. What such women are doing is appropriating for women all that is true in the theological and religious tradition about God. While repudiating the patriarchal and masculinizing deformation of the God-tradition, they continue to relate to the deity of Judaeo-Christian revelation. They emphasize the feminine aspects of the biblical deity, insist on a compensatory highlighting of feminine biblical metaphors for Yahweh, demand the use of gender inclusive language for both divine and human being in prayer and worship, and struggle toward a reimagining, for themselves and others, of the male God in female terms. In other words, they refuse to allow the biblical God to be appropriated by men and used against women. They see themselves as fully in the image and likeness of God/dess, not only because they possess intellect and will, i.e. spiritual faculties, but also because they participate bodily in the great divine work
of giving and nurturing life. Thus they attempt to achieve much the same appropriation of spiritual power, rehabilitation of the body, and reintegration of the dichotomized spheres of reality that more radical Goddess worshippers do, but they seek to do this without separating themselves from the Judaeo-Christian biblical and sacramental tradition.26

**Therapeutic or Psychological Approach to the Goddesses:** A third way in which feminist spirituality has incorporated the goddess is basically psychological and therapeutic. Basing themselves on the archetypal theory of Carl Jung, but repudiating or modifying Jung’s animus/anim a dichotomy, some feminist psychotherapists have seen the potential of goddess archetypes for healing the profound self-hatred and self-rejection which patriarchal culture has inculcated in women by teaching them to identify with the inferior qualities regarded as “feminine” while assigning the superior human qualities to men.27 Jung recognized the potentiality of transcultural intrapsychic patterns, which he called archetypes, to constellate the complexes of thought and feeling which are operative in our daily experience. A fundamental pair of archetypes, according to Jung, are the anima or the feminine principle in the male psyche, and the animus or the male principle in the female psyche.

The major problem with Jung’s theory, from a feminist perspective, is that Jung assigned the culturally stereotypical masculine qualities, i.e. those associated with spirit such as logical reason, initiative, creativity, etc., to the masculine principle and the culturally stereotypical feminine qualities, i.e. those associated with body, such as emotion, instinct, receptivity, passivity, etc., to the feminine principle. The net result was that men were enabled to draw upon the resources of the dark, inferior, and less differentiated feminine qualities which, in small doses, make life richer, more exciting, and more beautiful without ever having to identify with them, whereas women could reach above themselves into the higher sphere of spirit, mind, and creativity but could never claim these qualities as their own. They would always experience these qualities as recessive in themselves, foreign to their true nature, borrowed for special occasions when they had to act in spheres not their own, e.g. in the academy, political life, or religious
leadership. Despite Jung’s effort to valorize both the feminine and the masculine, his dichotomous approach had the effect of canonizing the traditional sexual stereotypes and the cultural hierarchizing of masculine and feminine which alienates women from the realm of “spirit.”

Feminist Jungian psychotherapists have revised the schema by agreeing that there are indeed archetypes of the masculine and the feminine in the psyche but that they are multiple. Women have a plurality of archetypes of the feminine within themselves as men have a plurality of masculine archetypes. Using the ancient Greek goddesses to describe the archetypes of the feminine in women, these therapists have explained the ascendancy in certain women, or in the same woman under different circumstances, of the inner paradigms not only of mother, child, and wife but also of solitary huntress, warrior and strategist, alchemical lover, contemplative virgin, goal-focused achiever, leader, thinker, intellectual mentor, artist, craftsperson, spiritual guide, and so on. Neither the bodily nor the spiritual is either more or less “natural” in women. The spiritual does indeed have a feminine persona in a woman, but it is not a recessive masculinity. It is her own feminine power active in a sphere from which real women have been traditionally excluded. The psychological task of women is to actualize all the inner goddesses, all the archetypes of female power.

3. Salient Characteristics of Feminist Spirituality

Against this background it is fairly easy to identify the salient characteristics of feminist spirituality and to see their interconnections. First, feminist spirituality is both rooted in and oriented toward women’s experience, especially their experiences of disempowerment and of empowerment. For this reason story-telling, the narratizing and sharing of the experience of women which has been largely excluded from the history of mainline religion, is central. Story-telling is both a technique for consciousness-raising and a source of mutual support. By telling their own stories women appropriate as significant their own experience which they have been taught to view as trivial. By listening to the stories of other women they come to see the
commonalities and the political power in women’s experience which they have been taught to believe is purely personal and private.

Second, as we have already seen, feminist spirituality is deeply concerned with the reintegration of all that has been dichotomized by patriarchal religion. This involves rehabilitating what has been regarded as inferior and reappropriating that which has been alienated. The fundamental reintegration is that of body with spirit. Thus, feminist spirituality is concerned with giving voice to and celebrating those aspects of bodiliness which religion has covered with shame and silence, particularly those feminine experiences associated with life-giving which have been reduced to sex and those aspects of sexuality which have been regarded as unclean.30

Very closely related to the emphasis on the goodness and holiness of the body is a third characteristic, a profound concern with non-human nature. Feminist theorists have explicated exhaustively the intimate connection between male possessiveness and exploitative violence toward women and that same possessiveness and exploitative violence toward nature. As men have raped women for their own pleasure and utility, so have they raped the environment for the same purposes. Feminists are convinced that only a spirituality which values both women and all those elements of the universe that have been “feminized,” including nature, children, the poor, the disabled, the aged, and the infirm, can contribute to a renewed and livable world.31

A fourth characteristic of feminist spirituality is its rejection of cerebral, rationalistic, and abstract approaches to religious participation. The emphasis on ritual that is participative, circular, aesthetic, incarnate, communicative, life-enhancing, and joyful is a deliberate rejection of the rigidly unemotional, overly verbal, hierarchical, and dominative liturgical practice of the mainline churches. And feminists choose to organize themselves religiously not in the hierarchical institutional structures of patriarchal religion with its insistence on obedience and conformity but in communities that are inclusive and participative. Consequently, feminists involved in the spirituality movement are committed to a reenvisioning of ministry, liturgy, theology, teaching, community building, and ecclesiastical organization.

A final, but perhaps the most important, characteristic of
Feminist spirituality is that from the very beginning it has involved commitment to the intimate and intrinsic relationship between personal growth and transformation and a politics of social justice. The feminist rallying cry, “the personal is political,” means not only that the problems women have experienced as their personal and private concerns are actually systemically caused and can only be rectified through structural reform, but also that societal transformation is only possible through and on the basis of personal transformation. Thus, unlike the traditional spiritualities of the churches which constantly (and often unsuccessfully) seek a point of intersection between a process of personal spiritual growth and a commitment to social justice, feminist spirituality starts with a commitment which faces simultaneously inward and outward. The changes and growth which must happen in women if they are to be and to experience themselves as fully human, daughters of divinity and its bearers in this world, are the same changes that must occur in society, namely, the reintegration of what has been dichotomized, the empowerment of that which has been marginalized and abused, the liberation of that which has been enslaved.

The word which has progressively come to serve as a cipher for feminist spirituality is “interconnectedness.” In every area feminists involved in the spirituality movement are seeking ways to reunify everything that has been divided by the all-pervasive dichotomous dualism of the patriarchal system, to replace the win-lose, either-or, we-they, in-out, right-wrong bases of mutual destruction with a both-and-inclusiveness which will both achieve and be achieved by reconnecting that which has been separated. Feminist spirituality prefers networks to chains of command, webs to ladders, circles and mosaics to pyramids, and weaving to building. It wants discourse to be both rational and affective, dialogue to replace coercion, cooperation rather than competition to be our usual mode of operation, power to be used for empowerment rather than mastery, persuasion to take the place of force, and all of this to be not merely the way individuals function but the way society functions. In short, feminist spirituality is a commitment to bringing about, in oneself and in the world, that alternative vision which is integral to feminism as a comprehensive ideology.
III. FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY AND CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

We come finally to the question of the relationship of Christian women and men who are feminists to feminist spirituality. Certain tensions, and also many points of convergence, should already have become obvious. However, just as there is considerable diversity among secular and post-Christian religious feminists involved in feminist spirituality, so Christians who are feminists occupy a variety of positions on a continuum running from very traditional Christian spirituality to very revisionist approaches. One way to distinguish among Christians who are feminists and who are involved in feminist spirituality is to examine the points of departure from which various feminists have come to identify themselves with the spirituality movement.

A. Varieties of Christian Feminist Spirituality

Not all women’s spirituality is feminist just as not all women’s movements are feminist. It is entirely possible for women to have a very patriarchal spirituality. In fact, it may well be the case that the spirituality of most women in the church is still at least unreflectively if not militantly patriarchal. However, there are women who claim the designation of feminist for spiritualities which most feminists would not recognize as such and might even consider anti-feminist.

Sometimes the designation feminist is simply an anachronism, a matter of assigning the term feminist to a woman who had a positive spiritual self-image and maintained her integrity in the face of patriarchal power. Sometimes the term is appropriated by women who exalt the role in their religious experience of precisely those qualities, such as receptivity and passivity, which men have devalued and assigned to women. Sometimes people simply equate the spirituality of women, especially insofar as it seems to contrast with the spirituality of men, with feminist spirituality.

As has been said in relation to feminism itself, feminist spirituality is necessarily informed by a developed feminist consciousness which is quite different from a positive self-image as a woman or even a basic commitment to the well-being of women.
Feminist consciousness begins in an appropriated and criticized experience of sexual oppression and involves a critique of patriarchy as the cause of that oppression, an alternative vision of a non-patriarchal future, and a commitment to structural change to realize that vision.

A first group of Christians whose spirituality is genuinely feminist are people who have been deeply involved with personal and/or social spirituality within the Christian tradition and who came to feminist consciousness at some point and began to realize that it had serious implications for their spiritual life. Many Catholic religious women and other ministers have had this experience. They have become sensitized to the oppressive masculinity of the language of prayer and celebration and the way that this linguistic hegemony functions to legitimate and reinforce ecclesiastical patriarchy. They are estranged from a male God in whose likeness they cannot imagine themselves and who is, for all practical purposes, men-writ-large. They have become progressively alienated from a sacramental system in which males exercise sacred power over women to grant or deny access to God and use sacramentally based office to exclude women from full participation in the church. They have come to recognize the ways in which male-controlled theology, moral formation, and spiritual guidance have functioned to infantilize and demonize women. In short, their consciousness-raising has extended to the sphere of spirituality and they have begun to judge traditional Christian spirituality as seriously flawed, even destructive of women.

A second type of Christian feminist is the person whose coming to feminist spirituality began in her or his involvement in feminist liberationist praxis. As this person has grown in awareness of the ways in which women are marginalized, excluded, victimized, degraded, and oppressed in family and society, he or she has begun to see that women undergo the same oppression in the church and that the church is a major legitimator of the oppression of women in family and society. The social analysis which enables such people to identify patriarchy as the root of women’s social, economic, and political oppression is extended to the church where it is identified as the cause of women’s religious oppression. However, such people recognize that the situation in the church is complicated by the spiritual element. It is not merely
that the church as social institution is patriarchal but that patriarchy has infected the inner life of the church as a community. Sexual apartheid in the church, like racial apartheid in South Africa, is not just an evil social structure but a deadly cancer of the spirit which is destroying not only its intended victims, women, but all believers whose spiritual experience is patriarchally deformed.

A third type of Christian who becomes interested in feminist spirituality is the woman who has experienced personal oppression and violence in the church. She may be a religious whose congregation's constitutional revision process has been violated or who has been threatened with serious sanctions for exercising her basic human rights; a married woman enraged by church law on contraception, divorce, or abortion formulated by male celibates without any input from those who bear the brunt of those decisions; a woman in ministry who has been summarily fired without explanation from a post she has filled with distinction for many years because the new pastor is not comfortable with women; a woman seminary student who cannot accept that her vocation to priestly ministry is simply denied without testing on the basis of her sex; a wife who completes the diaconate formation program with her husband who is then ordained while she is quietly dropped from consideration; a woman who is raising the child she conceived with a priest who continues to function in good standing while she bears the onus of single parenting and the ecclesial opprobrium of adultery; a parent whose child has been sexually molested by a cleric who is protected by the system. This type of experience, because it is so personally painful and is inflicted by church officials who claim to be acting in the name of God, frequently creates a crisis in the spirituality of the victims. They can no longer relate to the God who is presented and represented in this way and they are forced, through a crisis of faith, to find a new approach to God or even a new God to approach.

A fourth type of Christian feminist is the person who has become involved in the secular or post-Christian feminist spirituality movement and gradually finds it more satisfying, more life-giving, than participation in traditional patriarchal church life. She may continue to go to mass on Sunday and try to pray as before, but she finds herself overcome with anger at the sexist
language of the liturgy and the unrelieved maleness of ministry; she can no longer read or listen to the paternalistic pronouncements of the hierarchy exhorting her to accept with humble joy her second class status in the church; she is unable to read or meditate on a biblical text that suppresses her history and violates her sense of self-worth; ministering under the domination of clerics is becoming intolerable. Little by little she finds herself identifying with the community of feminists with whom she celebrates inclusive and empowering rituals and disassociating herself from the oppressive experiences of mainline Christian spirituality.

In summary, women who are both Christian and feminist come to see the relevance of feminism to their Christian spirituality in a number of different ways. For some, feminist insight comes as an addition to and an enrichment of a basically traditional experience of growth in the Christian spiritual life. For others, their feminist consciousness, raised in other circumstances or in relation to other issues, begins to enlighten their Christian spirituality and to call into question the assumptions of that spirituality insofar as these are patriarchal and oppressive. Others come to feminist spirituality out of an experience of ecclesiastical oppression, and still others out of an alienation that is intensified by its contrast with liberating feminist experience. What all of these paths have in common is that they lead directly into the area of spirituality, i.e. they touch not just institutional participation but the lived experience of the faith, the intimate place where the human person encounters the Holy Mystery of being, life, and love. This is why the issue of feminist spirituality is for most Catholic women whose consciousness has been raised a much more serious issue than questions of institutional reform. It raises questions of whether the God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition can be God for a self-respecting woman; whether Jesus is a savior or an oppressor of women; whether sacraments can be experienced as symbolic encounters with God or only as the sacred ritualization of male domination; whether one can find oneself as a person and grow healthily in a community in which one’s personhood and Christianity will never be fully recognized. The agony of the Catholic who is a feminist is experienced primarily in the area of spirituality.
B. Responses to the Effect of Feminism on the Spirituality of Catholics

No matter how the Catholic woman who is a feminist comes to see the connection between her feminism and her Catholic spirituality, seeing the connection will present at the very least a major challenge in the area of faith life and in all probability a major crisis.

One response to the crisis, and one which is becoming, unfortunately, ever more common, is abandonment of the Christian tradition. Raised feminist consciousness makes the person simply unable to absorb the incessant spiritual abuse of a resolutely patriarchal institution and she opts for her personhood, her self-respect, and her continuing spiritual growth which she realizes cannot be pursued in such an oppressive environment. Such feminists often refer to themselves as post-Christian, indicating that their roots are in the Christian tradition and that their feminist position is not neutral in relation to that tradition. But they no longer consider themselves Christians and no longer recognize the claim of the Christian community or institution upon them.

The responses with which I am most concerned in this chapter, however, are those of feminists who do not leave, or at least have not yet left the institution even though many of these admit that remaining is a daily painful choice. There seem to be at least two general groups of women who are both Christian and feminist: 1) those who are basically within the mainstream of the Christian tradition and whose spirituality remains recognizably Christian but who are involved in a continuous and radical criticism of the tradition; 2) those who are still formally within the institutional church but who have, to a large extent, relocated their spirituality into what has been named “womenchurch.” These two groups are by no means totally distinct, and most Christian women who are feminists probably have some affiliation with both. I am distinguishing them for the sake of clearer description and analysis.

1. Mainstream: Feminist Catholics

For purposes of clarity I will call the first group “feminist Catholics,” making Catholic the substantive and feminist a modi-
These feminists are usually women who have spent most of their lives developing a personal spirituality within the Catholic Christian tradition. Theirs is not a purely institutional spirituality, a matter of accepting church teaching, keeping church laws, and “practicing the faith” according to current church norms.

These women, many of whom are or were members of religious congregations, have developed a deep personal prayer life nourished by prolonged meditation on the scriptures that has formed in them a Christ-consciousness which is now integral to their personalities. Often this Christ-consciousness has been deeply marked by a personally appropriated study of one or another of the church’s great spiritual traditions and/or personalities, such as Benedictine liturgical spirituality or Teresian contemplative spirituality. These women responded with spiritual joy and enthusiasm to the renewal of sacramental and liturgical life in the conciliar period and were delighted to replace the somewhat wooden and impersonal preached retreats of their youth with intense experiences of personal growth in solitary directed retreats. Spiritual vitality overflowed in their adult years in committed and energetic ministry which became more and more creative as the decline in numbers of clergy and a renewed ecclesiology conspired to open previously clerical ministries to the non-ordained.

In short, the feminists in this first group are people with mature, personally appropriated spiritualities. Their spirituality was born within and nourished by the Catholic tradition. Jesus is central to their faith life which is trinitarian and communal, and their ministry is an integral expression of their spiritual lives. Christianity, specifically in its Catholic incarnation, is not merely an institutional affiliation of which they can divest themselves like a person leaving her country club, or an ideological commitment which one might lay aside by conviction like a Marxist leaving the Communist Party, or even a cherished vocation which one might surrender for a greater good like a teacher retiring in order to raise a child. These people do not belong to the Catholic Church; they are Catholics. And their Catholic identity is constituted much more by their spirituality, their lived experience of the faith, than by institutional affiliation. Even if these feminists chose to sever their institutional connection they would find it virtually
impossible to de-Catholicize their spirituality because Catholicity constitutes that spirituality in a fundamental way.

While it is certainly not possible to give a single description of the spiritual journey of such a large and diverse group of people, it might be possible to suggest, in a general way, the effect of heightened feminist consciousness on such women and the ways in which the encounter of their two commitments, viz. Catholicism and feminism, influences their spirituality. One way to organize this description is to talk of the inner and the outer faces of the experience.

Feminist consciousness, once raised, can only deepen. Consciousness-raising makes it impossible to ever "go home again." Once sensitized to the reality and the effects of patriarchy, one can only become ever more aware of its pervasiveness, more convinced of its destructiveness, more resistant to its influence on oneself and one's world. The feminist Catholic may begin with a mildly disturbing realization that the religious language of her tradition is heavily sexist, that she is being victimized in her ministry by the irrational fear and hatred of women that has been bred into an all-male, celibate clergy, that the God-imaging in the tradition is overwhelmingly masculine, that she is being restricted in totally unnecessary ways in the exercise of her sacramental life because of her sex. But once she has begun to see, begun the critical process of analysis, she will necessarily gradually be overwhelmed by the extent, the depth, and the violence of the institutional church's rejection and oppression of women. This precipitates the inward crisis which the feminist Catholic inevitably faces: a deep, abiding, emotionally draining anger that, depending on her personality, might run the gamut from towering rage to chronic depression.

This experience, which must be distinguished from the episodic anger we all experience in the face of frustrations or everyday mistreatment, should probably be called existential anger. It is not a temporary emotion but a state of being. Members of oppressed races and social classes know this experience well. Waking up in the morning angry and going to bed at night angry, especially for a person who has been socialized to women's responsibility for keeping peace in family and community and who has learned from childhood that a good Christian does not even feel, much less express anger, is a personally shattering experi-
ence. There are no categories or techniques in the repertoire of Christian spirituality for understanding or dealing with existential anger.\textsuperscript{38}

The onslaught of existential anger faces the feminist Catholic with a new and all-embracing spiritual agenda for which the tradition offers little help. The data of the experience are conflicting. In her heart the feminist Catholic knows that her anger is not only justified but mandatory, just as was Jesus’ anger at the oppressive hypocrisy of the clergy of his day, but this does not allay the guilt that arises from a lifetime of socialization and indoctrination about the unacceptability of this passion. At some deep level she believes in the Catholic faith tradition, but she sees more and more clearly that every aspect of it is not just tainted but perverted by the evil of patriarchy. It is not that the tradition has some problems; the tradition is the problem. She wants to hope that institutional purification and conversion are possible, but there is very little evidence that the male guardians of the patriarchal establishment have any intention of even addressing the problem. She wishes she could focus her anger on institutional arrangements and doctrinal positions, but the source of her suffering and the cause of her anger are most often real people, usually males in power positions who really cannot be honestly excused on the grounds of stupidity or ignorance because they \textit{do} know what they are doing. These people are simultaneously her personal oppressors and those for whose salvation Jesus died.

Not only are the data of the situation conflicting but the behavioral alternatives, at times, are all simultaneously unacceptable or ineffective. Walking out of offensive liturgies not only deprives her of sacramental experience but usually has little effect on the offending presider; but remaining only enrages her and confirms the offender in his oppressive practice. Expressing her anger to males who are sufficiently sensitized to the issue to understand what she is saying risks alienating potential allies; but expressing it to those who most need to hear it is a waste of time; and not expressing it at all is psychologically dangerous. Furthermore, the institutional powers are in agreement that a woman accused of “being angry,” like the woman once accused of “being a witch,” can be disposed of with impunity. Thus, expressing her anger can cost her her job, her reputation, and any leverage she
might have for bringing about change, while repressing her anger destroys her own integrity and psychological balance and makes her an accomplice in the oppression of her sisters.

While these descriptions are indicative rather than exhaustive, they should suffice to make the point. The feminist Catholic is in the sociological position in the church of the person of color in South African society. Sexual apartheid works exactly like racial apartheid. Oppression, frustration, discouragement, and hopelessness fuel an existential anger that is overwhelming, unquenchable, and utterly exhausting. The spiritual agenda of the feminist Catholic often consists primarily in searching for some constructive way to deal with existential anger, to become in her own way a spiritual Nelson Mandela or Rosa Parks or Joan of Arc.

A Carmelite, Constance FitzGerald, in a widely read article entitled "Impasse and the Dark Night," has suggested a way of conceptualizing, in the mystical categories of the Carmelite contemplative tradition, the experience of being totally blocked that is central to the existential anger of many feminist Catholics. Carolyn Osiek, in her book Beyond Anger, has tried to suggest ways to both affirm the anger and to use it without becoming paralyzed by it. Elsewhere I have suggested that women’s experience might be a resource for a renewed theology of the cross as well as for an appropriation of ministerial gifts.

These psychological and spiritual resources, some explicitly Christian and religious, some therapeutic, some sociological, are gradually emerging as feminist Catholics share their experiences of alienation and search for a way out. Two major fora for this sharing that have proved immensely strengthening for many feminist Catholics are spiritual direction, especially with a feminist woman director, and support groups in which women come together to strengthen one another in suffering, to strategize for change, and to celebrate both traditional Catholic liturgies and alternative rituals. Their experience is not unlike that of the earliest Jewish Christians who, while continuing to participate in temple and synagogue, also met together in their homes to share and celebrate their Christian identity and faith which could not find expression in the Jewish assembly. Years of intense living of Christian spirituality has strengthened these women in their con-
viction that there are resources within them for living even the passion and crucifixion of ecclesial patriarchy and that resurrection is worth their hope.

The outward expression of feminist Catholic spirituality usually takes the form of active commitment to ecclesiastical reform. Many of these women are active in the Women’s Ordination Conference, Catholics Speak Out, the Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church, Mary’s Pence, and other groups involved in ongoing challenge to the institution. Often they serve as well on diocesan pastoral councils, associations of religious and/or lay women, and advisory groups to church leaders.

Feminist Catholics in the academy are involved in a full-scale revisionist criticism of the Catholic tradition. Women scholars in church history, pastoral theology, biblical studies, systematic theology, sacramental theology, and moral theology are creating an alternative body of theological reflection which serious theologians can no longer ignore. They are demonstrating that what has been blithely regarded as “the tradition” of the church is, at most, half the tradition. Church history is not the history of the church but of what men have preserved of male experience for male purposes. Much that the hierarchy would like to present as simply “theology” is the local theology of those in power often developed for ideological ends. Biblical interpretation has been done almost exclusively by exegetes wearing, unconsciously but really, sexual blinders. And while moral theology has been developed by male celibates unenlightened by the contribution of at least half of those who lived that morality, pastoral theology has been distorted by the exclusion of the ministerial experience of half the church.

Feminist Catholics, especially those directly involved in pastoral ministry, are pouring immense energy into the reform of life in the grassroots communities of the church. They are refusing to tolerate gender exclusive language in daily discourse or liturgical celebration; they are taking effective action, sometimes even legal action, to protect their rights against clerical privilege and the arbitrary use of hierarchical power; they are changing the dominative procedures of the ecclesiastical workplace in the direction of feminist models of cooperation and participation; they are building alternative models of religious community.
Feminist Catholic parents and teachers are committed to raising the next generation of Catholics as feminists. They want the boys they deal with to eschew anything, including the ordained ministry, from which their sisters are excluded. They want girls to recognize their exclusion whenever and wherever it occurs and to protest it loudly and effectively. Above all, they want the girls and boys they are raising and educating to experience themselves as equals and to treat each other that way so that there will not be replacements for the generation of patriarchs that is dying.

What all of this activity has in common is that it is constructive expenditure of energy for the transformation of the church. Not only does it channel the existential anger with which feminist Catholics wrestle interiorly, but it is having an effect. The concerns of feminists can no longer be trivialized or ignored by church officials. Although it often seems that no progress has been made and no change seems likely, the extent and depth of change is actually astounding when one realizes that the Catholic feminist movement is less than thirty years old. Institutional arrangements have not been modified in any significant way. But the foundations on which those arrangements rest have been seriously undermined and the flow of personnel, money, and commitment necessary to sustain those arrangements is drying up. Like the Berlin Wall and South African apartheid, the church’s patriarchal sexism appears immovable, but it is built on the sand of oppression, and history is on the side of liberation and justice.

2. Womenchurch

A second group of women who are both feminist and Catholic are those we might call Catholic feminists. Here the substantive is feminist and the adjective is Catholic. The primary social location and focus of personal commitment of these women is to feminism, and this is what characterizes and determines the extent and the quality of their participation in the Catholic tradition. Most of these women find their spiritual home not in Catholic parishes or alternative communities but in the movement called “Womenchurch.”

Womenchurch defines itself as church, i.e. as a community of religiously engaged and motivated people who are women-
identified. Their starting point is the experience of women, not any particular institutional religious tradition, although the movement originated among Catholic women moving beyond the goal of ordination into a self-understanding as an exodus community, a community not in exile from the church in sectarianism or schism but the community of church in exodus from patriarchy. Their goal is the full personhood of women, not the maintaining or improving of the religious institution or the saving of disincarnate souls, their own or anyone else’s. The criterion by which they judge the genuinely religious quality of any experience, project, or process is whether it is life-giving for women.

Women in the Womenchurch movement now come from many different religious traditions, Christian and other, and from no tradition, although most of its members probably are or were originally Catholic and most Catholic women in the movement remain Catholics. Many Catholic women who experience themselves primarily as feminists but who have not abandoned institutional affiliation with Catholicism find themselves most at home in Womenchurch settings. And many feminist Catholics, such as those described in the previous section, participate in and are nourished by Womenchurch events even though their primary religious affiliation remains the institutional church.

The spirituality of Womenchurch is essentially feminist spirituality rather than the spirituality of mainline Christianity. Consequently, Womenchurch easily brings together for story-sharing, analysis, strategizing, political action, and ritual feminists who share a deep concern for religion but no common ecclesiastical or cultural history. Catholics, Protestants, Buddhists, native Americans, and devotees of pagan Wicca; whites and women of color; ordained women, lay women, and women religious all come together in Womenchurch on the basis of shared feminist theory and praxis which is the fundamental shaper of the reflection, action, and ritual of the community.

We might illustrate the difference between feminist Catholics and Catholics in Womenchurch as follows. A group of feminist Catholics might celebrate eucharist without an ordained presider but they would probably use the basic format of Catholic eucharist and they would be concerned about the question of how their celebration is related to the sacramental tradition of the church.
A group of Catholic feminists at a Womenchurch event, if they chose to celebrate eucharist (which is less likely because they would have trouble with its patriarchal presuppositions no matter who presided and because they would be unlikely to be in an all-Catholic group), would probably not be concerned with that question. They would be much more likely to develop a ritual, perhaps involving the sharing of a communal meal of bread and wine, which they would not see themselves as “borrowing” from a male church which owns the sacraments but would see as an organic expression of their own power to celebrate their spirituality.

Characteristic, then, of Catholic feminists is their primary self-location in the church of women, i.e. Womenchurch, whatever other institutional religious affiliations they might maintain. Second, their spirituality is essentially feminist rather than Christian or non-Christian, although it is usually enriched by those elements of the Catholic tradition which they still find meaningful. Its primary characteristics are those we discussed above under the heading of feminist spirituality, viz. non-institutional location, rootedness in women’s experience rather than ecclesiastical tradition, a profound concern to rehabilitate the bodily while reclaiming the spirit for women and thus healing the dichotomous dualisms characteristic of patriarchy, ecological sensitivity, a deep commitment to social transformation as integral to personal transformation, and a concern that all of their interaction be characterized by interconnectedness expressed in full participation, circularity of organization and shared leadership, artistic beauty, inclusiveness, and joy.

Catholic feminists, along with religiously committed feminists from other traditions, are not content to await, actively or passively, the reform of the institutional church. They have undertaken to develop rituals which not only do not oppress them but will give them life and hope. They do not hesitate to rewrite the stories of the tradition from the standpoint of women’s experience, to repudiate the stories from the tradition which marginalize, demonize, or degrade women, and to write new stories which carry the non-patriarchal content of the tradition in ways that are meaningful for women. These feminists are also not waiting for the institutional church to ask for their opinion about or to reform the official positions on moral matters that affect
women. They are not controlled by guilt in relation to the institution, and many have taken anti-establishment positions on such issues as contraception, divorce and remarriage, homosexuality, and abortion. In short, they are busy being church rather than trying to reform the male establishment which is usually regarded as church. However, they both hope for and expect that men of good will will eventually join them in the reshaping of a church for all believers. Thus their separatism is neither total nor ideological but practical and provisional, although no one in the movement thinks that the reintegration will happen anytime soon.

C. Catholic and Feminist: The Future of Women’s Spirituality in the Catholic Church

While some women who are both Catholic and feminist could locate themselves clearly in one or the other of the two positions described above, many others would find it very difficult to do so. Depending on the situation, the issue, the occasion, or the participants, they would identify primarily with their Catholic tradition or primarily with their feminist affiliation. Against the background of the descriptions given above I would suggest two conclusions about the future of women’s spirituality in the Catholic Church.

1. Complementarity of Feminist Catholicism and Catholic Feminism

First, feminist Catholics and Catholic feminists are making a complementary contribution to the transformation of both Catholic spirituality and the institutional church. In the area of spirituality it seems clear that the interior life of feminist Catholics is the “place” where the fierce inner battle over ecclesiastical apartheid is being lived in all its agonizing intensity. The church is certainly involved in an institutional power struggle that is theological and political. But, as with every authentic liberation struggle, at its heart lies a spiritual struggle. In every such struggle the victims must find a way between the Scylla of death-dealing oppression by the power structure they are fighting and the Charbydis of soul-destroying hatred that would make political victory meaningless. Community support is essential in this struggle, but ultimately
individuals must face, live through, and emerge from the ultimate threat to their selfhood that the struggle constitutes. Engaging this inner struggle, finding within themselves the truth-power that will make genuine conversion possible, is a major contribution to feminist Catholics whose spirituality has been subsumed into this paschal experience of death in hope of new life.

However, in the passage through the dark night of external oppression and inner desolation it is crucial that the imagination be enlivened with new possibilities. The exiles must have hope, and they cannot sing the songs of Sion in the Babylon of ecclesiastical violence. What Catholic feminists, especially those who are active in Womenchurch, are contributing to the spirituality of women who are both Catholic and feminist is a whole new repertoire of songs, new liturgical forms for the imagination, a prophetic image of a new church. These women have bravely moved ahead and begun to live what they believe, not waiting for permission or until the rest of the church is ready to move. And their living is an assurance that there is reality in the hope of those who live the exile. If exile is the primary self-image for feminist Catholics, exodus is the primary self-image for Catholic feminists.

In fact, there is much mutually empowering interchange between the two groups. While feminist Catholics may sometimes fear that their Womenchurch sisters have “thrown out the baby with the bath” and set sail for a non-existent promised land and Catholic feminists may sometimes deplore what looks like fearful conservatism in their still “churched” sisters, the two groups are increasingly respectful of each other. Not only is internecine struggle among feminists damaging to the movement; it is contrary to the very inclusiveness and connectedness that feminists want to promote and it plays directly into the patriarchal agenda of separating women from women. There is more than one kind of suffering, more than one kind of fear, and more than one kind of courage. The gifts of all must meet the weaknesses of each as the struggle continues.

In regard to the institutional church all women who are both Catholic and feminist desire passionately the conversion of the institution from the sin of sexism and know that this requires a full and final repudiation of patriarchy. Feminist Catholics are struggling to find within the tradition the resources for bringing about
this massive transformation. The work of feminist Catholic theologians, ministers, and parents toward this end is carried on in the firm hope that one can use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house and that from the debris of the house of ecclesiastical patriarchy we will be able to construct the home of equal discipleship within which the reign of God can be realized.

By contrast, Catholic feminists tend, if not to give up completely on the institution, to regard it as not worth their life’s blood. For them the best way to bring about a new church is to start being that church now. If the real life energy of the church is diverted into the swelling torrent of feminist spirituality, the patriarchal institution will soon be a dried up river bed, an arid trace of a lifeform that refused to change and so remains as a more or less interesting crack in the surface of history. Like other lifeforms that could not change, the patriarchal church will become an interesting historical fossil while the real church moves into the future as a discipleship of equals.

Again, the two approaches are not so much contradictory as complementary. The common aim is a new religious dwelling for the disciples of Jesus. Whether one rebuilds on the ancestral site or buys new land in a distant location is a prudential decision. In either case, a pre-condition of the new construction is that the old hovel of patriarchy must come down because it is unfit for human habitation. What the two groups of feminists in the church have in common is their diagnosis of the problem and their commitment to solving it. While feminist Catholics bring pressure to bear for transformation from within, Catholic feminists are serving notice that if the transformation is not undertaken in earnest, and soon, increasing numbers of believers will look elsewhere for spiritual nourishment.

2. Spirituality as the Place of Crisis for Women Catholics Who Are Feminists

The second conclusion I would draw from the foregoing reflections on the spirituality of women Catholics who are feminists is that spirituality, the lived experience of the faith, is the place of crisis for women whose consciousness is raised as well as for the church as institution.
What began for most women as a problem with the institution has become in recent years a problem of faith. When the first Women’s Ordination Conference met in Detroit in 1975 the women who attended were focused on the transformation of the power arrangements in the institutional church specifically through the admission of women to orders. By the time the second Women’s Ordination Conference met in Baltimore three years later, the women who attended were already aware that the “add women and stir” recipe for church reform was totally inadequate. Since 1978 women have come to realize that, in reality, we are not talking about how to organize the institution. We are talking about whether the God of Judaeo-Christian revelation is the true God or just men-writ-large to legitimate their domination; whether Jesus, an historical male, is or can be messiah and savior for those who are not male; whether what the church has called sacraments are really encounters with Christ or tools of male ritual abuse of women; whether what we have called church is a community of salvation or simply a male power structure. In other words, because the issue has moved from the realm of politics to the realm of spirituality, the stakes are now very high.

IV. CONCLUSION

At no time in its history, except perhaps at the time of the Protestant reformation, has the church faced a crisis of such proportions. However, the Protestant reformation involved a relatively small segment of the church in the tiny theater of western Europe. Feminism involves over half the church in every location in the world. All of the mothers of future Catholics are women and, despite the exclusion of women from orders, by far the majority of the church’s professional ministers are women. While not all Catholic women are feminists, time and historical process is on the side of rising liberationist consciousness, not on the side of oppressive ideology. The church as institution cannot survive the final disillusionment of women although women, as church, can probably survive the demise of the patriarchal institution. The conclusion is that because the issue is in the arena of spirituality it must be taken with utter seriousness. If anything is to be learned
from the Protestant reformation it is that when reform is urgent it may be deferred but it cannot finally be avoided and the price of deferral can be disastrously high.

However, precisely because the feminist issue within the church has resituated itself in the realm of spirituality, there is some reason to hope that the institutional church may be able to meet this monumental challenge to grow from a male power structure imprisoning the word of God into a fitting locus for the epiphany of the reign of God in this world. Women who are feminists and Catholics bring to the church not only a powerful critique and the very real possibility of massive withdrawal but enormous resources for transformation. They bring an image of a renewed church that is derived from the gospels rather than from imperial Rome, the feudal middle ages, and the divine right monarchies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They also bring a spiritual strength tempered in intense suffering and a loyalty that has survived twenty centuries of exclusion and oppression. To this vision of faith and this strength of hope they add a love of Christ, of the church itself, and of the world that has fueled a burning commitment to ministry since the earliest days of the church’s history and which is still unquenched despite what raised consciousness has enabled them to see.

The feminism of Catholic women is both the church’s ultimate and most serious challenge and its best hope for a future worthy of its gospel roots. When the male disciples of Jesus returned from the town of Samaria where they had gone to buy lunch they found Jesus in deep theological conversation with a woman. We are told that they were shocked and could not imagine what Jesus wanted from a woman or why he would bother to talk to her. But they knew better than to challenge Jesus’ designs whose horizons were obviously well beyond their culture-bound ken. So the woman, like other apostles who left boats and nets and father and tax stall to follow Jesus and announce the good news, left her water jar and went off to announce Jesus and to present her fellow townspeople with the only question that really matters: “Can this be the Christ?” Women today are asking this same question of the institutional church. Can you recognize in us, in our persons and in our experience, the image of Christ, and will you choose to act accordingly?
NOTES

2. Schneiders, “Theology and Spirituality,” 266.
10. Carol P. Christ has been a primary figure in the theoretical development of feminist spirituality both through her literary analyses of women’s literature of transformation and through her work on the function of “the goddess” in women’s psychological development through the appropriation and inner divine power and outward political power. For examples of her work in these areas, see her essays, “Margaret Atwood: The Surfacing of Women’s Spiritual Quest and Vision,” *Signs* 2 (Winter 1976) 316–330; “Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections,” in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, 273–287.
11. See, for example, the explanations of this fundamental character and agenda of feminist spirituality by Shelley Finson, “Feminist


15. Ruether, in “Feminism and Religious Faith: Renewal or New Creation?” 9, explains this process, and its continuation in Christianity, as follows: “... the more one studies different religious traditions and their early roots, the more one is tempted to suggest that religion itself is essentially a male creation. The male, marginalized from direct participation in the great mysteries of gestation and birth, asserted his superior physical strength to monopolize leisure and culture and did so by creating ritual expressions that duplicated female gestating and birthing roles, but in such a way as to transfer the power of these primary mysteries to himself. This would perhaps explain why mother-goddess figures predominate in early religion, but do not function to give women power. This ritual sublimation of female functions, as transfer of spiritual power over life to males, is continued in Christianity. The central mysteries of Baptism and the Eucharist duplicate female roles in gestation, birth and nourishment, but give the power over the spiritualized expression of these functions to males, and only males who eschew sex and reproduction.”

16. Gray, *Patriarchy as a Conceptual Trap*, 26. (This citation is in italics in the original text.)

17. For an accessible but well-developed treatment of Wisdom as a feminine personification of God in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, see Susan Cady, Marian Ronan, and Hal Taussig, *Sophia: The Future of


19. Some feminist spirituality involves a lyrical celebration of the bodily as sacred. See, e.g., Starhawk (Miriam Simos), “Witchcraft and Women’s Culture,” Christ and Plaskow, eds., Womanspirit Rising, 263. See also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Feminist Spirituality, Christian Identity, and Catholic Vision,” Christ and Plaskow, eds., Womanspirit Rising, 127–138, for the connection between goddess spirituality, which we will take up below, and the reclaiming of the bodily power to give life in the image of divinity.


21. I have attempted to distinguish between divinity presented in feminine form and particular feminine personifications of divinity by referring to the former as “Goddess” (without the article and capitalized, as we use the term God) and to the latter as “the goddess” or “a goddess” (with article and in lower case, as we would speak of the gods).

22. In answer to the question of whether Goddess is simply “female power writ large” or a real entity, Carol Christ, in “Why Women Need the Goddess,” Christ and Plaskow, eds., Womanspirit Rising, 278–279, replies that different women answer that question differently. Some see Goddess as a real divine protectress to whom one can pray. Others see her primarily as symbol of either life-death-rebirth or of the beauty and legitimacy of female power.

23. Miriam Simos, who is a leading practitioner and theorist of witchcraft and who is known by her wiccan name of Starhawk, provides an excellent explanation of this ancient religious tradition and its fate in Christian Europe in “Witchcraft and Women’s Culture,” in Christ and Plaskow, eds., Womanspirit Rising, 259–268.

24. Ibid. 261–262.

25. Ibid. 263.

26. Rosemary Radford Ruether, in “Feminist Theology and Spirituality,” in Christian Feminism: Visions of a New Humanity, Judith L. Weidman, ed. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984) 11, puts it well: “Feminist theology starts with the affirmation that God, the ground of
being and new being, underlies, includes, supports, and promotes female personhood as much as male personhood. Woman is not subordinate or ‘included under,’ but equivalent as imago dei.”

27. An important contribution to this discussion is Christine Downing’s *The Goddess: Mythological Images of the Feminine* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).


30. See, e.g., Christ, “Margaret Atwood,” in Christ and Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising*, 329–330, who insists, in regard to menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth, that “it seems to me far wiser for women as persons and as critics to name the power which resides in our bodies and our potential closeness to nature positively, and to use this new naming to transform the pervasive cultural and religious devaluation of nature and the body.”

Purvis, in “Christian Feminist Spirituality,” 504–514, names “embodiment” as one of the major characteristics of feminist spirituality. It involves a rejection of male fear of sexuality and an embracing of the erotic as a source of passion for union in love, for social justice, and for encountering God.

Schüssler Fiorenza, describing the effect of goddess consciousness, says in “Feminist Spirituality, Christian Identity, and Catholic Vision,” in Christ and Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising*, 127–138: “The Goddess is the giver and nurturer of life, the dispenser of love and happiness. Woman as her image is therefore not ‘the other’ of the divine. She is not body and carnality in opposition to spirit and soul, not the perpetrator of evil and rebellion. Being a woman, living in sisterhood under the aegis of the Goddess, brings us in touch with the creative, healing, life-giving power at the heart of the world.”

31. Cf. Streeter, “The Goddess: Power and Paradox,” 9; Riley, *Transforming Feminism*, 97, says, “For radical feminism, the primary root [of war] is men’s will to dominate women. From this root come all other forms of domination. The will to dominate appears subtly in the patriarchal social structures and the cultural ideology that supports those structures. It appears overtly in all acts of violence: rape, torture, sexual abuse, incest, pornography, domestic violence, the destruction of the earth. It finds its ultimate expression in war. . . .”


34. I suspect most feminists would not recognize as feminist the approach taken by Mary E. Giles, in *The Feminist Mystic and Other Essays on Women and Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 5. Giles objects to much of contemporary feminism and reveals her own approach, which most feminists would label at least anachronistic, when she says, on p. 30, “Catherine and Teresa were free, joyous, loving and creative, alive in and through their being women. As such they were feminists.”

35. One can see this kind of development, for example, in the work of Joann Wolski Conn who, in her first major work on spirituality, *Women’s Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development* (New York: Paulist, 1986) 8–27, was hesitant to use the term “feminist” and preferred to speak of “women’s spirituality.” However, she has since become quite explicitly feminist in her treatment of spirituality. See e.g., “Discipleship of Equals: Past, Present and Future?” *Horizons* 14 (Fall 1987) 231–261.


37. A very good personal account of this type of journey is given by Riley in *Transforming Feminism*, 1–11.


44. For a good treatment of the impact of feminist scholarship on the theological academy see Carr, *Transforming Grace*, 63–94.

45. This fact has been recognized by the undertaking by the U.S. bishops of the writing of a pastoral letter on women’s concerns. See National Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Partners in the Mystery of Redemption: A Pastoral Response to Women’s Concerns for Church and Society,” *Origins* 17 (April 21, 1988) 758–788.
