

For many women, the good news of the gospel of Christ has been tainted by sexism and oppression. Women and their roles have been relegated to positions that are subservient to men, in spite of God's original intent of equality between the sexes.

Those who support this hierarchical ordering of the sexes generally cite Genesis 2 and 3 to support their positions. Traditional translations assert that the woman was created from man's rib (2:18-25) and man was subsequently responsible for naming the woman (v.23). When the woman was yielded to temptation and then offered the forbidden fruit to her husband (3:17), God punished the woman by commanding, "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you" (3:16 NIV). For this reason, many church advocates therefore determine, based on this misreading of the text, that women are inferior to men. To further strengthen their belief in male superiority, proponents also use the work of fourth century theologian Augustine to further strengthen their position. Augustine's doctrine of Original Sin is centered on Genesis 2 and 3, and at its base blames the woman for introducing sin and suffering into the world, along with temptation and sexuality.

According to Charles Ess, author of *Violence Against Women and Children*, Augustine was possibly "the single most important source in Western tradition for the image of Eve as (sexual) temptress and cause of sin" (Ess 1995, 100). He credits Augustine's work with powerfully shaping and defining Christian belief in both the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions. According to Augustine and his successors, Pauline theology of the fall obliterated human freedom to choose good. Consequently, humans became alienated from their own good human potential, giving rise to the need for propitiation through the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Therefore, "the scapegoating of Eve as the cause of the fall of Adam makes all women, as her daughters, guilty for the radical impotence of 'man' in the face of evil, which is paid for by the death of Christ" (Reuther 1983,167)! These words of Latin Church Father Tertullian illustrate women's culpability in the fall,

*You are the Devil's gateway. You are the unsealer of the forbidden tree. You are the first deserter of the divine law. You are she who persuaded him whom the Devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image man. On account of your desert, that death, even the Son of God had to die (de Cult Fem 1.1)*

Augustine successfully made this interpretation a foundational element of what becomes the orthodox doctrine of Original Sin. In doing so, Augustine embeds in Christian orthodoxy an image of the primordial woman, which serves as a myth justifying the subordination of the female. Variations of this Augustinian perspective was "accepted with slight variations by the Latin theological tradition found in Thomas Aquinas and was continued in the Reformation theologies of Martin Luther and John Calvin" (Ruether 1998, 4).

While proponents of hierarchical and patriarchal systems usually cite only Genesis 2:18-25 which details the account of woman's creation from man's rib, they fail to mention this parallel account of the creation in Gen 1:26-27 where God's intention for creation is clearly stated, "Then God said, 'let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (NRSV).

This first creation account clearly depicts equality between the sexes; both male and female had dominion over created things, and both "image" their creator, God. Woman was created to be neither subordinate nor inferior to man, but equal in authority over all that was created. Consequently, the domination of men over women is in no way God's original intent for creation or the by-product of female sin but rather reflects the proclivity to "domination that was and continues to be the primary expression of sin" (Plaskow 1980, 7). Since domination and the subordination of God's creation by others, is sin, the role of Christ in God's good news of salvation for women entails, restoration of the self as the *imago dei*; and the transformation of, the church and other social and legal systems that have denied women rights and perpetuated the subordination and oppression of others. As such, this paper will explore how patriarchal attitudes embedded in Christian Orthodoxy, created an environment ripe for the oppression and subjugation of women; In addition, this paper will examine sin as the subordination of those created in God's image, and as injustice, (particularly, the injustice of sexism and the oppression of women). Finally, this paper will discuss salvation from sin in light of Christ the iconoclastic liberator.

Sexism and the oppression of women is not a 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon, it is as old as recorded history. Even our Judeo-Christian biblical texts, contain imagery and metaphors that appear to authorize and legitimize sexist human power, which often culminate in the subjugation of and sexual cruelty toward, women. Prophets such as Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel often used a metaphor of family relations designed to get the attention of kings, priests, scribes, merchants, and other prophets. One metaphor that seemed particularly effective was the metaphor of the promiscuous wife. The prophets used this metaphor to get their audiences to see parallels between their fate and that of the impure women. In using this metaphor, the prophets anticipated the patriarchal attitudes and assumptions of its primarily male audience and emphasized male power and female subservience.

In her speaking on the kinds of audiences that would be receptive to the rhetoric of Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, Renita J. Weems, Associate Professor of Hebrew Bible at Vanderbilt Divinity School contends that the prophets audiences were largely, if not exclusively male. She further adds that, "only a male audience that never perceived rape or sexual abuse as a real threat," could

be expected to hear the kinds of vulgar descriptions of women, sexual degradation, assault, violation, and torture that the prophets described and not recoil in fear (Weems 1995, 41). In ancient Hebrew culture, women's livelihood, including their sexuality, was specifically positioned in the hands of men. In fact, "Hebrew women were expected to be modest, chaste, industrious, deferring, and willing to submit to male authority" (Weems 1995, 43). Any women not adopting or fitting into this ideal was viewed as a threat to the entire social order of their community. Prophets used particularly metaphorical language, which played on the fears of men concerning women's sexuality and their belief that women somehow pose a threat to male honor and status.

One instance of this fear is the imagery of the promiscuous wife where the prophets play on male fantasies and fears of women's sexuality. This imagery was based on a paradigm that viewed, "women's bodies as mysterious and dangerous and perceives women's sexuality as deviant and threatening to the status and well-being of men" (Weems 1995, 41). As this example illustrates, the marriage metaphor takes for granted men's power over women, particularly their sexuality and assumes the actions of men were somehow parallel to God's actions. Although not all men hearing the voices of the prophets were encumbered by these fears and fantasies, some may have been completely disturbed by the imagery as they found it obscene. Even so, by use of the marriage metaphor (particularly the metaphor of the promiscuous wife), prophets expected their audience to sympathize with the rights and responsibilities that came with male power and dominance and to understand the threat that women could pose to male honor.

The book of Hosea clearly demonstrates this through his accusations of adultery toward Gomer his wife. For example, his proposed penalty for her betrayal, are indicative of the power held by Hebrew men to decide the fate of their wives. Hosea threatened to strip his wife naked and kill her with thirst (2:3, 5), barricade her with thorns and a wall presumably in her own home (2:6), and then take back everything he had given her and leave her naked and empty (2:9). There is no question of Hosea's brutal dominance over his wife in this relationship. Hosea was not restricted by any temporal laws of that era and he could have either shown mercy, by granting a divorce or become more cruel and violent by having her subjected to various types of public abuse. Of course, the prophets' foremost desire in using the marriage metaphor was for the male ruling class to discover the parallels in the divine command for the worship of the one God. Nevertheless, Hosea's treatment of his wife is often marginalized as Weems accurately acknowledges, "drawing analogies from the customs of marriage and sex seem to have played down the monstrous ways in which the husband punished his wife and emphasized the fact that he was justified in restoring his honor" (Weems 1995, 44).

Unlike Augustine's doctrine of Original Sin, Reinhold Niebuhr, author of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, (1964) articulates a convincing critique of

Pelagianism by arguing in his doctrine of sin, that human nature itself provided the occasion for sin. Consequently, sin was determined, “an inevitable but unnecessary concomitant of the human condition” (Hodgson and King 1985, 192). According to Niebuhr, three elements distinguished the Christian account of human nature from the modern view. First, Christianity through its doctrine of the *imago dei* affirms that humans can reach the heights of spiritual self-transcendence. Second, it insists that in spite of their self-transcendent abilities, humans remain weak, dependent, and finite creatures, involved in all the contingencies of the natural world. Finally, this creatureliness, is not evil in itself, however, the evil is the inevitable but not necessary, refusal to acknowledge creatureliness and dependence.

Hence, Niebuhr considered the religious dimension of sin to be man usurping the place of God, which eventuated in man’s rebellion against God. Furthermore, Niebuhr considered the moral and social dimensions of sin to be injustice. As a result, the ego, which falsely makes itself the center of existence in its pride and thirst for power, inevitably subordinates other life to its will and does injustice to other life. One of Niebuhr’s intentions in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* was to connect the biblical and distinctively Christian conception of sin as pride and self-love to the observable behavior of men. An illustration of this connection between sin as pride and self-love is nowhere more evident than in sexism, and the religious and social oppression of women. Even in Niebuhr’s analysis of sin as pride, his focus is primarily on the male psyche.

Consequently, feminist theologian and author of *Sex, Sin and Grace* Judith Plaskow, contends that Niebuhr’s, “representations of human sin as self-assertion, self-centeredness, and pride speak out of and to the experience of only half the human race” (Plaskow 1980, 1). Plaskow argues for a doctrine of sin, inclusive of the particularities of women’s temptations rather than positioning the male perspective of sin as universal truth. Furthermore, unlike male sin, the specific forms of feminine sin have a quality, rarely characterized by terms such as pride. On the contrary, terms such as dependence on others for one’s self-definition, tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence, and minimizing or negating the self, more appropriately describe women’s sins. In general, women are guided toward certain roles from the time they are born and taught to see these roles as expressing their true female nature. It would not be surprising, therefore, if the particular sin of women were the abdication of their freedom for the adoption of society’s view of themselves. For instance, Simone de Beauvoir in her introduction to *The Second Sex* (1961, xv) suggests that,

The failure of women ever to rebel against their lot is partially explained by certain advantages, which accrue to them from their status as “other”. The most obvious advantages, she says, are material ones; as long as they depend on men, women are spared the difficulty of providing for their own physical comfort. But more significant, the “otherness” of women also enables them to evade the necessity of having to justify and give meaning to their own lives. (Plaskow 1980, 64)

To the degree of women's acceptance of this status of "other" for its rewards and welcome relief from the burden of freedom, they are guilty of complicity in their own oppression; they sin. Lacking models of females who manage to be both women and persons, women and Christian women in particular often find it easier to drift into what is familiar. They do what is expected of them rather than take the "risk" of a freedom in which objectives and outcomes must be contrived without male assistance. In spite of women's complicity, sexism and oppression in any form is injustice and therefore sin, because they diminish the self as the *imago dei*, to a status of non-personhood. The acknowledgement of sexism as wrong, evil, and sinful brings about the complete collapse of the myths of female evil. The realization that "the social structures of the marginalization of women are unjust creates a fundamental *metanoia*, or turning around, from the perception of women as 'other' to the recognition of woman as equivalent human person" (Ruether 1983, 174). This *metanoia*, inevitably starts within woman herself, who successively demands recognition of woman's personhood from men as well.

Sexism as sin is based on distorted relationality. Therefore, "the objectification of woman as bearer of repressed and negative parts of the male psyche involves the distortion of the being of both males and females" (Ruether 1983, 174). For instance, men's failure to integrate into their own identity those suppressed capacities, which they project onto women; and women being denied as possessing those capacities for independent selfhood, decision-making, and critical intelligence monopolized by males. As this example illustrates, "sexism is a serious expression of human sinfulness, and of alienation from authentic existence" (Ruether, 1983, 193).

Living authentically was a priority with Jesus for all of God's creation. Accordingly, Jesus declares, "the thief comes only to steal kill and destroy; I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full" (NIV John 10:10). This full life or authentic existence is revealed in God's kingdom, for whose coming Jesus taught his followers to pray. In speaking of God's Kingdom, Rosemary Ruether, author of "*To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* explains the kingdom of God can be simply defined as "God's will done here on earth" (Hodgson and King 1985, 393). As such, the kingdom means the fulfillment of people's basic human physical and social needs, which include "food, shelter, remission of debts, including both the wrongs that we have done to others.

It also consists of releasing financial indebtedness that holds the poor in bondage to the rich, avoidance of the temptations that lead us to oppress one another, even in God's name, and, finally deliverance from evil." Here it suffices to note that Jesus seems to express a "radicalized view of the concept of a coming Reign of God as a time of the vindication of the poor and the oppressed" (Ruether 1983, 120). The poor and the oppressed are not viewed in nationalist terms as Israel, but rather as marginalized groups and classes within the Jewish world of his day. For Jesus, the Kingdom is neither nationalistic nor

'otherworldly.' The Reign of God is expected to happen on earth, as the Lord's Prayer makes evident. In other words, salvation for the oppressed and those in need is the restoration of God's "prophetic and redemptive activity taking place in the present-future; through people's present experiences and the new possibilities disclosed through those experiences" (Ruether 1983, 122). Jesus' vision of the kingdom excludes the oppression and subjugation of women.

In fact, the Kingdom of God concerns itself with doing justice and providing service to humanity. By becoming a servant of God, "one becomes freed of all bondage to human masters. Only then, as a liberated person, can one truly become 'servant of all,' giving one's life to liberate others rather than to exercise power and rule over them" (Ruether 1983, 122). For this purpose, Jesus provided his disciples a new model of leadership based on service to others, even service to the point of death. Jesus demonstrated this new model of leadership by washing his disciples' feet. Certainly, this act didn't mean Jesus was subservient to his disciples, but rather, it was reflective of how true power is revealed in loving service to others. Those who are poor, downcast, abused, mistreated, hungry, and thirsty, have a certain priority in God's work of redemption and reconciliation. Moreover, part of the signs of the kingdom is benevolence and grace where the lame walk, the captives are freed, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.

Jesus' interaction with the woman with the issue of blood discussed in Mark's gospel poignantly illustrates this observation. After the woman secretly touched Jesus' clothes and was healed of her "flow" the passage exclaims, "Then the woman knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering." (NIV Mark 5:33-34). This passage not only demonstrates the value Jesus placed on the woman it also reflects her unique form of redemption. For twelve years this woman was considered ritually unclean which would have excluded her from most social contact, subjecting her to ridicule and alienation. Undoubtedly, this woman, like most women, adopted society's view of herself thus, diminishing her capacity to reflect the *imago dei*.

In modern medicine and psychiatry, she may have suffered from what is classified in the APA Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders as "*Susto*, a term expressing deep despair" (Townes 1997, 30). *Susto* occurs when persons feel their souls have departed from them. They may feel empty and abandoned. *Susto* is usually associated with the loss of a loved one, or a frightening event. It is thought that the event makes the soul leave the body, resulting in unhappiness or even sickness. Feeling disconnected from what gives life may have caused the woman with the flow of blood to feel as though her very essence was lost. Losing her soul meant she also lost connection with God, others, and even herself. Losing her soul created alienation from the larger source of power within herself and more importantly, from life itself.

While she may have anticipated a future “otherworldly” redemption from her feelings of loss and alienation, Jesus welcomed reception of her touch and his acknowledgement of her as “daughter” reaffirmed her immediately as created in the image of God. As this passage illustrates, “something happened in Jesus ministry that suggested to some early Christians that gender relations had been changed by redemption” (Ruether 1998, 1). Jesus, unlike the religious and social systems of his day, rejected hierarchical and patriarchal systems that oppressed humanity, and particularly women. Jesus understood that, the domination of men over women was sinful, and that patriarchy was a sinful social system. This system failed to reflect the true will of God and the nature of women, “such theological constructions subvert God’s creation and distort human nature” (Ruether 1998, 8).

In his efforts to reverse the distorted social and religious systems of his day, Jesus the messianic prophet “proclaims his message as an iconoclastic critique of existing elites, particularly religious elites” (Hodgson and King, 1985, 394). Jesus also proclaimed an iconoclastic reversal of systems of religious status, those of hierarchy and patriarchy. His purpose was to create a new order where these systems, as a rule, are overcome: where the first shall be last and the last shall be first. In the iconoclastic reversal sayings, the reign is compared to incidental things such as “a mustard seed that grows into a sheltering bush (Mark 4:30-32; Matt. 13:31-32); like a leaven that a woman sows in a measure of flour that leavens the whole (Matt. 13:33; Luke 13:20-21); reversing the holiness of unleavened bread; like an old woman sweeping her floor to search for a lost coin (Luke 5:8-10); or a shepherd who uncharacteristically leaves his ninety-nine sheep to search for the one that is lost (Matt. 18:10-14; Luke 15:3-7)” (Ruether 1998, 19). Entering the reign of God reverses those patterns of oppression and elitism. The last shall be first; the tax collectors and the harlots will go into the reign of God before the chief priests and elders (Matt. 21:31).

Jesus role in God’s good news of redemption was also that of liberator. However, this liberation was not that of a military coup, a political crusade, or a strategy for economic or social change. On the contrary, “it was an immediately experienced liberation of the blind, the lame, lepers, those with bodily fluxes, those possessed by demons that caused madness and ‘fits,’ all those healed and restored to mental and physical health; also the ‘sinners,’ the prostitutes, tax collectors, and various impoverished people, all affirmed as God’s beloved children” (Ruether 1998, 18). All of these formerly hopeless ones, including women in every category - widows, prostitutes, those given to fits caused by demons, the bleeding, the bent over, and perhaps a Samaritan or a Canaanite - not only received healing, forgiveness, and hope, but gathered in a joyful banquet in which, by sharing with each other their small provisions, they created abundance together, so that twelve baskets were required to gather up all that remained after the feast (Mark 6:43; Matt. 14:20; Luke 9:17).

Such feasting with the “unholy,” as one with Jesus and his disciples, observing no separation of clean and unclean persons, no careful distinction of holy and profane persons, was scandalous and sure evidence for the “righteous” that Jesus himself was an agent of Satan (Mark 3:22; Matt. 12:24; Luke 11:15). Nevertheless, for those oppressed and in need of redemption that, “heard him gladly,” he was their liberator and teacher, a true prophet in Israel, an envoy of God’s wisdom, perhaps even the messiah himself. Therefore, through Christ, God’s good news of redemption is not primarily about “reconciliation with a God from whom our human nature has become totally severed due to sin, and ascending to a communion with a spiritual world that will be our heavenly home after death” (Ruether 1998, 8).

On the contrary, redemption is about restoring a primordial goodness that is still accessible as our authentic selves, although eclipsed by false ideologies and social structures that have justified domination of some and subordination of others. After all, the domination of women through sexism and oppression along with the subjugation of others, has led to abuse and violence toward women and children, racism from whites toward blacks, war and the holocaust. Thus, redemption from sin requires transformation of “self and society into good, life-giving relations, rather than an escape from the body and the world into eternal life” (Ruether 1998, 8). Otherworldly eschatology though not denied, is put aside.

Analogous to Ruether’s rejection of redemption as otherworldly, African-American womanist scholar Delores Williams contends that, “social salvation ...now presents a necessary and serious challenge to all Black Christians. It prods them to leave heaven and “otherworldly pursuits to the business and judgment of God” (Townes 1997, 98). For generations African-American Christians have believed in salvation through Jesus Christ. Consequently, “they have understood the gospel (or good news) to be Jesus’ power to deliver the oppressed, Jesus power to provide healing sustenance and to guide humankind toward a positive quality of life” (Towne 1997, 118).

However, she further contends, that these theologies lose some of their power, “when the Black church does not support the people’s quest for salvation on earth” (Towne 1997, 118). Williams’s criticism of African-American denominational churches is due in part to its reinforcement of the “oppression of black women and their sexist denial of their ministry, their exploitation of their work for the church, their otherworldly theology and failure to be prophetic voices against social oppression” (Ruether 1998, 234). Not only are these criticisms relevant for the Black church, but the church universal is to bear witness to the world that it is built on a tradition dedicated to female and male disciples supporting each other in the work of hastening the kingdom of God here on earth-the kingdom mandated to serve all humanity, the world and the land with justice, care, love and peace.

Finally, the synoptic gospel of Luke poignantly characterizes Jesus redemptive role as liberator in his discussion of a woman crippled for eighteen years. The woman was in bondage to a spirit that caused her to be bent over unable to straighten up at all. Upon seeing her, Jesus called to her and proclaimed “woman thou art loosed from thine infirmities” (KJV Luke 13:11). When Jesus put his hands on the woman, she immediately straightened up and praised God. The story of this crippled woman is the story of all women, particularly women suffering from sexist and oppressive systems of domination and subjugation. Patriarchal theologies create environments that demean and keep women bent over by a distorted view of themselves thereby, preventing them from realizing their own vision for the same independent selfhood, decision-making, and critical intelligence afforded men.

Like the crippled woman, all women desire to live authentically while in this present world. For this reason, God’s good news for women involves *metanoia*, “a turning around in which they literally discover themselves as persons, as centers of being upon which they can stand and build their own identity” (Ruether 1983, 186). In the same way, redemption as liberation demands “a new sense of pride, not in the male sense of ‘lording it over others’ but in the sense of basic self-esteem. Without basic self-esteem one has no self at all, as a base upon which to build an identity or to criticize past mistakes” (Ruether 1983, 186).

Jesus’ proclamation that the woman was “loosed” along with his life affirming touch was for her liberation. She was loosed from alienation, rejection, and broken community. God’s good news of redemption gave her a new life here on earth with which to praise God. In her praise of God, undoubtedly, the woman modeled to others what Jesus accomplished in her life. She shared the good news of the gospel, simply by being, for who could deny she was now able to walk and stand up straight. The role of Jesus in God’s good news of redemption was the transformation of lives. Hence, “redemption is realized not primarily in an otherworldly escape from the body and the finite world, but by transforming the world and society into personal and social relations of justice and peace between all humans” (Ruether 1998, 7).

Jesus understood that justifications for women’s subordination as due to natural inferiority, subordination in the created order, and punishment for sin, were false ideologies constructed to justify injustice. Therefore, all forms of human injustice and violence, the subordination of women, the enslavement of blacks to whites, and war, are derived from the basic sinful tendency of domination of some over others. God’s Good news of redemption for women is summed up in Christ message of hope and liberation in Luke’s gospel, “Woman thou art loosed! ”

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