

automatic mechanism by which we are bound to progress regardless of how we struggle, so there is no automatic salvation regardless of our growth in the life of the Spirit. The grace of God will never reject us, but we can, if we really want to, reject the grace of God. We can want some possession for ourselves so badly that we will even sacrifice for it the friendship of God. Yet even then perhaps God may bring us his gift of contrition, of real faith in his love, of forgiveness so that we set forth again and

the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
... we shall come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon our heads;  
we shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

(Is. 35: 1b, 10)

## **Is there a place for Feminists in a Christian Church?**

**Daphne Hampson and  
Rosemary Radford Ruether**

*Based on a dialogue held on 16 May 1986 in London at Westminster Cathedral Hall, and organised by Catholic Women's Network and Women in Theology. Dr Daphne Hampson presents her own position at length, Dr Rosemary Ruether responds to it at length, and a discussion between the two of them follows.*

### **Daphne Hampson:**

Obviously the Christian church is better off with feminists than without feminists. Therefore if one is a feminist and a Christian one should stay in the Christian church and work for change. I do not underestimate what that means: how time and energy consuming, how discouraging and at times undermining it is. I remember well. We need feminists at

every point in society, and I have no desire to criticise others who are holding the front at a point where I am not and cannot be. The only reasons for leaving can be that one is too desperately hurt, or that one no longer feels at home within the Christian church and religion. For me the break was not easy. As one thing after another fell away—going to the eucharist, reading the Bible, I came to wonder whether anything would remain. But prayer and a love of God, which were simply too deep in me, held. In some ways I have managed to rebuild. My religion is now more closely integrated with all else I believe about the world than it was before. I have prised apart Christianity and being a religious person—an effort which has taken time and thought and the help of others. Since I left the church I have been going to a Quaker meeting for a place to be, although I have not joined the Society of Friends as a member.

There is no problem about being a feminist and a religious person; no incompatibility between the two. Far from it, feminism is in some sense a religious matrix. Feminists speak of respect for others, of care for the earth. A more specifically religious understanding of life fits well with this. One can engage in prayer and meditation, one can see God through the world and as present in one's relations. I have certainly taken much with me from Christianity. If I am *post-Christian*, I am for all the world *post-Christian*. Christianity shaped in the first place my religious sensibilities. It was through Christianity that I learned to pray and grew to love God.

One can be a feminist and religious. But can one be a feminist and a Christian? I want to say that, to put it mildly, a feminist must experience Christianity as deeply problematic. Indeed, that Christianity cannot allow for the equality of women. I am not simply saying that Christianity is lethargic and that I do not believe that the church is ever going to get round to having a woman Pope; or that there are 2000 years of tradition which act against women. I am contending that it is intrinsic to the nature of the Christian religion that it is sexist: that Christianity cannot continue to be itself and allow for the equality of women.

The problem as I see it is that Christianity is a historical religion. It is by nature a historical religion, it cannot cease to be a historical religion; and it is this which makes it so impossible for women. One could imagine that there could be a non-historical religion; one, for example, which was built on religious experience, or which started from first principles about the universe. But Christianity is not such a non-historical religion. Christianity proclaims that God entered history. Not all Christians, I am aware, believe this in the form of an incarnational faith, though many do. But at the very least Christians believe that God was in a particular way bound up with a certain part of human history. Christians tell a story that concerns God having a peculiar relation to the people of Israel, in the fullness of time sending his Son, who was born,

died, resurrected, and brought the church to birth. You might express the story slightly differently. But in recounting to another what Christianity was about you would have to relate this story and this history. Indeed, the church has a literature, the Bible, which it sees as different from other literature, and as revelatory of God. What I am saying is that it is not simply that Christianity arose *in* history: all ideas arise in history, and bear the imprint of the time when they arose. But that Christianity sees certain historical events as revelation. Christianity is not *simply* a message about loving one's neighbour; it is bound up with a particular historical person, Jesus Christ, about whom Christians say more than just that he was a good man. If one was to remove the history of Israel, the history concerning Jesus, the resurrection in some form, the early church, and the Bible as a particular literature, the foundation of Christianity would be lost.

But this is the problem for feminists. Christianity, because of the type of religion which it is, *necessarily* has one foot in the past. It is not a timeless truth; it is rooted in history. Now, that history and culture in which Christianity is rooted is a sexist history and culture. That is evident. The sexism of that society is reflected in a myriad ways in the religion. God is described overwhelmingly using male metaphors. Men perform all the important roles. The parables tell of women carrying out women's tasks, and men men's tasks. The early leaders of the church were nearly all male. And so forth. When we do hear of women they are usually disadvantaged persons making the best of their lot in a male society, and sometimes managing to transcend the bounds set for them. The religion cannot be freed of this historical context. The sexism of that context is always going to be present together with the religion. If one reads the Bible one hears of a society which is sexist. The medium is the message. At a subconscious level at least, one imbibes sexist attitudes. On one level the parable of the prodigal son speaks of God's loving kindness and the elder brother's self-righteousness. On another it conveys that God is to be compared to a father (not a mother) who divides his property between sons. The effect of this is not to be underestimated. The Bible is not just read as any literature but as scripture. For it to be read as revelation to a congregation tends to reinforce sexism. Symbol systems are powerful. It affects human relations today when stories and history are read which convey that male is the norm for being human, and in which God is predominantly seen through male metaphors. Nor does it help to read stories about women, however brave those women may be, if they are still subordinate. The story of Martha and Mary is a story about whether women should cook or whether they may be permitted to sit at the feet of a rabbi. We do not have a story about a man sitting at the feet of a woman teacher.

Christianity is a historical religion bound to a sexist past. Not only

that. Because Christianity believes that God was in a particular way bound up with one particular thread of human history, above all with the person of Jesus Christ, that thread of human history, in particular what Jesus Christ did and said, becomes in some way normative or authoritative for what is truth—for how we should understand God, or how relate to one another. Let me repeat this. Christianity does not believe (as a religion might) that all times and places are equally close to God, so that in the determination of truth we can start from where we are. Christianity believes that God is especially known through a particular history. Moreover, Jesus Christ is not just seen as a good man, a human like the rest of us, one who lived close to God. Christianity proclaims God to have made God's self known through revelation in history. Therefore that revelation and the events surrounding it become a kind of benchmark for the religion. Take the debate about the ordination of women. Both sides carry on the debate with reference to the past. Thus the questions posed are such as: did Jesus intend that women could be priests; or, can one, by extrapolation from what he did say, conclude that in this very different age it is right that women should be priests; or, what does the New Testament believe about relations between men and women. Because the religion is what it is—a religion with its roots in the past and with a literature coming from that past which is seen as a point of reference—it becomes very difficult to say that *a priori* women and men are equal, that ethically it is wrong to discriminate and that that is the end of the matter—women must be ordained. There is always this past dimension. The locus of authority for the religion is always in the past. It may also be that there is conceived to be a locus of authority in the present: one may ask what it is that the spirit is saying to people today. But even if there is this present dimension there is always also going to be this reference to the past, and the past was sexist. Christians cannot simply discard the past so long as they are Christians.

As a post-Christian feminist how do I relate to the past? I have come to the conclusion that it cannot be the case that God is related in a particular way to a certain history. God—whatever we mean by God—must be related in the same way to all times and places. Moreover, that it cannot be that Jesus of Nazareth was not only a human person but was differently related to God from the way in which other human beings are related. Therefore no past period of history can be authoritative for the present or normative as to how we should conceive of God or relate to one another. We must formulate what it is that we think to be good and true and ethical, without having to justify what we want to say with reference to the past. That is not, of course, to say that we start with a blank sheet. We are not people without a past. But we can draw on what we want to from the past, just as in all other fields of human endeavour people draw on the past. A philosopher writing on liberty may find John

Stuart Mill's work an inspiration. But she can take what she wants and finds appropriate for today, and leave what she finds irrelevant or what she judges wrong. As people living in the West we shall presumably take much from the Judaeo-Christian tradition. But the locus of authority as to what we think true and what we want to say, remains with us. If Jesus had good relations with women we may think well of him. In so far as he was limited by the sexist presuppositions of his society that does not have to affect us.

What, then, is the relation of being religious to being Christian? I said that I have discarded being Christian. Discarded seems to me to be the right word. I have come not to believe that God could be related in a particular way to a certain history or that Jesus could be other than the rest of us. That is to say, the whole 'myth' of Christianity seems to me untenable. By the 'myth' which is Christianity I mean the following: that God created the world, that humankind fell, that God had a peculiar relation to the people of Israel, that God sent Jesus, who died and rose again, ascended and will come again at the end of time. The Old and New Testaments, and more particularly the Christian creeds, fill out this myth. I now live without reference to this myth. I see the myth as a vehicle—I use the word precisely—as a vehicle which has carried people's religious sensibilities. I learned to love God myself in conjunction with the story which is Christianity—though I always had difficulty with some central articles of belief. I have now discarded what I have called the vehicle, but I have continued to love God. I think that for most Christian people the vehicle of Christianity is so interwoven with their love of God that they cannot imagine separating the two: indeed, they do not want to, because they believe Christianity to be true. But for me the vehicle of Christianity, the story, became quite untenable: it cannot, I think, be reconciled with all else we know about the world, and it is profoundly sexist.

Has my understanding of God changed now that it has been free to change because I no longer have to substantiate what I want to say with reference to past religion or to the Bible? I think there has been development. I no longer think of God in the way that many within Christianity have: as some kind of being, out there, having anthropomorphic qualities, so that one could say 'God speaks', or that God intervenes in the world. I think of God as the basis of all that is; that with which, when we are in tune, we can come to be healed and be most fully ourselves. I am well aware that some within Christianity in part think in this way—particularly perhaps women do. But one must also say that there is a strong Biblical tradition which speaks of God as a kind of agent or actor on the scene. 'He will cast down the mighty from their seat and will exalt the humble and meek.' I have not noticed that God acts in that kind of way and do not believe in the existence of a God who could

do that kind of thing. I am not even sure that I want that sort of a God, even though he should be performing such actions in favour of women! It seems to me to be a very male way of thinking of God: God is one who is objective to us, over-against us, and separate from us. It comports much better with my feminist sense of reality and my feminist ethic to conceive of God as being within us, moving between us and indeed, as one of my feminist students daringly put it, coming into being with us. It follows that I am quite uninterested in calling God 'Mother' rather than 'Father'. That is still far too anthropomorphic a conception of God; a God modelled after the human being. I want a revolution in how we conceive God.

I think, then, that there is a basic clash between feminism and Christianity. Christianity is essentially related to the past. It sees revelation in history. The very conjuring up of that past, for example by reading the Bible, brings sexism in its train. That is not to be escaped. Christianity sees a particular past as in some sense normative; so that Christian women who are feminist have to try to contend for what they wish to say with one hand tied behind their backs, making reference to that past. This making of the past normative follows from the fact that Christianity sees God as particularly related to that history and to that person Jesus Christ, which history and person therefore acquire authority.

I think that, not least, there is an ethical issue involved here. Feminists have been insistent that that which is exterior to ourselves cannot be allowed to have authority over us: something is not right because one's husband or boss says so, or because society has always done it that way. Feminist women have had the courage to be their own authority. Is it not then galling, and in contradiction with feminist ways of acting, to admit to an authority which lies outside oneself: to agree that things will be determined with reference to the past, or determined by a church in which one has no real power and in which decisions (even decisions which primarily concern women) are taken by men? But much of the Christian religion has actually seen God in that kind of role: we should obey God rather than our own best will. The way in which I now see God does not allow for that kind of clash. For God is that with which I am in tune, not one separate from myself who commands.

It is sometimes said to one who holds my position 'How does one know of God if not through revelation?' —by revelation is meant revelation in Jesus and in the Bible. If I may say so, this seems to me to be a decidedly male question! Do we know nothing of God through prayer, through religious experience, through the world in which we live? Of course it must be the case that in ancient Israel also people sensed God. We may want to look to the writings they left which tell us of their understanding of God. If Jesus was deeply in tune with God, the record

of his awareness may be illuminating. But the biblical writings are not more authoritative than our own experience of God—and they may be less relevant. All that we have got, in my opinion, are present and past writings in which people reflect on their awareness of God. There is no way in which the Bible can embody an objective revelation which is secure. The desire that there be such an objective revelation may indeed well be an attempt to escape from being religious persons ourselves.

Why does it matter that our religion should not be sexist? It matters because religion has profound ethical implications. It affects relations between human beings. If Christianity is necessarily sexist, and I have argued that it is, it will continue to distort, as it has in the past, relations between men and women. Were I to go to church with a man whom I loved and we were to hear the Bible read, literature in which God is predominantly conceived in male metaphors and in a male way, in which all the leading people in the story are male, in which God sent his son, and in which the women who are present perform the roles which a sexist society has consigned them to, then that would affect the relationship between us. Religion is potent. It has been the most potent ideology the world has known for undermining the integrity of women as first-class members of humanity.

If we are to create a world in which men and women are held to be equal, then, I contend, we are either going to have to become atheists (which is not I think the way forward) or we must needs aspire to a post-Christian religious position. At the end of the day it must be said that if God be good, then God cannot be commensurate with a religion which is sexist. Women have less stake in a religion which comes from the past. They have not been accorded the privilege of being counted equal within that religion. Moreover, the religion has been formulated by men. Many women have had to go through the shattering experience of leaving behind much of the religion of their childhood, or they have become profoundly uneasy about it and are looking for something new. Men, who have not had to go through such a jolt, are for the most part still able to use what I have called the vehicle of the Christian religion to express their love of God. Therefore I think that women are going to be to the forefront of our finding ways to speak religiously which are relevant to the present and for the future. Above all, I rejoice that feminist women will be free to speak religiously in a way which is in conformity with their sense of reality and of themselves.

Is there a place for feminists in a Christian church? Obviously my answer is ambiguous. I would rather that there were, than that there were not, feminists in the church. But I think that the very success of feminist aims in the church—for example, in bringing about the ordination of women—while it will on the one hand act as a catalyst promoting further change, may on the other hand tend to hide what I believe to be the

ultimate incompatibility between feminism and Christianity. I think that feminists must go further than Christianity will allow. And, in any case, I do not believe Christianity to be true. That does not however mean that I do not want to be a religious person. I do. But I must be religious in a way which is commensurate with all else which I believe about the world and with my feminism. I hold it to be the case that in feminism Christianity has met with a challenge to which it cannot accommodate itself. That challenge is not going to go away, for feminism has raised a profound ethical issue concerning human equality.

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**Rosemary Ruether:**

Daphne, I want to start by thanking you for the candour and rigour with which you have stated your reasons why you have decided no longer to define yourself as a Christian. This seems to me to be an admirable work of personal self-clarification. It also stands as a powerful challenge to the Christian churches. I am fully sympathetic to your view as a personal decision. I believe that our first duty is to ourselves, in the sense that, as human persons, we must have adequately supportive communities to be able to function creatively. If the particular church communities available to us present only a demoralizing sick-making environment that demeans our personhood, then we should avoid them as ‘occasions of sin’, to use an old-fashioned Catholic phrase. Women’s self-sacrificial ethic has often caused them to neglect their own nurture. If we are to work effectively, as feminists with a religious orientation, we must have primary communities where we feel at home, which nurture and support our being as feminists. If we can’t find such communities in the institutional church, then we should create them.

I am, however, less impressed by the theoretical side of your argument. You seem to want to absolutize your own experience and turn it into a logic that is universally binding. This ignores the plurality of contemporary Christianity. Considerable changes are happening, theologically and pastorally, and Christian communities are emerging which affirm the very things that you say that Christians cannot confirm. The chief defect of your argument seems to me to be your definition of Christianity as a historical religion. I am sure that this is the way that conservatives use this idea of Christianity as a historical religion to resist change. But, in fact, such an idea is thoroughly unhistorical. It is unhistorical because being historical means, first of all, being a living community of people, who have a present and a future, not just a past. Secondly, the search for absolutes in past historical experience is

unhistorical, since history is ever partial, relative and limited. History is a subversive science that throws into question the idea of absolute and final revelation in a past historical moment. For the past five hundred years Christianity has been reinterpreting itself to bring its understanding of revelatory experience in history into line with genuine historical consciousness. The feminist critique will force it to do still more of this rethinking.

Finally, Daphne, your view of Christianity as enclosed in a past revelation is, I would argue, theologically questionable. I would argue that Christianity is not a historical religion in this sense, but an eschatological faith. It lives by the norm of the reign of God in the still unrealized future of creation, not by a fixed, completed past.

I would like to outline two kinds of mutually exclusive absolutes that seem to shape this discussion and say why I accept neither of these alternatives. Then I will say something of why I see Christianity as one religious culture among others that is open to feminist restatement. The two absolutes I wish to question are Christian absolutism and post-Christian or Enlightenment absolutism, the two being historically related and reactive to one another.

Christian absolutism says that Christianity is the one true faith and that only through Christian revelation, completed in one man two thousand years ago, is there true knowledge of God and redemption from sin. All other religions are mere idolatry, if not demonism. Against this Christian absolutism, I believe that Christianity is one particular religious culture among others, all of which have some authentic spiritual power and truth. God is not limited to Christianity. Jesus was not a Christian, but a faithful Jew, who did not intend to found a new religion, but to announce the coming Reign of God in the religion of Israel. Christianity as a Jewish messianic movement started out by rejecting a closed revelation, fixed in past texts, in favour of a renewed Spirit of God available in present experience.

We need to recognize the particularity of all religious traditions and their symbols of relationship to the Divine. All are an integral part of particular cultural communities and have shaped and been shaped by their life and practice in these communities over time. Some religions look back to foundational experiences, preserved in the memory of the community as normative. Others tell the story of their origins through timeless, archetypal images that coincide with the beginning of the world. No one particular religion can claim to be the one universal religion, any more than any one culture or language can claim to be universal. But all are particular ways of pointing to and experiencing eternal truth.

I would suggest that there are also different generic types of spirituality. Part of our conflicts over religion come from people with

one type of spirituality not being able to communicate with people with another type. I suspect that one key difference between you, Daphne, and myself lies in the kind of spirituality each of us finds most congenial. I would suggest four types of spirituality within the Western religious traditions.

There is mystical religion, exercised through withdrawal from outward multiplicity to inward quiet and there finding the presence of the Divine. Platonism has been the root of this kind of mystical religion, but Christianity adopted it and has been the main vehicle for it since the fourth century. You prefer this type of spirituality.

Then there is historical religion, not in the sense that the others are not in history, but in the sense that the presence of God is experienced in the midst of historical struggle and change. This is the spirituality that is most meaningful to me. We do not need to take literally anthropomorphic expressions such as 'God acts' or 'God intervenes' in history, as though these were events taking place apart from human action. Rather, I would say that God is experienced in the midst of human action in conflicts over social justice and injustice. God is experienced as 'breaking into' existing social reality as judgment upon human claims to righteousness. This 'shattering' of present reality does not mean shattering the goodness of human nature, an Augustinian-Calvinist distortion of this idea based on a quasi-Manichaean anthropology. Rather, what are shattered are the ideological pretensions of dominant systems of power.

American militarism, which arrogates divine righteousness to punish those it regards as 'evil doers', such as Libyans and Nicaraguans, is an example of such an idolatrous power today. To say God 'shatters' such power does not mean God literally overthrows it as a substitute for human struggle against it. Rather, it means one is transported into a compelling experience of authentic divine justice in a way that reveals the utter hollowness of the claims to divine righteousness made by such systems of domination. One is also grounded anew in God's true mandate for creation that empowers one to struggle against demonic misuse of power. This type of religious experience is very appropriate for one moment of feminism. Feminist spirituality also unmasks the claims of patriarchal religion to represent divine will. Women and men are renewed in their authentic humanness and struggle against patriarchal pretensions.

Eschatological faith is an extension of historical religion, but also corrects its tendencies to sacralize past institutional expressions. Historical religion expresses itself in ethical codes of behaviour that are intended to right the balances of justice and restore harmony to the relations of humans with each other, with nature and with God. Eschatological faith relativizes such historical systemization in canonical

codes and texts. It sees God continually breaking in from the future, bringing the community anew into the presence of the Reign of God, where God and creation find final reconciliation.

Although the complete realization of this hope transcends history, these new experiences of the presence of the Reign of God empower the community to shake free of the dead letter of past institutional expressions and envision new possibilities for creating the beloved community. Christianity was originally born as an expression of this eschatological edge of historical religion. So it is particularly contradictory when it absolutizes past texts and codes and uses these to resist new movements of the Spirit. The gospels point back to the story of Jesus, not to make this a self-enclosed past, but a new beginning that points forward to the ongoing struggle of the community and to the ultimate future in the coming Reign of God.

The Gospel of John is particularly strong in insisting that the past historical Jesus is paradigmatic of a truth that must continue in the ongoing life of the community. Jesus himself must leave the scene in order that he can send the Spirit, the Counsellor who will 'lead you to all truth'. This means that all truth was not completed in the past. That was only a paradigm and foretaste of a truth, that must be deepened and developed in the ongoing life of the church, which lives, not solely from the past, but from the power of the Spirit who comes from the eschatological future. This means the historical institutionalization of the church must be continually relativized to open up fresh ways to encounter God and incarnate the redemptive community.

Fourthly, there is a type of religiosity which is older than all these other three and which I would call nature religion. Judaism, Christianity and Islam have referred to this in a derogatory fashion as 'paganism', as though this meant false and demonic religion. But we need to remember that 'paganism' means the religion of the *paganus*, of the rural places and people. Nature religion presupposes the harmony of the natural world, as distinct from human systems of alienation and injustice. This harmony is still there, despite all of our distortion and violence. This harmony of nature upholds us with steady reliability, in the cycles of day and night, the great turns of the seasons, the renewal of sunshine from darkness, warm from winter cold, new rains, new life springing from the soil and from the bodies of the female human and animal.

Paganism honours sexuality because it honours life, and sexuality is the power and vitality of life. Paganism seeks through communal ritual to bring the human community into harmony with this great harmony of nature, ward off destructive excesses in nature, and bend the human and non-human communities into beneficent cooperation with each other. This type of religion has been unjustly maligned and misunderstood by historical, ethical religions. New insight into the truth and even the

necessity of an element of nature religion in our spirituality has come into modern consciousness through feminism, through the ecological movement, and through the renewed voices of native peoples, such as American Indians, who throw off Western colonialism to recover their own spirituality.

Some feminists have decided to reject Christianity for a feminist exploration of paganism. This, in itself, does not bother me. I see this as a vital type of spirituality that needs to be redeveloped in order to save the planet itself. As a Christian, I see this as a creation-based spirituality that corrects the tendency to anti-creational dualism. My criticisms of some aspects of Goddess religion have not been directed against the legitimacy of such spirituality itself, but rather the way in which such spirituality at times gets confused with post-Christian absolutism which simply exalts the underside of the Christian and Western dualisms of male/female, body/mind, nature/civilization.

The solution to the plurality of types of spirituality is not to decide that one is right and the rest wrong. We need to develop a dialogue between different historical religions and different types of spirituality. This will not lead to one universal synthesis. We need to honour the particularity of human expressions of religion. But we may be able to glimpse a kind of complementarity of these different types of spirituality. Each express different moments of human experience. Most great historical religions have tended to have a place for all four of these spiritualities. This has been the case for much of historical Christianity, although clerical dogmatism could not admit to this practical eclecticism. The Reformation and Counter-Reformation represent an outbreak of open warfare between and against this plurality, an effort to 'reform the Church' by repressing nature religion and eschatological religion, domesticating mystical religion and absolutizing clerical religion, lodged in institutional vehicles of authority.

Disgust with clerical authoritarianism and violence led to efforts to emancipate religion and intellectual culture from clerical control in the post-Reformation West. Autonomous sciences were developed. Education and the state were freed from clerical control. This is what post-Christianity means in Western culture. But post-Christian thinkers have tended to manufacture their own expressions of absolutism. For them Christianity was hopelessly enclosed in its particular social and cultural expressions of the past. But their own new science or philosophy was the universal truth freed from all historical particularity. Post-Christian feminists have tended to fall into versions of this same kind of Enlightenment absolutism. Such post-Christian absolutisms have tended to ignore their own roots in Christian patterns of thought and their particularity to class and culture in Western society.

How, then, do we deal with the fact that Christianity has been and is

pervasively patriarchal? I would be the last to deny this since I have spent the last eighteen years demonstrating this fact. I reject the idea that somewhere back in the past, at the time of Jesus and the early Church, everything was right for women. It is not simply a matter of returning to some original, good, egalitarian Christianity that gleamed like a flash in the pan for a few minutes in the first century and then vanished from sight. There are indeed many flashes of alternative possibilities, that included women, in past periods of Christianity. But these will never amount to an alternative norm, if one starts out with the presupposition that one has to find an alternative consensus of what was 'always and everywhere the case', in order to justify new developments.

I think that historical Christianity has been pervasively patriarchal, but so has been post-Christian Western culture of the Enlightenment. Historical liberalism, socialism and psychoanalysis have been patriarchal, have either ignored women or sought to justify their subordination in new ways drawn from modern, supposedly 'scientific', authority. All the pre-biblical pagan religions also were male-dominated, as far as we know from any literary records. So I question the assumption that if we just get out of Christianity, either into paganism or into the Enlightenment, our problems are solved. Males have dominated the shaping of all these cultures. They have shaped them to justify their own dominance and the marginalization of women.

How, then, do we find any cultural base for feminism? Is feminism totally bereft of precedent and cultural memories upon which to draw? I don't think this is the case. Although males have monopolized the shaping of public culture until now and used it to justify their own dominance, they have not only been about the justification of their own dominance in their various creations of religion, philosophy, literature and science. They have also been about their own emancipation from the systems of alienation and domination, either as sensitive, creative persons from within cultural elites, or as insightful visionaries and liberators within oppressed communities.

These struggles of men for emancipation have never intentionally included women. This is because the androcentricism of male culture is such that most males, bent on emancipation for themselves, never notice women at all. When women try to include themselves in such projects of liberation, not simply as humble auxiliaries in the male agenda, but as subjects of liberation, this has regularly involved male impatience and hostility. New systems of society arise which empower new groups of males, but reduplicate the subjugation of women in new ways. This has been a key reason why male movements of liberation have failed.

Feminism is trying to do better than this male history of struggles for redemption and liberation. It is trying to do better, both by including women and by including the agenda of liberation from patriarchy in the

project of emancipation. It is also trying to forge a pattern of liberation that does not create a new system of oppression in which, for example, white middle-class women will be included in a new system of cultural opportunities by marginalizing non-white men and women. There are no ideal moments in the past for this. But there are many partial insights which can spark the imagination and which we can transform and develop in the making of a new culture.

The male traditions of struggle for emancipation, humanization, harmonization with fellow persons and nature, are all material for this development, not in their past androcentric forms of expression, but as interpreted by feminist principles. By feminist principles I mean those principles I have just outlined: that liberation includes liberation from patriarchy; liberation means the creation of a new society and culture where women are fully valued, but not the creation of a new oppression of other groups whose value is discounted and unnoticed. There were also many women, and movements of women, that tried to do this in the past. However partial and unsuccessful their efforts, their memory can be recovered as part of our legacy and our history.

To say that one is about this process of feminist emancipation as a Christian, or as part of the Christian church, is not to say that this is the only place to do it, but simply that this is one place where one can do it and where it needs to be done. One can do this in Christianity because Christianity is not simply a culture of domination. It is also deeply rooted in a culture of liberation and has been constantly renewed by recovering new insights into that culture of liberation. Christianity is rooted in the great insights of the Hebrew Bible that denounced systems of injustice that oppressed the poor. Prophetic faith included the critique of religion. The prophets and Jesus recalled faith to the work of justice and mercy, rather than sanctification of oppression. God's prophetic spirit is again made present in history, applying the denunciation of unjust society and religious ideology and the hope for communities of justice and peace to a new situation.

The Christian gospel stories also notice that women are at the bottom of these unjust social and religious hierarchies. The gospels often tell the stories of the good news by contrasting women of insight with blind, hostile representatives of clerical authority. In his teachings Jesus also tried to go beyond revenge theologies by insisting that the poor shall be lifted up, not to become new oppressors, but to become helpers of all in a community of mutual service.

These insights and many others belie the patriarchal construction of Christianity. The restatement of these insights in our context can be enormously fruitful for developing a feminist culture of emancipation. But we should be clear that we are restating these insights in the context of women's experience, not pretending that this was its original context.

The norm of truth for Christians, and for feminists, is not an idealized past, but the fullness of redemptive potential yet to be fully realized. To locate the norm of truth in a closed past is not only to be unhistorical; it is to betray the key Christian insight that it lives, not by the letter of the past, but by the presence of the Spirit that comes from the eschatological future.

For these reasons, Daphne, I believe Christianity can sustain a feminist interpretation and become a religion of emancipation from patriarchy. As a Christian, I am engaged in restating the insights of Christianity in feminist terms because I am concerned that the churches become vehicles of hope, rather than of oppression, for women. But I do this, finally, not to vindicate the church or to remain enclosed in a Christian future, but to reach out to a new human future, a new future for all earth's beings. Here the great religious cultures can meet in mutual affirmation and a common struggle to overcome the systems and ideologies of oppression and create a just and happy earth for ourselves and for our children.

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*Daphne:* I have three points to make in reply to you, Rosemary. Firstly, I insist that Christianity is not just a message (about the liberation of the poor, or whatever), which Jesus uttered but which anyone else could have uttered, a conclusion which we could come to today without reference to the past. Nor is it just the hope that the ordering of human affairs will come to be as we would have it (or that God's spirit will bring this about). Christianity necessarily makes reference to a particular historical past: Christians believe that God was present in Jesus in a particular way and that a certain segment of history is revelatory. It would not be a Christian community which did not make reference to this past. From the start Christians did not simply proclaim Jesus's message; they also proclaimed a message about Jesus. You seem to evade this. Christianity cannot avoid the historical reference: and that makes it sexist, for that history is patriarchal and reference to it carries its sexism into the present. Moreover, because God is seen as being related in a peculiar way to a certain segment of history, that segment of history becomes normative—and that is a problem.

That is the first point I have to make. Secondly, I do not see how you can contend that what I have called 'the Enlightenment' is not absolute. Of course, the knowledge which I have designated by this term came to be realised over a period of time. But the knowledge itself, namely that nature is a complete causal nexus and there cannot be

'interventions' of God, is surely not something which can be gone back on? When Newton's planetary mathematics did not work, he postulated that God put his finger in the pie. We cannot now think like that. Moreover, history is a self-contained nexus of cause and effect, so that there cannot be events which are discontinuous with this nexus. There cannot be unique events which are interventions of God. Of course post-Enlightenment thought has been patriarchal; but that does not affect whether we can go back on the Enlightenment understanding of history and nature as self-contained wholes. So there is a problem for Christianity (which I should have thought Christian theology has been trying to deal with since the late eighteenth century) as to how it can claim that God was related in a particular way to particular events, and indeed how Jesus (or the events surrounding Jesus) can be unique. I wish to have a spirituality, in the western tradition, which in many ways is still that of Christianity, but which has discarded what I have called the 'vehicle' of Christianity. By 'vehicle' I mean the particular myth which is the Christian framework, and the belief (which it involves) that God could be related in a particular way to a certain segment of history. (Of course, it may be that people within a certain history have better discerned God—that is another matter and something I might well be disposed to grant.) I want to hold an understanding of God which is not incommensurate with the post-Enlightenment world. I find that the problems which I believe feminists must necessarily have with Christianity are incidentally solved.

My final point is in another key. I find powerful a gospel of proclamation such as you put forward; in your case having to do with the overthrowing of unjust orders of society, in particular that women may come into their own. I am moved by your vision. But for me spirituality and love of God must also have to do with a stillness, a centredness in God, and indeed a 'focus' on God. I miss that in you.

*Rosemary:* It strikes me, Daphne, that, rather than try to answer your three points point by point, it would be better if I said something about what appears to me to be a further area of difference between your understandings of Christianity as a historical religion and mine. Your construction of the truth content of Christian statements, such as the resurrection, depends on a fundamentalist understanding of the truth that reduces religious truth to questions of literal fact. You must be as well aware as I am that Rudolf Bultmann developed the theological method of 'demythologizing' sixty-five years ago and that this has been taken for granted in liberal theological education ever since—this was a presupposition in the theological education I received at Claremont School of Theology in the 1950's, one which is taken for granted among

my colleagues in Christian seminaries today, and I am sure that this was also the case among your professors at Harvard Divinity School as well. So it seems to me rather peculiar that you talk as though you had never heard of demythologizing or historical-critical method, or the metaphorical understanding of the truth content of religious statements!

Admittedly, quite a lot of theologians and biblical scholars have been using ambiguous language. For quite a while they have assumed that the truth content of statements like 'Jesus arose from the dead' lies not in their literal facticity, but in their metaphorical and paradigmatic meaning, as appropriated in people's lives in the Christian community. Yet they are wont to use an ambiguous language in their writing and, still more, in their preaching which is intended to bring across the power of the metaphorical meaning without directly confronting the question of literal facticity. They do this for several reasons. First, they often haven't fully sorted out the difference in their own minds. Secondly, fundamentalists are in political power in the church, and they don't want to have a struggle with them. And, finally, and most importantly, the educational and cultural gap between pre-critical and theologically-educated Christians makes it difficult to bridge the two kinds of consciousness in any other way.

But this ambiguous language, intended metaphorically, but stated in a way that could be constructed as including the literal facticity, is problematical. It generates, in worse form, the fundamentalist denouement that liberals try to avoid, leaving ordinary Christian people caught in the middle and unable to understand the issues. It also leads many to simply reject Christianity as 'untrue', based on a literal construction of religious symbols. And this seems to be the tack that you, Daphne, are taking, either because you perceive no meaning in such symbols, apart from such literal facticity, or else because you find it a useful way of confronting this ambiguity, by calling Christians on the question of literal fact, or perhaps for both these reasons.

My own understanding of the meaningfulness of Christianity remains unmoved by your repeated claims that Christianity is simply 'untrue', since it has not occurred to me for many years to rest the truth claims of Christianity upon the literal facticity of the virgin birth or the bodily resurrection of Christ. If these things were only literally true, they would be simply oddities to me, not religious truths. What makes these things religious truths to me lies in their metaphorical, or, as Bultmann put it, their existential meaning. The virgin birth represents for me the religious truth that the birth of Christ is a work of divine grace, and not simply the product of human historical causation. The resurrection represents my basic faith commitment that lies, violence and death will not have the last word in human affairs. Life will triumph over death; truth will win out finally against deceit. That these are *faith*

commitments means that they rest on a fundamental trust in God and in the meaningfulness of human life, that transcends the 'facts' of human, historical experience.

Any response to the position that you have adopted regarding the 'untruth' of Christianity must rest on a discussion of the distinctions between different ways of judging any statements to be 'true'. Faith statements are basically statements about one's fundamental values and stance toward life. This meaning of the truth of a particularly symbolic statement is fundamentally different from saying that a particular event has factually occurred at some time in the past, even though this event may be meaningless in my life. When I affirm the truthfulness of Christianity for me, I am speaking primarily about the first kind of 'truth', whereas you seem to have reduced the question of the 'truth' of Christianity solely to the second kind of truth, as facticity.

*Daphne:* My closing comment, Rosemary, must be this. A consideration of Bultmann, far from demolishing my thesis, in fact proves my point. Bultmann, taking the Enlightenment paradigm that nature and history are complete causal nexuses, says that the resurrection cannot be an event in our ordinary history, but is in God's, which is bound to ours—for it is the resurrection of him who died. Christianity is the preaching about this. Therefore Bultmann refers throughout to the New Testament! That is my point: there can be no Christianity without reference to this past—which is a sexist past. My argument does not rest on a fundamentalist definition of Christianity.

One final remark. You (unlike Bultmann, whose theology relates to this past) seem to purport that Christianity is not tied to history, but is mythological. Why make use of such a sexist vehicle, such a sexist myth? If, on the other hand, Christianity be true, one sees why it should be adhered to—though in that case a theodicy problem arises as to God's goodness!