

Feminist Theology and Christian Ministry: The Dialectic Approach of Rosemary Radford Ruether

John Stephanus Klaasen¹

Abstract

Christian ministry in Catholic, traditional Protestant and Anglican churches is based on the hierarchical and patriarchal ecclesiastical models that separate male and female. Such division gives rise to antagonisms and dualisms which inform the ministry of the church. The question that this article is concerned with is the kind of ministerial model that can be effectively appropriated in the twenty first century Church. Another question flows out of the primary one and has to do with the application of the dialectical approach to Christian ministry by Ruether. I will trace the contrasts in Christian history and then describe the responses of feminist theology within three paradigms. The dialectic approach of Ruether will be applied to two contrasts in order to discover some markers for a model of ministry that is mutually enriching, reciprocal and socially relevant.

Introduction

The ecclesia and Christian ministry specifically and directly relates to personhood. The classical Christian view of ministry separates male and female and the role of ministry presupposes this separation. The separation of male and female, which has its roots in patriarchy, results in a distorted view of what it means to be a person. Such division gives rise to antagonisms and dualisms which have become almost irredeemably damaging to the reconciliatory nature of the ministry intended by the prophetic tradition of the church. Feminist theology has rightly pointed out that the nature of the relationship between male and female has an effect on the church's view of ministry. I am aware that feminist theology is both different and to some extent similar to womanist theology.² Womanist theology goes beyond discrimination on the basis of gender. The term womanist "differentiates African American women and their experience of oppression which is much more multifaceted

¹ John Stephanus Klaasen (PhD) is a Senior Lecturer in The department of Religion and Theology at The University of The Western Cape. He is an ordained priest and a member of the Advisory Board for Theological and Formation of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. Email: <jsklaasen@uwc.ac.za>.

² Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2006), 4-6.

from white women's experience since it also involves race and class."³ The scope of this article is restricted to women's experiences within a male dominated church and society. The question that this article is concerned with is the kind of ministerial model that can be effectively appropriated in the twenty first century Church. Another question flows out of the primary one and has to do with the application of the dialectical approach to Christian ministry by Rosemary Radford Ruether.

Ruether presents us with a model of ministry and mode of ecclesia that challenges the dualism in Christian ministry. Instead of the one against the other that results in either/or, a synthesis between the supposedly opposites rediscovers inclusive, holistic ministry. Contrasts such as spirit-filled community and institutional hierarchical community need not be mutually exclusive. Contrasts can lead to a mutually enriching ministry. I will trace the contrasts in Christian history and then describe the responses of feminist theology within three paradigms. The dialectic approach of Ruether will be applied to two contrasts in order to discover some markers for a mode of ministry that is mutually enriching, reciprocal and socially relevant. This article seeks to contribute to critical engagement of Christian ministry within post-Apartheid South Africa.

Contrasts: Antagonistic or Creative Tensions

The separation between male and female within the Christian tradition goes back to Augustine. According to Ruether, influenced by Neo-Platonism, Augustine holds the view that the soul has two functions which are deliberative and obedience. For the man, the deliberative function is the command to rule over irrational animals. His obedient function is to worship God. On the other hand, the obedient function of the female is towards the man as his helper or subordinate or simply his wife. The deliberate function for the wife is to perform the household duties. This is a clear indication of two fundamental principles of early Christian ministry. Firstly, the man is situated below God in the hierarchy and the woman below the man. Secondly, the woman has specific, but inferior capabilities. These principles were the basis of the inequality of women and men in relation to ministry. Augustine also followed the Greek and Latin Church fathers' view that feminine symbols reflect the "lower passions and bodily nature, and the masculine to symbolize the higher rational and spiritual nature". This is Augustine's view despite his acknowledgment that wisdom is female grammatically and imaged in the Biblical tradition. For Augustine sapientia or wisdom is the male part of

³ Susan Rakoczy, *In her Name: Women doing Theology* (Pietermaritzburg, Cluster Publications, 2004), 14.

the mind and the scientia is the female or lower part. Divine wisdom is male. Gender images are spiritual and intellectual and therefore the image for God must be exclusively male.⁴ It needs to be taken into account that in the Book of Proverbs, wisdom (“sophia”) is feminine. According to Ruether, the Augustinian view was built on by Thomas Aquinas, who claimed that women are not only inferior by virtue of the divine law, but also by their physical and biological defectiveness. The woman is by nature weaker than the man. Therefore, Christ as the complete representative of full humanity, had to be male. This implied that only a man represents Christ and therefore only man can be priest and presider. This was the theological basis for the reinforcement of the exclusion of women to the sacrament of ordination at the 1976 Catholic Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood.⁵ Ruether asserts that Aquinas ignored the alternative view that celibacy and the call to spiritual and monastic life overcome the gender subordination. Influential theologians such as Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich introduced sophiological images of God that challenged androcentricism and the exclusion of women as capable of being theomorphic and Christomorphic.⁶

The hierarchical nature of man and woman was also part of Luther’s ecclesiology. Luther was influenced by Augustine’s teachings of sex, lust (concupiscence) and sin, although his view was more positive in terms of the relationship between man and woman within marriage. Marriage is a gift from God, within which man and woman become companions and custodians of procreation.⁷ It is within marriage or the household that a hierarchical order is found, which became normative in modern and postmodern Christianity. Again drawing from Augustine, Luther taught that sex would have been free from lust if it was not for the weaker mental state of the woman. The man is therefore rightly regarded as the primogenitor. The Protestant reformers, through their rejection of celibacy and monasticism as vocations for women and men, refute the equality of women and men.⁸

⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Sexism and Misogyny in the Christian Tradition: Liberating Alternatives,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 34 (2014): 83-94.

⁵ Ruether, *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 34, 89. Vatican released the statement on July 2010. See the *National Catholic Reporter*, September 2010.

⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 12-13.

⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family: Ruling Ideologies, Diverse Realities* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 74.

⁸ Ruether, *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism*, 13.

A contemporary conservative theology of gender is held both within the Roman Catholic and traditional Protestant churches. It usually takes the form of an “equal but different” paradigm and dualism and complementary divisions. The divisions give rise to man as the powerful and dominant gender and woman as the weak and subservient one. This kind of theology forms the basis for the exclusion of women from the ordained priesthood and the decision-making bodies within the Roman Catholic and many Protestant churches.

Feminist theologians have responded in various ways to this distorted, limited and largely un-social and un-contextual approaches to ministry.

Liberal Paradigm

The liberal paradigm has its roots in the three presuppositions of the Enlightenment, namely reason, universal principles and the autonomous individual. These three assumptions, if applied consistently, form the core of the equality of men and women. Feminists maintain that women have the same rights as men and can make independent decisions. Feminist theologians argue against the subjugation and alienation of women by men within a patriarchal system, while liberal feminists argue for self-criticism of the Bible so that new insights can be rediscovered. Secular feminists of early liberalism have been very critical towards the church and its ministry. The theology of church and ministry derived from the patriarchal institution that separates women and men in a hierarchical order. Feminist theologians, like secular feminists, rejected that truth is set in the relativities of culture and history. Feminist theologians appropriated the liberal paradigm, in a way consistent with Reformation Protestantism, the discovery of the true moral life in conformity with the commandments of God, rather than the values of culture ... Likewise, instead of denying the givenness of nature, which would open up unlimited choices and possibilities for human development, the neo-orthodox theologian affirms the discovery of true humanness, beyond social distinctions, through obedience to the Word of God. Feminists who write from within this framework are convinced that it provides a continuous resource for social criticism, as well as a challenging vision of the future God intends for creation.⁹

A critical look at the church and its ministry raises questions about the extent to which the institutional church as the embodiment of Jesus’ ministry, displays the equality, freedom and human dignity of both man and woman. An even more critical question is whether the tension of abstract or instrumental reason and concrete reality serves women’s

⁹ Susan Frank Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 31.

emancipation from the oppressive socio-political and ecclesiastical reality of the last two centuries, which have been marked by patriarchy. Even when women can apply reason they are made by the church to exercise reason as opponents of men. In the same way, even where women can exercise ministry, it is within the model of church constructed and controlled by men. Ministry is intertwined with ecclesia. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Carol Gilligan (1982, 1984) are two of the contemporary feminists who apply this paradigm.

Social Constructionist Paradigm

Social constructionists go beyond the need for equal rights as found in the liberal paradigm. Women's identity is influenced by psychological, social, political, theological and economic factors. In other words, the identity of women does not lie in a single norm, that of reason, but it is within the social construction of self-understanding. The structures and institutions are viewed as harbingers of women's identity. Secular social constructionists are influenced by the Marxist hermeneutic of suspicion and the Freudian unconscious mind of society. With regard to the former, it questions the fears and vulnerabilities in terms of social status, roles, positions and authority of men if women are not regarded as equally capable of embodying the ministry of Jesus Christ. With regard to the latter, social constructionists seek to uncover the neglected or misguided perceptions of women fostered by social structures and institutions.

Whereas fact and value are separated in the liberal paradigm, within this paradigm the two are combined. Ministry is not based on the right to do, but it is entrenched in the social understanding and differentiation of roles of the members of the group. From the perspective of Hegelian dialectics, ministry is meaningful within the social construction of the phenomena that ought to be investigated. The deconstructive aspect is the logic of the social life that is reinforced by practices and institutions. Reconstruction takes the form of structural change and an open ended societal identity.¹⁰ Dorothee Solle and Rebecca Chopp (Radford Ruether's former student) are two of the most prominent proponents of this paradigm.

One of the major problems of the social constructionist paradigm is the absoluteness of particular experience and context at the expense of Christianity. In this sense, Christianity becomes merely a tool for some other kind of ideology. Another problem with some of the social constructionist protagonists is the inconsistencies or contradictions within

¹⁰ Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, 76-78.

some of the traditions that they use to counter patriarchy. Ruether, for example, successfully applies Gnosticism to the dismantling of the traditional and oppressive distinction between male and female but ignores the inconsistent view of the world of Gnostics.¹¹

Naturalist/Radical Paradigm

This paradigm values the true nature of women separately from that of men. It challenges the context and objectives of the description of the natures of women and men. Women who accept this paradigm as a liberative expression of women seek to retrieve or reformulate the true nature of women independently of the patriarchal tradition within which men define the nature of women. Approaches such as that of Aristotle to naturalism raised the suspicion of the authenticity of nature and that description of nature impact on the roles of women. This has serious ramifications for ministry within the context of the church.

Parsons also argues that the integrated nature of mind, body and spirit as a feature of this paradigm is in stark contrast to the mind-body dualism of the liberal paradigm. This paradigm also contrasts the social constructionist view of the de-centering of the self. Because of the emphasis on the personal, naturalists prefer the view that nature is a constant that can be developed through moral consideration.¹²

Mary Daly, influenced by Nietzsche, is one of the foremost contemporary feminists (theologians) who claim that the institutional church and patriarchal Christianity fails to bring about a revolution that recognises the nature of women. She claims that "Nietzsche, the prophet whose prophesy was short circuited by his own misogynism wanted to trans valuate Judeo-Christian morality, but in fact it is women who will confront patriarchal morality as patriarchy. It is radical feminism that can unveil the 'feminine' ethic, revealing it to be a phallic ethic."¹³ For Daly and other feminists who adopt this paradigm, transformation of existing church structures and ministry is not enough. The rediscovery of the values that has been hidden by the church and its structures must be unlocked through the nature of women. This led naturalist theologians to reject the formal structures of the church and worship in their own creative way. Women-Church is a typical example of the reaction of

¹¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 34-37.

¹² Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, 133-134.

¹³ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 102.

those who follow this paradigm. This form of church, justified by Ruether, puts into question the necessity of ordained ministry and the authority of ordination.

This paradigm has serious implications for women who are part of the institutional church. How feasible is it to engage with a tradition that has its roots firmly in the kind of society that reflects the very nature of that tradition and where engagement is within the framework that perpetuates and protects that tradition? What value has the ministry that embraces and gives meaning to a tradition that excludes rather than welcomes, one that distorts truth for the benefit of men? For the most part, ministry is defined outside of the institutional church for the practice of those who are part of the various modes of church.

These three paradigms are very useful tools to critique patriarchy and hierarchy. Most ministries in the Christian tradition have been characterised by the dominance of men's interpretation of scripture, prescription of the praxis and practise of ecclesiology, ministerial formation and the formulation of canon law and doctrine. The three paradigms share the common denominator of the centrality of the experience of women for engagement about ministry. Feminist theologians share in this commonality, although they differ in methodology and aspects. The liberal paradigm draws from the Enlightenment project and applies the three core aspects of reason, universal principles and individual to equality, rights and autonomy for matters concerning ministerial formation and praxis. Biblical hermeneutics (self-criticism and a canon within a canon), God as Creator of women and men and "ordo" are some of the major issues that this paradigm concerns itself with. With regard to the social constructionists, a hermeneutic of suspicion and the hidden value and meaning of women's experiences within the structures and institutions goes beyond the right to minister, but it critiques the institutions and structures that control ministry. Aspects such as the church, Christ and doctrine are critiqued against symbols, Christologies and power. The naturalist paradigm is based on natural law as used by feminist theologians. The body is correlated with church, humanity and gender. Feminist theologians and not the "male God" of phallogocentrism provide language that uncovers the hidden values that are associated with "trans valuated trinity".¹⁴ Aspects of church, God and personhood are critiqued and given truthful meanings.

¹⁴ Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 102.

Notwithstanding the high level of epistemological contributions that those who place themselves within these paradigms make in their critical engagement with the current dominant models of ministry prevalent in both the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, the contributions have been fragmented. It is almost the rule for feminist theologians to place themselves in one of the paradigms and address certain core issues at the neglect of other issues. The fragmentation also resulted in the isolation of certain feminist theologians who opted to choose one view against the other. This has resulted in diverse and opposing views of ministry. Whilst all feminist theology is rooted in the experiences of women and critique of patriarchy (phallogentrism), the diverse paradigms are problematic for ministerial practice and meaning. Interplay between these paradigms provides a more wholistic and interactive approach to ministry and inclusive model of ministry. Ruether is one of the few feminist theologians who moves between two paradigms in an interactionist way. Her interplay between the liberal paradigm and social constructionist paradigm is illustrated in her criticism of those feminists who secularise nature:

Nature begins to be secularised, instead of a small circle of grace controlled by the Church; universal reason pervades nature, making the whole orderly, rational, and good. The rationality of the deist God, immanent in nature's laws, is analogous to human reason. Nature therefore, is eminently knowable and controlled by man. Her laws are reducible to mathematical formulas, the key to both knowledge and mastery over nature...Early feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft and the Grimke sisters base their ideas on this liberal concept of universal human consciousness and transcendence over nature.¹⁵

Ruether also criticises the limited view of feminist anthropology. She claims that liberalism does not recognise the psychological and economic exclusion of women from the public sphere. The traditional male is regarded as the norm and women can be incorporated through tokenism. Liberalism provides the right for women to function in the traditional structures of society without transforming the institutions that enslave women (1983:109-110).¹⁶ Rationality, Ruether claims, must be freed from its limited capacity and false dualism of the psychic and sociology. Rationality must be developed to its full potential by integrating it into society in relation with others and God.¹⁷ Rationality and relationality are two sides of the same coin.

¹⁵ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 109-110.

¹⁶ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 109-110.

¹⁷ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 113-114.

Ruether's Interaction Dialectic

Like most feminist theologians Ruether's methodology gives experience a central place in the hermeneutical circle. Ruether also places women's experience as the focus for doing feminist theology, but she differs from some feminist theologians in so far as she claims that "Human experience is the starting point and the ending point of the hermeneutical circle".¹⁸ Ackermann rightly asserts that Radford Ruether's vision is inclusive and that this "does not divert her from what she considers the critical principle of feminist theology – the promotion of the full humanity of women".¹⁹ The advancement of the full humanity of women is the critical principle of feminist theology. Where the full humanity of women is denied, there redemption is denied.²⁰

Ruether does feminist theology from a specific biblical historical tradition. She draws from five sources that include scripture, marginalised Christian traditions (such as Gnosticism, Montanism, Quaker tradition and Shakerism), the principle theological themes from classical Christian theology, non-Christian Near Eastern and Greco-Roman religion and philosophy, and critical post-Christian worldviews (such as liberalism, romanticism and Marxism.)²¹ Within each of these sources there are dualisms that result in sexism. Ruether rejects dualisms in favour of dialectics.

Sexism is uncovered through dialectic interaction. Snyder claims that Ruether "has constructed a methodology that is dialectical, one that she believes does justice to her search for truths that will set us all free".²² Dialectics is far more inclusive than the dualisms that form the basis of patriarchy. Whereas dualisms, like man/woman, are divided for the purpose of either-or, dialectics move beyond both poles to a synthesis. Dualistic categorisation promotes a hierarchy and sets one above the other. This has resulted in social evils such as racism, sexism and clericalism. On the other hand, dialectical thinking explores the "other" and brings both poles into a new relationship. "Dialectical thinking for Ruether provides a way to discover deeper truths about persons, communities, and ideas that may appear on the surface to be oppositional or negative, but that after their polarities are explored in a

¹⁸ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 12.

¹⁹ Denise Ackermann, "Rosemary Radford Ruether: Themes from a Feminist Liberation Story," *Scriptura* xx (2008): 37-46.

²⁰ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 18-19.

²¹ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 21-22.

²² Mary Hembrow Snyder, *The Christology of Rosemary Radford Ruether: A Critical Introduction* (Connecticut: Twenty Third Publications, 1988), 15.

mutually critical way, reveal new insights and syntheses heretofore unrealized".²³

Ruether applies dialectical methodology to the ecclesia and ministry when she moves beyond the present hierarchical church that is based on the patriarchal family order and the early church's charismatic ministry models. She points out the continued tension between these two models from the patristic church to the twentieth century church. Out of the tension between spirit-filled church and hierarchical church comes a new synthesis. Ruether refers to the new synthesis as "a dialectical process that must lead on to the cohuman church".²⁴ Ministry must be understood as "the articulation of the community whereby the community symbolizes its common life, communicates it to one another, and engages in mutual empowerment".²⁵

This view of ministry is symptomatic of the interplay between the liberal paradigm and the social constructionist paradigm. The church is not hierarchical and patriarchal that defines the one above the other. It is not the church where certain people have all the power and certain people's status is dependent on the generosity of others. The church does not disguise ministry so that it becomes a monopoly controlled by a few. In the same way, ministry is more than ordination. Ministry is collective praxis and is authentically experienced as a collective exercise with a variety of functions. Ruether is not calling for the purification of existing ministries, nor is she calling for an abandonment of one in favour of the other. Ruether is calling for a new synthesis, new being, and new ministry. The transformative nature of ministry lies not in the traditional models, nor in the critical classical institutional models, clerical versus laity, but in the extent to which these models can dialogue with each other in a mutual, reciprocal, interactionist and open-ended way.

From Traditional and Classical Models to a Liberationist Model of Church

Ministry has serious implications for ecclesiology. The type of church reflects the model of ministry and the model of ministry informs the ecclesiology. In her all-important work *Women-Church*, Ruether gives a

²³ Mary Hembrow Snyder, "Rosemary Radford Ruether," in *A Handbook of Christian Theologians*, eds. Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 399-410.

²⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Communities* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1985), 62.

²⁵ Ruether, *Women-Church*, 86.

comprehensive historical account of the tension between church as spirit-filled community and church as institution. The former model of church was characterised by charismatic ministry and the latter by the traditional leadership as found in the synagogue. By the late first century the bishops as *pater familias* entrenched the patriarchal pattern of society in contrast to the earlier egalitarian charismatic model. This tension has appeared in various forms over the next twenty centuries. During the second and third century the bishops became the counterparts of the emperor and opposed the charismatic, prophetic and millennialist Christianity.²⁶ Monasticism, an ascetic form of prophetic Christianity, challenged sexism and patriarchal suppression of women through the denouncing of sex and procreation. Monasticism became the vehicle through which attempts were made to return to the early charismatic church. From the seventeenth century there was a renewed effort by movements such as the antinomians led by Anne Hutchinson and Quaker Margaret Fell who prioritised grace over works and by implication egalitarian ministry over hierarchical ministry or separateness. Movements such as Methodism and Pietism in Germany had informal worship that operated concurrently with the established church.²⁷

In the Anglican Church this tension between the hierarchical patriarchal church order of bishop, priest and deacon, and new movements such as Renew, Small Christian Communities, Fresh Expressions and Alpha is evident. The former seeks to protect the traditional model of church and ministry that leaves power in the hands of bishops, who are overwhelmingly and in most dioceses exclusively male and ordained, and the latter who seeks to base ministry on the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Ministry should not be an either/or, nor one above the other, but it must be an interplay between the perceived dualisms. Hunt rightly asserts that "it is far worse to persist with models of church and structures of ministry that are inadequate to the pastoral needs of most people".²⁸ The institutional church with its stringent ministerial structure that maintains hierarchy and patriarchy is as inadequate as is the Women-Church started by women for the gatherings of women. Via, herself a supporter and participant of Women-Church, claims that Women-Church failed to meet the spiritual needs of children and men, gays, lesbians and married couples who did not find that the church is a nurturing environment for

²⁶ Ruether, *Women-Church*, 12.

²⁷ Ruether, *Women-Church*, 13-21.

²⁸ Mary E. Hunt, "Response 11 to Rosemary Radford Ruether: 'Should Women Want Womenpriests or Women-church'", *Feminist Theology* 20, no. 1 (2011): 85-91.

diversity and family life. Women-Church also did not provide the theological, educational, social and liturgical life that the local congregation provides.²⁹

Ministry forms out of the symbiotic process when 'it reaches back to lost options behind them'³⁰ and "their new options".³¹ Dialectics of the institutional and spirit-filled models of church gives rise to a new mode of church. The current hierarchical and patriarchal church does not conform to the early patristic church of inclusivity and equality, but rather sides with the more organised bourgeoisie church. Two examples of the early patristic church illustrate this point. The "Marcionite churches practised a discipleship of equals in which women taught, exorcised and baptised." New Prophecy also "saw themselves as continuing Christianity in which the Pentecostal outpouring of the gifts of the Spirit mandated prophetic teaching by women and men alike".³² Christian leaders, although they did not accept these teachings unreservedly, were at the very least sympathetic to these teachings. The anti-gnostic bishop Irenaeus sympathised with the New Prophecy's teaching of apostolic Christianity. Tertullian in North Africa denounced Marcion and the Gnostics, but accepted Montanism. We find that the hierarchical church rejected Montanism in favour of the apostolic succession from the disciples to bishops and those to whom bishops extended the ministry. "Clement of Alexandria spoke of Christianity as a type of gnosis, while Origen constructed a cosmology of devolution into bodily finitude and reascent through successive incarnations into a disembodied heavenly world. Sexual abstinence for martyrdom was extolled by both sides". However, both Origen and Tertullian rejected the public ministry of women because of their different interpretation of redemption, baptism and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.³³ The church of the patristic age was characterised by differences, sometimes contradictions and antagonisms. A revisit of the church of the patristic age will help to discover the neglected views of ministry that serve as an antithesis for the new inclusive, equal and wholistic ministry. This is one of the necessary contributions that a feminist approach to ministry can make to the current inadequate ministerial modes of most institutional churches.

²⁹ Jane Via, "Response 1 to Rosemary Radford Ruether: 'Should Women Want Womenpriests or Women-church?', *Feminist Theology* 20 no. 1 (2011): 73-84.

³⁰ Ruether, *Women-Church*, 38.

³¹ Ruether, *Women-Church*, 39.

³² Ruether, *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism*, 30.

³³ Ruether, *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism*, 31.

Another contribution to ministry and a return to authentic discipleship is the critical engagement of the growing divide between the clerical and lay involvement in ministry. Ordination is not a patristic form of ministry, but a mediaeval phenomenon that was based on the societal structure of class division. Ordination, and by implication clericalism, caused discontinuation of the communitarian nature of ministry. Ministry in the patristic period mainly by laypersons and the later specialised ministries was initiated and conferred by the community and not the order of bishop through the church's close association with the Roman Empire.

Clericalism is based on the symbolic order of the family unit of Early Christianity with the father as the sole authoritative figure. It is this model that is still practiced in Roman Catholic and traditional Protestant churches. This is nowhere better illustrated than in the current liturgy of the consecration of a bishop. The liturgy states that "The Bishop is ordained to be father in the diocesan family and in the Church of God, guardian of the faith and pastor of his clergy and people".³⁴ But even within Anglican liturgy there exists a contrast. In the same liturgical resource of the ordination of bishops, ministers are lay persons, bishops, priests and deacons and in all four instances ministry is first "to represent Christ and his Church".³⁵ Here we find a stark contrast between the presumption of a bishop as father and the three fold order of ministry (bishop, priest and deacon) and that of lay persons.

The destructive tension between lay ministry and clerical ministry has had negative effects on the meaning and practice of ministry. The clergy is divorced from the rest of the congregation and claims special power as ministers and, by implication, authority over the people. Ruether lists a number of ways in which clericalism widens the gap between clergy and laity. By ordination clergy possess the "magical tools" in the form of sacramental power. For example, baptism becomes a rejection of the natural life. "Quasi Manichean Augustinianism" that separates grace from nature, redemption from creation gives to clergy the power to mediate the divine power for the purpose of redemption. With regard to epistemology, the clergy monopolise theological education to make the laity dependent on them for the interpretation of symbols and rites. On the political and social level, scripture is used to justify hierarchy and

³⁴ Anglican Church in Southern Africa, *An Anglican Prayer Book 1989* (Jeppestown: Harper Collins Publishers, 1989), 572.

³⁵ Anglican Church in Southern Africa, *An Anglican Prayer Book 1989*, 433.

patriarchy.³⁶ This point can be disputed because in the twenty first century theological education is open to all who wish to study theology.

Lay ministry and ordained ministry need not be complementary or antagonistic. These ministries need not be viewed in a hierarchical order or that all ministries are clericalised, but rather as operating as gifts of the Spirit. When these ministries give expression to prophetic ministry, then ministerial formation takes the form of creative tension. The tension that these ministries create brings into being newness, liberation and redemption. Ruether rightly claims that, “A ministry of function rather than clerical caste can allow a true plurality of ministerial needs of the community to be defined and responded to. It can draw on the skills and gifts of a variety of people in the community to meet these needs and thus activate their gifts in ministry”.³⁷

Conclusion

Ministry starts with the question: “who are we?” There is a sub-question that informs “who are we.” But a fundamental underlying question is: “who is asking the question?” Ruether rightly asserts that:

the grace of redemptive life is not beyond nature, but grace or divine gift is the ground of being of nature. Creation is itself the original grace or blessing. Evil and alienation arise from the distortion and twisting of our true natures...The loss of contact with our good potential does not mean that it is unavailable or has been destroyed. It means that we rediscover our authentic capacities by turning around or changing our minds (metanoia) to reencounter the true capacity for human life.³⁸

Women’s experience becomes the liberating hermeneutic to contrast clericalism and leads to a retrieve of the redeeming aspect of ministry of the patristic period. “Ministry is the active practice of our authentic life and the building of alternative bases of expression from which to challenge the systems of evil.”³⁹

Women’s experience is also the basis of the liberating community that provides the antithesis of the distorted male-dominated, hierarchical church. The synthesis, the church that liberates all humanity, is found not in the opposing sexist categorisations nor in the gender complementarity

³⁶ <http://womensordinationworldwide.org.ottawa-2005/2014/2/2rosemary-radford-ruether> [Accessed 23 November 2015].

³⁷ <http://womensordinationworldwide.org.ottawa-2005/2014/2/2rosemary-radford-ruether> [Accessed 23 November 2015].

³⁸ Ruether, *Women-Church*, 86.

³⁹ Ruether, *Women-Church*, 87.

whose ends are division, alienation, suppression and subjugation, but in the equal, inclusive and charismatic church community. Women's experience seeks not to exclude or dominate, but to find the "still small voice" of the Spirit of the early patristic period that has constantly penetrated classical theology throughout the history of the church. It is within this "voice of contrasts" that Christian ministry is exercised.

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