

# The Derogation of Women's Rights: Confronting the Religious Buffering of Gender Violence by Reclaiming Women's Basic Right to Divine Patronage

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## *Abstract*

This paper engages with violence and discrimination against women that is endorsed by a misconstrued theological anthropology and religious beliefs that promote their subordination, render them pathologized, and reduce their possibility of self-realization. The article offers ways to re-think the connection between gender violence and religious beliefs and tries to bridge the divide between religious theory and malpractice and malthinking by refuting any kind of theological and biblical justification for violence against women. It is hoped that a freedom is created that counters the idea that "patronage of the Divine" is exclusively for the man. It confronts the hypocritical paradox that religions diminish women while at the same time defending their human dignity and rights. It is hoped that this article will contribute to the synergy of beliefs and practices that the woman is intrinsically endowed with human dignity and is equitably the Image of the Divine.

## **Introduction**

Violence against women is pervasive in many religions and this is often ingrained in the subordination of women to men. According to Christine E. Gudorf this subordination is the primal violence, and from here other forms of anti-women violence are spawned.<sup>2</sup> In the world of Christendom the greatest amount of violence is engendered by men. While this is true of wars, it is also true of murder, rape and other kinds of violence and women bear the brunt thereof. Grace M. Jantzen says that: "when it comes to gendered violence Christendom has much to answer for, as men appealed to the Bible to justify their treatment of women."<sup>3</sup> Women are traced back to Eve, the temptress, and regarded

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<sup>2</sup> Christine E. Gudorf, *Violence against Women in Contemporary World Religion: Roots and Cures* (Cleveland: Pilgrims Press, 2007), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Grace M. Jantzen, *The Courtroom and the Garden: Gender and Violence in Christendom* (Cleveland: Pilgrims Press, 2007), 29.

as the weaker sex and inferior to men, both in mind and body, and throughout the history of Christianity men were perceived as godlike in their rationality and reproductive ability, and it was their so-called God-given authority to subdue a woman to submit, violently if need be. Contrary to this, there are also plenty of views in Christendom as well as in the Bible that complicate the scenario, and make it possible to argue "that violence against women is an aberration and perversion of Christianity."<sup>4</sup> It is believed that 'true Christianity' would condemn violent attitudes and actions against women since violence juxtaposes the self-realization of women.

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, human rights are equal and inalienable for both women and men and can be exercised against the state and society. This understanding is relatively new and was not evident or practiced in any prominent Western or non-Western culture or society prior to the seventeenth century. The same holds for human dignity: prior to the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, dignity was not a universal principle of equality; it was reserved for particular groups and social hierarchy. This article explores the essential relatedness between human dignity and human rights and the abuse of women's rights, which is tantamount to undermining women's dignity. The question is: does the awareness of human dignity and the understanding of women's rights construct reciprocated sources to enhance ethically acceptable behaviour and actions towards women? The foundation of women's dignity and human rights can be found in the Christian belief that she is unequivocally created in the *Image of God*. The biblical citation from Genesis 1:27, stating that women are created in the *Image and Likeness of God*, equivalent to men, appears *not* to provide the same divine patronage that should safeguard women against gender violence. Instead, women are still regarded as less in human value, and this view is demonstrated and bolstered by religious and cultural systems. This notion of divine patronage implies that a woman is entitled to the same protection, deliverance and covenant relationship by virtue of being created in the Image and Likeness of the Divine/God. Divine patronage is often expressed in human patronage, as is illustrated in Exodus 2:16-20 where Moses protected and helped the daughters of the priest of Midian, an action that carried divine approval. The Jews perceived themselves as the benefactors of divine patronage, and their

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<sup>4</sup> Jantzen, *The Courtroom and the Garden*, 31.

gratitude for this patronage was expressed on a daily basis. God was experienced as a profoundly generous giver of all things at all times.<sup>5</sup>

The existence of human rights does not seem to counter gender brutality and neither does it appear to serve as an incentive that promotes the 'culture of human rights' in South Africa. The principled belief that a woman, also created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27), should enhance women's rights and dignity, but the most derogative interpretations thereof, such as, the woman being inferior and subordinate to the male, seem to nourish the mindset for destructive cultural, ecclesial and social dispositions. This mentality undermines the observance of human rights since the depiction of the woman as Eve legitimated "all sorts of violence against women within the Abrahamic tradition – physical violence, psychological violence, and structural violence."<sup>6</sup> 1 Cor. 11:7 bolsters Paul's view that: "man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man." This view, and others similar to this, often unjustly sustains the derogation of women and instead that the woman comes *directly* under the patronage of the Divine. She is perceived as first being under the patronage of the male, and only by virtue of the male can she claim to be the Image of God. The aim of this article is to suggest that women too can share *the dignity that comes with being the Image of God*, and may even have a *direct claim to divine patronage* by refuting the derogatory accounts commonly held by Christians. The fundamental human right of a woman is that she is created in the Image of God, *directly* and not by proxy and this awareness should avert all forms of violence and abuse against women.

## Religion as the Underwriter of Women Abuse

The heritage of violence against women is apparent in copious religious literature and in many instances religions have sanctioned and legitimated the various forms of abuse meted out to women. Yet, many women continue to rely on their religious faith and practice, not only to survive the violence aimed at them, but also as a source of hope and power that helps them resist that violence and to continue their struggle to eradicate violence from their lives.<sup>7</sup> The multifaceted nature of religion is a curious phenomenon in the sense that it includes both oppressive

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<sup>5</sup> Zeba A. Crook, *Reconceptualising Conversion: Patronage, Loyalty, and Conversion in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean* (Berlin / New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 88.

<sup>6</sup> John Raines, *The Mother of Life and the God of Death: Religious Roots of Violence against Women in Christianity* (Cleveland: Pilgrims Press, 2007), 95.

<sup>7</sup> Gudorf, *Violence against Women in Contemporary World Religion*, 10.

and liberating capacities; it provides women with the capacity to live with violence as well as to counteract violence.

Jantzen is of the opinion that some of the conceptual foundations of traditional Christian thought generate a construction of gender, both masculine and feminine, that in turn makes gender violence almost inevitable.<sup>8</sup> She claims that part of the solution is to destabilise the conceptual models, which will simultaneously address the biblical issues that condone violence against women. The Old Testament Biblical narrative of the covenant history created a patriarchal gender structure (Gen 9:8; Gen 17:8; Ex 19:5-6). God, the male deity, is also the God of Battles, the King of Kings with powerful masculine qualities. The covenant was made with and by men, and the presence of a woman would render a man unfit to encounter God. To bear this out Moses in Ex. 19:15 says: "Be ready by the third day; do not go near a woman." The critical moments of Jewish history rendered women invisible.

The Oxford Dictionary of Religions states that all religions underwrite the subordination of women and it affirms that religion, by its very nature, is sexist and contains some easily diagnosed and some not so easily diagnosed inducements to violence against women.<sup>9</sup> In the words of Maguire: "Those judged inferior are more liable to abuse and, when their 'inferiority' is nominally blessed, the prejudice sinks deep, well fed roots."<sup>10</sup> He is of the opinion that religiously grounded prejudice is the most lethal of all prejudices simply because religion is uniquely powerful, and not to address it when it is at the core of a problem, is analytically and sociologically naïve. For this reason, he suggests that religiously nourished illnesses require religious cures. The guilt of religions has to be exposed: if not, it will remain a symbolic powerhouse that remains part of the problem of women and girl abuse, rather than part of the solution. It also prevents the full realization of human rights. One way forward is to make way for renewable moral energies and apply them to the healing of women and of men and to the healing of the religions themselves.<sup>11</sup>

Ironically, gender justice and universal human dignity are also prominent features in all religions. In many instances, the Ten Commandments in the Bible are considered the foundation of human rights. They are

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<sup>8</sup> Jantzen, *The Courtroom and the Garden*, 30.

<sup>9</sup> J. Bowker, *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1041.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel. C. Maguire and Sa'diyya Shaikh, *Violence against Women in Contemporary World Religion: Roots and Cures* (Cleveland Ohio: Pilgrims Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Maguire and Shaikh, *Violence against Women in Contemporary World Religion*, 1.

immensely important for all persons, not only for Christians and Jews, but for those who seek to live a sound moral life. The Ten Commandments may not be a human rights manifesto in its original formation, yet the Bible has much to say about human rights. While the term dignity generally defines the intrinsic worth that belongs equally to all human beings, to all genders, and constitutes the intrinsically valuable aspects of every human being, it often lacks clear substance and often suffers ambiguity. The commandments are all foundational human rights and imply respect for each person's human dignity. Yet, there are biblical texts that attest to brutal violence against women, violating the Ten Commandments, such as Judges 21:10-24, Numbers 31:7-18 and Judges 5.

## **Women have to Reclaim their Rightful Dignity and Refute Life-denying Gender Theologies**

In Christian terms, the dignity of the woman is housed in the realization of being created in the "Image of God", but the critical question is: do those who inflict violence upon women consider women as the *Image of God*? The common understanding is that: only together with a man is the woman perceived as being in the image of God, but when she is referred to independently, she is then not recognised as the Image of God.<sup>12</sup> In the biblical sense, man and woman *together* are the bearers of the 'Image of God.' According to the Hebrew Scriptures, God expressed aesthetic delight as well as moral goodness as utilized in the creation of man and woman. Due to the many derogatory interpretations of the Genesis text, and the fact that they serve as justification for the deprecating treatment of women, it is high time that the understanding of women comes into the equation with her own rightful entitlement of being the Image of God. As intimated by Paul in 1 Cor. 11:7-8, a woman's claim to the patronage of the Divine is dependent on the male: "For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, *but woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man.*" The literal interpretation of these types of scripture verses resulted in misconstrued theological anthropologies that emasculate the dignity of women as well as her growth towards personal self-realization. This misconstrued theological anthropology of the woman forms the basis of much harm and damage to the dignity of the feminine. The instructions of the servile status of women given by Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians (5:21-24) accurately described the customs and gender injustice of his day. In contrast, in his letter to the

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<sup>12</sup> Maguire and Shaikh, *Violence against Women in Contemporary World Religion*, 12.

Galatians (3:28), he announced the new and revolutionary perspectives of the Jesus movement where all hostile divisions between the male and female, slave and free, Greek and Jew are washed away. It appears that adherents to Christianity seemed to be selective and conveniently ignored the revolutionary perspectives of the Jesus movement and warp back to the cultural atmosphere before Christ and the Jesus movement.<sup>13</sup>

Equality in being and worth (ontological equality) is a clear biblical (New Testament) teaching that affirms that all human beings – male and female – have equal standing before God. The scriptural evidence for this equality states that both ‘male and female’ were created in the ‘Image of God’ (Gen 1:27; Matthew 19:4; Mark 10:6); both have been redeemed by Jesus Christ, so that “in Christ there is “neither male nor female” (Gal. 3:28) and both are joint heirs of the grace of life (1 Peter 3:7, RSV). The male/female couplet reflects the same wording of Genesis 1:27: “So God created humankind in God’s image, God created them; male and female God created them.” Both man and woman are equal participants in the life of Christ. The ambiguous links between human rights, religious and cultural beliefs are clearly illustrated in the conflict between human rights and the iniquitous nature and use of some “biblical values” bolstered by a misconstrued theological anthropology. This serves as a serious impediment for a woman’s journey towards wholeness.

### ***A Misconstrued Theological Anthropology Demerits the Dignity of Women***

In the past the “*Image of God theology*”, which was strongly influenced by the philosophical, cultural and social norms of the day, misconstrued the theological anthropologies of woman. While the biblical concept of the Image of God is theological in derivation, it is, however, philosophical in its specification. It is metaphysical, because it points to a certain kind of being, described by scholastics as an intellectual being. However, any true philosophy and theology of woman has to appreciate her as a being, as a person. It is essential for female self-realization that the global personality of women, and her unique stance in relation to God, should not only be understood, but also observed. Wrong conclusions have resulted in the formulation of a misguided theological and philosophical anthropology of woman, which often religiously and culturally justify

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<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Slater, *Christian Identity Characteristics in Paul’s Letter to the Members of the Jesus-Movement in Galatian Contribution Towards Shaping a Diastatically Variated South African Society* (Bloomington: Author House, 2012), 117.

gender violence against women. Thomas Aquinas, the brilliant theologian, joined Aristotle in teaching that women were a biological mistake. He taught that the man is the symbol of nature's perfection and the woman is *aliquid deficiens et occasionatum*, she is something deficient and misbegotten. Concerning women's ordination to the priesthood he was of opinion that even children and the insane could be validly ordained as priests, as long as they were male, but adults and healthy women could not be.<sup>14</sup>

The feminist reconstruction of the Image of God, has started by seeking a just and trustful anthropology of the human person. It is imperative that a unitary view of human nature is constructed, which rejects a male-identified unitary anthropology and a dichotomous complementarity.<sup>15</sup> This deconstruction implies looking at the manner in which woman was portrayed as being, or not being, in the Image of God. Deconstruction of the theological groundwork that fostered the deceptive views about women should facilitate the reconstruction of a truthful anthropology, which will promote the self-realization of the human potential of both woman and man.

The deconstruction and reconstruction of the theology of the Image of God starts by seeking a just and trustworthy anthropology of the human person. In addition a theological anthropology, which will facilitate the self-realization of the woman, has to recognize her personhood in the Image of God. Hartel's<sup>16</sup> study of the feminine in terms of Thomistic theology, reaffirms the scholastic understanding that woman, like the male, images God by using her mind, intellectual powers, and by the very act of existing. By this he deduces that God is in the woman by God's very efficient causality, and the woman images God by her dignity and causal activity.

Although there is in the biblical tradition an understanding that women are less than fully human, less than rational and like slaves, herds and material things, are classed as a possession of man, today women are currently experiencing their own emergence into fuller personhood. This is so, says Anne Carr, because the message of Jesus Christ has taken on a new power for women who are searching for ways to express full

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<sup>14</sup> Maguire and Shaikh, *Violence against Women in Contemporary World Religion*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> K.E. Borrisen, *Subordination and Equivalence: The Nature and Role of Women in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas* (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1991), 275.

<sup>16</sup> J.F. Hartel, *Femina ut Imago Dei: in the Integral Feminism of St Thomas Aquinas* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1993), 275.

personhood adequate to their own experience of themselves.<sup>17</sup> Women are becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity and are asking for recognition of their full humanity so that they may reach full womanhood. The human race, which was created in the Divine image, was created both female and male. This implies that something in the transcendent God must correspond to both masculinity and to femininity. Neither male nor female are exclusive to the Image of the Divine: but as individuals and *together* they are in God's image.<sup>18</sup> The text of Paul in 1 Cor. 11:7-8, as intimated before, has caused much confusion and theologians as early as Augustine, as well as of later centuries, claimed that women are not the Image of God. Theological allegations of this nature, which have contributed to befuddled theological, philosophical and anthropological formulations, need deconstruction. In the effort to reconstruct an appropriate and inclusive theological anthropology, it is well to take cognizance of erroneous readings of the past, starting with the relevant theological writings of both Augustine and Aquinas. It is well to keep in mind that much of the literature of religions is descriptive of the way things were, not prescriptive about the way things ought to be.

There is no doubt that traditional anthropology that presented the woman as being of lesser value, did violence to her personhood by hampering her true development and hindered her in the process of encountering herself as a free person. Freedom is one of the chief blessings that form an intrinsic part of the state of human nature. While Aquinas, in Aristotelian terms, recognized the supreme value of the gift of freedom, he restricted the freedom of woman by proposing two *kinds* of female subordination: one before and the other after the Fall. Aquinas claims that the first form of subordination is that the physical stature of the female is different from that of man. This natural form of subordination of the woman to the man is, in Aquinas' opinion, reinforced by the sin of humanity's first parents. However, Aquinas emphasizes that the subjection of woman, whether before or after the Fall, is that of a *free person*, not of a slave. In other words, according to Hartel the woman is free to follow her *own conscience*, to make decisions concerning the governance of the man, and to determine whether the governance of the man is for her good.<sup>19</sup>

Hartel argues that Aquinas interprets the subjection of woman as a punishment for sin. He points out that subjection was not a reality in the

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<sup>17</sup> Anne Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 8.

<sup>18</sup> E. Rae & Marie-Daly, B, *Created in her Image: Models of the Feminine* (New York: Crossroad, 1990),10.

<sup>19</sup> Hartel, *Femina ut ImagoDei*, 213.



state of innocence, in other words the time before the Fall, it can therefore be interpreted that in the *original state of existence* the woman did not live in subordination. He thus claims that subjection, as the result of sin is therefore an immoral situation. Slater reflects on Hartel who relates that "lack of freedom implies pain and this is not analogous to the original state of nature."<sup>20</sup> Aquinas, in trying to make sense of woman's freedom, contrasts the state of a slave with the state of a free woman. In this way, he argues that woman is free while being subjected to man." Slater is of opinion that according to the judgment of Aquinas the woman, even though man governs woman, remains a free subject since she retains her own good and her own *free conscience*. The Fall has not altered this position.<sup>21</sup> Adding to this is the view of Murphy O'Connor, an Irish theologian, who states that freedom is the dignity of authentic humanity, and before the Fall, all humans were endowed with the privilege of incorruptibility and total freedom.<sup>22</sup> It is precisely on this issue of freedom, reflects Slater, that the woman ought to stake her right to self-realization, the fulfilment of her humanity and womanhood.<sup>23</sup>

It is important to reiterate that Aquinas was of the opinion that the two categories of subjection existed after the Fall: the first being that of a free subject already in existence before the Fall and reinforced after the Fall. The second category, which came after the Fall, is the painful existence of woman as slave to man. It is good to know that the punishment of the woman after the Fall did not result in the loss of her freedom. The woman remains a free subject even though her subjection after the Fall has limits. It is limited to the particular good of the woman; her own good. It is clear that in whatever way the woman is interpreted, the fact remains that her self-realization subsists in herself as a free being. Thus, for the benefit of the woman's personal self-realization, she ought to be freed from the implications of the so-called punishment after the Fall, and so be able to recapture the worthy disposition of authentic humanity evident before the Fall.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Jennifer Slater, *A Theological Anthropology of Self-realization: The Humanization of Women and Consecrated Life* (Bloomington: Author House, 2012), 121.

<sup>21</sup> Slater, *A Theological Anthropology of Self-realization*, 122.

<sup>22</sup> Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Becoming Human Together: The Pastoral Anthropology of St Paul* (Wilmington, Del: Michael Glazier, 1982), 108.

<sup>23</sup> Slater, *A Theological Anthropology of Self-realization*, 122.

<sup>24</sup> Slater, *A Theological Anthropology of Self-realization*, 122.

### ***The Religious Cure for Religiously Nourished Illnesses: The Construction of an Original State of Grace***

While Thomas Aquinas was clearly influenced by the theory of Aristotle, it is important to note that the latter's theory did not consider woman as a slave. To the contrary, his theory held the view that woman and man are friends by nature and share in common this inherent freedom. On account of this natural friendship, woman is a free and intelligent being both before and after the Fall, and therefore cannot be the slave of man. It is also good to recognise that despite all this knowledge, Aquinas never relinquished the view that women are regarded as misbegotten males. This pervasive and traditional understanding of the woman that emerged as a result of an erroneous interpretation of the Fall, never made provision for her full self-realization. It is quite obvious that her self-realization will not be authentic if it constantly forms part of a context that was designed as a consequence of punishment and sin. For a woman to be self-realized calls for an acknowledgement that the woman was also created in the image of God, and thus to be released from a position that deprives her of her *original status before God*. For the woman to be self-realized would therefore imply that she obtains freedom from a traditionally sinful situation that keeps her in bondage. It is thus part of the woman's anthropological challenge to be liberated from an original punishment that robs her of a life of wholeness. This calls for the *theology of women* to scrutinise the *Image of God* doctrine.

### ***The Dignity of the Woman is Housed in the Divine Image of God***

Contemporary theology of the "Image of God", as presented in *Gaudium et Spes*, stresses the dignity of the human person as seated in the 'Image of the Divine.'<sup>25</sup> This defines the essence of a human person, it refers to the right to life and to the inalienable dignity of the person. This includes the principles that foster, protect and express the dignity of the person in the exercise of freedom.

*Gaudium et Spes*, Article 12, reads:

For scripture teaches that the human was created "to the Image of God", and is able to know and love his creator.... But God did not create the human, the man a solitary being. From the beginning "male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27).

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<sup>25</sup> Pope Paul VI on *Gaudium et Spes* (*The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*). Promulgated by his holiness, on December 7, 1965 in *The Second Vatican Council Documents*. (The Vatican Press, Rome).

Reflecting on the above extract with reference to the dignity of the woman, Pope John Paul II, states: "Man – whether man or woman – is the only being among the creatures of the visible world that God the Creator has willed for its own sake."<sup>26</sup> Being a person in the Image of the Divine implies personal self-realization in God. Personhood gifts the person with his or her authentic self and this giftedness is related to the God-given human rights of the woman. Human Rights as articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are there to protect the dignity of each person with no exception since "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."<sup>27</sup> Laurie Ackermann states that it is very difficult to separate human dignity from equality and that in many theological and philosophical writings the two concepts are intertwined.<sup>28</sup> Hence, when unequal treatment is meted out on a person, it also impacts negatively on the dignity of the person. This understanding is deeply rooted in Abrahamic religions, as shown by Martin,<sup>29</sup> an American New Testament Scholar, stating that personal identity grows as a result of the understanding that each human being has dignity and a covenant responsibility to God in worship, trust, gratitude and obedience. The rights of woman are not distinct, but are firmly grounded in human worth derived from the Priestly statement, which claims that both man and woman were created in the "image and likeness of God" (Gen.1: 26-27). In this regard Martin asserts that the one unique feature of this statement, which is made with regard to every human person, irrespective of race, culture or sex, is its inherent democratization of the idea of personal dignity.<sup>30</sup> It is therefore understandable that the notion of humanity's dignity, and the value of human life as created in the divine image, is paramount to being human and human rights provide understanding and protection of Human Dignity.

## **Women Subsist in the Patronage of the Divine and not by Proxy**

The image of God in the woman constitutes the divine spark of her personality and the very subsistence of her soul. This perception relies on an understanding of God where masculinity and femininity are in

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<sup>26</sup> John Paul II, *John Paul II on the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year* (Rome: Libreria Editrice, 1988), 25-26.

<sup>27</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 1.

<sup>28</sup> Laurie Ackermann, *Human Dignity: Lodestar for Equality in South Africa* (Cape Town: Juta and Co Ltd, 2012), 30.

<sup>29</sup> F. Martin, *The Feminine Question: Feminist Theology in the Light of Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 295.

<sup>30</sup> Martin, *The Feminine Question*, 303.

equal genderless proportion. The self of the woman is that aspect where her likeness to God can be recognized most distinctly, and this is by virtue of the fact that she is the image of God *in her own right and she is not the image of God by delegation*. The deepest level of her personal dignity subsists in the *de facto* belief that she comprises of the *Imago Dei*. From a theological perspective, the integral form of feminism locates the centre of woman not in herself, nor in man, but in the Divine.<sup>31</sup> The woman is theocentric, and accordingly apprehends her individual self when she is personally centred on God, and her liberation is a freedom in relation to her image and likeness to God. This is facilitated by a renewed understanding of the Being of God that makes provision for feminine imagery.

It follows, therefore that, if woman images God in her own right, as is testified in Genesis, then God should also be understood as a 'transcendent feminine.' Whereas the divine masculine aspects of God were emphasized throughout the ages to the detriment of the feminine aspects, contemporary biblical scholars promptly uncovered the feminine imagery of the Divine. There is no shortage of images that reflect the feminine qualities of God in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament. The term Spirit of God, *ruah*, which depicts God's life-energy, is a feminine term, and God as Wisdom, which is also personified as a woman (Wisdom 7:27-81), is spoken of in terms that are usually reserved for God alone.

The self-realization of woman (which is the opposite to the abuse of woman) forms part of the deep-seated need to experience *God as feminine*. To this end Rae and Marie-Daly claim that when the feminine in God is addressed, then woman as being in the Divine Image, is also addressed.<sup>32</sup> They propose that both male and female have to discover, experience and acknowledge, without any reservation, the femininity of God.

## **To Rediscover the Feminine Divine Combats Woman Abuse**

It is very important to realize that authentic womanhood is built on a doctrine of God that acknowledges the feminine aspects of the Divine. This awareness, together with a feminine anthropology, makes provision for the realization of the full humanity of the woman. Despite the fact that

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<sup>31</sup> Hartel, *Femina ut ImagoDei*, 270.

<sup>32</sup> E. Rae & B. Marie-Daly, *Created in her Image: Models of the Feminine* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 12.

women in the feminist field call for the transformation of the patriarchal worldview, it is for woman herself to articulate a new understanding of the female psyche, and the recovering of her own sacred image as depicted in the feminine Divine. Women are responsible for restructuring their own worldview and by so doing they gain individual self-knowledge and insight into their personal essence. A reconstructed anthropology should therefore make provision for a woman to have a personal experience and understanding of her own essence, which is housed in the Divine. A woman has to love and appreciate her own personhood first and value who she is. Love casts out abuse and violence. "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love." 1 John 4:18.

Carr argues that it is essential to ascertain and unmask the symbols that denigrate the humanity of woman.<sup>33</sup> If cultural and religious ideologies that surreptitiously harbour violence and abuse, thus denying woman's full humanity, preventing her from achieving full personhood and womanhood, are to be unmasked, this would imply that it is no longer possible to use traditional, conservative biblical injunctions and religious interpretations that support the subordination of women. These obstacles are in themselves a violent contravention of a woman's development. The church, as well as religions, are significant cultural forces and they form attitudes, self-understandings and the expectations of women, men and society. Theologies, languages, and structures have done a lot of damage to the self-realizational capacity of women. It is clear therefore that certain cultural and religious ideologies have prevented women from participating in and providing opportunities for both self-realization and self-transcendence.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

The way forward is to work towards creative discontinuities and introduce inspired religious scholarship concerning the appreciation of the value and worth of women in culture, society and church. This would imply that women make a self-diagnosis of their situation and become aware that "violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women" and that "violence

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<sup>33</sup> Carr, *Transforming Grace*, 102.

<sup>34</sup> Carr, *Transforming Grace*, 212.

against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men."<sup>35</sup>

Religion across the board reveals the perverse virtuosity in its assault on women. It preaches male control and stimulates violence and at times it is employed as an effective cover-up. Culturally ensconced male dominance has perverted religion and the teachings of various religions may not be outright violent, but torture women and amputate their spirits. Much of religion has to embrace the healing of women as well. The problem of gender abuse has to be approached collaboratively since all religions, without exception, impose blinders on their devotees. Maguire says we cannot continue to skip around landmines in religions to avoid this issue.<sup>36</sup>

Scriptural texts that condone or justify violence against women ought to be dismantled and alternatives have to be explored. Some need radical rejection just as some doctrines need serious revision. Hence, the importance for any feminist theologian is to capture the woman's rightful disposition as the Image of God. A woman's sense of freedom is not always recognized as an independent gift because of the false understanding that her self-realization is dependent on her affiliation with the male. By confronting religious buffering of gender violence directly and claiming her basic right to Divine Patronage, will the woman find access to equality, security, liberty, integrity and dignity as befits all human beings?

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<sup>35</sup> Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. *United Nations General Assembly*. Retrieved 2015-10-28.

<sup>36</sup> Maguire and Shaikh, *Violence against Women in Contemporary World Religion*, 16.

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