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JOURNAL OF GENDER AND RELIGION IN AFRICA
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Editorial

In June 2016 the South African Commission on Gender Equality declared that a local KwaZulu-Natal municipality's scheme of "bursaries for virgins" was unlawful, unconstitutional, and discriminatory. The findings and recommendations of the report were celebrated by gender activists who welcomed the recognition of the CGE that this scheme was marked by culturally patriarchal ideals of women's bodies. Significant within the celebrations of the ruling, was little evidence of deep and thoughtful engagement with the tensions between provisions by the constitution of South Africa for cultural and religious freedom and women's bodily autonomy. Moreover, the ruling brought up for introspection an interrogation of the ways in which femininity and masculinity are conceptualized within religious and cultural domains. This and other contemporary case studies within South Africa and beyond, highlight the need for continuous and sustained theoretical and philosophical engagement on the intersections of gender, religion and culture that is firmly rooted within an advocacy paradigm.

We are pleased that the contributions in this issue of the journal provide critical reflections and analysis within this broad focus. The articles by John Klaasen and Jennifer Slater concentrate on the constructions of sex difference within the disciplines of ecclesiology (focusing on ministry) and systematic theology (focusing on anthropology) respectively. Klaasen draws on the dialectic approach of Rosemary Ruether to provide "some markers for a model of ministry that is mutually enriching, reciprocal and socially relevant." The article is a welcome contribution to the discussions around the role of women in Christian ministry within post-Apartheid South Africa.

While Klassen suggests how contrasts can be used in productive ways, Slater, drawing on feminist philosopher Grace Jantzen's work, shows the ways in which the conceptual foundations of sex difference and contrasts within traditional Christian thought "generate a construction of gender, both masculine and feminine, that in turn makes gender violence almost inevitable." Slater traces a history of "image of God theology" which contends that women are not fully created in the image of God, but in the image of man. She ends by arguing that a more responsible theology must hold that "women subsist in the patronage of the Divine and not by proxy", so that violence against women can indeed be seen as violence against the divine.

Keeping with the theme of violence, Sinenhlanhla Chisale uses an auto-ethnographic method to trace the ways in which pre-marital counselling within Christianity and African traditional religion, “introduce the newly married couple to androcentric and binary views of marriage.” A detailed and in-depth examination of various teachings from religious and cultural pre-marital counselling sessions demonstrate the links between the teachings and gender-based violence.

The contributions by Fatima Seedat and Leila Hassim both take a methodological and theoretical turn, showing up the possibilities that emerge for engaging religious texts and systems when feminist reading strategies or feminist strategies for protest are applied as heuristic devices. In Seedat’s piece she offers an analysis of a sufi narrative on sex difference, and convincingly “illustrate[s] the complex and contested representation of female spirituality in Islamic thought.” In doing so, she locates “contemporary negotiations of female spiritual agency along an historical trajectory of negotiation,” thus countering much of the binaries which persist in discussions on sex difference, including those which maintain that gender equality work originates outside of Islam.

Continuing in a philosophical and literary paradigm, Leila Hassim offers a medieval manuscript (The Mirror) by Marguerite Porete as an example of the power of counter-religious movements, as well as a filter through which to view the contemporary charismatic movements in South Africa. The parallels between the manuscript and the movements, are drawn by reading Marguerite’s text and that of the contemporary charismatic movement as “mirror movements” of each other, each devoted to responding to “repressive legislation from an ecclesiastical source.” She concludes with a plea to consider “Marguerite’s recognition of variation and how all differences are actually a sameness” so that we may “adjust our perspectives of charismatic churches and instead of viewing them suspiciously like Marguerite was viewed in her day, we might have to view them as part of a functioning macrocosm exercising their variation towards a universal wholeness.”

From an analysis of the ways in which the construction of sex difference within patriarchal religious systems leads to inequity (Klassen) and violence (Slater and Chisale); to the importance of the consideration of feminist reading strategies and strategies of feminist protest, as a means with which to make sense of the gendered world we live in, the issue concludes with an article by Herbert Moyo which points to the importance of the recovery of women's often un-noticed agency within patriarchal religious systems. Moyo uses the church-women’s leagues in Southern Africa as an important case study of “ecumenical

movements from below," and suggests that scholars of ecumenism ignore the agency of these women who work within a feminist ecclesiological paradigm at their peril.

Sarojini Nadar and Fatima Seedat

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

John Stephanus Klaasen[1]

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

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[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]

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[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

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[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 phallocentricism 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 (phallocentricism), 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, Reuther 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.

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[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 Gnostism, 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

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[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

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[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 Prophesy 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 Prophesy'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 renascent through successive reincarnations 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.

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[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 Manichaean 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

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[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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On Spiritual Subjects: Negotiations in Muslim Female Spirituality

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Abstract

This paper applies reading strategies adapted from feminist philosophy to the discursive construction of women as spiritual subjects in a Sufi narrative. The aim of this reading is first, to show the challenge women's spiritual excellence presents to normative representations which privilege male spirituality, and then to illustrate the ways in which women's spiritual excellence is negotiated in the text, at times challenging but generally reaffirming patriarchal distinctions between masculinity and femininity. To do this, the paper offers a deep reading of Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār's textualization of Rabī'a al-'Adawiyya using the cosmological gender of Sufi thought and reading methods drawn from feminist philosophy. It reads the male/female duality of 'Aṭṭār's text for the assumptions, the imaginaries and metaphoric networks, and the silences that inform the representations of Muslim female spirituality. In 'Aṭṭār's construction of a metaphoric spiritual masculinity, we are made to see Rabī'a's spirituality as an illustration of gender performance. Even though he does not go as far as we might want, 'Aṭṭār shows us how it is possible to be in the way that men "naturally" are while being embodied as women "naturally" are. In casting a woman as a man Aṭṭār appeals to the subtext of a Sufi cosmology of genders, to metaphors of masculinity and femininity and to ideas of affect and receptivity in order to construct a body such as Rabī'a's in masculine ways. Thus, he pays homage to Rabī'a's spiritual agency, and that of other women like her, but does so without relinquishing the spiritual superiority that he associates with the male body. The effect of the analysis is to illustrate the complex and contested representation of female spirituality in Islamic thought, and in doing so to also locate contemporary negotiations of female spiritual agency along an historical trajectory of negotiation.

Introduction

This article focuses on the construction of female spiritual subjectivity in an instance of sufi thought through the application of feminist reading strategies to the representation of a notable sufi, Rabī'a al-'Adawiyya (d. 185/801). The aim is not only to illustrate the challenge women's spiritual excellence presents to normatively male representations of spirituality,

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but also to show how the contestations of female spiritual excellence are not negotiated simply. The aim in doing this is two-fold; firstly to illustrate the complex operations of thought employed in representing Muslim women's spiritual excellence in a masculine paradigm, and in doing so to also locate contemporary negotiations of female spiritual agency along an indigenous trajectory of historical negotiation. The paper analyses the discursive construction of the feminine in Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār's (d. 618/1221) textualization of Rabī'a al-'Adawiyya[2] using reading methods drawn from feminist philosophy, namely Luce Irigaray and Michelle Le Doeuff. Reading through the movements of masculinity and femininity it unpacks the assumptions, the imaginaries and metaphoric networks, and the silences that inform the vision of Muslim female spirituality represented by 'Aṭṭār.[3] In 'Aṭṭār's construction of a metaphoric spiritual masculinity, we are made to consider Rabī'a's spirituality as an illustration of gender performance.

Feminist Reading Strategies

Feminist philosophy suggests that to deconstruct the power of discourse is to offer a specular or self-reflecting analysis of the subject of discourse. For Luce Irigaray, the speaking subject necessarily draws nourishment from "matter" that allows it to make systematicity and representation possible. In the absence of historical women's writings, and in order to seek out historical understandings of the feminine, feminist analysis through historical text must rely on a number of innovative reading methods. Amongst these is a reading technique that examines what Irigaray calls "*the "grammar"* of each figure of discourse". Such reading examines the 'syntactic laws' that representation relies upon, the 'imaginary configurations', and 'metaphoric networks', as well as what is not articulated at the level of utterance: the silences of discourse. The goal, she explains

> … is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth or of a meaning that is excessively univocal... [We] should not put it, then, in the form "What is a woman?" but rather, repeating/interpreting the way in which,

[2] Farid al-Din 'Attar, "Rabi'a: Her Words and Life in 'Attar's Memorial of the Friends of God," trans. Paul Losensky with Michael Sells, in *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings,* ed. Michael Sells (New York: Mahwah Paulist Press, 1996).

[3] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985). Michell Le Dœuff, *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, etc.* Trans. Trista Selou (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991). See Silvers (2007) for a discussion on the 'gender cosmology' of Sufism.

> within a discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject ... (emphasis in the original).[4]

Remaining with the idea of 'the imaginary', Le Doeuff has employed it as a rhetorical term that constitutes the assumptions upon which a text rests, namely narratives, figures, imagery, and pictorial or analogical structures within knowledges which indicate an 'intellectual and political elision'.[5] The imaginary, she explains,

> marks those places within texts where the discourse is unable to admit its founding assumptions and must cover them. It signals, thus, a crucial vulnerability within texts and arguments, a site for what remains otherwise unspeakable yet necessary for a text to function.[6]

My task in this paper is to employ these reading methods for the ways in which the feminine finds itself defined in *'Aṭṭār's* historical narrative of *Rabī'a*. I make apparent the negotiated representation of female spirituality and draw attention to the contested nature of femininity in discourse on women's spirituality.[7]

Reading for Woman

Before we enter into the text, we must note our use of feminist reading strategies. Reading classical texts for the portrayal of sex-difference and gender is easily reduced to anachronism when we read to affirm or challenge contemporary ways of thinking. To avoid the anachronism, the challenge of feminist reading and writing is to locate the texts, as far as possible, in their own milieu, in terms of time and space. Our distance in terms of both makes an unmediated reading almost impossible. To alleviate the challenge to the extent possible and to allow contemporary readings of the past that do not reduce us to a similar silence in the present, feminist reading methods are invaluable. Rebecca Flemming (2000), in her assessment of Thomas Laqueur's (1990) formidable thesis on a medieval single sex biology, warns us that "just as the Aristotelian body is not the body of modern sex in any number of ways" so too what "bears down upon the body" is hard to think of as gender in an analytic

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[4] Irigaray, *This Sex*, 74-80.

[5] Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989). Grosz explains that Le Deouff`s concept of the imaginary is different from Lacan, who uses the imaginary to refer to the formation of the ego and the development of two person relationships.

[6] Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, xix.

[7] See the reading methods that Luce Irigaray provides in *This Sex Which is Not One* (1985) and the suggestions Michele Le Dœuff makes in *Hipparchia's Choice* (1991).

sense (Flemming 2000:16). We may benefit from similar cautions, namely against the sense that we may have full knowledge of the intimacies of the historical writer's minds. We know too that credible scholarship cannot emerge from an uncritical application of contemporary categories onto historical sites.

Further, it is tempting to suggest that historical understandings of the world were markedly inferior to ours. Theories of historicism and modernisation may even require that we argue for modern progress over historically less enlightened or less expansive views of the world. In this sense, present day theories of gender and sex-difference frequently work on the premise that today's gender arrangements are a vast improvement of historical arrangements, and they may well be, but our distance from that history limits what we may validly say about it. In the study of Islam especially, the narrative of historical progress is a tempting one, even as we try to mediate the biases of historicism and orientalist understandings of Muslim women's lives. By contrast, normative Muslim thought works with a reverse premise for the development of gender relations, viz. that historically, Muslim communities offered greater rights to Muslim women than were then present in non-Muslim communities, that historical communities were more observant of Islamic norms and that the present day practices are a demotion of the past (Badawi 1995, Doi 1992). Present day reforms, they argue, are primarily the result of Muslim submission to pressures of western rights-based social norms, inherently inimical to the Islamic system of rights. Furthermore, to normative narratives, critical reformist Muslim scholarship argues for reform in contemporary Muslim practice to come closer to the divine message of gender equality, which some argue has never been realised (Barlas 2002, Wadud 1999).

Without suggesting a reversion to historical inequalities, we do, following Le Doeuff and Irigaray, have reading strategies that enable in-depth and nuanced readings of the historical feminine. These strategies make obvious, as far as they can, the operations of the "grammar", the "imaginary configurations", and the "metaphoric networks", as well as the silences and the political elisions that manage the "scenography that makes representation possible".[8] I have relied on them here not without a deep awareness of the distance that stands between us and the text, both chronologically and experientially.

[8] Irigaray, *This Sex*, 75 and Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, xix.

Textualising Rabī'a

What might these spaces be? I would like to venture into some of the spaces that Sa'diyya Shaikh (2009) and the other scholars here have opened, to explore what some of these possibilities may be through a thirteenth century chronicle of the life of the most prominent female Sufi. When Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār set upon the task of chronicling the lives of seventy-five Sufi teachers he included amongst them only one woman, Rabī'a al-'Adawiyyah, a female Sufi accredited with originating the doctrine of pure love.[9] While the biographies of women were not unusual in literary practice at the time, 'Aṭṭār's presentation of Rabī'a in a collection of male biographies indicates that he was also aware that including Rabī'a in his collection would also require a defence to explain "why her memorial is placed among the ranks of men". This he does by prefacing her entry with an introduction spanning three paragraphs that also serves as a defence of Rabī'a's presence in his text. His introduction to the entry on Rabī'a reads thus:

> Veiled with a special veil, veiled with the veil of sincerity, burned up in love and longing, enamoured of proximity and immolation, lost in love-union, deputy of Maryam the pure, accepted among men, Rabī'a al-'Adawiyya – the mercy of God most high upon her.
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> If anyone asks why her memorial is placed among the ranks of men we reply that the chief of the prophets – peace and blessing upon him – declares: God does not regard your forms. It is not a matter of form but of right intention, if it is right to derive two thirds of religion from 'A'isha Sādiqah[10] – God be pleased with her – then it is also right to derive benefit from one of his maidservants. When a woman is a man on the path of the lord Most High, she cannot be called a woman.
>
> Thus it is that 'Abbāsah al Tūsī said: "When on the morrow plain of resurrections they call out 'O men', the first person to step on the plain of resurrection will be Maryam". When Ḥassan Baṣrī would not hold a meeting unless a certain person were present, then certainly that person's memorial can be entered in the ranks of men. Indeed, when it comes to the truth, [*haqīqa t*], where this folk is, there is no one – all are unity. In unity how can your existence or mine remain, much less "man" or "woman"? As Abū 'Alī Fārmadī, God's mercy upon him, says, "Prophecy is the essence of might and sublimity, Noble or common do not enter in it". Thus being God's friend is also exactly like this. This is especially so for Rabī'a, who in her age had no equal in proper behaviour or mystical knowledge. She was esteemed by the great

[9] Shaikh (2009) lays out these ideas and explores their potential for rethinking dominant understandings of gender within Islamic law.

[10] Sells translates this as *Ṣādiqah*, though Attars text says *al-Ṣiddīqa*. Thanks to an earlier reviewer for noting this discrepancy.

> people of the age and was a decisive proof for those who lived in her time.[11]

In the first two paragraphs of the entry on Rabī'a 'Aṭṭār justifies her presence in the section on men, and throughout the introduction we observe 'Aṭṭār's skilful arguments as he attempts to make place for a woman in a text that privileges male mystics. To a degree he attempts reframing normative understandings of gender difference and to a degree he re-inscribes these.

While it might first appear that 'Aṭṭār's narrative resists the normative association of spiritual excellence exclusively with men, as he includes Rabī'a amongst the great male Sufi's, to understand if it is indeed that he intends to disrupt this normative association requires we examine how he includes her. The introduction begins with honorifics that highlight her femininity through her veil and her love, and he associates her with Maryam who occupies the highest ranks of spirituality in the Qur'anic worldview. Next he dismisses the objections to Rabī'a's presence in a listing of male Sufis in three ways arguing namely that "God does not regard forms"; 'A'isha was a source of religion; and Rabī'a "cannot be called a woman". His first and last arguments affirm Rabī'a in spite of her gender, and the second argument affirms Rabī'a through her gender. While the tone of the introduction is consistently apologetic, 'Aṭṭār achieves the inclusion of Rabī'a' in a list of male Sufis.

'Aṭṭār's most striking justification for including Rabī'a amongst the notable male Sufis is that upon her pious path, Rabī'a was a man and not a woman. He says of her "(w)hen a woman is a man on the path of the lord Most High, she cannot be called woman". For Sachiko Murata (1992), Annemarie Schimmel (1997), and Rkia Cornell (2007) this may be an effective response to Rabī'a's femaleness; the masculine framing of women amounts to elevating her from the lowliness associated with femaleness to the heights of maleness.[12] Sa'diyya Shaikh, however,

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[11] 'Attar, "Rabi'a: Her Words",155.

[12] Sachiko Murata's work is one of the earlier broad ranging English language studies of the feminine in Islam. Applying Taoist symbolism to Sufi texts, Murata frames the relation between male and female as a hierarchy reflecting the dualistic *jamālī* and *jalālī* attributes of God and presents a theory of complementarity of males and females as two created genders based on an implicit hierarchy of male to female. Annemarie Schimmel's (1997) overview of women and spirituality in Islam also employs a thesis of complementarity based on spiritual equality and natural subordination. While both analyze the many ways in which Islam and Sufism give value to women, femininity and female ways of being, neither Murata nor Schimmel have broken free from a perjorative explication of femininity as something to be surmounted and overcome, whether in the ordinary course of life or upon the spiritual path. The argument they advance retains a view of male and female as a difference of degree, much like the Aristotelian notion of difference where the claim that two

reminds us that the masculine framing of accomplished Sufi women is "double-edged". While it recognizes women's spiritual agency, it also

> reflects the pervasiveness of patriarchal ideology where spiritual mastery is fundamentally connected to men... Iconoclastic women can only be understood if they are somehow seen to abandon their womanhood and take on male personae.[13]

Unable to cast Rabī'a's spirituality in normatively masculine ways, 'Aṭṭār's strategy is to cast her as male. What does this imply for Rabī'a' as a woman? To answer this we need to take a few steps back and ask what prompts 'Aṭṭār to contemplate Rabī'a as "a man on the path of the lord Most High"? Is it the fact that she is on the spiritual path and to be on the path is to be figuratively male? Many other women were Sufis, too, and not all of them were presented as Rabī'a was, i.e. in male form, and so it does not seem that the path requires gender specificity, even though its aim may be to produce the ideal Sufi which, by some accounts, is also a man (Schimmel 1997). Silvers (2007, 1-2) explains that while some female Sufis who "mastered their souls" were considered "'men' on the path", typically, exceptional women in the early periods of Islam were "called the best of all men and women". In the shifts between masculinity and femininity, biographers such as 'Aṭṭār illustrate their operative hierarchy of sex difference. In so doing they reveal the 'founding assumptions' as well as the 'crucial vulnerability' within the text. What prompts 'Aṭṭār's statement is that Rabī'a's way of being on the path is only explicable if she is not seen as female. Rabī'a's way of being on the path is not a way of being ordinarily associated with women, and is different enough to warrant it not being considered female. The way in which 'Aṭṭār's arguments for Rabī'a's place in his chronicle works with ideas of masculinity and femininity, male and female bodies, and male and female ways of being disrupts this "natural" association of bodies, genders, and desires. In disrupting seemingly natural associations that link certain bodies with certain genders, he subsequently disrupts the link between certain bodies and certain appropriate desires. Yet, following Shaik's advice, it would be incorrect to consider this disruption a simple affirmation of female spirituality.

Sufi Narratives of Sex Difference

Analysing women's spirituality through a study of Sufi approaches to gender difference suggests a variety of gendered subjectivities. Murata

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things are equal is not necessarily incompatible with the claim that one of the two is better than the other.

[13] Shaikh, "In Search of al-Insān: Sufism, Islamic Law and Gender," 17.

and Schimmel, and later scholars too (Lutfi, 1985; Moris, 1992), explain the Sufi women's gendered subjectivities in terms of complementarity, however differently presented.[14] More recently scholars have developed further alternatives for understanding gender difference in Sufi thought (Shaikh, 2009; Silvers, 2007).

Drawing on Murata, Laury Silver's (2007) explains the "cosmological gender" paradigm of Sufi literature in terms of a tripartite collective of the spirit, the soul and the body through a dynamic of masculinity and femininity that functions at the cosmological level, which is also somehow connected with more mundane and material expressions of gender.[15] The spirit is thought to be effective and masculine.[16] The body, in contrast, is receptive and feminine while the soul is not specifically gendered.[17] The Divine too is "never specifically gendered either masculine or feminine", rather it is known through either the masculine names of majesty (the *jalāli* names) or the feminine names of beauty (the *jamāli* names).[18]

Jamal Elias (1988) employs a similar gender cosmology. He produces a complementarity framework in the dynamic of transcendence and immanence while also making a distinction between the "physical woman and ideal woman" as "the female and the feminine". The physical woman or the *Muslima* (the Muslim woman) is the one whose lower self prevails over her spiritual nature and so she is inferior to men in her spiritual and intellectual abilities; [19] in Shī'ī thought she is Fatima, "the

[14] The undercurrent is discernible in both texts. Refer to the conclusions of each book for more on this.

[15] Silvers, "Representations: Sufi Literature," in *EWIC*, 5:535.

[16] Silvers, "Representations: Sufi Literature," in *EWIC*, 5:536.

[17] Silvers, "Representations: Sufi Literature," in *EWIC*, 5:536.

[18] The binaries are dynamic and relational and not static or rigid associations of specific genders with specifically sexed bodies. So, instead of maleness, the fact that a thing produces effects in something else constitutes it as male and rather than femaleness, the fact that it receives effects constitutes it as female (Silvers, "Representations: Sufi Literature", in EWIC, 5:535-6). The masculinity and femininity assigned to the names suggests a scheme of binary pairs, the foundation of which is the binary of receptivity and effect wherein to be receptive and to be affected by something is represented as feminine and to be effective and to have an effect on something is represented as masculine. This binary also directs the subjective positions between the Divine and the spirit, the soul and the body. To contemplate the Divine is to be receptive to the Divine and receptivity is feminine, thus "all of creation is female" with regard to the Divine (Silvers, "Representations: Sufi Literature", in EWIC, 5:537).

[19] She follows her faith and practices its rituals "albeit in a lesser capacity than her Muslim [male] counterpart" (Elias, "Female and Feminine in Islamic Mysticism", 210). She is the subject of Qur'an 2:228, the one to whom "men have a degree above" (Elias, "Female and Feminine in Islamic Mysticism", 209: note 1). She has diminished status in religious

perfect expression of the human self" and in Sunni thought she is Maryam, "the human spirit filled with Divine light".[20] In this gender cosmology, the individual male Sufi occupies that space above the physical women and below the celestial feminine which resides above man (as Adam) and beneath God.

Elias's distinction between the physical and the celestial highlights both the affirmative and the prejudicial uses of femininity in Sufi thought. Moris, too, reads the "symbolic function of woman" in Sufi literature both "positively as the symbol of Divine mercy and negatively as the source of concupiscence and therefore of dissipation of the soul".[21] Silvers and Shaikh have similarly recognized the multivalent nature of gender in Sufi literature. Silvers recalls the various "equitable, admiring, and misogynistic depictions" of women. Drawing on Ibn 'Arabi, Shaikh argues for Sufi readings as potentially productive of "an egalitarian politics of gender".[22] She argues that the Sufi critique of egoism and suspicion of social power may provide useful spaces from which to challenge male superiority and gender discrimination (p.#). In Shaikh's reading, the gender affirmative subjectivities of Sufism are also potential further resources for gender affirmative subjectivities in law. However, Shaikh also indicates that the "tensions between patriarchal inclinations and gender-egalitarian impulses" do not allow us to gloss over the claims to male superiority that often feature in Sufi literature.[23]

Whether in the "yin yang" framework of complementarity that Murata uses, the "different but equal framework" that Schimmel uses, the notion of whole and part employed by Lutfi or the notion of polarization and competition between genders that Moris uses, the complementary models of gender contrast against the multivalent models that Silvers, Shaikh and Elias suggest. Both the models of a complementarity and multi-valence offer valuable resources for theorising gender difference and female subjectivity, to imagine and at times re-imagine gender at the

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matters, being responsible for having Adam thrown out of paradise, causing the argument between Abel and Cain and, in some Sufi literature, she is the cause of "all mischief" (Elias, "Female and Feminine in Islamic Mysticism", 220-1).

[20] Elias, "Female and Feminine in Islamic Mysticism", 218. She is the ideal beloved, Layla; she is the symbol virtue and divine compassion (Elias, "Female and Feminine in Islamic Mysticism", 209). She is that which is realized in divine mercy. According to Elias, in Sufi literature "the physical woman as human being is minimized so that [as a wife] she becomes an accessory to the course of events in a mystic's life". She is the "profane impinging upon the sacred" (Elias, "Female and Feminine in Islamic Mysticism", 214).

[21] Morris, "The Sufi Perspective on the Feminine State", 48.

[22] Shaikh, "In Search of al-Insān: Sufism, Islamic Law and Gender", 2.

[23] Silvers, "Representations: Sufi Literature", in *EWIC*, 5:535, and Shaikh, "In Search of al-Insān: Sufism, Islamic Law and Gender", 2.

physical and cosmological levels, revealing what Shaikh calls the potential of Sufi thought to produce "fulfilling and affirmative gendered subjectivities".[24] 'Aṭṭār's discussion shows some of these imaginings at work, specifically in the disruptions he effects on the seemingly natural connection between bodies and their spiritual performances.

Performing Spirituality

Butler's challenge to the 'naturalness' of what we consider the sex of a body, illustrates that the body too is a discursive construct; gender functions as "discursively constrained performative acts" that produce the "body through and within the categories of sex",[25] thus the sex of a body (and not just the gender of a sexed body) is iteratively and discursively constructed.

> Rather than being an expression of [immutable] sex, gender produces sex. Masculinity and femininity are learned bodily performances that masquerade as natural by invoking bodily markers [primary and secondary sex characteristics].[26]

For 'Aṭṭār, to be figuratively male implies performing in ways characteristic of men and not characteristic of women. And yet Rabī'a conducts this performance (i.e. her male-like way of being on the path) as a female, defined as such by a female body; indeed she can only be "*like* a male" because she *has* a female body (both italics are mine). When 'Aṭṭār calls her 'a man on the path' he also recognizes that her actions do not conform with her body. And Shaikh reminds us, 'Aṭṭār must work within an anthropological scheme that cannot align femaleness into the "ideal of human perfection".[27] Against this dilemma, 'Aṭṭār's few short paragraphs are a rich repository of the 'imaginary' that informs him, and of the silences that inhibit his text. It is a maze of statements and counter-statements that both construct and deconstruct Rabī'a as a male and a female. Through his introduction to Rabī'a, 'Aṭṭār makes and unmakes genders, disrupts and reaffirms normative associations of bodies and genders, and dispels and then reclaims the associations of body, gender and desire. His narrative is clearly a struggle; 'Aṭṭār is trying to write Rabī'a in such a way that he is firstly able to include her in a text dedicated to male spiritual excellence, and

[24] Shaikh, "In Search of al-Insān: Sufism, Islamic Law and Gender".

[25] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), xxviii

[26] E. Armour and S. St. Ville, *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006): 5.

[27] Shaikh, "In Search of al-Insān: Sufism, Islamic Law and Gender," 17.

secondly to do so without completely departing from even his own normative understandings of masculinity and femininity. ʻAṭṭār's two challenges, then, are first to textualize Rabīʾa amongst men using normative notions of masculinity without departing from normative understandings of gender, and second, to do so even as he challenges these.

We begin with ʻAṭṭār's second challenge: to simultaneously challenge and remain within at least some normative understandings of gender and difference. To do this, ʻAṭṭār begins in the traditional way of introducing a master. Rabīʾa's name is preceded by embellishments intended to enhance the reader's regard for her. Within each of these embellishments there is a discernible tension between what is expected of women and the exceptional way in which Rabīʾa represents this expectation. She is "veiled", as women often are, but he qualifies his statement by explaining that hers' is "a special veil, a veil of sincerity". Her veil is burned because of love, yet it is no ordinary love. Not unlike the stereotype of the emotional woman, she is indeed lost in a love-union, but it is not an ordinary love-union. It is a love-union where Rabīʾa's love is the love for proximity with the Divine. These unique ways of veiling and loving bring her into the company of good women and so she holds the rank of being in the company of the most privileged of women, Maryam. But, he reminds us, even Maryam "is accepted among men", and thus returns to the normative masculine.

ʻAṭṭār establishes for his reader that he is indeed speaking of a woman. Simultaneously, he also tries to dislodge his reader of some normative notions of what it is to be a woman – veiled, lost in love and, to be like other women (rather than the male companions that constitute the remainder of his book). Rabīʾa is typically female in all of these aspects, but in a very untypical or special way. Through these slight locutionary tensions ʻAṭṭār eases his reader into his presentation of Rabīʾa. He focuses on normative notions of femininity, while simultaneously challenging them in unexpected ways. Rabīʾa is veiled, but in a special way; Rabīʾa is in love but in the best way; she shares the ranks of other women, but only the very best of women, in fact of a woman who is also accepted amongst men. ʻAṭṭār wants to make space for Rabīʾa without losing his reader.

The tension continues into the next paragraph, and reflects ʻAṭṭār's first struggle: to textualize Rabīʾa amongst men using normative notions of masculinity since the criteria for textual presence in this book is masculinity. To achieve this he shifts the focus from Rabīʾa's femininity; instead he seems to rid her of it and cast her in a male form as far as this

is possible. He first argues that her form is irrelevant and then establishes her masculine credentials until he almost completely dislodges her femininity by casting her as a male until "she cannot be called a woman". I will return to a detailed discussion of this statement shortly. For now, I focus on how ʻAṭṭār develops Rabīʾa's male credentials. He associates her with Maryam, who, though also a woman like her, is "accepted among men". Maryam is indeed the first among men. He also associates her with Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, a respected male Sufi. Finally, he dislodges her female form completely when he explains that in mystical unity male and female forms do not endure. ʻAṭṭār's achievement here is in clearing a space in his reader's mind for a woman who acts like a man is expected to act. But ʻAṭṭār does so without making this way of being female seem abominable; instead, he naturalizes it by relying on precedence and past authority.

In saying that we cannot speak of Rabīʾa as a woman, is ʻAṭṭār contesting what it is to be a man? Or is he contesting Rabīʾa's bodily form; is he asking whether Rabīʾa should be considered a man or a woman in the form of her body? If it is the former, then ʻAṭṭār is offering the possibility that masculine traits are not exclusive to masculine bodies; for the further effect of framing her in masculine terms is to open the possibility of the disruption of the seemingly natural association of masculinity with a masculine body, and similarly femininity. In the positive associations of femininity as veil and love, we see affirmations of women's ways of being spiritual. These initially promising associations are unfortunately quickly relinquished: ʻAṭṭār does not go as far as we might hope; instead what he is alluding to is what he and others view as a mismatch between Rabīʾa's female body and her spiritual perfection. For ʻAṭṭār, Rabīʾa is *like* a man and this implies she can no longer be associated with the body of a woman in the natural association of women with female bodies. For Rabīʾa's way of being to make sense to a hierarchical and patriarchal understanding of sex difference requires that her way of being is first dissociated from women's ways of being and next become associated with men's ways of being. Thus, Rabīʾa's female spirituality is discursively deconstructed, decoupled from femininity and reconstituted and coupled now with male spirituality. If, as Butler contends, masculinity and femininity are "learned bodily performances", learned ways of being which masquerade as natural ways of being, "premised upon bodily markers", then in ʻAṭṭār's construction of a metaphoric spiritual masculinity, we are made to see Rabīʾa's spirituality as an illustration of gender performance. Even though he does not go as far as we might want, ʻAṭṭār shows us how it is possible to be in the way that men "naturally" are while being embodied as women "naturally" are. In casting a woman as a man Aṭṭār appeals to

the subtext of a Sufi cosmology of genders, to metaphors of masculinity and femininity and to ideas of affect and receptivity in order to construct a body such as Rabī'a's in masculine ways. Thus, he pays homage to Rabī'a's spiritual agency, and that of other women like her, but does so without relinquishing the spiritual superiority that he associates with the male body.

Citational Bodies

However, 'Aṭṭār's recasting of Rabī'a, similar to the recasting of Sufi women as men in other contexts, is never complete. Bodies (and the sexed nature of bodies) are also discursively constructed through citation and iteration of norms (Butler). The body has a citational value which Aṭṭār struggles with here; to cite a female body is to cite the history associated with female bodies. In iteration, however, there is simultaneously a possibility for disrupting norms. 'Aṭṭār's iterations of gender binaries, dichotomies, preferences and statuses is full of subversions as well as conformances, demonstrating the very intricate ways in which citation creates space for disruption while it also opens a space for reaffirming norms. 'Aṭṭār uses both these potentials productively. By reconstituting Rabī'a as male 'Aṭṭār does two things; first he reaffirms a superior value for the male form over the female form, and second he also suggests that form is immaterial – a person in a woman's body may also be a man. Similarly, recalling Maryam as "the first person" in "the ranks of men" he disrupts the normative association of a female body with the category of femaleness. Nonetheless, he still asserts the superiority of being "among the ranks of men" over being amongst the ranks of women. While he upsets the association of genders and bodies, he does not dispel the superiority of the male gender, even as he questions the superiority of the male body. When he connects Rabī'a's significance with her relationship with Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, he shows Rabī'a as a person of such high regard as to have captured the mind of a venerable male Sufi. Other narratives of the fictional associations of Hassan and Rabī'a where her spirituality supersedes his may be material there,[28] but here 'Aṭṭār associates Rabī'a with Hassan in order to validate her. He grants her status through her association with him and again 'Aṭṭār challenges and then reaffirms the hierarchy of these two genders.

His final defence is to challenge the role of the material difference between nobles and common people, the self and the other, and the male and the female in judging spiritual worth. 'Aṭṭār's aim here is to

[28] Thanks to the anonymous reviewer for this insight.

erase the effects of these material forms of difference. Yet, once again, by referring to these as polarities he also reminds his reader of the differential values assigned to these different material forms; reminding us how citation may simultaneously affirm and resist the normative, we cannot escape the greater value he assigns to the noble, the self and the male, and, most importantly for us in this instance, the lower value he assigns to being female.

The value of citation in affirming the normative means that we may also read ‘Aṭṭār from a different perspective in that he not only validates Rabī’a through masculinity, but it appears as though he also recognizes the value of her femininity upon the spiritual journey. This occurs in two ways: through his portrayal of Rabī’a as a unique individual with no equal in her time, and his recognition of a historical precedent of female excellence in ‘A’isha. In both instances ‘Aṭṭār focuses on Rabī’a as a woman amongst women and seems to be arguing for her virtues as a woman. Religious knowledge has historically been associated with ‘A’isha and in this regard Rabī’a is portrayed as being much like ‘A’isha. This is the only aspect of ‘Aṭṭār’s justification that is free of the tensions that run through the remainder of the two paragraphs. His reference to ‘A’isha amounts to an affirmation of femininity in itself and in regard of a woman as a woman. In this instance ‘Aṭṭār is actually successful in disrupting the prejudicial view of Rabī’a’s female form. Elsewhere he values her because she is ‘like a man’, she is ‘not a woman’, because her form is irrelevant, because she has relations with other important men, because she is uncharacteristic of women and because she is unique amongst women. This is the only place where his assessment does not try to explain away Rabī’a’s femaleness.

Despite his attempt to subvert normative gender identities, and the recognition of the value of female qualities, we couldn’t say that, in his justification for including her amongst the great male Sufis, ‘Aṭṭār was successful in presenting a notion of gender difference that recognized the fullness of Rabī’a’s femaleness. The challenge that Rabī’a presents to those who try to explain her excellence is to conceive of Rabī’a as an individual whose particular way of being leads her to the state of spiritual excellence reflected in her spiritual journey. While ‘Aṭṭār’s narrative, and other narratives of the genre that cast notable women as men may generate a space wherein gendered subjectivities have the potential to be constructed in fluid and contingent ways, normative gender hierarchies of maleness and femaleness persist and indeed prevail. Unfortunately the feminine that Ibn ‘Arabi imagines has remained marginal and has not come to fruition. The subject of Sufi literature remains the male Sufi and the central subjectivity that continues to

dominate the literature remains prejudicial to the female subject. So Rabī'a is not the normative female, nor is she the normative male, and she is not even the normative Sufi. Rabī'a remains the aberrant female as she remains the aberrant Sufi.

To read Rabī'a's metaphoric masculinity as only an indicator of a privileged male normativity is, however, to discount the complexity and the multiple valencies of gender that 'Aṭṭār displays so well as he textualizes Rabī'a.[29] The complexity of gender constructions here is intricately associated with the broad gender cosmology of Sufi literature, the founding assumptions of the text and its intellectual vulnerabilities. The assumptions of the text are apparent in the 'operations of grammar' wherein spiritual excellence is only readable as a male trait, and masculinity is made a necessary preface for spiritual rank. In 'Aṭṭār's imaginary, women may be men, and bodies don't always align with normative genders. This metaphoric network makes possible the convergence of female bodies and masculine ways of being. The silence of the text, what remains unspoken, is however most significant for reading 'Aṭṭār here; it is that Rabī'a is one amongst many women who have been acclaimed for their spiritual excellence. This reveals the vulnerability of the text, namely that indeed Rabī'a is a woman and indeed she does achieve an undeniable level of spiritual excellence, normatively considered only a male prerogative. Despite 'Aṭṭārs subterfuges, Rabī'a is both female and spiritually excellent and so spiritual excellence here is female.

This complexity may be read as more than a simple dichotomy and contestation between polarized genders. Nuanced assessments of how gender and sex, male and female ways of being, and male and female bodies, in addition to other bodies and other ways of being which have not been included here, are constituted through discourse, may prove valuable in understanding classical gender arrangements in more complex ways, providing more insights into how contemplation of the Divine in the feminine may challenge male prerogatives to spiritual excellence and pejorative understandings of female spirituality.

Conclusion

The application of feminist reading strategies reveals the intricate negotiations of feminine subjectivity and spiritual excellence. Irigaray's

[29] Heidi Ford is more comfortable with this reading than with a more intricate reading of gender. See "Hierarchical Inversions, Divine Subversions: The Miracles of Rābi'a al-Adawīa", *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*15, no. 2 (1999): 5-24.

motive in uncovering what lies beneath articulations and silences, is not only to "jam the machinery" that produces an excessively univocal representation of the feminine, cast as deficiency or negativity, but also to recast the apparent univocality of a text into a multiplicity of voices that offers a varied narrative, revealing here the possibilities that endure in cosmological genders and naturalized sex difference. To delve into the philosophical imaginary, so that the unconscious assumptions that act as given and natural may be revealed as prejudicial assumptions, which cannot withstand scrutiny, is to make apparent the elisions and the vulnerabilities of the text.

The value in doing this first, is in that it challenges the idea that the history of representation of women is simple or uncontested. The narratives of femininity and masculinity that emerge in the complex negotiation of Rabī'a's textual presence records a negotiation encumbered by ideas of privation and privilege that continues today. Second, it firmly locates present day negotiations of feminine subjectivity as part of an historical and indigenous trajectory of negotiations. The accusation that contemporary critiques of women's status in Islam are the result of foreign influence, and therefore not "authentic", cannot hold true in light of 'Aṭṭār's subtle subversions. Finally, while 'Aṭṭār illustrates a willingness to consider non-normative gendered ways of being, we are unfortunately seldom too far from the assumption that femininity is by default inferior to masculinity.

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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.[2] 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."[3] Women are traced back to Eve, the temptress, and regarded

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

[3] 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."[4] 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

[4] 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.[5]

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."[6] 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.[7] The multifaceted nature of religion is a curious phenomenon in the sense that it includes both oppressive

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

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

[7] 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.[8] 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.[9] 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."[10] 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.[11]

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

[8] Jantzen, *The Courtroom and the Garden*, 30.
[9] J. Bowker, *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1041.
[10] Daniel. C. Maguire and Sa'diyya Shaikh, *Violence against Women in Contemporary World Religion: Roots and Cures* (Cleveland Ohio: Pilgrims Press, 2007), 1.
[11] 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.[12] 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

[12] 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.[13]

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

[13] Jennifer Slater, *Christian Identity Characteristics in Paul's Letter to the Members of the Jesus-Movement in Galatian Contribution Towards Shaping a Diastratically 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.[14]

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.[15] 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[16] 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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[14] Maguire and Shaikh, *Violence against Women in Contemporary World Religion,* 3.

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

[16] J.F. Hartel, *Femina ut ImagoDei: in the Integral Feminism of St Thomas Aquinas* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1993), 275.

personhood adequate to their own experience of themselves.[17] 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.[18] 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.[19]

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

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

[19] 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.[20] 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.[21] 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.[22] 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.[23]

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.[24]

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[20] Jennifer Slater, *A Theological Anthropology of Self-realization: The Humanization of Women and Consecrated Life* (Bloomington: Author House, 2012), 121.
[21] Slater, *A Theological Anthropology of Self-realization*, 122.
[22] Jerome Murphy-O Connor, *Becoming Human Together: The Pastoral Anthropology of St Paul* (Wilmington, Del: Michael Glazier, 1982), 108.
[23] Slater, *A Theological Anthropology of Self-realization*, 122.
[24] 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.'[25] 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).

[25] 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."[26] 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."[27] 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.[28] 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,[29] 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.[30] 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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[26] John Paul II, *John Paul II on the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Yea*r (Rome: Libreria Editrice,1988), 25-26.

[27] Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 1.

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

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

[30] 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.[31] 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.[32] 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

[31] Hartel, *Femina ut ImagoDei*, 270.

[32] 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.[33] 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.[34]

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

[33] Carr, *Transforming Grace*, 102.
[34] 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."[35]

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.[36]

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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[36] Maguire and Shaikh, *Violence against Women in Contemporary World Religion,* 16.

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For Better or Worse: Pedagogies of Premarital Counselling and Intimate Wife Abuse: An African Woman's Interpretation

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Abstract

This article argues that intimate wife abuse and gender-based violence (GBV) is fuelled by premarital counselling. The extent to which Christian and traditional indigenous premarital counselling encourage GBV in marriage contexts by promoting "dangerous masculine and feminine" conceptualisation of marriage, is explored via an autoethnographical methodology and an African feminist critical hermeneutics approach. Findings indicate that the pedagogies of the traditional and Christian premarital counselling are gendered in a way that promotes and justifies intimate wife abuse in marriage contexts complicating women's struggle with GBV.

Introduction

My first attempt to get married failed due to intimate partner abuse by my fiancé. This man was in a process of marrying me; I moved to his family's household and commenced wife duties before he completed the process of marriage. The Ndebele tradition of Zimbabwe allows a woman to join her husband after part of the *lobola* is paid and other marriage requirements are fulfilled such as *ukangaziwe* (know me), *isivula mlomo* (open mouth), clothes for the parents (both mother and father) and *inkomo yeqolo or kamama* (mother's cow). Among the Ndebele from a traditional context, wife violence is not viewed as abuse, but discipline and love.[2] Emotional violence is not considered by this ethnic group as a form of violence, since there are no physical scars on a person's body. I was never physically beaten but my experiences of intimate partner violence were emotional. As a victim of emotional violence, I experienced loneliness and fear: fear of losing this man who was in the process of marrying me and fear of being blamed for failing to be "a good wife." The internal wounds of emotional violence never heal,

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[2] Chisale, Sinenhlanhla S, "Love, Discipline, Punishment or Wife Battering: A View from Ubuntu," Gender *and Behaviour*, 14 no.2 (forthcoming).

the bleeding never stops, the pain endures and fear runs deep. However, it is worth noting that my experiences of violence did not stop me from falling in love; they did not make me hate men. After falling in love, I then decided to get married after some years of a single life.

This time, I got married after I had the privilege of studying feminist and gender discourses from undergraduate and postgraduate courses. I was fortunate to have read theories on gender and feminism that critically engaged discourses of gender stratification, GBV, violence against women (VAW) and wife abuse. My studies engaged feminist and gender theories that explain feminist cultural and religious interpretations such as feminist critical and cultural hermeneutics that empower women.[3] I was fortunate to be a member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter "The Circle") who guided me on how to apply African feminists' theologies in my lived experiences. However, my upbringing and belonging to a conservative African Ndebele traditional family made it difficult for me to apply what I learnt from my studies in public domains. Using reflexive methodology and African feminist critical hermeneutics, this article seeks to discuss how and the extent to which Christian and traditional indigenous premarital counselling encourage GBV in marriage by promoting "dangerous masculine and feminine" conceptualisations of marriage.

Premarital Counselling and Wife Abuse

Premarital counselling differs with contexts and themes. Research indicates that premarital counselling covers themes that range from couple's careers to sexual relationships and the religious affiliation of the couple.[4] Murray's study asserts that clergy seem to address the following topics in their premarital counselling sessions: (a) commitment to marriage, (b) communication skills, (c) attitudes and beliefs toward marriage, (d) conflict resolution, and (e) the importance of spending time with one's partner. The least important topics according to clergy are: (a) family-of-origin factors, (b) friendships and social support, (c) careers, (d)

[3] Musimbi Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2002).

[4] Christine. E Murray, "Which Topics are Important to Address in Premarital Counselling? A survey of Clergy," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counselling* 60, no. 1-2 (2006): 69-81; See also David. D. Babb, "An Assessment of Premarital Counselling Practices of Pastors of the Wesleyan Church," *Dissertation Abstracts International* 10 (1992): 3527; Onesimus A. Ngundu, "Mission Churches and African Customary Marriage: A History of Church Marriages and a Case for an African Christian Customary Marriage Ceremony," *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 30, no.1 (2011): 35-53.

the couple's reasons for entering marriage and (e) fun and leisure.[5] Some clergy may emphasise the traditional gender stereotypes of couples. According to Bevans, theologically, the clergy are encouraged to contextualise their teachings by respecting people's traditions while remaining faithful to the Gospel.[6] Thus, clergy in Christian premarital counselling may approve of the teachings of traditional premarital counselling. According to theological literature, Christian premarital counselling is informed by missionary practice and western theories.[7] Missionaries emphasised women's submission to men, particularly their husbands parallel to African indigenous cultures that are patriarchal.[8] The construction of women as oblivious and unknowledgeable about marriage exposes them to wife violence.Research has shown that wife violence is common in many parts of Africa; and many women have experienced some kind of violence from their intimate partner.Some have even lost their lives.[9] Baloyi claims that intimate wife violence in Africa seems to be an acceptable way of keeping wives under control.[10] Some Christian women interviewed by Phiri lament that they experience different forms of violence at the hands of their husbands.[11] Purity Malinga quoted in Phiri asserts that "in African culture my wife is not my equal. She is my property. She is like one of my children. I have paid *lobola* for her. Therefore we cannot be equal."[12] This indicates that cultural and religious teachings increase women's vulnerability to wife violence. Some husbands believe that beating a wife or using violence against a wife is a form of discipline. An ordained male student from Phiri's study confirms this when he asked her how he is expected to discipline his wife if beating her is wrong.[13] This ordained student

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[5] Murray, "Which Topics are Important to Address in Premarital Counselling," 70.

[6] Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Revised and Expanded Edition) (New York, NY: Orbis Maryknoll, 2002), 118.

[7] Mathews. T. Kapolo, "Premarital Pastoral Care and Counselling: A Quest for an African Model," *Word and World* 21, no 2 (2001): 129-134. See also Thinandavha. D Mashau &, Martha. T. Fredericks, "Coming of Age in African Theology: The Quest for Authentic Theology in African Soil," *Exchange* 37 (2008): 109-123.

[8] Lilian Siwila, "In Search of a Feminist Cultural Analysis Model for Effective Dialogue on Harmful Cultural Practices," Journal *of Gender and Religion in Africa,* Special Issue 18, no. 2 (2012): 105-120.

[9] Sitawa. R. Kimuna &, Yanyi. K. Djamba, "Gender Based Violence: Correlates of Physical and Sexual Wife Abuse in Kenya," *Journal of Family Violence* 23 (2008): 333-342.

[10] Elijah. M. Baloyi, "Wife beating amongst Africans as a challenge to pastoral care," *Die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 47(1) (2013).
Art.#713,10pages.http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v47i1.713, accessed 14 April 2014.

[11] Isabel. A. Phiri, "Why Does God Allow our Husbands to Hurt us? Overcoming Violence against Women," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 114 (2002): 19-30.

[12] Phiri, "Why Does God Allow our Husbands to Hurt us?", 24.

[13] Phiri, "Why Does God Allow our Husbands to Hurt us?", 24.

suggests that there are some Christians who support wife violence. The question I seek to answer, therefore, are: how does premarital counselling encourage GBV particularly wife violence, who are the authorities and why are they the appointed authorities of premarital counselling?

According to McGrath, the primary providers of premarital counselling are the clergy.[14] As much as this is true in the western and Christian context, in African traditional or indigenous contexts the primary providers of premarital counselling are adults in families, community leaders and family friends, especially adult women.[15] In African traditional contexts, it can be argued that premarital counselling begins during childhood and is a continuous process up to marriage. Premarital counselling is a Christian and cultural practice that is imbued with patriarchal ideologies, where the what, how, who and why of marriage is taught.[16] In this article, I present my experiences of premarital counselling from both the Christian and cultural context, explaining how the teachings of each context are an obstacle to gender equality and elimination of GBV in a marriage context.

Methodological Consideration

This qualitative reflexive study follows a feminist approach of autoethnography because it focuses on the self *(auto)* and the author's experiences as a person and writer/painter/artist, whilst participating and self-reflexively observing the social world in which I am situated in culture (*ethnos*). In the research process experiences are often expressed in writing (*graphy)*.[17] Weiler asserts that "feminist researchers begin their investigation of the social world from a grounded position in their own subjective oppression."[18] As a Ndebele traditional and Christian woman from Matetsi community in Zimbabwe, I have experienced both the Christian and traditional premarital counselling. The theoretical

[14] Carey McGrath, "Premarital Counselling: Hierarchical and Egalitarian," *Priscilla Papers* Autumn 26, no. 4 (2012), 5-9.

[15] Musa. W. Dube, "Feminist Theology – Who do You Say that I Am?", *Feminist Theology Journal* 15, no. 3 (2007): 346-367.

[16] Fulata. L. Moyo, "Religion, Spirituality and Being a Woman in Africa: Gender Construction within the African Religio-Cultural Experiences," *Agenda* 18 no. 61 (2004): 72-78.

[17] Sarah Wall, "An Autoethnography on Learning about Autoethnography," in *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5, no. 2 (2006).
http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/5_2/pdf/wall.pdf (Accessed 9 August 2015).

[18] Kathleen Weiler, *Women Teaching for Change: Gender, Class and Power* (New York, NY: Bergin & Garvey, 1988), 122.

underpinnings of this autoethnographic study are grounded in my personal experiences of premarital counselling from both a traditional and a Christian perspective. I shall use autoethnography to locate my own life story within "the broader contextual analysis which Stenhouse says is a story of action within a theory of context."[19] Borrowing from Dorothy Smith's analysis of feminist research, I shall use autoethnographic research to create the space for my absent experience.[20]

Theoretical Perspective: African Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics

African feminist cultural hermeneutics' starting point is women's experience and the rejection of patriarchy.[21] It begins with a hermeneutic of suspicion where women are suspicious of some cultural and religious teachings that dehumanise them.[22] A central tenet of African feminist cultural hermeneutics is that the liberation and dignity of women will only be realised after patriarchy is eradicated from all areas of life, since[23] the oppression of women is multi-dimensional.[24] It gives women a starting point to advocate for their rights demanding that oppressive and destructive biblical and cultural traditions like premarital counselling should not be granted any claim to truth and authority in today's world.[25] According to African feminist cultural hermeneutics, a critical evaluation of scriptures should be done from a particular experience. This is done to develop specific goals and strategies for the liberation struggle against patriarchal teachings of scriptures and traditional religion used to subjugate women in both religion and cultural contexts.[26] This perspective enables me to reflect upon my own experience and social situation in a more subjective way. This research is shaped by the

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[19] Ivor Goodison, *Studying Teachers' Lives* (London: Routledge, 2013), 6.

[20] Dorothy. E. Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988), 107.

[21] Mercy. A. Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theologies* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 18; see also Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics.*

[22] Isabel. A Phiri & Sarojini Nadar, "What's in a Name? Forging a theoretical Framework for African Women's Theologies," *Journal of Constructive Theology* 12 no. 2 (2006): 5-24.

[23] Eunice Kamaara & Mary. N. Wangila, "Contextual Theology and Gender Reconstructions in Kenya," In *Theologies and Cultures*, VI no. 2 (2009): 110:133.

[24] Denise. M. Ackermann, "Feminist Liberation Theology. A Contextual Option," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 62 (1988): 14-28.

[25] Mary. N. Wangila, *Female Circumcision: the Interplay of Religion, Culture and Gender in Kenya* (New York, NY: Orbis Maryknoll, 2007), 34.

[26] Wangila "Female Circumcision," 34.

feminist political agenda of research where theorising begins with my own experience of premarital counselling.[27]

Pedagogies of Premarital Counselling: Initiation into Marriage

The initiation of women into marriage in African traditional and African Christian communities is a continuous process up to marriage. The climax amongst the Ndebele of Zimbabwe is during the payment of *ukangaziwe* (know me). What is interesting about initiation into marriage is the internalised oppression by women as they are the ones who initiate younger women into submissive forms of marriage relationships.[28] Initiation into marriage is done through culturally designed systematic pedagogical approaches. I shall discuss the pedagogies that I experienced as well as some which I observed in the Ndebele context of Matetsi.

Fertility in Marriage

Ancestors in Nguni culture, particularly Ndebele from Matetsi, are described in patriarchal expressions mainly as *obabomkhulu* (grandfather); however, at times it depends on the sex of the ancestor. Amongst the Ndebele people of Matetsi, marriage, in most cases, has links to ancestors and is understood in patriarchal terms as ordained by masculine ancestors for procreation reasons. Hence, Ndebele people consider infertility as the wrath of the ancestors and a terrible curse to the couple. Mbiti confirms this in his discussion of fertility in African religion.[29] Thus, if a couple experiences infertility, a ritual to appease ancestors to open a wife's womb or correct a husband's sexual impotence must be performed. In some African contexts like the Ndebele from Matetsi, infertility is usually blamed on the wife. This emerges in Folkvord, Odegaard & Sundby's study on male infertility in Zimbabwe, where men shift the blame of their childlessness to the wife and her hostile womb.[30] Therefore, *ukuthethela* (rituals to appease ancestors) are mainly focused on women and statements like *vulani isibeletho somntanenu* (open your daughter's womb) are expressed by elders who qualify to appease ancestors.

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[27] Loraine Gelsthorpe & Alison Morris, *Feminist Perspectives in Criminology* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1990), 88.

[28] M.W. Dube, "Feminist Theology," 352.

[29] John. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Longman, 1969).

[30] Sigurd Folkvord, Oystein Odegaard A. & Johanne Sundby. "Male Infertility in Zimbabwe." *Patient Education and Counselling* 59, no. 3 (2005): 239-243.

The primary purpose of marriage in Christian and African traditional religion is for procreation and is a wife's responsibility.[31] Thus, in some traditions a wife goes through an intensive process of premarital counselling about the significance of fertility and bearing children in marriage. I was told never to take my work to the bedroom, because the bedroom is for sex, mainly for procreation. When a woman does not fall pregnant in the first year of marriage "people will start to talk" and the woman will be questioned. After a traumatising miscarriage, my gynaecologist advised me to wait for a year or more before I tried for another baby, but elderly women around my private domain insisted that I stop taking contraceptives and try as soon as possible to fall pregnant, because that is key to my marriage. Emphasis on fertility begins in childhood and runs throughout the marriage process. A popular song among most Ndebele marriage ceremonies was produced by a South African Band, Platform One, entitled *makoti womyakazisa ma elele* (shake him up when he is asleep), which reminds a wife that sex and making children is more of her duty rather than her husband's. Therefore, the woman is encouraged to shake and wake him up when he is asleep to do his duties as a husband.

Ukubekezela Emendweni *(Being Patient in Marriage)*

Among the Ndebele, traditional premarital counselling is purely patriarchal and uses different forms of communication including symbolism, poetry, songs and dance to teach the woman how to handle and sustain her marriage. Songs like *emendweni kuyabekezelwa* (exercise patience in marriage) are used to encourage a wife to exercise patience in all challenges she may encounter in marriage. Men are not taught to be patient; symbolism and song in traditional premarital counselling is directed to the woman. Shangase argues that all responsibility of protecting and sustaining marriage is placed on a wife's shoulders.[32] In agreement, Moyo declares that women must be prepared to enter into a marriage and to keep that marriage strong even if "it means sweating blood in order to keep their husbands."[33] This suggests that the virtue of patience is a wife's role.

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[31] Mbiti, "African Religions and Philosophy," 102.

[32] Ntombikayise Shangase, "Sexual Harassment and Culture," in *Silent No Longer: The Church Responds to Sexual Violence,* edited by Susan Rakoczy (Pietermaritzburg: Joint Publication of Lumko Institute, Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness, National Justice and Peace Commission & Theological Advisory Commission, 2000), 23-26.

[33] Fulata. L. Moyo, "The Red Beads and White Beads: Malawian Women's Sexual Empowerment in the HIV/AIDS Era," *Journal of Constructive Theology* 11, no.1 (2005), 53-66.

I experienced the emphasis of patience in all premarital counselling sessions, as well as on my wedding day. Amongst the Ndebele from Matetsi, it is the women who gather in a room and lecture the bride and the men also gather to address the groom on marital issues. Nonetheless, addressing the groom is no longer the case in Matetsi; it is assumed that the groom is knowledgeable about marriage. The women in this room addressed me on how I should take care of my husband and in-laws. Each elder taught me to persevere even if I faced challenges in my marriage. One elder said to me, "My daughter there are girls who will compete over your husband, at times forcing him to forget you and the children. It is normal. Just exercise patience and pray God will help you…" Patience in marriage was emphasised by every speaker. Women took turns to speak and elevate patriarchy. Dube confirms this and identifies it as "hard counselling."[34] I was advised to submit to my husband at all times. Research has conclusively shown the links between teachings on submission and GBV.

Infidelity among Couples

Infidelity by a husband is not to be questioned because men are traditionally and socially allowed to have more than one wife. I was reminded that *indoda yinja* (a man is a dog), meaning that a man like a dog cannot be tied down to one sexual partner, hence as a wife I should not be surprised when my husband has other sexual partners. This resonates with African feminists such as Tamale and Dube who have observed this in many African traditional communities.[35] A husband's infidelity is blamed on the wife for not satisfying him sexually. On the other hand, a wife's infidelity is forbidden; those caught are humiliated and labelled 'loose' and referred to as *umfazi ongalayekanga* (a woman who did not go through proper premarital counselling). That woman is therefore sent back to her parents for discipline and proper marital counselling, or worse she is divorced for infidelity.[36] Rosewarne presents her personal struggles of being a willing participant in infidelity that resulted in another woman's devastation, as well as her own.[37]

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[34] Dube, "Feminist Theology," 352.

[35] Sylvia Tamale, *Women's Sexuality as a Site of Control and Resistance: Views on the African Context,* a paper presented at an International conference on bride price held at Makerere Conference University, Kampala, Uganda, 16-18 February (2004). See also Dube, "Feminist Theology," 352.

[36] Maureen Kambarami. "Femininity, Sexuality and Culture: Patriarchy and Female Subordination in Zimbabwe,." *Understanding Human Sexuality Seminar Series: Culture, Femininity and Sexuality, Africa Regional Sexuality Resource Centre* (2006).

[37] Lauren Rosewarne, *Cheating on the Sisterhood: Infidelity and Feminism* (California: Praeger, 2009).

According to her, the competition for a man's affection by women undermines gender equality and sisterhood and destroys women's consistency in campaigns for gender equality and justice as men are able to divide them causing unsafe competition.[38] Rather than fighting for the common good, women's attention is diverted to this man, and each wants to win his affection by sacrificing their humanity.

In Christian premarital counselling I was encouraged to pray for my husband through 'thick and thin' and Prayer Women's League (PWL) from my church expressed that a woman's suffering in marriage is normal. This corresponds with Phiri's findings that women who experience violence in Christian homes state that they pray hoping that prayer will change their husbands.[39] Parallel to Phiri, Owino asserts that wives believe that prayer and submission to suffering will change their husbands.[40] This assumption encourages women not to apply critical hermeneutics of Biblical scriptures and reason. Therefore, a disturbing number of religious women, particularly Christians and Muslims, suffer and endure pain at the hands of their husbands because of naive religious interpretations.[41]

Sex in Marriage

Initiation to sex in marriage was explained in patriarchal terms such as "give him sex", "serve him his food", "arouse him", "give him his cake", as if marriage was only for serving the sexual desires of husbands. This is parallel to Baloyi's assertion that "sex and marriage in an African context are inseparable."42 There are assumptions that in order to enjoy unlimited and guaranteed sex, a person must be married. For this reason, premarital counselling is used to socialise and instruct women on how to erotically please their husbands by moving the lower waist and twerking following the sexual rhythm of their husbands during sex.[43] All

[38] Rosewarne "Cheating on the Sisterhood," 10

[39] Phiri "Why does God Allow our Husbands to Hurt us?," 24.

[40] Kennedy Owino, ""Maleness" and its Possible Influence on Abuse and Domestic Violence in South Africa: A Critique of some Expressions of Evangelical Theology," *Journal of Constructive Theology* 16, no 2 (2010), 146-168.

[41] Marie M. Fortune, Salma Abugideiri & Rabbi. M. Dratch, "A Commentary on Religion and Domestic Violence" (2010), *Faith Trust Institute,* www.faithtrustinstitute.org (accessed 10.01.2016).

[42] Elijah M. Baloyi, "An African View of Women as Sexual Objects as a Concern for Gender Equality: A Critical Study," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 31, no. 1, (2010), Art. #380, 6 pages. DOI:10.4102/ve.v31i1.380.

[43] Moyo, "The Red Beads and White Beads," 58.

this is in an effort to keep the husband happy, while superseding the happiness of a woman.

In Christian premarital counselling, the clergy, prayer women's and men's leagues use the Biblical text to counsel women and men. PWL constantly reminded me about my expected role as a wife and woman in the community. Paul's letter to the Ephesians (5:22-33)[44] was frequently interpreted by both my marriage pastor and women from my church to promote my subjugation in marriage. PWL and my marriage pastor used counselling sessions to emphasise male dominance, female obedience, submission, fruitfulness and patriarchal philosophy. The creation story in the Book of Genesis was constantly used to highlight the importance of my submissiveness to my husband. Rothman observes this in her discussion of "patriarchal kinship."[45] She argues that patriarchal kinship is found in the Book of Genesis, in the "begats." Adam as the first man qualifies each man to have "begat a son in his likeness, after his image."

An African Feminist Hermeneutics of Premarital Counselling

Traditional and Christian premarital counselling re-socialises women to gender hierarchies. This is parallel to Dube's findings that "marriage is another stage where gender roles are fully reiterated and reinforced."[46] Christian counselling uses theological epistemologies based on the Bible while traditional religion uses cultural epistemologies to interpret marriage. The dictum *for better or worse* is usually explained out of the context of GBV and intimate wife abuse, indicating that the contract of marriage is biased and is an institution that embodies patriarchal power relations.[47] This dictum motivates women to stay in abusive relationships because they expressed these words as an oath on their wedding day.

The level of education plays an important role in empowering women to find their own hidden transcripts of resistance. A good example of this is my mother who was a professional teacher, who during the formal

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[44] **22** Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. **23** For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. **24** Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands (English Standard Version).

[45] Barbara. K. Rothman, "Beyond Mothers and Fathers: Ideology in a Patriarchal Society," in *Mothering, Ideology & Agency,* edited by Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang & Linda Rennie Forcey (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 139-158.

[46] Dube, "Feminist Theology," 352.

[47] Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 158.

premarital counselling sessions with men present, agreed with the patriarchal discourses of marriage that women taught me. After premarital counselling, she voiced her resistance by reminding me that I am an educated woman and I must act like one and respect my rights. Sultana's ethnographic study in the northern region of Bangladesh confirms this; she examines the awareness of women towards their rights in the household.[48] Her findings indicate that women's education was a key indicator of women's greater awareness of their rights in the family, because "it helps to increase women's consciousness about gender relations and organise them to engage in grassroots struggles for their rights."[49] Although women in premarital counselling reminded me that I am a woman and a wife before I am an educated woman, I knew my rights in marriage. I was able to detect some of what was taught, particularly patriarchal discourses that elevated my husband. However, I was not able to voice them because of the conservativeness of the context I found myself in. In such contexts I applied my own hermeneutics of suspicion and hidden transcripts and protested in silence. African culture socialises women not to be outspoken.[50] Tamale articulates that "while silence can work to reinforce oppression, it can also be a tool of resistance and struggle, especially for the marginalised."[51]

Although I was among the educated, in all premarital counselling sessions my age qualified me to be marginalised. Among the Ndebele, respect is earned by age rather than gender and class. Research indicates that women across the continent have adopted creative and unique methods of resistance and contestation of hegemonic sexual discourses, including silence.[52] Silence and tolerance mean that women find their own hidden transcripts of resistance within their situations and this works to their benefit as the oppressed and marginalised, since it is "unengageable" and ambiguous.[53] As a form of respect, my age prohibited me from engaging with the elders in premarital counselling; rather I engaged with them in silence.

African feminist cultural hermeneutics conscientised me that it is women who use culture to enforce women's oppression. Kamaara & Wangila

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[48] Alam Sultana, "Patriarchy and Women's Gender Identity: A Socio-Cultural Perspective," *Journal of Social Science* 6, no. 1 (2010), 123-126.

[49] Sultana, "Patriarchy and Women's Gender Identity," 125.

[50] Dube "Feminist Theology," 352.

[51] Sylvia Tamale, "Women's Sexuality as a Site of Control and Resistance," 23.

[52] Tamale, "Exploring the Contours of African Sexualities: Religion, Law and Power," *African Human Rights Law Journal* 14 (2014), 150-177.

[53] Tamale, "Women's Sexuality as a Site of Control and Resistance," 23.

rightfully argue that "…women are not only victims but also perpetrators of oppression against themselves", where they encourage younger women to appreciate and accept patriarchy and its traditions, keeping women subjugated in marriage for the benefit of men.[54] As a result, Kanyoro's argument, that such activities be conceptualised as "women's violence against women,"[55] is relevant and critical in campaigns against VAW and GBV. Campaigns against VAW should acknowledge that women are as much perpetrators as they are victims. The gendering of marriage has consequences to women, who may silently go through abuse in respect of what adult women taught them. Premarital counselling made me and other women vulnerable to all forms of violence. Both traditional and Christian premarital counselling teachings are hierarchical and autocratic, pushing women into submissive roles that promote intimate wife abuse.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have argued that my hermeneutics of suspicion reveals that there is a thin line between premarital counselling and GBV and that this is ignored in efforts to eliminate GBV. In conclusion, I wish to argue that since premarital counselling is patriarchal and enforces women's submission to men, it is a death sentence for women. Its teachings are biased and dangerous to women. The findings of this study join growing literature in the field of religion, gender, GBV and wife violence in critiquing religious and cultural pedagogies that promote "dangerous masculinities and femininities" that enforce women abuse. My research offers empirical evidence as well as a theoretical explanation for how cultural and religious teachings introduce the newly married couple to androcentric and binary views of marriage. The results support theories that see wife violence within the intersection of gender constructions. My experiences of premarital counselling reveal a disturbing hegemonic patriarchy engraved in premarital counselling that exposes wives to GBV or intimate wife violence. Thus, to be sincere to myself as an African woman, African cultural hermeneutics allows me to reject any teaching that enforces the oppression and victimisation of women.

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[54] Kamaara & Wangila. "Contextual theology and gender reconstructions in Kenya," 131.

[55] Kanyoro, "Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics," 107.

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Faith and Protest: Then and Now, Medieval Womens' Literary Protest Strategies, Focussing on Marguerite Porete's Mystical Treatise *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, and its Possible Relevance to Current Issues Surrounding Faith and South African Realities[1]

Leila Hassim[2]

Abstract

This article considers the application of two counter-cultural issues of faith taken from a thirteenth century French manuscript to current issues of faith in South Africa. The thirteenth century French manuscript is a mystical treatise by Marguerite Porete who was burned at the stake for her ideas of faith, and the current issue of faith in South Africa is the charismatic movement currently flourishing on the South African landscape.

Introduction

What does a thirteenth century spiritual treatise, credited to a woman whom it is thought resided in northern France in Valenciennes but hailed from Hainut (a county loosely connected to the German Empire) and who was burned at the stake, have to do with issues of faith in current South Africa? The separation between the two by time, geography and culture would have one think that there can be no link. Yet a closer look at Marguerite Porete's *The Mirror of Simple Souls* would have one consider that Marguerite was dealing with issues not unlike those South African women are currently facing. Two such issues are reclamation of autonomy and arguing for the allowance of contrasting diversity.[3]

[1] This article is relative to research for Ms Hassim's Literature PhD, the working title of which is: "Liminality and Aspects of Divinity in Two Late Medieval Mystical Texts": Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* and Marguerite Porete's *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. Both texts deal with issues of faith and how divinity might be experienced by, and present itself to, individuals and society.

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[3] Clarification of this statement unfolds as the discourse progresses.

What is generally considered by scholars to be Marguerite's social critique is embedded in *The Mirror*'s spiritual theme. The theological and social aspects of the text are intertwined and not easily distinguishable. No attempt at disentanglement will be made here. Instead, *The Mirror*'s less obvious counter-cultural formulations which are implied in the text's theological discussion and which are rooted in the female experience and how that relates to current issues of faith in the South African context, will be discussed. The focus will be on two of Marguerite's heterodox spiritual sentiments and how that might be used as a filter in order to arrive at a nuanced comprehension of emerging and flourishing charismatic movements. For the purposes of this paper, charismatic movements will mean 'the innumerable churches and sensibilities that are phenomenologically Pentecostal or charismatic – i.e. manifesting many of the charisms central to Pentecostal and charismatic spirituality – but self-identify in ways that include neither the word "Pentecostal" nor "charismatic." It is worth noting that most [charismatics] simply understand themselves as "Christian," considering their religious experience to be more or less a normal part of Christian life.'[4]

It is not to be understood that Marguerite's mystical treatise is a thirteenth century equivalent of, or that it in any way forms a basis for, or supports, charismatic movements in South Africa. It is to be understood that *The Mirror* only lends itself as a means to understanding religious variance as it presents itself in any given society. It is also not to be understood that this paper has as its basis a theological departure point. The discourse for this paper is rooted in a literary exploration of Marguerite Porete's mystical treatise *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, and the literary exploration is applied to an empirical understanding of a current phenomenon, that is, charismatic movements in South Africa. The following point has already been made in the previous paragraph but in the interest of avoiding any confusion as to how Marguerite's treatise is being applied, I repeat it here: Marguerite's treatise is a spiritual one. The unorthodox spiritual tenets of her treatise lend themselves to being used as a lens through which one can filter the social ethics that are inherent in charismatic movements. To read this paper as one which reduces Marguerite's treatise to a social critique would be to misunderstand the application of a thirteenth century spiritual treatise to a modern religious movement. It must be understood that Marguerite's treatise is being applied only as a means to filter empirically understood social ethics of charismatic movements.

[4] Amos Yong, "The Emerging Field of World Christianity: A Renewal Reading of the Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity," *Journal of World Christianity* 4, No.1 (2011): 27-43.

The Mirror in Context and how it is Relevant to Current South African Realities Regarding Faith

The Mirror of Simple Souls is a medieval manuscript widely accepted to be the work of Marguerite Porete and produced between the years 1285 to 1306.[5] In 1310[6] Marguerite was executed for refusing to recant 'the heterodox tenets of her ideas.'[7] There is speculation that Marguerite might have been a Beguine.[8] Beguines were lay religious women who in their shared adversity as marginalised medieval women-folk, formed quasi-autonomous communities dedicated to humanitarian efforts and lifestyles of solitary religious worship and who were recognised but not necessarily endorsed by the Catholic Church.[9] This sub-culture arose out of an awareness that medieval women had of their marginalised status. Beguines did not necessarily consciously choose to form a sub-culture. Rather, it seems that women, being aware of their social restrictions, consciously chose an alternative lifestyle. Due to the increase in the number of women who exercised the choice of a solitary and mendicant lifestyle, Beguines and Beguinages developed spontaneously as a semi-organised subculture. Whilst Beguines were recognised by the Catholic Church and some Beguinages enjoyed the patronage of endorsed clergy and aristocrats, not all Beguines were subject to this privilege and were, generally speaking, viewed suspiciously due to their choice of living on the margins of society. Just as noteworthy is the fact that Beguines were not heretical *per se*. Unfortunately for Marguerite, she happened to be condemned for heresy but this does not mean that the movement itself was, and that all Beguines (or even mystics) were heretical.

To illustrate the relevance of a thirteenth century document's postulations to current issues of faith in South Africa it is necessary at this point to consider a few similarities between fourteenth century Beguinages and charismatics. First, like the Beguines, the persons constituting charismatic movements are seemingly lay-religious. Second, like the Beguines, members of charismatic movements seem to practise a form of religious worship that does not conform to mainstream liturgy. Third, like the Beguinages that received recognition but little or no

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[5] Robert Lerner, "New Light on the Mirror of Simple Souls," *Speculum* 85 (2010): 91-116.

[6] Maria Litchman, "Marguerite Porete's Mirror of Simple Souls: Inverted Reflection of Self, Society and God," *Studia Mystica* 16 (1995): 4-29.

[7] Katherine Wilson, *Medieval Women Writers* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984): vx.

[8] Edmund Colledge, OSA., J. C. Marler and J. Grant, "Introductory Interpretative Essay," *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, by Marguerite Porete, trans. E. College, J. C. Marler, and J. Grant (South Bend, IND: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991): xlviii.

[9] Carol Neel, "The Origins of the Beguines," *Signs* 14.2 (Winter 1989): 321-341.

endorsement from the Catholic Church, charismatics are recognised as a feature of the South African religious landscape but are seemingly not endorsed by any of the centralised, established Abrahamic institutions or by any of the latters' endorsed associations. In fact, it seems that charismatics are self-endorsed. That is not to say that charismatic movements and their members' experiences are any less authentic. It is pointed out here only to show that a given parallel exists between two religious groups so far removed by time, geography and culture. Fourth, Beguine communities seemed to form spontaneously but not necessarily arbitrarily and operated quasi-autonomously. So too it seems, do charismatic movements. Fifth, in so far as the Beguines' and charismatics' religious practise seem to be at variance with society as a whole, both could be referred to as religious sub-cultures: the Beguines in their overall lifestyle and charismatics in their individual character. However, just as there are similarities between the two groups there are also differences.

First, the Beguines formed a sub-culture due to their knowledge of themselves as marginalised women and responded according to that self-knowledge. Charismatics seem to assemble under a different kind of self-knowledge than that of the Beguines. Second, Beguines generally lead ascetic lifestyles whereas charismatics (and seemingly the principals of the movements) seem to lead more worldly lifestyles. Paradoxically, these differences still reveal given parallels between the two unorthodox faith communities and thus compound the idea that Marguerite's thirteenth century *Mirror* is relevant within the context of current South African issues of faith.

So what are we to make of the charismatic-church phenomenon? In order to understand the phenomenon we could look at commonalities in charismatics' self-knowledge because it is that self-knowledge and a recognition of a similar knowledge in another that draws individuals together, thus creating a potential charismatic movement because surely the gatherings are not arbitrary, and surely it is in response to some or other 'thing'? Furthermore, we could also look at the ministry that charismatic movements espouse in order to understand what in the ministry resonates with the congregation and thus holds individuals in fellowship. But this paper is not a study about charismatic movements but about how a thirteenth century's spiritual treatise may be used as a filter through which to view charismatics so as to augment our understanding of the phenomena. So we will turn our attention to applying *The Mirror*'s counter-cultural spiritual sentiments to charismatic movements in the hope that we might arrive at a nuanced comprehension of the phenomena.

Annihilating the Soul, or being 'Saved', as a Means to Reclaim Autonomy

The full title of Marguerite's mystical treatise reads *The Mirror of Simple Souls brought to nothing, and who live only in the will and desire for Love*. The words '*brought to nothing'* and '*live*' introduces the juxtaposing concepts of life and death, ascent and descent, and creation and 'de-creation'[10] all of which relates to the text's theme of liberation via annihilation. That is, it is through the death of the external that the internal starts to live: zoning out external forces that an individual is subject to, awakens an internal guiding force. That internal force is the soul who is already in union with God. This concept links to Marguerite's protest against religious authorities having control over the minutiae of the lives of individuals, such as the 1215 Catholic Church's ruling of ministering to the laity and making communion, confession and penance obligatory.[11] This means that late medieval religious worship and ritual was characteristically a public act, not a private one. Mass was a corporate activity and the community would ideally gather for the various daily religious rituals. Thus, religious worship had become increasingly 'clericalised.'[12] Marguerite takes issue with such forces when in the prologue she pointedly says 'Men of theology and scholars ... /Will never understand this writing properly.' So if Marguerite's notion of annihilating the soul might be a response to repressive legislation from an ecclesiastical source and is what birthed *The Mirror*, what is it that births charismatic movements and/or, what might they be responding to? To answer this question we have to explore the parallels between the two communities further.

Given the Catholic Church's 1215 ruling of intervention in the lives of the laity it is unsurprising to find that early on in *The Mirror* there is an entire chapter dedicated to arguing for autonomy and liberation from centralised religious authority. Chapter four of *The Mirror* is a soliloquy by the interlocutor Love, the main thrust of which is a desire for freedom from external religious dictates. External religious dictates here mean the many and varied tiers that formal theology postulates are the means towards reaching union with God. These tiers, I contend, can range from basic liturgical practice, to attending mass, to tithing, to dressing in a

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[10] William Pratt, *Singing the Chaos: Madness and Wisdom in Modern Poetry* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1996), 183.

[11] Caroline Dinshaw and D. Wallace (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), xiii.

[12] Valerie Edden, "The Devotional Life of the Laity in the Late Middle Ages," *Approaching Medieval English Anchoritic and Mystical Texts: Christianity and Culture: Issues in Teaching and Research* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), 38-40.

particular religious manner, to formal theological study, and so on. Accessing God through these steps only becomes accessible by attending to this kind of religious prescription or, as was the case in the early thirteenth century, via endorsed clergy/institution/patron. What Love claims in chapter four is that one is accountable only to the self because the self is considered as being in union with God. This Bonaventurian perspective sees God and the individual as one and as such postulates that there is no need for mediation or to attend to religious prescription because accessing God is as simple as inner contemplation which leads to the self-dissolving into divinity. In the opening line Love makes clear her deviation from obligation to man-made laws (religious prescription) by using the words 'to no created thing.'[13] Furthermore, the charity that Marguerite speaks about rests upon the notion of complete abandonment to an inner self which recognises that it is in union with God. Because the inner being is in union with God, it does not recognise any external authority that seeks to contain it.

The concept of charity has numerous functions here. It operates in the biblical sense in that it is a form of tithing. It can mean a state of mind or a state of being. It works as a personification in that the abstract becomes embodied in an interlocutor named Charity. From this personification of the word and concept flows its metaphysical sense and application which suggests complete abandonment of Marguerite's self, that is, her soul as it transmutes into the divine soul. In other words, the act of charity is the complete surrender of the human soul so that it no longer exists except in a state of perfection in that it is at once the divine spirit. Could this thirteenth century notion of annihilating the human soul possibly be what charismatics call being 'saved'? Certainly the notion of being saved seems to permeate charismatic rhetoric as does the notion of annihilating the human soul in *The Mirror*. Could it be then that what charismatics call 'saved' is what Marguerite wrote about eight hundred years ago? That is, the complete surrender of the human soul to the divine spirit constitutes the perfect act of charity and is what it means to be 'saved'? Before we can answer this question we have to look at what 'saved' means and what it is 'saved' persons consider themselves saved from.

Empirically speaking, 'saved' seems to indicate a desire and acceptance of material and spiritual blessings as opposed to abandonment of such. This notion of 'saved' seems contrary to the understanding that to be a

[13] Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. E. College, J. C. Marler, and J. Grant (South Bend, IND: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 13.

'Christian' means to be Christ-like, that is, to imitate Jesus in humbleness and simplicity and so on. However, empirically speaking, the notion of 'saved' also seems to indicate a surrendering of personal angst in favour of a spiritual force that exists beyond human comprehension and which directs the lives of the 'saved' persons. So, in answer to the question is Marguerite's thirteenth century idea of annihilating the soul today's idea of being 'saved', I would answer yes. Some would argue that being 'saved' seems incomplete and artificial in so far as the human soul is not entirely abandoned because the state of being is still a corrupt human form that aspires to the purity of the divine. Charismatics then, by this argument, fall short of actually annihilating the soul. To annihilate the soul, according to Marguerite and the aforementioned contention, means to go beyond human limits and the notion of being 'saved' seems only an expression indicative of dedication to religious living within human limits. I contend that both notions, that is annihilating the soul and being 'saved', by implication, mean that one is wholly liberated from strife, be that external and concrete and/or internal and intangible. Thus, by my thinking, the two notions are similar. By this latter argument, to be 'saved' or for a soul to be annihilated, means to abide by the Bonaventurian reckoning that God is innate and not by Aquinas's philosophy that God is external.[14]

So what are persons 'saved' from? I would say from the visceral and/or cerebral human response to external and/or internal struggle, because ceding to struggle would mean severance from the ultra-pure free-flow state that is divinity which by Marguerite's postulations is characterised by dissociating from strife and an absence of accountability. That is, if we are to believe Marguerite's descriptions of being in a sublime unification with spirit. This latter conclusion we arrive at via a reading of the whole of Marguerite's mystical treatise and how she describes what it is like when the human soul has transmuted into the divine spirit. Chapter four – being only one of many sections in the text that is at pains to explain this ineffable state of being – implies that unification with divinity means that one's consciousness is in a flow state that comprehends neither good nor bad because its God-essence is incorruptible and that free will is actually divine will in disguise. Again, this theory resonates with Bonaventura's philosophy.

Following on then from the aforementioned philosophy, it is important to bear in mind that annihilating the soul and being saved are notions that

[14] Richard McKeon, "Philosophy and Theology, History and Science in the Thought of Bonaventura and Thomas Aquinas," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36.3 (July-Sept. 1975): 193-212.

at first glance seem to be at variance with each other but may actually be notions referring to the same idea but that that idea applies differently according to era. For the Beguines it meant living ascetic and mendicant lifestyles coupled with humanitarian activities. For charismatics it seems to connote existential and egalitarian activity that seem to mimic Marguerite's discourse on the conduct of annihilated souls. For example, Marguerite's theory that annihilated souls answer to no central authority but God resonates in the fact that some charismatics are self-endorsing. The anxiety about conforming to social and religious stricture exposes itself in Marguerite's annihilation-of-the-soul discourse as well as in charismatic movement's self-endorsement. For Marguerite there appears to be a desire to surrender to uninhibited freedom. There is a sense of the desire to release a deeply hidden and suppressed natural being who knows only pure love and no corruption. The analogy Marguerite uses in chapter twenty-nine when Love explains to Reason the state of being an annihilated soul is in when in union with God is that of a child who cannot tell the difference between safety and danger or wrong and right because it is so immersed in its own pleasure and in its own naturalness that it is actually behaving according to divine will. What Marguerite is communicating is a desire for freedom from social dictates and constraints and immersion in a pleasurable spiritual identity. It is also a communication of a desire to be self-possessed in that the inner-being recognises that it is in harmony with the divine and as such is not accountable to anyone or anything because whatever its undertakings, they are undertakings by recognition of an innate divine consciousness exercising itself. This, I contend, is what charismatics are communicating in their existence and presence on the religious landscape and in their deviation from normative religious practise in that their practise mimics Marguerite's description of annihilated souls. That is, based on their unorthodox style and character, charismatics are not only expressing the desire to immerse themselves in spiritual freedom but are also signalling their release from centralised religious authority and the desire to personally fulfil their needs, be that spiritual or worldly.

Centralised religious authority seems to be one of the structural forces charismatics might be responding to given that mainstream authoritative ecclesiastical endorsement is largely absent from these communities. The notion of entitlement by right of divine consciousness is aptly captured in the ministry of prosperity theology, for example. The move by Charismatics away from mainstream churches towards a decentralised, semi-organised and quasi-autonomous community, such as that experienced by Beguines, now starts to make sense. It is the promise of freedom from strife embedded in the prosperity ministry of some charismatics that seems to resonate with congregations whose members

lives seem at times to be filled with strife in any given sense of the word for, philosophically speaking, every person seeks the kind of fulfilment espoused in the Bible. It is the promise of freedom from strife as detailed in Marguerite's annihilation discourse and as applied in charismatics' application of the notion 'saved', that seems to bring members to assembly. However, it is to be noted that this might be only one of many variables at work. The spontaneous assemblies are, I contend, not arbitrary but are of themselves an existential response to the desire for socio-economic and spiritual upliftment, perhaps due to a failure on the part of mainstream churches and/or government to fulfil the socio-economic and spiritual needs of their members – not unlike the Beguinages whose female members socio-economic and spiritual needs were not being met by society, government and the Catholic Church. We can speculate about whether or not those needs were being fulfilled in life as a Beguine, and similarly we can only speculate about whether or not women's needs are being met within charismatic movements. The matter is raised here to illustrate that the issue needs investigation.

Marguerite's annihilation discourse is a call for liberty of conscience. It espouses the notion that because God is pure love, a soul can only enact and embody that love. Marguerite argues that the divine conscience is in control of human will when human will completely surrenders to it. Thus the proposal is freedom of conscience as opposed to moral policing. For women in charismatic movements liberty of conscience could mean less vilification regarding given historical religious perspectives of women as 'temptress' of Adam and thus responsible for mankind's fall from grace. Charismatic movements also make upward mobility within church more accessible for women due to there being little or no prescriptive endorsing religious authority, as is sometimes the case in mainstream Abrahamic organisations. Hence, for women in charismatic churches, there seem to be little or no oppressive forces at work and thus women in these organisations seem to enjoy more 'freedoms' than those in orthodox mainstream religious organisations. In these three senses then, it could be said that women enjoy liberty of conscience within charismatic movements.

The discourse on the annihilation of the soul is also an assertion for an independent spirituality informed by subjective religious experience and not only informed by organised religion, and Marguerite frames this assertion within mysticism. This is one of the ways that Marguerite circumvents dogmatic theology and social restriction and puts out the idea that a society without systematically enforced strictures is possible. It is important to bear in mind that during Marguerite's lifetime many Templars, Cathars, Waldensians and others, met their fate under papal

and/or regency initiated orders for refusal to cede to authority. In essence, then, *The Mirror* promulgates a refusal to conformability when and where no wrong is deemed to have been done, especially on the part of those subject to conventional strictures. Perhaps this is a charismatic perspective, given that it seems it is not deemed morally questionable when some charismatics (mostly the figureheads) flourish materially whilst the larger congregation seems to not only fund that prosperity but also seem to spiritually feed off the success of the figureheads. Perhaps charismatics are themselves the embodiment of the child-like innocence that Marguerite speaks of that is synonymous with being in union with divinity. But what then is the significance of this child-like innocence for women in charismatic movements? One speculative answer could be that in charismatic movements, the seemingly lesser vilification of Eve births a perspective that regards women as irreproachable which, in turn, confers upon women a child-like innocence, one that is susceptible to corruption by malicious force as played out in the story of Eve and the snake in the Garden of Eden in the Bible. From this perspective women are not seen as evil temptresses but rather as innocent victims themselves. Ultimately, though, it may be that the charismatic phenomenon is just a demonstration – like Marguerite's *Mirror* is a theory – of alternative spiritual precepts which simultaneously function as a voice-over for critiquing the norms of society. In short, Marguerite's *Mirror* and charismatic movements' presence and unorthodox ministry presents subversive objection to normative sociological and theological discourse and both make arguments about existentialism and egalitarianism. Certainly, like *The Mirror* in theory challenged its era's conventional notions of wrong and right, charismatics by their existence and *modus operandi*, are challenging contemporary conventions regarding moral and religious codes.

The Case for Heterogeneity and Universalism

The inherent polarities that seem to co-exist in *The Mirror* reveal Marguerite's articulation of a desire for the accommodation and acceptance of diversity and heterogeneity. I do not use diversity and heterogeneity in the modern political understanding of the words. Here, it implies the following Augustinian thinking: systems exist. Systems exist within systems. There are categories of systems, be that human, animal, spiritual and so on. Each system has a unique character that appears to contradict that of other systems. However, units in a system, and systems themselves, synergise in their space and place towards a unifying wholeness despite their seeming contradictory appearance,

function and chaotic interaction.[15] We could relate this to Marguerite's social reality. French religious population during the fourteenth century included Cathars, Waldensians, Beguines, Jews, Franciscans, Dominicans, and so on. All desired the same outcome, that is alignment with God. However, practise and custom differed and the variations seemed to contradict each other. Unhindered, this seemingly chaotic human-scape is actually cohesive because their commonality is their contemplation of God. Thus, despite their differences their commonality holds them in unity. Bearing this in mind then, diversity and heterogeneity as it applies here, refers to overall multiplicity as opposed to the current political understanding of it, which only implies variety in culture and race in human society.

We cannot, however, ignore the political aspect of diversity and heterogeneity altogether. Within the historical context, politics deserves some mention because Marguerite's environment informed her discourse in the same way that charismatics' environments inform their establishment and practice. Let us consider, for example, the fact that there is a diverse cast of forty-one characters in *The Mirror*. All these characters orbit three main characters, namely Reason, the Soul and Lady Love, at random intervals. Each of these characters relate to government (religious and political), the individual and God respectively. What Marguerite seems to be doing in casting numerous and contrasting interlocutors held together by three main cast members is what Richard Rohr might call trying to 'find a higher order inside constant disorder.'[16] When we place this assertion in the historical context we see that Marguerite could be commenting on the suppression and slaughter of various religious sects – some of which were endorsed – that sprouted during the medieval era such as the Cathars, Waldensians, Beguines, Templars and Jews. The presence of various faith communities in fourteenth century France constituted an array of differing beliefs and customs, all of which claimed to answer to and worship only, God. In her discussion on the meditation of love in chapters twenty-seven to twenty-eight, Love asserts that all souls share a common will. That is, the souls belonging to the various sects present differently yet the basic and common tenet is their meditation of Love/God. This reiterates the idea of systems synergising towards a unifying wholeness. It is borne in mind that whilst the discussion at this point in the dialogue is only between Love and The Soul and is about their will combining, at an alternative

[15] Arthur Hillary Armstrong, *An Introduction to Ancient Philosophy* (London: Metheun and Company, 1986), 221.

[16] Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Boss, 2011), 59.

level The Soul also functions as the layman, that is, the medieval world's Every(wo)man. Therefore, whilst the conversation between Love and The Soul is about these two characters' wills specifically, there is sub-textual comment about the soul of Every(wo)man meditating on pure love, such as that exercised by anchorites, Beguines, Cathars, Templars and so on. However, it is not being suggested here that Beguines are the equivalent of Cathars, Waldensians, Templars, Jews, and so on. What is being pointed out is that Marguerite was sensitive to variation within her environment and alludes to this lyrically in chapter twenty-two which is titled, 'Here the Soul begins her song'. Interestingly, there, Marguerite gives recognition to 'priests, and clerics, the Preachers/The Austin Friars, the Carmelites,/and the Friars Minor'[17] at a point in the narrative trajectory when the soul has transmuted with divinity. The significance of this is that at a spiritual level of comprehension Marguerite acknowledges and accommodates variance and especially that which differs from hers.

It is not a stretch to link Marguerite's theory of differing cultural practices all working towards the same goal, that being unity with God, to the vast array of faith communities in current South Africa. I assert that Marguerite's socio-cultural religious environment was not all that different to the current socio-cultural religious environment in South Africa in the sense that there are many and varied charismatic churches co-existing with many and varied endorsed, mainstream churches. In the preceding paragraph we could substitute the medieval religious movements with current religious organisations such as Catholics, Protestants, Moslems, and so on. The point is that the religious landscape is as varied now in South Africa as it was in medieval France, despite the space, time and cultural differences. Hence it is not a stretch to link Marguerite's notion of what constitutes the soul to the individuals that constitute charismatic churches and other mainstream religious practices. Furthermore, I contend that current 'souls', to use Marguerite's nomenclature, function according to the aforementioned Augustinian philosophy. That is, despite their seeming contradictory appearance and practice, their commonality is their contemplation of God and in that contemplation they sometimes unwittingly and sometimes consciously synergise towards a unifying whole, despite their contradictory and chaotic interaction. There are many examples of unwitting synergy towards a unifying wholeness. I shall mention only two recent ones. One occurred in Kenya when Kenyan Moslems protected Christians on a bus during a terrorist

[17] Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. E. College, J. C. Marler, and J. Grant (South Bend, IND: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 152.

attack.[18] Another occurred during the protests at South African universities when white students surrounded black protesting students knowing and realising that as white students they were less likely to be harmed by riot police.[19] Surely the Kenyan Moslems and the white South African students did not organise and plan on those days to take moral stands? Their incidental virtuous conduct serves here to illustrate the Augustinian theory that despite contrasting differences and chaotic interaction, everybody and everything synergises towards a unifying whole. For an example of conscious synergetic activity that seeks universalism we can look at 'The House of One' being constructed in Berlin. This undertaking is a conscious effort headed by a rabbi, a priest and an imam in conjunction with their congregations to set up a singular building to stand as a place of worship for all three religious sects.[20] This project is in and of itself testimony to the argument that chaotic interaction seems divisive even polemic, but is actually at a deeper level of understanding, synergy towards unification in its deliberation of the divine.

In *The Mirror* Love says 'This soul gives to Nature whatever she asks of her.'[21] This implies that we cannot judge an individual's response to an inner prompt, be that active or passive or a bit of both, and responses are neither good nor bad given that free will is divine will in disguise. More to the point, Love says 'sin is nothing.'[22] The implication is that everything is predetermined and nothing is coincidental and what might appear random and morally questionable is actually decided upon at a higher spiritual level. By this understanding then we could philosophise that charismatic churches are functioning units within society and are contributing towards a greater good. Marguerite illustrates this point by using the medieval tropes of book, painting and mirror. On an inter-textual level these medieval tropes enhance Marguerite's protest against exclusive ideology. That is, Beguines are different from Catholics who are different from Cathars and so on. Here we can substitute medieval organisations for current South African ones and the construction could read: Catholics are different from Protestants, who are different from

[18] "Kenyan Muslims Shield Christians in Bus Attack" http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35151967

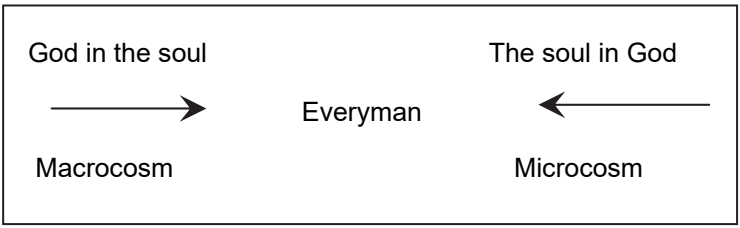
[19] "White Students Form Human Shield To Protect Black # Fees Must Fall Protesters From South African Police," http://www.hiffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/10/22/white-students-form-human-shield-protect-black-protesters-south-african-police_n_8356054.html

[20] "Berlin's House of One: a Church, a Mosque and a Synagogue under One Roof" http://www.thegaurdian.com/world/shortcuts/2014/Jun/25/berlin-house-of-one-unity-christian-muslim-jew

[21] Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 36.

[22] Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 22.

Charismatics and so on. The implication is that at a micro level individuals present differently just as the book, the painting and the mirror are different products. However, at the macro level all are functioning parts of a sameness. The book, the painting and the mirror all have the same purpose which is the ability to reflect. That is, the book reflects society, a painting is a likeness of something and a mirror displays images. Thus, at the macro-level, religious variation is also part of a sameness in that all ponder God. In other words, the book, the painting and the mirror are foils to religious variance and serve to show how things can be different yet the same. The triple imagery of self-reflecting book, mirror and painting serves to compound Marguerite's notion that God reflects in the soul and vice versa. The link to social diversity is situated in the dialogue when the soul moves from speaking about herself only (singular) being an image of God, to referring to how God is reflected in all his creatures (plural). Diagrammatically the construction looks like this:



This depicts God, the macrocosm, resident in the soul, the microcosm, and how that an individual is incorruptible because he/she is in accordance with the divine will which is the permeating presence of the Holy Spirit, and thus, that the divine will is acting through and out of the individual. Hence, we come to see that by Marguerite's articulation diversity is actually similarity. The book and the mirror become unifying concepts that symbolise an all-encompassing macrocosm. Self-reflecting microcosms constitute the macrocosm.

Conclusion

If we abide with Marguerite's recognition of variation and how all differences are actually a sameness, then we have to adjust our perspectives of charismatic churches and instead of viewing them suspiciously like Marguerite was viewed in her day, we might have to view them as part of a functioning macrocosm exercising their variation towards a universal wholeness. The alternative is to maintain a suspicious view of charismatics and conform to what is the general

perception of them as a corrupt form of religious practice. The question we then have to ask ourselves is, if we maintain the latter view, will we be making the same mistake(s) medieval government made when they executed Marguerite at the stake and will we then also be guilty of, in the figurative sense, *auto de fè* in our judgement of apostates? Since this paper's departure is a literary and empirical one regarding issues of faith in South Africa, it does not presume to have an answer or answers but only postulates that *The Mirror* lends itself well to being a filter with which to view the charismatic movement.

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Ecumenism from Below: An Exposition of Practical Ecumenism in South Africa by the Women's Leagues

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Abstract

This article explores ecumenism from below as demonstrated by women's leagues in Zimbabwe and South Africa where Christians from different denominations worship together once every week. Ecumenism at institutional theological levels remains a theoretical and theological exercise in many parts of Christendom. Women's leagues are practicing ecumenism through their interdenominational weekly activities with very little regard for church theology. The Easter Sunday reminds us that the gospel preached by the church is the gospel initiated by women who experienced and preached the resurrection to men. In contemporary Zimbabwe and South Africa ecumenism is initiated by women. Without the theological debates conducted by ecumenical institutions, the women's leagues of different churches have been worshipping together at least once a week, mainly in Harare, Zimbabwe and in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa since 1984. This article discusses the ecumenical practices of the women's league in Zimbabwe and South Africa through *Fambidzano/Mubatanidzwa wamadzimai/Amabandla ahlangene* ('United or Mixed Churches' in isiZulu/isiNdebele and chiShona respectively). These leagues participate in pastoral care through diaconal work and worship services especially on Thursdays. This paper concludes that the activities of the women's leagues are forms of ecumenism from below as opposed to ecumenism from above by theologians and church leaders which has largely remained at a theoretical level.

Introduction

The church came to Africa already denominationalised from the schisms in Europe.[2] Even though some mission societies that came to Southern Africa were ecumenical in nature, their mission work resulted in the formation of churches along the denominations that already existed in

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[2] See Gustav Gous, 1999. "Ten Memory Marks in the History of Ecumenism," in *Essays and Exercises in Ecumenism,* ed. Christo Lombaard (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1999), 42-54; DB Barret, (ed.) *World Christian Encyclopaedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); T. Dowley (ed.), *The History of Christianity* (Herts: Lion Publishing, 1977).

Europe. In the contemporary context some of the denominational differences are hostile to each other.[3] For example, some sermons condemn other denominations. Historically, in some extreme cases, there has been no love amongst the disciples from different denominations resulting in condemnations.[4] A publication by the Lutheran Institute for Ecumenical Research says "…an honest look at church history shows that Christians have often been better at hating one another than loving one another, and this hatred has distorted their ability to perceive the truth or the gospel."[5] Several denominations in Africa have ecumenical relations based on the relatedness of church traditions.[6] However, Africans, especially in rural areas, are culturally communal.[7] The communal nature of African life makes church divisions less visible during the week when Christians from different denominations interact at the socio-economic and political level, only to be physically divided by the denominations on days of worship. In this context of division, members of the women's league from different denominations, with a certain level of gender consciousness,[8] worship together, making ecumenism a reality. This paper discusses worshipping together by the women's leagues through the *Fambidzano/mubatanidzwa wamadzimai/Amabandla ahlangene.* This worshipping together has a positive effect on other church services where these women participate such as funerals, weddings and Sunday/Saturday services.

Members of the women's leagues in Zimbabwe and South Africa who participate in the *Fambidzano/mubatanidzwa wamadzimai/Amabandla*

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[3] *Lutherans in Ecumenical Dialogue: 2003-2010* (Strasbourg: Institute for Ecumenical Research, 2010), 7-12.

[4] An example are the conflicts between Lutherans and Mennonites in Europe during the Bloody religious conflict.

"The Baptists, who advocated church reforms even more radical than those proposed by Martin Luther or Ulrich Zwingli, were persecuted by both the Catholics and the Protestants and had to flee for their lives. Nevertheless, thousands were killed." (http://www.dw.com/en/lutherans-reconcile-with-mennonites-500-years-after-bloody-persecution/a-5837683 [Accessed on 20/08/2016]).

[5] *Ecumenical Dialogue*, 7.

[6] James Amanze, "Some Large ecumenical organisations on the African continent," in *Essays and Exercises in Ecumenism,* ed. Christo Lombaard, (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1999), 137-149.

[7] Herbert Moyo, "Religion and African Indigenous Knowledge Systems: Healing and Communal Reconstruction in African Communities," *Alternation* Special Edition 11 (2013), 207-236.

[8] Humphrey Mogashoa, "Some Ecumenical Organisations in Africa," in *Essays and Exercises in Ecumenism,* ed. Christo Lombaard (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1999), 106-135.

ahlangene[9] justify their coming together using the following verses from the gospel of John: "I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one…as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me." Earlier in chapter 17:11 of John we find the following words, "Holy Father keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one."[10] Jesus said these words on the night that he was betrayed. This was towards his last moments on earth before his crucifixion. The words said by a person when they are about to die are revered in many communities. Even though Jesus was speaking to his individual disciples, the Lutheran Institute for Ecumenical Research argues that these words of Jesus are ecumenical and they apply to all Christians. If so, the institute further argues that the church has not discerned these ecumenical words of Jesus. "The truth is that the disciples of Jesus have not always been one. We disciples have been diverse, which can coexist with unity, but we have also been divided: angry, hostile, and mistrustful."[11] This hostility has failed to show the church as a living example of love, love for one's enemies. According to the Lutheran Institute for Ecumenical Research, Jesus instructed his followers "…to love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another."[12] The institute goes on to say, "…an honest look at church history shows that Christians have often been better at hating one another than loving one another."[13] In Southern Africa there are efforts towards worshipping and solving socio-economic and political challenges by churches working together. On the other hand there is a continuation of the formation of new denominations almost on a monthly basis.[14] This article discusses the aspect of wanting to be one to fulfil the prayer of Jesus for unity.

I am of the view that there are two efforts at play in the quest for ecumenism. There is the effort by scholarly theologians who are concerned with theological differences and similarities in the ecumenical debate. On the other hand, we have the communities of worship that may not necessarily understand the theological differences or even the similarities yet they find themselves in different denominations. This

[9] From hence forth this will be referred to as *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene.*

[10] John 17:11.

[11] *Ecumenical Dialogue*, 7.

[12] John 13:34.

[13] *Ecumenical Dialogue*, 7.

[14] The formation of new denominations is division of the denominations and as such they cannot be said to be one. If the divisions were additions then, in my view, there should be additions of new congregations of the same denomination. This is a debatable issue that requires another paper.

article acknowledges that Sunday is the most divided day where you see people in different uniforms going to different churches. Scott cites Martin Luther King Junior as having observed the same divisions in the American society on the 18th of December 1963 that "the most segregated hour in this nation is Sunday at 11:00 am."[15] At times, families are also divided according to denominations and this is apparent on Sundays (at times Saturdays depending on the denominations involved). However, despite these Sunday divisions, social events such as funerals and weddings bring Christians from different denominations to worship together because of the communal nature of life in Zimbabwe and South Africa. The paper further exposes the ecumenical role played by the women's leagues, especially on Thursdays when they have a me

Background

As a gender-sensitive male minister I have participated in capacity development projects of the Lutheran church in Mozambique, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Swaziland and South Africa. I understand the envisaged ecumenical life of the church in Southern Africa. I also teach practical theology in a South African secular university (University of KwaZulu-Natal in the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics [UKZN-SRPC]) whose students are ecumenical and international. As of March 2015, the UKZN-SRPC had students from at least sixteen denominations coming from at least thirty three countries since its establishment. Therefore, I understand ecumenism from local congregations and academic institutions, particularly in Southern Africa.

Belonging to a particular denomination in South Africa does not necessarily depend on one's theological convictions. The missionaries in Southern Africa partitioned countries/communities for their denominations to avoid competition among the different mission groups. For example, Zimbabwe was divided among the Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Seventh Day Adventists, Church of Christ, the Brethren in Christ Church and the Dutch Reformed Church.[16] There was relatively no competition among missionaries, so there would be no two missions in the same community. At times one group of missionaries would give congregations to their counterparts. For example, in Matabo area in Zimbabwe, Anglicans gave St Steven's and St John's congregations to Lutherans. The membership was not involved in the

[15] Scott Williams, *Church Diversity: Sunday the Most Segregated Day of the Week* (Green Forest, AR: New Leaf Press, 2011), 19.

[16] Herbert Moyo, *Jesus is HIV Positive: Listening with Compassion to the Infected and Affected*, (Pietermaritzburg: Master's Thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2005), 38.

negotiations for reasons best known to missionaries. Congregants had to conform to the transaction of the missionaries or else they were going to remain without a church. In many parts of contemporary Zimbabwe the concept of being one church for the whole community has been challenged by urbanisation. People moved from their rural areas to seek employment in the urban areas, carrying their church with them. In the cities, one could find churches competing for space and raising the question of theological differences of the then one church setting of the rural Zimbabwean context. The second challenge was the birth of African Initiated Churches that have a different understanding of being church from the missionary churches. Later, there was the introduction of Pentecostals and charismatics.

In most cases, church lay members do not know how they are different from other denominations. For example, Lutherans, Anglicans, Assemblies of God and Family of God Church do not know the theological differences between their denominations. The laity are not the catalysts for denominational divisions. Ministers are the ones who keep on defining how their denomination is different. Church members notice the differences mainly in the colours of their denominational uniforms which are most popular amongst the women's leagues. The uniting activities in which church members participate are forms of ecumenism from below. The informal local and grassroots fellowships are an opportunity that can be capitalised on for greater collaboration among denominations. Grassroots fellowships are composed of people living in the same locality who meet for worshipping outside their denominations as they engage personal and contextual challenges as well as for socialising. The people who meet to fellowship are able to exchange ideas for self-development. Because they live in the same geographical location they are in most cases equally affected by the same communal context.

The Concept of Ecumenism

Other than the high-profiled ecumenical dialogues at international and national levels, in my view, ecumenism also means the physical coming together of Christians to worship as one big family from different denominations. According to Köning, ecumenism is "the movement among churches to get in touch with one another, to get to know one another and to explore avenues of cooperation and unity."[17] In this case, ecumenism means the ability of churches to identify common societal

[17] A. Köning, *Systematic Theology – Study Guide 2 for THB 301-X; Ecumenical Theology* (Pretoria: UNISA, 1984), 177.

goals and go on to cooperate in communities in response to identified challenges. At local, national and international levels churches cooperate in diaconal work in response to challenges such as disasters (both natural and human made). Crafford and Gous define ecumenism as: "The movement in which every believer and every church as part of the body of Christ on earth, seeks out the 'other' – that is, those on the other side of language boundaries, cultural boundaries, racial boundaries, countries' borders, confessional boundaries, racial boundaries and ideological boundaries, in order to take part in discussion, reconciliation, co-operation, understanding the truth of the scripture and, as an end goal, being one with each other."[18] Ecumenism as physical worshipping together may be very difficult to achieve as the church continues to form new denominations and ministries.

In Zimbabwe, there is an ongoing formation of new denominations and/or ministries, at least on a bi-monthly rate. In South Africa, ministries are being formed on at least a monthly basis. It is now fashionable to form one's church or ministry. The formation of the new ministries does not necessarily mean to say the ecumenical/universal or Holy Catholic church is growing numerically. Most of the new ministries are transferring people from one denomination to another, thereby maintaining the same total number of Christians. The transfer of church members from one denomination to another has increased inter-denominational criticism, especially in sermons. The inter-denominational criticisms strain possible ecumenical relationships. However, Christians should be able to have a common vision and mission which should enable the church to worship together during specific times and events such as Easter, Christmas, weddings, funerals and some Eucharist services. Kinimi understands ecumenism as "…a worldwide reconciliation in Christians' faith to establish co-operation and unity for the proclamation of the gospel to the nations."[19] Kinimi's understanding does not envision only the gathering of Christians in one venue to worship together as one body. Kinimi imagines the cooperation of different denominations in responding to socio-economic challenges that may face communities served by the churches.[20] The women's groups, especially the *Fambidzano*, help each other with employment opportunities, income-generating projects and education on self-development.

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[18] D. Crafford and G. Gous, *Een Liggaam – Baie Lede: Die Kerk se Ekumeniese Roeping Wereldwyd en in Suid-Afrika* (Pretoria: Verba Vitae, 1993), 9.

[19] L. Kinimi, "Towards Defining Ecumenism," in *Essays and Exercises in Ecumenism,* ed. Christo Lombaard (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1999), 9.

[20] Kinimi, *Defining Ecumenism*, 9.

As noted earlier, the physical worshipping together is curtailed by theological debates by ministers. This is so despite several theological agreements and joint declarations such as the Lutherans and Catholics' Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Faith of 1999.[21] Since 1965, the Lutheran World Federation through the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, France, has been involved in ecumenical debates with Catholics and then later with the Orthodox Church, Anglicans, Methodists, Mennonites and most recently with Pentecostals. The theological debates always acknowledge the progress that has been made in the bilateral theological dialogues, such as the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Lutherans and Catholics. Lutherans and Catholics, through the Institute for Ecumenical Research and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU), have acknowledged that the climax of their bilateral agreement should be worshipping together. Bishop Ambrose Moyo of the Evangelical Lutheran Church says the fruits of the bilateral relations should be "when Lutheran and Catholics would come to a point where they can share the Eucharist."[22] Lutherans and Catholics cannot yet share the Eucharist because there are still some theological hindrances that need to be debated and resolved first. In a document entitled, "*From Conflict to Communion"* between Lutherans and Catholics, the PCPCU president, Kurt Cardinal Koch says, "The goal of ecumenical efforts has to be the common supper, but it would be difficult for this document to be the step to it…. We, for example, cannot impose papacy on you; and I can expect from you not to push us to Eucharistic hospitality and church community as these are constitutive questions for the theological basis of our faith."[23] The statement by Cardinal Koch clarifies that theological obstacles have to be overcome before Catholics and Lutherans can finally partake of the Eucharist from the same table. This kind of debate is also present across other denominational relationships. However, this is not the case with the women's leagues which usually meet without the clergy. It is also disturbing to note that the few trained female local theologians who are clergy in congregations do not participate in *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene*.

[21] "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, 31 October 1999. Retrieved 2014-01-17.

[22] Lutheran World Federation Communication, *Joint Lutheran-Catholic Publication on Reformation Launched*, *Geneva 17/06/2013*. <www.lutheranworld.org/news/joint-lutheran-catholic-publication-reformation-launched> [Accessed 14 May 2015].

[23] Lutheran World Federation Communication, 2013

Methodological Considerations

The data for this paper was produced through in-depth narrative interviews. The participants for the interviews were selected through snowball sampling. Interviews are used as a way of enabling participants to share their experiences and understanding of the *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene*. The interviews were conducted in different locations in Harare and in Pietermaritzburg. The interviews took place between January 2013 and December 2014. The interviews were done in isiZulu and chiShona in Pietermaritzburg and in Harare, respectively. I used the following open-ended guiding questions to direct the discussions:

- What is ***Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene***?
- What is it that attracts you to ***Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene*** meetings?

The study applied purposive sampling, which was coupled with snowballing.[24] Purposive sampling was the suitable sampling style since I had a specific target group.[25] The study targeted members of the Christian women's leagues from Harare and Pietermaritzburg who participate in the *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene*. Initially, I approached members of *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* from the Lutheran church in Harare in 2013 and in Pietermaritzburg in 2014. The interviewees from the Lutheran church both in Harare and in Pietermaritzburg introduced me to other members of the *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* from other denominations. The size of the sample population was determined on the basis of theoretical saturation, which is the point in data collection when new data no longer brings additional insights in response to the research questions.[26] Being referred to potential participants by other women enabled non-Lutheran women to be interviewed. The snowballing enabled me to access fifteen women in Harare and eighteen women in Pietermaritzburg. In total I interviewed thirty three members of *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene*.

[24] L. Cohen & L. Manion, *Research Methods in Education* (4th edition) (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 89.

[25] M.J. Salganik & D.D. Heckathorn, "Sampling and Estimation in Hidden Populations Using Respondent-Driven Sampling," *Sociological Methodology* 34 no. 1, (2004), 200.

[26] Salganik & Heckathorn, *Sampling and Estimation in Hidden*, 214.

Theoretical Perspective: Feminist Ecclesiology

Feminist ecclesiology refers to a theological and practical paradigm of the church that understands women[27] as the church. The current setting is that women are the majority members of a church that remains dominated by male leadership and power. In other words, the theology and the practices of the church are informed by the minority patriarchs who dictate to the majority who are mainly women. A good example is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe which is composed of 85 percent women yet all the three bishops of the church are men. Rosemary Ruether associates such a church with 'clericalism' and she equates clericalism to patriarchy.[28] Feminist ecclesiology:

> …should be a means by which it is possible to discern whether particular ecclesiological discourses describe ways of being church, in terms of theological discourse and women's ecclesial practice, which take into account women's being church and see them as a meaningful resource for the church's theological self-understanding.[29]

Similarly, Ruether espouses what she calls, "The ecclesiology of Women-Church: Ministry and Community."[30] *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* is a manifestation of feminist ecclesiology, as will be seen in the interview responses of members of the movement.

Furthermore, feminist ecclesiology engages women and their contextual needs. Watson says "Feminist ecclesiology is feminist in that it takes account of women's lives – of women's experiences of faith and sexuality – as a vital source for the reconsideration of ecclesiology."[31] This theory (feminist ecclesiology) is relevant for this paper as it defines the nature and function of *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene*.

Findings

What is Fambidzano/Amabandla Ahlangene*?*

In summary, all the women were clear that *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* is a gathering of women of prayer from different

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[27] This theology understands only women and not men as the church.

[28] Rosemary R. Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities,* (Eugene and Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 75.

[29] N.K. Watson, *Introducing Feminist Ecclesiology* (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

[30] Ruether, *Women-Church*, 75.

[31] Watson, *Feminist Ecclesiology*, 11.

denominations who worship together. The responses were clear that the experience is different from their denominational services in that *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* is a meeting of women alone without men and children. The prayers in these meetings are said to be 'strong' as they are a combination of the prayers of all women of faith from the local community. The women also said that they share in what they learn from their different denominations, which enriches them with knowledge and experiences. They also said that their meetings are a sign that it is possible for Christians to come together in worship in fulfilment of the prayer of Jesus on the unity of His disciples. In Pietermaritzburg three of my interviewees emphasized that *Amabandla ahlangene* are a form of a 'united church' of equals who meet to praise and worship God outside the structural church. It came out also that *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* is a community of believers keen to bring together all women who believe in Jesus Christ.

What is it that Attracts you to Fambidzano/Amabandla Ahlangene *Meetings?*

Besides praying together, the women said that their activities and teachings in *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* are based on the socio-economic needs of women. Women learn about income-generating projects, motherhood, improving one's chances of employability for those who are not employed and basics of entrepreneurship. The meetings have also made it easy for women to be a support system to each other in sorrow and in joy such as in funerals and weddings respectively. In these meetings women are able to share their experiences which they otherwise would not share in the presence of men, pastors and children such as abusive marriages and how to deal with issues of sexual intercourse with their husbands. The women are attracted to these meetings because they are a safe space for them.

The *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* is a place where women read the bible as women, thereby appropriating it for themselves. Women deliberately read the bible with feminist lenses. The women also engage their challenges such as mothering in a context of HIV and AIDS, unemployment, crime, female domestic abuse, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and political violence. The issues women claim to engage in their meetings echo Watson who stated, "Feminist theology means writing women as church into the process of theological reflection on the nature and role of the church. Recent sociological studies have shown

that many women seek their spirituality outside the church, rather than within it."[32]

Analysis and Discussion

The activities of women in the *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* are what is expected in the regular church. Listening to the explanations of women both from Pietermaritzburg and in Harare demonstrated that *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* is a movement that is a church on its own 'outside the church'. Watson said that "many women seek their spirituality outside the church."[33] It seems as if women are in actual fact not seeking for their spirituality outside the church, instead they are creating a parallel ecumenical church through *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene*. In this parallel church women do not have to follow everything designed by males; they can worship in their own way. It seems the *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* still does what is done in the church; the major difference is that their gathering is ecumenical and involves only women. Women are doing their own spirituality without the control of males or clericalism. *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* is a church. Women are church and they are so without men that control the different denominations. Watson says,

> It is important to rethink the significance of the boundaries in which ecclesiological discourses take place. By this I mean particularly boundaries of traditions and of existing disciplines. Feminist ecclesiology has to take place both on the brink and within the existing church boundaries. Women's discourses of faith and theology have to identify the boundaries largely set and defined by men and seek to transcend them.[34]

Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene is constructed outside the male defined boundaries of church traditions and denominations. The *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* is existing as an ecumenical church which is yet to be recognised in the male designed types of churches. At least women are doing church on their own and there is no need for any authentication from men. Watson points out that, "Feminist ecclesiology recognises the ambiguity of male-defined boundaries for women and their discourses of faith, theology and spirituality, transcends them and also seeks to find ways of working within them constructively."[35] As the women read the Bible as community they are beginning to have their

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[32] Watson, *Feminist Ecclesiology*, 10.

[33] Watson, *Feminist Ecclesiology*, 10.

[34] Watson, *Feminist Ecclesiology,* 10.

[35] Watson, *Feminist Ecclesiology,* 10-11.

own communal understanding of the 'Word of God' and they now have hymns and choruses that they sing together. Now there are songs and styles of preaching and praying that cut across participating denominations. These can also be experienced in communal gatherings such as weddings and funerals.

Fambidzano/Amabandla Ahlangene and Ecumenism

Ecumenism from below is the ecumenism of the community or the people's ecumenism. The women's leagues from different denominations have organised ecumenical worship sessions. These women come together once a month and they sing, read and share the word of God and pray together. The respondents also emphasized that they engage in income-generating projects such as dress making, baking and cooperatives in a variety of businesses and education. During the meetings, they usually take turns to share from the same text which would have been read by whoever will be leading Bible reading on that day. During these meetings more time is allocated to preaching, teaching and testimonies.[36] They also sing hymns and choruses from their different denominations together. The meetings also have space for discussing some contemporary issues as women such as drug abuse, unemployment of women and the youth, diseases in general and development issues. Of note is that the meetings do not discuss ecumenism or ecumenical theology. I take this as a sign that ecumenical theology is a non-issue to these women as they have already achieved ecumenism as evidenced by their interdenominational meetings. The women do not share the Eucharist as they do not have ordained ministers in their midst to consecrate the elements. This may be an area where the women's leagues are bending to the theology of their denominations where the Eucharist can only be officiated by an ordained minister. However, at the end of their worship sessions they always share food and drinks as a community.

The challenge for this movement from below is that clergy is not part of it. Ministers do not play any role, therefore there is no sharing of Holy Communion as noted above. This is a dilemma in that ecumenism from the structural church or ecumenism from above is aimed at communion yet clergy is not participating in *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* which is an opportunity for sharing the Eucharist. Is it true that "ecumenism at institutional or macro level will intimately come to nothing

[36] Presler, *Transfigured Night,* 127.

unless the church members make it work"?[37] Therefore, ecumenism from above should take advantage of ecumenism from below such as the *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene*. The *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* is fulfilling some objectives of formalised ecumenical dialogues in that the women's leagues also engage socio-economic challenges during their meetings.

At times individual pastors are invited by the leadership of the movement to teach on a particular subject. The women use the expertise of human resources outside their own ranks to discuss and seek for solutions on topics of common communal or social concern such as drug abuse, HIV and AIDS, road accidents, political violence and teenage pregnancy.[38] The discussions equip the women with knowledge and some skills on how to engage the different challenges both at a personal and communal level. These local forms of ecumenism seek "cooperation and collaboration with other churches, other faith communities, and people's initiatives on relevant issues of people and life in each specific context."[39]

Conclusion

The activities of the *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* are ecumenical activities that fulfil Jesus' wish for the church to be one. The religious practices of the members of the women's leagues in communities are located above denominational differences. The lessons from the *Fambidzano/Amabandla ahlangene* are influencing the wider community in gatherings such as funerals and weddings. Such experiences of people in local congregations are rich for ecumenism which needs to be engaged with by the structures of denominations. "Neither have the institutional forms of ecumenism 'from above' entered into adequate dialogue with the less structured and more people driven forms of ecumenism."[40] These need to be nurtured and promoted, moving towards both informal and institutional ecumenism that enriches the life of the church and communities. By so doing Jesus' call for oneness would be fulfilled.

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[37] Goosen G., *Bringing Churches Together: A Popular Introduction to Ecumenism* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001), 147.

[38] D. McLeod, "The Basics of Christian Unity," in *Ecumenism Today. The Universal Church in the 21st Century*, eds. F.A. Murphy. and C. Asprey, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 108.

[39] World Council of Churches, *Resource Book: WCC 10th Assembly, Busan 2013* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), 110.

[40] Kobia S., *The Courage to Hope: The Roots for a New Vision and the Calling of the Church in Africa* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2003), 159.

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