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The Christology of Elizabeth Johnson as a Resource for Church Renewal

by
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Can a male savior save women? This question was posed by Rosemary Radford Ruether in 1976.¹ In the intervening two decades, it has received a variety of far-ranging responses with both positive and negative consequences for the church. Moreover, it has polarized Christian women who have seriously reflected on it.

Those who respond negatively to the question base their argument on the belief that the church is an irredeemably sexist institution and therefore cannot claim to save/help women because of its central (male) symbol. These nay-sayers, or post-Christian feminists, ultimately abandon the church in anger and frustration, seeking an alternative spirituality or religious movement where the female is valued, such as in Goddess-worship. Their exodus has meant a double loss for the church, both in sheer numbers and in the contribution of female theologians such as Mary Daly, who originally offered to the church a distinctively female perspective which had been largely under-developed throughout its history.²

Those who respond positively to the question base their argument on the belief that the Christ symbol is, by definition, inclusive of women, while recognizing that it has been used against them. Choosing to remain within the church, they are left in the unenviable position of critiquing christology in practice, while defending it in theory. For these Christian feminists the question is a source of impetus rather than a barrier as they attempt to retrieve/revision the liberating message of revelation for women as well as for men. Their enduring presence and their critical insights into the christological doctrine serve as a beacon to the church, providing it an

¹Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Christology and Feminism: Can a Male Savior Help Women?" Occasional Papers (United Methodist Board of Higher Education) 1/13 (1976), 5-6.
opportunity to reform itself of the sin of sexism and ultimately gain a truer vision of Christ.

Ecclesia semper reformanda.
As a divine-human institution, the church\(^3\) knows itself to be capable of mistakes, sin and evil. Thus the need for reform arises from a sense of dissatisfaction variously expressed as "the discrepancy between what the church, beginning with Jesus of Nazareth, was meant to be, and what it has in the course of the centuries become"\(^4\) and "the feeling of the never bridged distance between the historical church and its truth, that of its Alpha and of its Omega."\(^5\) This chasm between the church's reality and its ideal serves as a continuing motive in its earthly existence. It is the reason for Vatican II's call of the whole church to holiness (Lumen Gentium, ch. 5).\(^6\)

According to feminist theology, among the traditions of the church most in need of reform - owing to the judgment that it is the one most oppressive of women - is christology.\(^7\) The burden of proof is on Christian feminism to show how the church's christological doctrine has digressed from an original moment of sexual equality, and/or that it should be moving towards sexual equality as one of its eschatological goals.

To this end, this paper presents the christology of Elizabeth Johnson, sister of the religious order, the Congregation of St. Joseph, self-described

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\(^3\)References to the church in this thesis are to the Roman Catholic church.
\(^5\)Yves Congar, "Renewal of the Spirit and Reform of the Institution," in Ongoing Reform of the Church, Vol. 73, 40.
\(^7\)Rosemary Radford Ruether, To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 45.
feminist and systematic theologian as a voice in the church today able to both critique traditional Christology and offer direction for its reconstruction.8

Johnson's Christology follows the three steps of liberation theology: naming a situation as sinful and analyzing its roots, searching the tradition for oppressive elements, and searching it again for liberating elements.9 Her application of this methodology to women in the context of Christology is a serious challenge to a male-defined church in a world in which women in North America and western Europe, as well as in developing nations, experience a new-found dignity and expect their church to reflect this both in the theory and in the practice of its central doctrines.

In order to be faithful to the feminist liberation theological tradition in which she situates herself, Johnson's critique of classical Christology must be supported by an analysis of the oppression which feminists claim women suffer as members of the church. As a first step, therefore, a judgment is made that the church is sexist, which according to Johnson is clearly reflected in its traditional speech about God. Accordingly, the first part of chapter one will establish the importance of God-language in the context of Johnson's

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argument that the symbol of God functions (i) against women by justifying androcentrism and reinforcing patriarchy, and; (ii) against the image of God by compromising the incomprehensibility of God. Having exposed the effects of the sin of sexism generally, the balance of chapter one will then show how these patriarchal and androcentric qualities have distorted christological doctrine in particular, through an exaggerated emphasis on the maleness of Christ. This is Johnson's critique of classical christology, step two.

With classical christology thus deconstructed, the stage is set for its reconstruction. For Johnson, the third and final step of critical retrieval, is based on a neglected biblical christology, which she names "Jesus-Sophia." Chapter two, therefore, presents Johnson's theological defence of this tradition according to the Wisdom trajectory in Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Once orthodoxy has been established, its potential as a corrective to the problems of a male savior for women is discussed. It will be seen that Johnson's christological reconstruction is faithful to the best of Catholic tradition and feminist thought in its call for both men and women to be the imago Christi. Finally, Chapter three will consider the church's responsibility to meet the challenge of feminist christology in general and the christology of Elizabeth Johnson in particular, and the possible benefits which could derive from so doing.

This thesis represents a challenge to the church. It holds in tension (i) the feminist observation that of all Christian doctrines christology is the one most used to oppress women, and (ii) the church's responsibility to discern the legitimacy or truth of this observation. Both positions derive from well-developed traditions in the Catholic church: the former from a feminist critique and reconstruction of christology, a theological movement while relatively recent is both academically rigorous and global in nature; the
latter from the church’s own age-old and enduring mandate for renewal. The challenge to the church is to reconcile these disparate traditions in a way which allows it to remain faithful to the call of renewal (Vatican II) and to ensure that its christology is as inclusive in reality as it claims to be. The christology of Elizabeth Johnson is a resource for this ongoing work. In her words it is "but one among many needed theological and theological labors"\textsuperscript{10} in the church today.

Chapter One
Johnson's Critique of Traditional Christology

God-Language

According to one critic, "Elizabeth Johnson is a theologian who takes language seriously and language about God most seriously of all." Indeed Johnson's analysis of the male-bias in metaphors for God and the exclusive and literal interpretations given them by the church make "God-language" an important consideration in her critique of traditional christology.

When one considers that a human being cannot directly experience God through the five senses, the compensatory role of language and imagination in spiritual belief becomes immediately apparent. It follows that words and expressions, symbols and icons for God should be rich, abundant, and varied (yet always rooted in scripture) in order to mediate the nature of divine being which transcends human understanding. Indeed the limited nature of language as a conduit for God serves as both an argument and a prescription for an expansive use of God-language, as Johnson rightly notes, "The very incomprehensibility of God demands a proliferation of images and a variety of names . . ." And yet, all human efforts to define God are destined to fail, since God cannot be contained by language.

Given that language for God is so meaning-laden, however, the search for "right speaking" about God is, itself, a necessary one. According to

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12 Johnson, She Who Is, 6-7.
13 Elizabeth Johnson, "The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female," Theological Studies 45:3 (September 1984), 444.
Johnson, God-language not only informs an individual's and community's image of God, it also shapes their relationship with God as well as with themselves, other human beings and all of creation. In brief, it has the potential to inspire good or evil, bring weal or woe:

God spoken of as a wrathful tyrant can be called upon to justify holy wars and inquisitional torture chambers. Language about God as universal creator, lover and savior of all, on the other hand, moves believers toward forgiveness, care, and openness to inclusive community.

The role of God-language can hardly be over-stated in its comprehensive influence on the life of the church, both in its theology and in the spirituality it inspires in individual members. It therefore merits close attention.

A comparison of the many ancient scriptural metaphors for the divine being and their selective use today suggests a devolution of God-language in the Christian tradition since its origins. Biblical metaphors for God: Father, lord, king, landowner, slave master, leader of armies, shepherd. Female biblical metaphors for God: Mother, bakerwoman, female householder, mother bear or hen, midwife. Contemporary liturgical titles by which God is addressed: "Father, all powerful and ever-living God," "God, our loving Father," "Lord our God," "Almighty and ever-lasting Lord." There are virtually no equivalent female titles for God. Ironically, there seem to have been more female references to God extant in early Judaism and Christianity than there are in evidence in the tradition more than two thousand years later, prompting the Christian feminist call for

14Johnson, She Who Is, 4.
15Ibid., 36.
16Living With Christ Sunday Missal for 1995-96.
inclusive, non-gendered and sex-equivalent God-language. Moreover, of the multitude of divine images the church claims as its heritage, what has survived as the most fitting description of and oft-used reference to God, is that of a male ruler of the family and society, hence, "Father" and "Lord." Because God must be represented in a way which makes sense for humans, either anthropomorphically as male or female, or from their experience with the natural world (i.e. as animal, plant, mineral), the popular image of God as a divine father in heaven is, in itself, a legitimate one. Indeed, the scriptures show that Christ himself sanctioned this image when he instructed his disciples to "Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect" (Mt 5:48) and taught them to pray the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6:9; Lk 11:2). It serves, theoretically, as one appropriate metaphor for the divine being from among many other possibilities. In church practice, however, the father metaphor has so usurped traditional speech about God that the image of the nameless one has been essentially reduced to that of a heavenly patriarch in the Christian imagination. According to Johnson, this is a result of the fact that the male rendering of God in Christianity has been exclusive (bereft of recourse to female reality), literal (such that references to God as female i.e. "God, our heavenly Mother," automatically produce cognitive dissonance or even a sense of blasphemy in the hearer), and patriarchal (whereby the particular kind of male that God is, is one who rules over his Kingdom).17 Thus what Johnson refers to the "single, reified metaphor of the ruling man"18 now largely defines the Christian-God lexicon; "Father" and "Lord" being the inherited products of a two-thousand year search to name divine being. However because the search

17 Johnson, She Who Is, 33-34.
18 Ibid., 36.
has been biased, the product is false, with results that are both unjust for women and untrue of God. These will now be discussed under the so-called twin faces of sexism - androcentrism and patriarchy - and idolatry, respectively.

**Androcentrism**

Johnson defines androcentrism as "the personal pattern of thinking and acting that takes the characteristics of ruling men to be normative for all of humanity."19 (The term derives from the Greek, *aner*/*andros*, meaning male human being.) Androcentrism makes of men the model of humanity, such that they define women, children and 'lesser' males negatively. For example, the influence of androcentrism on the Western world is seen in the way that 'male' qualities of intellect and reason have been valued historically while 'female' qualities of emotions and bodiliness have been devalued.20 Its influence on Christianity has been pervasive, impacting on virtually all its doctrines. In the process of locating expressions of androcentrism in the church, feminist theology has made God-language a priority, by unmasking its claims to a neutral or value-free theology. This point was first and perhaps best expressed by Mary Daly in her famous phrase: "When God is male, the male is God." Johnson has convincingly established that traditional speech for God reflects a male God. What

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19 Ibid., 23-24.
20 See, for example, Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) and Mary Belenky et al. *Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind* (Basic Books, 1986) who argue that the stereotypically male ways of moral reasoning, knowing and learning i.e. through rationalization, have defined the norm in the fields of ethics and academia, respectively, while the stereotypically female ways i.e. through connection with others have been largely ignored.
remains to be seen is her analysis of the effects of the male symbol system on Christian men and women.

According to Johnson, the fact that God has been traditionally imaged as belonging to only the male sex, and in particular, as belonging to the ruling class of the male sex ("Father," "Lord"), has had a divinizing effect on males: "The patriarchal symbol of the divine sculpts men into the role of God, fully in 'his' image and capable of representing 'him.'" Thus males, and in particular, ruling class males are considered to image God better than anyone else. In a word, they are the *imago Dei*.

As one might expect, sexual identification with God is advantageous to male Christians. It dignifies and elevates maleness in general and allows men positions of power and authority in the church hierarchy:

> Throughout Christian history, as theology has interpreted God as "he," as male, there has been a corresponding dominance of men in roles of leadership and authority (popes, reformers, theologians, ministers, priests) within the church.22

This is perhaps the most obvious male advantage, in contrast to women's absolute exclusion from the church hierarchy. Although this status is held by only a small group, its effects are subtle and extensive such as in the learned attitudes of superiority which an assumption of shared masculinity with the divine carries for male believers. According to Anne Carr, "Boys grow up believing that they really do - or should - represent God on earth in roles of authority, knowledge, dignity, and power."23

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23Ibid., 139.
In its interest in the experience of women as a theological resource, feminist theology has also made women the subject of an equivalent inquiry. As such, a previously neglected but important piece has been added to the Christian corpus by Johnson and others in their recent analysis of the interior processes and the psychological consequences of all-male symbolism on Christian females.24

On the feminist assumption that the ability to identify with the divine being impacts on the quality of human-divine relationships, the participation of males and females with the male God is necessarily disproportionate.25 The natural symmetry between male images of God and men allows them to experience the divine being fully in themselves, whereas the dissonance created in women by the same image, requires that they negate their sexual identities in order to experience the divine being to the same capacity as males. Women thereby intuit that their own being, goodness and power is flawed and consequently lose the sense of sacredness proper to the female as well as a sense of personal authenticity. In the tradition of the Catholic church, women seek a priest as one who mediates God. However, in so doing, females place themselves in relationships of dependency on male authority, namely the church hierarchy, and ultimately deny that they themselves are also the imago Dei.26 In direct contrast to

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25 The following discussion on the effects of androcentric symbolism for God on women's religious identity is based on Johnson, She Who Is, 37-38.
26 Both Johnson and Carr refer to the strong statement made by Carol Christ concerning the effects of a male God on female spirituality: Religious symbol systems focused around exclusively male images of divinity create the impression that female power can never be fully legitimate or wholly beneficent. This message need never be explicitly stated . . . for its effects to be felt. A woman completely ignorant of the myths of female evil in
boys, according to Carr, "Girls internalize images of themselves as inferior, wrong, incomplete, guilty, unsure, incapable."²⁷

Because the messages it sends are subliminal and, therefore, difficult to decipher, these harmful effects of God-language are seemingly lost on most Christian women who then unknowingly perpetuate a language and thought system which operates against them.

**Patriarchy**

Patriarchy is a form of social organization in which power is always in the hand of the dominant man or men, with others ranked below in a graded series of subordinations reaching down to the least powerful who form a large base.²⁸

The need for the patriarchal family in ancient times can be appreciated from the point of view of the propagation of the human race, which depended on the fertility of females and thus, on their protection.²⁹ In an over-populated planet, however, patriarchy has long out-lived its original purpose, yet it remains largely intact, particularly if one includes as patriarchy later developments of that first power imbalance i.e. racism (white people over

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²⁷ Carr, *Transforming Grace*, 139.
people of colour), classism (rich over poor), humanocentrism (human over non-human) as well as all other existing "isms." Indeed, several feminist readings of history argue that patriarchy is the "father" of all major relational systems of the Western world. Johnson does not seem to assign motive and is therefore not necessarily included in this group. However, she does note that all human relational systems are distinguishable by the evidence of a dominant form of Western rationality, "hierarchical dualism" which manifests itself in a basic dynamic of inequality. This vestige of ancient Greek philosophy was originally an organizing principle of the Hellenistic world which separated and ranked spirit over matter. From the point of view of the twentieth century, however, it can be seen that hierarchical dualism essentially created the necessary conditions for sexual inequality and structures of domination/subordination particularly as it manifested itself in the human community i.e. in the equation of the spirit with the male principle and matter with the female principle. The division of the sexes into spirit and matter in a two-tiered universe where spirit was valued \textit{a priori} over matter, effectively rendered the superiority of the male and the inferiority of the female "innate," and justified the rule of the male over the female as the natural order of things. Hierarchical dualism thus provided the basis for the patriarchal formula for male power. By establishing hierarchical dualism as the connecting thread in systemic oppressions, Johnson presents an argument for expanding God-language... 

beyond patriarchal metaphors by exposing the multi-layered injustices which faith in such a God perpetuates.

According to Johnson's definition, racism and classism are strongly related to patriarchy due to the fact that they operate according to its defining dynamic (power of a few over the many) and criteria (discrimination based on a single characteristic.) A minor difference, is that instead of being of the opposite sex, these humans belong to a different race or a lower class than dominant males. Their lack of physical and cultural identification with the latter, relegates them as "other," projects on to them so-called "feminine" characteristics and finally poises them for the subordination to which females are subject. Indeed, the mutual association, inferiorization and domination of females and 'lesser males' was noted in Aristotle's Politics, where according to Radford Ruether, "ruling class males are the natural exemplars of mind or reason, while women, slaves and barbarians are the naturally servile people who must be subdued and ruled by their 'head'."\textsuperscript{32} Sexism, racism, classism all claim hierarchical dualism as their common heir, whereby privileged ruling class males distinguish themselves as separate from and superior to females, people of colour and the poor and on that basis, justify their domination.

In addition to these forms of social domination, Johnson considers the ecological domination of the earth to be another of hierarchical dualism's casualties, and therefore, a form of patriarchy. As in the above examples, it was the original identification of nature with matter which sealed its fate: in the minds of men, it existed only to be used and increasingly, abused, since the dawn of the modern age. For example, man's exploitation of nature

reached new heights in the Age of Enlightenment wherein the philosophical understanding of man as a rational being translated into his further detachment from nature along with its attendant scientific attitudes of experimentation, control and manipulation. Given the contributions of Newton, Bacon and their contemporaries, nature was thereafter considered as an object to be used for a higher purpose, namely for the advancement of humankind. Indeed their legacy lives on in the ecological crisis of the twentieth century.

According to Johnson, however, there is an important lesson in the ecological crisis which bears on the connection between females and nature, a historical and seemingly natural connection given the basic and instinctual observation of the life-giving abilities of human mothers and "Mother Earth." This lesson lies in the connection between the exploitation of females and the exploitation of nature in a system where hierarchical dualism prevails:

Within a sexist system the true identity of both women and the earth are skewed. Both are commonly excluded from the sphere of the sacred; both are routinely taken for granted and ignored, used and discarded, even battered and 'raped,' while nevertheless they do not cease to give birth and sustain life.33

It is not difficult to understand why patriarchy is the bane of feminists, who stand for mutuality in all relationships and more specifically, for the sexual equality of males and females. However, it is ostensibly an even more formidable social system of male domination for Christian women due to the fact that patriarchy is accepted by the church as derived from the will of

33Johnson, Women, Earth and Creator Spirit, 2.
God and is exercised in His name.\textsuperscript{34} As members of the church they must respect the fact that it is religiously sanctioned which is problematic in light of Johnson's analysis of God-language:

Language about the father in heaven who rules over the world \textit{justifies} and even \textit{necessitates} an order whereby the male religious leader rules over his flock, the civil ruler has dominion over his subjects, the husband exercises headship over his wife.\textsuperscript{35} (Emphasis added.)

While patriarchal metaphors also serve to inspire an image of God as protector or guardian of humans - biblically grounded on Yahweh in the Hebrew scriptures - Johnson argues that the church's exclusive and literal use of them has come to support systems of inequality, such as those described above. Indeed the injustice of the situation has caused some women their faith, as in the example of the post-Christian feminist, Daphne Hampson, whose vindication for leaving the Anglican church was based on the following sentiments:

How can God be seen to be good when one considers what history has been, and what it has meant for women that God has been perceived primarily in male terms? ... Why, if God is good, has any harm come to women? For that God has been conceived as male, and that biblical teaching which arose out of a patriarchal society has been held to be the revelation of God, must surely be seen to be the underlying facts of western culture which have led to discrimination of women.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{35}Johnson, \textit{She Who Is}, 36.
\textsuperscript{36}Hampson, \textit{Theology and Feminism}, (Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 11.
In addition to the obvious oppression which is legitimated by patriarchal language, a further danger is that Christians are left to assimilate into their belief system the idea that God 'himself' provided the original model for the patriarchal family and society. Obviously God has not provided the patriarchal model, rather the church has allowed God to function as such by its selective speech about God. This leads to an important but often missed distinction: it is not God but rather exclusive and literal speech about a patriarchal God which justifies oppression. It also illustrates Johnson's point regarding the power of God-language as an ideological tool "of subtle conditioning that operates to debilitating women's sense of dignity, power, and self-esteem."37

According to Christian feminists, theological truths are discernible according to whether they cohere with the feminist principle, which demands that the dignity of women be respected.38 This is not a claim which the church can make of its traditional speech about God. Rather the lack of female references to God and the virtually exclusive patriarchal symbolism in its stead means that females have historically been denied the positive experiences naturally assumed by males in virtue of their sexual-identification with the 'male' God. Worse, females have been ruled by males, who have enjoyed that status and power in the name of God. Given Johnson's appreciation of the power of God-language this is not surprising, for "the symbol of God functions."39 It functions against

37Johnson, She Who Is, 38.
38The principle is based on the promotion of the full humanity of women. Now variously expressed, it was first articulated by Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 18-19.
39Johnson, She Who Is, 4.
females both psychologically by justifying an androcentric world view and sociologically by legitimating and reinforcing patriarchal social structures.

Johnson has established that androcentrism and patriarchy stereotype female reality and then ban it as an unsuitable reference point for God, and by extension the church hierarchy. Accordingly, they collectively discriminate against women by making men appear more God-like in the Christian consciousness, and allowing them positions of authority. Thus not only does traditional speech about God work as a psychological force against women's dignity, power and self-esteem, but it also works against them sociologically as a stumbling block to women's full realization in the church. This last point, in particular qualifies God-language as a sin against women, according to the Vatican II document Gaudium et Spes which clearly states that any form of discrimination is sinful (par. 29). This is well-noted by Johnson: "If a woman in the church is denied the right and freedom to embrace a state of life because of her sex, is this not discrimination which should be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent?" Through its pervasive and unchecked androcentrism and patriarchy, the church wrongfully justifies and perpetuates the myth of male superiority. Thus does the symbol of God function.

**Idolatry**

According to Johnson's analysis of God-language, the fact that historically only men have held the privilege of naming God has bequeathed to the church a less than balanced view of God. Moreover the image of the

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40 Johnson, "The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female," 442.
41 Elizabeth Johnson, "Feminism and Sharing the Faith: A Catholic Dilemma" in Catholic Studies, No. 29 (February, 1994), 4.
male-defined God has been seemingly impregnable:

More solid than stone, more resistant to iconoclasm than bronze, seems to be the male substratum of the idea of God cast in theological language and engraved in public and private prayer.\textsuperscript{42}

Taken together Johnson's observations of the male ownership of God and of the strength of that monopoly have been sufficient cause for her to charge the church with idolatry. One notes in her own definition of the term, the characteristics of traditional speech for God which are seen to be problematic for women:

Whenever one image or concept of God expands to the horizon thus shutting out others, and whenever this exclusive symbol becomes literalized so that the distance between it and divine reality is collapsed, there an idol comes into being. Then the comprehensible image, rather than disclosing mystery, is mistaken for reality.\textsuperscript{43}

In a word, the graven image has become manifest in the ruling class male, owing to a exclusivism and literalism in its presentation. This is due to the fact that the necessity for using images for God drawn from the whole of human reality as well as images given by the cosmos, has not been respected.\textsuperscript{44}

According to Johnson, patriarchal symbolism is sinful on two accounts: (i) theoretically, it places human limits on God, thus substantiating the earlier claim that the search thus far to know God better has resulted in a

\textsuperscript{42} Johnson, "The Incomprehensibility and the Image of God Male and Female," 444.
\textsuperscript{43} Johnson, \textit{She Who Is}, 39.
\textsuperscript{44} See pg. 4 above.
false product and; (ii) practically, it elevates the human male to super-
human status and leaves the female out of the equation altogether. The
nature of the sins are different, however. The former is an explicit
transgression of the first commandment of the decalogue, prohibiting the
worship of false idols; whereas the latter is an expression of evil as it exists
in social structures and personal attitudes. Although the intent of
oppression is comparatively more difficult to prove (as is characteristic of all
social sin), its effects are nonetheless impressive, as Johnson has made clear.
In her analysis of sexism, Johnson has shown androcentrism and patriarchy
to be alive and well in the church. The remainder of the chapter will focus
on how these present themselves in the church's tradition of classical
christology.

The Maleness of Christ

According to the Vatican Declaration of Women in the Priesthood,
"Christ is and remains a man". The point is a given for all who would
claim to be members of the church. Johnson's critique of traditional
christology, however, is not based on Jesus' human sexuality per se, which she respects as "part of the perfection and limitation of his historical
contingency", (along with his race, class, ethnic heritage, culture, his Jewish
religious faith, and his Galilean village roots), but rather on the emphasis
which the church has given it, relative to these other human characteristics:

45 Ordinatio Sacerdotalis, Vol 24, 49ff.
46 In contrast to post-Christian feminists, who claim that the particularity of Jesus' sex is basic to Christianity making it incompatible with feminism. See Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973) and Daphne Hampson, Theology and Feminism (Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, 1990)
47 Johnson, She Who Is, 152.
Consciously or unconsciously, Jesus' maleness is lifted up and made essential for his Christic function and identity, thus blocking women precisely because of their female sex from participating in the fullness of their Christian identity as images of Christ.48

It is worth noting from the above comment that Johnson's critique of God-language and her critique of christology share some important similarities, namely an exaggerated emphasis on maleness and conversely a virtual denial of the relative importance of femaleness, both in the Christian community and in the Godhead. Just as these are for Johnson signs of sexism in the larger church, so they will be seen as such in traditional christology. Her way to this conclusion is by showing how three church doctrines have become distorted in the history of the Christ symbol.

**Doctrine of God**

According to Johnson's survey of early church texts and tradition, the incomprehensibility of God is a constant theme in the history of Christianity:49 It is implied in the bible's recording of the various human and non-human manifestations of God, which together represent the impossibility of capturing divine being in a single image or even in a conflation of disparate images. It was acknowledged in the early Christian centuries by an assumed attitude of silence, ignorance and humility toward a God knowable only through a process of negation i.e. in the tradition of apophatic theology; and in Augustine's dictum, if we have understood, then

49The following discussion on the incomprehensibility of God is based on "The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female," 441-465.
what we have understood is not God. It was formulated into Aquinas' doctrine of analogy, which required that any concept or symbol for God, even the idea that God exists undergoes a simultaneous movement of affirmation, negation, and letting-go for even just a dark surmising of what God may be like, since according to Aquinas, "All affirmations we can make about God are not such that our minds may rest in them, nor of such sort that we may suppose God does not transcend them." Further to these revelatory moments, Johnson shows how the incomprehensibility of God is thematic in the thought of a long list of theologians, ranging from the aforementioned Church Fathers to the feminist Sallie McFague. According to the church, the one knowable fact about God is God's unknowability.

One method by which the incomprehensibility of God was expressed in the early church was through the use of female images for God. Johnson notes for example, that Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, Augustine, Jerome and John Chrysostom all made references to the motherhood of God and that their medieval counterparts, Dame Julian of Norwich and, to a lesser degree, Anselm of Canterbury carried on the tradition. Given that this was the period of church history in which the classical doctrine of God was being developed Johnson suggests that the female imagery may have been used consciously to compensate for its male-biased language and to give integrity to the tradition of the incomprehensibility of God.

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50Ibid., 453.
53Ibid.
According to Johnson, however, the church has since undermined its earlier efforts to establish conclusively the truth of the incomprehensibility of God and its corollary, the image of God male and female: the fact of God's incomprehensibility has been largely pre-empted by the image of the comprehensible male God, and the method of imaging God in female terms has all but disappeared save for a recent and relatively isolated example of Pope John Paul I, in his reference to God as mother-father. She places much of the blame for this on the way in which christology was wrongly interpreted. More specifically, her first criticism of classical christology is in the way the maleness of Jesus points to the maleness of God: "If Jesus is a man, so uncritical reasoning goes, and as such the revelation of God, then this must point to the maleness of Jesus as an essential characteristic of divine being itself."

According to Johnson the church's history shows a relative fixation on a single, albeit foundational, New Testament revelation, the relationship between the Son and the Father. Indeed, the image comes on the authority of Christ himself, in self-revelation, "He who sees me, sees the Father" (Jn 14:9) and in his own references to God as "Abba" (cited in all four Gospels). However, because the image has been used exclusively and literally in the tradition, it has resulted in a misguided ("naive") idea of revelation which is interpreted as meaning that "God is male, or at least more like a man than a woman, or at least more fittingly addressed as male.

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54 Ibid., 463.
55 Ibid., 152.
56 Without denying the importance of these passages in establishing a precedent for human relations with God, the Fatherhood of God must now be interpreted as a product of the strongly patriarchal period of the church in which it was written and also placed in the context of other images of God given by Christ i.e. the Good Shepherd and the Woman in Search of the Lost Coin.
than as female." The celebrated works of Michelangelo, Lucas Cranach and William Blake reflect this interpretation, fixing it in the minds of generations of Christians. A related concern for Johnson is in the way that tradition has "tied the knot tighter" on this biblical metaphor through its unrelieved use of the *logos* to make the incarnate Christ realizable to the Christian community. As a male principle of Greek thought (meaning "Word" or "Reason") it largely served to reinforce the relationship between Father and Son. According to Radford Ruether with the introduction of the *logos* into Christianity, "the unwarranted idea develops that there is a necessary connection between the maleness of Jesus' historical person and the maleness of Logos as male offspring and disclosure of a male God." Given the images of the Son and *Logos* it is not a far step to conclude that maleness in fact does constitute the divinity of Christ.

Due to its selective reading of scripture and appropriation of tradition the church has not respected the mystery and incomprehensibility of God established in its early period, with the result that it has produced in the Christian imagination an image of God lacking in female expression. Traditional christology can thus be seen as contributing to the hegemony of male images for God, as well as its residual problems for Christian women.

**Christian Anthropology**

There is a simple truth in the two creation stories of the bible: male and females are created in the image of God. Both sexes are meant to enjoy equally the experience of being *imago Dei*. The application of this truth to

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57 She Who Is, 152.
females, however, has only come to be appreciated recently with the rise of feminism in general and feminist theology in particular,\(^{59}\) for prior to these movements, the domination of females by males actually received legitimation from these very same texts. Noteworthy is the fact that the christomorphism of women as revelatory has followed a similar path in the Christian tradition.\(^{60}\)

The New Testament shows that both sexes can equally claim to be the *imago Christi* according to a number of baptismal and martyrdom traditions which establish doctrine on this point. Quoting Paul for example, Johnson shows that in the early Christian communities baptism meant that all sexual and cultural differences among humans became null and void, once an individual entered the community of Christ. Among the passages supporting this point, there is what might be considered the Christian feminist "Magna Charter," Gal. 3:27-28:

> As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Jesus Christ."

Furthermore, in two separate passages, Paul refers to the inclusive call for all members of the community to be transformed into images or icons of Christ (2 Cor 3:18; Rom 8:29). Elsewhere, in Luke's description of the conversion of Saul, Jesus' response "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Schüssler Fiorenza has established that females were active agents in

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establishing early Christian communities.\textsuperscript{61} Therefore this Lukan passage must be taken to mean both men and women.

Not only through baptism but also through martyrdom, are both men and women included fully in the Christian community. Johnson shows how this belief of the church spans its history in referring to a quotation by Eusebius on the torture and death of a first century saint, Blandina: "In this battle, they saw with their bodily eyes, in the form of their sister, the One who had been crucified for them" and a statement made at Vatican II that the effects of martyrdom are equivalent to a transformation of a disciple into an intense image of Christ.\textsuperscript{62} In both cases, one's sex is not a block to being a martyr, hence an "icon of Christ."

Just as a misinterpretation of Genesis 2 has caused females to be considered less theocentric than males in the church (and, in fact as the embodiment of evil), so the church's lack of attention to the above texts and traditions have caused females to be also considered less christocentric than males. Rather the church has seemingly focused on the one distinguishing characteristic of Christ which identifies him with men, separates him from females to define christomorphism, namely his sexual identity. As proof that the church assigns an essential difference clause, as it were, to the maleness of Christ, Johnson points to official arguments against women's ordination, such as the \textit{Vatican Declaration on Women in the Ministerial Priesthood}. The document argues that because males share in the physical nature of Christ, they enjoy a greater capacity for identification with him, and are thus able to represent him on earth, in the church hierarchy,

\textsuperscript{61}Elisabeth Schüller Fiorenza, \textit{In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins} (New York: Crossroad, 1983)
\textsuperscript{62}Johnson, \textit{She Who Is}, 73-75.
whereas women are denied this privilege precisely because of their lack of "natural resemblance" to Christ. According to the logic of the argument, the fact that Christ became incarnate as a male effectively renders maleness as normative humanity. This is Johnson's second criticism of traditional christology. She criticizes the church for using the fact that Jesus was a male to promote an androcentric anthropology, "in the belief that a particular honor, dignity, and normativity accrues to the male sex because it was chosen by the Son of God himself for the enfleshment of incarnation."63 Furthermore, according to Johnson, so deeply ingrained is this androcentric christology in the church, that the prospect of Christ becoming incarnated as a female is doubtful:

Could God have become a human being as a woman? The question strikes some people as silly or worse. Theologically, though, the answer is Yes. Why not? If women are genuinely human and if God is the deep mystery of holy love, then what is to prevent such an incarnation? But taking for granted the implicit inferiority of women, Christian theology has dignified maleness as the only genuine way of being human, thus making Jesus’ embodiment as male an ontological necessity rather than a historical option.64

With respect to Johnson's analysis, one can only concede with Hampson, that "Christology gives a male human being a status which is given no woman."65 In contrast to this conclusion is the evidence of scripture and tradition both of which explicitly include females as Imago Dei/Imago Christi. Traditional christology has not promoted these truths, and on that basis is problematic.

63Ibid. , 152.
64Johnson, Consider Jesus, 107.
65Hampson, 76.
Soteriology

Although the Council of Chalcedon (451) was marked by controversy and debate (leading in some cases to fist fights and even death), the question of women as a group separate from men, did not figure in its discussions, nor did the maleness of Jesus have any christological interest for the Church Fathers at the time. Rather the Council struggled primarily with the unity of Christ's two natures before finally establishing orthodox Christology: that in one person (one hypostasis), both human and divine joined, without confusion, change, division, or separation. This christological formulation provided the basis for the Church Fathers, namely the humanity of Jesus ("What is not assumed is not redeemed, but what is assumed is saved by union with God.") Chalcedon affirmed dogmatically (after Nicea) that believers were saved by virtue of the fact that Christ was not merely divine, but also fully human. Because the dualistic anthropology of the time understood man as the head of woman, women's reality was included in the assumed humanity of the savior, and they were thereby saved. The doctrine was initially no respecter of sex and applied equally to both men and women. It thus enjoyed a longevity which was left unchallenged as long as women believed themselves to be included into the Christian community through Baptism in Christ.

As feminist theology evolves within the larger Women's Movement, however, the inclusiveness of the Christ symbol is now being challenged for the first time the history of the church. The criticism of Christology as androcentric and patriarchal is seen to be problematic for Christian women in the context of their newly claimed dignity and the attendant claim to represent the imago Christi, in themselves, and not through, in, or under
men and to be represented by him in a like manner. Carr expresses the felt exclusion and confusion of these women:

All that has been said about the human in Christ does not apply fully or in the same way to all persons. Women present a special case in Christianity, a question in theology and the life of the church. Consequently, some feminists question whether in the Christian view women really are persons, really are human, and really can be Christian. And they question in what sense Jesus Christ is the savior of women.66

Thus the question, "Can a male savior save women?" has been asked. The problem is that the focus on the maleness of Jesus has seemed to imply that maleness is constitutive for the incarnation, putting women's salvation at least theoretically into jeopardy if female humanity is not assumed by Christ.

There is a certain irony in the way that the history of the Christ symbol has influenced the doctrines of God, Christian anthropology and soteriology for although they were established in a strongly patriarchal period of the church, they are in essence, inclusive of women, while in an unprecedented moment of women's liberation they prevent women from experiencing themselves as the imago Dei/imago Christi. Johnson has shown that the distortion of these doctrines is due to an androcentric stress on the maleness of Jesus' humanity which was never intended according to Chalcedon where the salvific potential of Christ was defined. On this basis she charges the church with heresy and blasphemy.67

66Carr, 162.
67Johnson, She Who Is, 167.
Because it is the interpretation and not the doctrine (or men, not Christ) who have distorted christology, Johnson is hopeful that Christology can be renewed in such a way that it is inclusive of women, men and all of creation. Thus her own answer to the question, "Can a male saviour save women?" is positive, with the following caveat:

The negative response will perdure until the inner structure of Christology and its effective history are transformed to cohere with the liberating impulse of the gospel, valuing women as full participant in the mystery of redemption with capacity by nature and grace to represent Jesus Christ.68

Chapter two treats the reason for Johnson's optimism for an inclusive christology, "Jesus-Sophia."

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68 Ibid., 154.
Chapter Two

Johnson's Reconstruction of Christology: "Jesus-Sophia"

Introduction

Analyzing problems is always easier than creating solutions. While this is true of almost any human enterprise, it is particularly the case for Christian feminists, who try to imagine non-sexist alternatives against a background of patriarchy and androcentrism. Be that as it may, it would be less than satisfactory for feminist theologians to restrict their contributions to the negative task of critique, for as Johnson rightly notes, "Negatives alone do not nourish." Moreover, because it is now a forgone conclusion at least among these women that the church is a sexist institution, that foundational piece of feminist theology has been written already; whereas the larger, positive task of reconstruction still mostly lies ahead waiting to be realized in the minds and hearts of women and, ultimately, concretized in the life of the church.

This is not to deny the importance of critique, which, in exposing the androcentric and patriarchal church, provides both the motive and direction for reconstruction. Accordingly, as Christian women juxtapose their experience of oppression in the church with the knowledge that they are created and loved by God equally with men, there is a moment of awakening, a conversion. This dynamic (of "contrast and confirmation") is described here by Johnson:

The contradiction between the suffering caused by sexism and the humanum of women, between the crushing on the one hand and women's own dignity on the other, gives rise

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69Johnson, She Who Is, 29.
to a profound and irrevocable no. This should not be! The judgment arises: we are worth more than this.\textsuperscript{70}

The indignation resulting from women's raised consciousness expresses itself theologically in the task of reconstruction, which acts as a corrective to their experience of discrimination and lack of voice and recorded history in the church. Seen in this light, critique is a necessary forerunner to women being able to claim their rightful place in the Christian church.

It follows from this that feminist reconstruction involves locating and naming the clues or moments in the church's sexist past which have the potential to be inclusive and empowering of women and, further, to appropriate these into church history, doctrines, liturgy, and ethics, thereby making their application more expansive and authentic for today's world. As such it helps guarantee the church's relevance for the next generation of women, not a small point by any standard. Indeed, according to Schneiders, theological reconstruction is critical from the perspective of feminists who wish to remain Christian:

\begin{quote}
Unless educated and aware women can find a creative and liberating understanding of God and of Jesus, one which does not glorify masculinity at the expense of femininity and does not justify the oppression of women by men, they have no future in institutional Christianity.\textsuperscript{71}
\end{quote}

The centrality of the Christ figure to Christianity and the strong critique brought against it by feminist theologians has made the reconstruction of

\textsuperscript{70}Ibid., 62.
\textsuperscript{71}Schneiders, \textit{Women and the Word}, 7.
christology a priority within feminist theology. This chapter will consider
Johnson's response to Schneiders' challenge.

Methodology

Johnson's methodology has been described as one which has a "new
but not rootless approach," and she agrees with the analysis. Her
rootedness derives from the fact that she takes Catholicism as her point of
departure, and her originality is established by her insistence on the
inclusion and flourishing of women in its every expression.

While all Catholic feminist theologians embrace fully the feminist
critical principle of full humanity of women (discussed below), not all are
guided to the same extent by the church and its teachings. Among those
who have moved somewhat beyond mainstream tradition, are Radford
Ruether who incorporates "usable material" from extra-Christian sources,
and Schüssler Fiorenza who uses the technique of "imaginative
reconstruction" in order to read women back into Christian history. Despite
their shared analysis of the church as sexist, Johnson's work stands in
contrast to the afore-mentioned with respect to the fact that she remains
firmly grounded in the Roman Catholic tradition. Except to establish
misogyny as a fact of life in the early church, the church fathers are

72 The reconstruction of christology has diversified from a white, middle-class
perspective into womanist, Hispanic and Asian perspectives: Jacqueline Grant White
Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response
(Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); Virginia Fabella, "A Common Methodology for Diverse
Christologies?" in With Passion and Compassion, ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba
Oduyoye (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 108-17; Nellie Ritchie, "Women and
95; Elizabeth Amoah and Mercy Oduyoye, "The Christ for African Women," in With
Passion and Compassion, ed. Fabella and Oduyoye, 42.

73 Mary Hines, Review of She Who Is, by Elizabeth Johnson, in Horizons 20 (Fall 1993):
328.
almost wholly abandoned in feminist reconstructions on the grounds that their theologies are too male-biased to be helpful to women. In contrast to the self-imposed distance of her contemporaries, Johnson's familiarity with Catholic tradition allows her to appreciate their valuable contributions in the development of church doctrine and, where possible, redeem what is revelatory for women. In other words, she overlooks the trappings of a sexist era in order to glean the essential. For example, Johnson has shown that female images were used by early Christian and medieval theologians as a corollary to the proofs for the incomprehensibility of God. Their references to the motherhood of God, even if only a sideline to the proofs themselves, carry benefits which extend beyond biological mothers since they promote the dignity of all women in their claims to include femaleness in the Godhead. Johnson's attempt to retrieve that which is revelatory for women within the tradition and discard that which is not, is not unlike the practice of medieval alchemy which involved the attempted transmutation of baser metals into gold and silver.

Johnson's methodology is consciously modeled on the church's own example in inter-religious dialogue. Just as the church at Vatican II was able to concede after centuries of suspicion and prejudice that "what is true and holy in (non-Christian religions) reflects a ray of divine light" (Nostra Aetate), so Johnson, aware of the built-in bias against women, "surveys and probes the tradition" for what she considers to be usable material, namely that which is liberating for women, its "scattered rays of truth." In brief, she applies a feminist hermeneutic to the traditional wisdom of the church.

74 See pg. 31 above.
75 Johnson, She Who Is, 9.
76 Ibid., 10.
Being at once orthodox and woman-centered, Johnson uses both Christian and feminist resources to establish the criteria for her method, with the conviction that an early Church Father and the feminist critical principle are equally able to discern theological truths. St. Irenaeus provides an insight which works as a measuring stick for all theology in his well-loved aphorism, *Gloria Dei vivens homo*, "The glory of God is man fully alive." Johnson takes Irenaeus to mean that the realization of human potential and God's happiness are not mutually exclusive but exist in direct proportion to each other:

Wherever human beings are violated, diminished, or have their life drained away, God's glory is dimmed and dishonoured. Wherever human beings are quickened to fuller and richer life, God's glory is enhanced.77

Because the original text reflects the androcentrism of the time it potentially casts doubt into the present-day believer as to its applicability to the female sex. Johnson, therefore, changes the Latin *"homo" to "mulier to make the phrase unambiguously inclusive of women, *Gloria Dei vivens mulier*, "God is the glory of woman fully alive." According to Johnson, the change is more than mere semantics or a question of political correctness, for, read in this way, the phrase places a new imperative on the dignity of women. Including the human female in God and God in the human female renders a deeper insight into both realities: "it holds the promise of deepening further the truth of the incomprehensibility of God, as well as promoting the human dignity of women - the two not being separable from one another."78

77Ibid., 14.
A recent articulation of St. Irenaeus' insight is to be found in the critical principle of feminist theology. Stated alternatively as "the promotion of the full humanity of women"\textsuperscript{79} or "the emancipation of women toward human flourishing",\textsuperscript{80} the principle insists that the church honour its biblical truths, established by the priestly writers of the Hebrew scriptures (Gen 1:28) and the apostle Paul in the Christian scriptures (Gal 3:28). These texts provide the scriptural basis for Christian anthropology and, therefore, must be respected. Johnson ensures that they are.

Having established Johnson's criterion for doing theology, these can now be applied specifically to her reconstruction of christology. Johnson accepts the premise that christology, in essence, provides for the full humanity of women, as well as the observation that it is the one doctrine within Christian tradition which has been used most frequently against women. This makes for a difficult position which holds that while it has yet to be realized in history, an inclusive and egalitarian christology is realizable!

Johnson uses an image of Jesus currently being retrieved for women and the poor by feminist and liberation theologians respectively, Christ as liberator. Like these, she claims Jesus' option for the poor and marginalized as the life-giving impulse of the christological tradition: "That is the 'scandal of particularity' that really matters."\textsuperscript{81} Her method is to connect this life-giving impulse with the biblical figure of Wisdom,\textsuperscript{82} not unlike the first century Christians in their attempts to express the salvific experience of Jesus. Johnson, therefore, proves her orthodoxy by choosing to revive a

\textsuperscript{79}Radford Ruether, \textit{Sexism and God-Talk}, 18-19.
\textsuperscript{80}Johnson, \textit{She Who Is}, 30.
\textsuperscript{81}Ibid., 67.
\textsuperscript{82}"Whoever finds me finds life." Prv 8:35
symbol which pre-dates the Christian church itself but is nonetheless a part of it. Moreover, her treatment of the Wisdom tradition is in full respect of Vatican II's teaching that the scriptures teach, "firmly, faithfully and without error the truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation."83 She shows that although the figure of Wisdom has been lost or buried in layers/centuries of institutional sexism, the symbol was originally an important piece of church history and doctrine, and does in fact have a bearing on our salvation, insofar as it was instrumental in the development of the doctrine of the incarnation.

Because the wisdom tradition in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures has been the source of conflicting interpretations, her reconstruction begins with an exegesis of the appropriate texts. And because her reconstruction is only as sound as the scripture which supports it, this is a critical stage involving two inter-related steps: proving the divinity of Sophia in the context of the Wisdom writings as a preface to establishing an early Christian wisdom christology. Given the necessity of both to her argument, they are treated individually below.

Finally, in order for her christological reconstruction to satisfy the feminist critical principle, it must show that Christ does not have the effect of reinforcing male power and female submission. Or, stated positively, it must be a corrective to the androcentric bias of traditional christology. Eleanor McLaughlin's comment provides the discussion with a working definition for an inclusive christology:

If there is to be found or constructed a feminist Christology which includes woman as well as man in the icon of God, the male hegemony must be deconstructed such that the

83Die Verbum 11; quoted by Johnson, She Who Is, 78.
image of God made Flesh is seen and experienced as female as well as male.84

Neither Wisdom in her original context nor in her early Christian appropriation can accommodate the concerns contemporary Christian women have with a male savior, which are largely based on the way the Christ symbol has been historically interpreted. By meeting/reading first century wisdom christology with a twentieth century feminist lens, Johnson's recovery of wisdom becomes her discovery of "Jesus-Sophia." Thus she brings the church to a new place, ironically by returning to its origins, and then including women in the inclusive and egalitarian vision of Christ. This rings true when considered against Johnson's stated purpose for writing her magnum opus, She Who Is which she describes as "an exploration which attempts to braid a footbridge between the ledges of classical and feminist Christian wisdom."85

The Wisdom Tradition in the Hebrew Scriptures

According to Johnson, "there is no other personification of such depth and magnitude in the entire scriptures of Israel (than Wisdom)."86 Her comment is noteworthy in view of the fact that Wisdom is a female figure. Not only is the word of feminine origin in both Hebrew, hokmah, and Greek, Sophia, but Wisdom is consistently female in the Hebrew scriptures, appearing alternatively as sister, mother, female beloved, chef and hostess, teacher, preacher, and maker of justice.87 More mundane and even

84 Eleanor McLaughlin, "Feminist Christologies: Re-Dressing the Tradition," in Reconstructing the Christ Symbol, 121.
85 Johnson, She Who Is, 12.
86 Elizabeth Johnson, "Wisdom Was Made Flesh and Pitched Her tent Among Us," in Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology, 98.
87 Ibid.
expected, is the fact that the Wisdom tradition has been largely ignored by biblical scholars in favour of the historical and prophetic books since the Enlightenment period. Although Johnson's efforts to read Wisdom back into the tradition are part of the larger process of revisiting biblical christology, one noteworthy by-product is that they provide a balance to the sexism of the Hebrew scriptures, seen in the predominance of the male figure of Yahweh and in passages which shame women, such as the stories of Hagar, Jephthah, and the unnamed concubine. Lady Wisdom is a positive female image "of power and care" and Johnson presents her as such.

As a result of being the most developed personification in Jewish tradition, Sophia fits the stereotypical description of woman as a "complex being" (although as Johnson notes in no other way is She stereotypically female, variously described as being noisy, assuming authority, and taking initiative). She is not readily identified or captured in a single profile, but is an evolving subject of various authors writing for audiences in different time periods and geographical places. As difficult as it is to pinpoint Wisdom, however, especially in view of the several conflicting interpretations, Johnson is clear on one defining characteristic: Sophia is a female expression of God in the world. This is a strong statement in view of the fact that Wisdom was relegated to minor significance until recently.

Johnson's argument is based on the divine nature of Sophia's words and acts of creation, guidance and redemption in the context of Jewish

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88 Ibid., 96-7.
90 Johnson lists these as: the personification of cosmic order; the personification of Wisdom sought and learned in Israel's Wisdom schools; the personification of a divine attribute and a hypostasis. See "Wisdom Was Made Flesh and Pitched Her Tent Among Us," in Reconstructing The Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology, 99.
monotheism. Not only is she able to rule out the possibility that references to Wisdom were intended for a second deity but she shows a "functional equivalence"\(^91\) between the words and deeds of Sophia and Yahweh. With regard to the presentation of Sophia in intertestamental literature and Hebrew scriptures, Johnson asks, "Of whom else can this be said?"\(^92\) As the following summary of her exegesis shows, only God.

Only God is so hidden and elusive, a being who cannot be found by human efforts (Job 28:12-28). Only God can claim to give life: "Whoever finds me finds life" (Prov 8:35); only God can claim to order and guide: "By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just" (Prov 8:15); only God can claim to create: "The Lord by wisdom founded the earth" (Prov 3, 19); she is the "fashioner of all things" (Wis 7:22, 8:6) and "mother" of all good things (Wis 7:12); only God can claim to save: according to the book of Solomon, Wisdom is responsible for leading her people out from a nation of oppressors through the deep waters of the Red Sea; and only God can claim to pervade all things: by entering souls and making them friends of God (Wis 7:27), and pitching her tent among human beings (Sir 24:23).

Because claims which can only be made of God are here made of Sophia, Johnson concludes that these passages were intended as descriptions of God in God's manifestation of Sophia. Thus, "There can be distinction but no separation between this figure and Israel's God."\(^93\) ... "She is the personification of God's own self coming toward the world, dwelling in it,

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\(^92\)The following biblical quotations are based on "Jesus, the Wisdom of God: A Biblical Basis for Non-Androcentric Christology," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* LX 1:4 (December, 1985): 261-94.

\(^93\)Ibid. , 267.
Wisdom in the Hebrew scriptures is simply God. And notwithstanding the criticism that she disregards the less "personal" functions of Wisdom in her efforts to present Her as "persona and figure," Johnson finds that there is much scholarly consensus on this interpretation.

With regard to contrarians, most notably, von Rad and Ringgren, Johnson refers to their assumption that God can only be rightly imaged as a male, as a "pair of blinders blocking the full significance of the text." She refutes von Rad's claim to the ultimacy of Yahweh ("only Yahweh can speak that way") by placing Him in the context of a variety of images from which He was formed, "an image of the God of Israel's faith, an image formed of as an amalgam of ancestor, desert, and fertility deities" and challenges Ringgren's need to artificially transfer the saving activity of Sophia to God. In responding to these men, it seems that Johnson's own position is clarified: "Sophia is not YHWH, understood in the specificity of that name, but both female Sophia and male YHWH express the one God who promises life upon being found."

Wisdom Christology in the Christian Scriptures

One intuits that the images of the feminine divine represented by Sophia are ripe with possibilities for an inclusive christology. In fact,

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95 Mary D'Angelo, Review of She Who Is, by Elizabeth Johnson, in Horizons 20 (Fall 1993): 335.
96 Johnson notes that scripture scholars James Dunn, C. Larcher, and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza all support her exegesis on the functional equivalence of Sophia and Yahweh.
97 Johnson, "Jesus, the Wisdom of God," 275.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
according to Johnson, the wisdom of God was one of the titles used by the first-century Christians in an attempt to express their experience of the saving power of Jesus, along with the more familiar, Son of God, Son of Man, Logos, and Messiah. The identification of Jesus with Sophia underwent an intense period of development from the early identification of Jesus as the child or envoy of Sophia (in the Gospel of Luke) to the insight that this identification was the reason behind the incarnation. Johnson refers to passages from Paul, Matthew and John as well as current exegesis on these texts to develop her argument.

Beginning with Paul, Johnson notes that his was the first explicit reference to Jesus as the Wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24), setting a precedence for its further use in the Pauline tradition, which according to Johnson is fairly extensive: he is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15); the radiant light of God's glory (Heb 1:3); the first born of all creation (Col 1:15); the one through whom all things were made (1 Cor 8:6). Thus, Johnson's conclusion that "What Judaism said of Sophia, Christian hymn makers and epistle writers now came to say about Jesus." Further, Johnson shows how Matthew extended the identification of Jesus with Sophia by having Jesus speak her words, and do her deeds. The Matthean passages where Jesus is considered to be quoting Sophia are: 11:28-30 where Jesus calls out to the heavily burdened to come to Him to find rest (a direct borrowing from Sirach 6: 23-31); as well as the "Lament over Jerusalem" (Mt 23:37-39) in which Jesus depicts himself as a hen brooding over the people's rejection of the prophets before withdrawing like Sophia from the city that rejects him; and Mt 11:25-28 in which Jesus shares

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100 Johnson, "Redeeming the Name of Christ," 121.
101 Ibid.
His intimate knowledge of "Abba" to the little ones, as Sophia does with God (8:4). In order to show that Matthew presents the deeds of Jesus as those of Sophia, Johnson compares Matthew and Lukes's use of "Q." While both authors list the ministries of Jesus and John the Baptist as being scorned by their generation, Luke remains faithful to Q, while Matthew edits one word, such that Luke and Q's reading, "Wisdom is vindicated by her children" is changed to "Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds" in Mtt 7:19. Noteworthy is the fact that in both cases Jesus uses the feminine pronoun in speaking of himself, however, only Matthew explicitly identifies Jesus with personified Wisdom herself.\(^\text{102}\)

Finally, Johnson considers John's gospel to be the "fullest flowering of Wisdom christology"\(^\text{103}\) with respect to the wisdom themes which run throughout, themes of "seeking and finding, feeding and nourishing, revealing and enlightening, giving life, making people friends of God, shining as light in the darkness, being the way, the truth and the life."\(^\text{104}\) Most importantly, for both the development of subsequent theology and the identification of Jesus and Sophia in the Christian scriptures is the prologue which presents the pre-history of Jesus as the story of Sophia. Jesus is presented as the one who was with God in the beginning and the one through whom God made all things. According to Johnson and several scripture scholars, "The prologue was originally an early Christian hymn to Wisdom which at its climax identifies her with Jesus Christ."\(^\text{105}\) Johnson's theory for the substitution of "Logos" for Wisdom in this passage is treated in the final section of this chapter.

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\(^{102}\)Johnson, "Wisdom Was Made flesh," 104.
\(^{103}\)ibid.
\(^{104}\)ibid.
\(^{105}\)i.e. Rendel Harris, Raymond Brown, and John Ashton
According to Johnson the use of the wisdom trajectory in the Christian scriptures had profound theological implications for the development of christology since "Jesus came to be seen as God's only begotten Son after he was identified with Wisdom."¹⁰⁶ Johnson argues her point, that Jesus is Sophia-Incarnate and was considered as such by the late first century, by referring to the fact that of the various biblical symbols used of Jesus - Son of God, Son of Man, Logos, and Messiah - Wisdom alone is able to relate Jesus ontologically with God because she alone "connotes divinity in its original context."¹⁰⁷ The linking of the human being Jesus with the divine Sophia, therefore, "moves thought to see that Jesus is not simply a human being moved by God but must be related to God in a special way."¹⁰⁸ "Her relation of intimacy with God was seen to be manifest in his, her work in the world embodied in his, her spirit poured out in his."¹⁰⁹ In this configuration, the early Christian identification of the crucified and risen Jesus with the divine feminine Sophia were inextricably bound together in the Incarnation.¹¹⁰ As such it provides for a female element in Jesus which cannot be avoided, denied or discarded if the tradition is to be true to itself. It is worth quoting Johnson at length on this point:

Since Jesus the Christ is depicted as divine Sophia, then it is not unthinkable - it is not even unbiblical - to confess Jesus the Christ as the incarnation of God imaged in the female symbol. Whoever espouses a wisdom Christology is asserting that Jesus is the human being Sophia became; that Sophia in all her fullness was in him so that he manifests the depth of the

¹⁰⁶Johnson, "Redeeming the Name of Christ," 121.
¹⁰⁷Ibid.
¹⁰⁹Johnson, "Redeeming the Name of Christ," 121.
¹¹⁰Similarly James Dunn makes the point, "Herein we see the origin of the doctrine of incarnation." Quoted by Johnson, "Redeeming the Name of Christ," 121.
divine mystery in creative and graciously saving involvement in the world.¹¹¹

Johnson's exegesis seems to satisfy McLaughlin's criteria (above) for an inclusive christology, namely that the Christ symbol "be seen and experienced as male as well as female." Further, this has been possible without the necessity of projecting a personal agenda onto the text. Johnson has merely followed the lead of the early Christian writers in their appropriation of the wisdom writings from the Hebrew scriptures, allowing christology's "ancient inclusivity to shine through." Wisdom christology at least theoretically solves the 'feminist problem' of the male Christ figure by understanding His divinity in terms of His incarnation of the female Sophia. However, reconstruction need also replace the focus on maleness with an expansive, inclusive vision of Christ. To quote Johnson, it need "untie the knot of sexist christology."¹¹² The following section will discuss the potential which this biblical revelation has on women and the church, respectively, in the figure of "Jesus-Sophia."

"Jesus-Sophia"

If the female symbol of the divine is intrinsic to the divinity of Jesus, it follows that the maleness of Christ (like all His other human characteristics) becomes inconsequential. This is precisely what Johnson has claimed of "Jesus-Sophia." Worth noting is the fact that in naming Christ, Johnson has broken with a past male tradition (although in all other respects

¹¹¹Johnson, She Who Is, 99.
¹¹²Johnson, "Wisdom Was Made Flesh," 106.
she conforms to scriptural tradition.) Indeed, given Johnson's conviction of the power of God-language her choice of Wisdom is a calculated one:

The figure of personified Wisdom offers an augmented field of female metaphors with which to interpret the saving significance and personal identity of Jesus the Christ, and the choice of metaphor matters.113

The metaphor matters because in the final analysis the metaphor has the powerful suggestive force to determine whether christology is liberating or damaging to women. More specifically, the identification of the female Sophia with the male Jesus influences the way one hears the story of Jesus and interprets its meaning.

When read using the prophet of Sophia metaphor for Jesus, the gospel story is somewhat jarring to late twentieth century sensibilities: "This envoy of Sophia walks her paths of justice and peace and invites others to do likewise. Like her, he delights being with people."114 But it is always inclusive: "Scandalous though it may appear, his inclusive table community widens the circle of the friends of God to include the most devalued people, even tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes."115 Among those he befriends are women, a scriptural fact long neglected by the later tradition, but considered by Johnson to be critical in discerning the message which "Jesus-Sophia" brings. Johnson shows how the ministry of Jesus "unleashes a hope, a vision, and a present experience of liberating relationships that women, the lowest of low, savor as the antithesis of patriarchy."116 This view has been offered by other feminist theologians whose exegetical work shows an 'inclusive'

113"Redeeming the Name of Christ," 122.
114Johnson, "Redeeming the Name of Christ," 123.
115Ibid.
116Ibid., 123.
Jesus. Schneiders identifies some of the liberating moments in the gospels in the following examples:

Jesus chose women as disciples and apostles (Jn 4:4-42; 20: 11-18), taught women as He taught men (Lk 10:39), performed miracles for women (Lk 7:11-17, Mtt 9:18-26), praised their faith (Mtt 9:22) and accepted their love (Lk 7:37-38). These activities reach their full revelatory significance when considered in the light of the sexist culture in which Jesus lived, a culture which "neither permitted nor rewarded egalitarian relations." According to Schneiders, Jesus called for and inaugurated a new order in human relations. This idea in some ways answers the question of why Christ was revealed as a man and not a woman, for it was precisely as a male that He was able to judge the status quo. A female's critique of society would not have been considered relevant in the context of first century Palestine, just as the women's witness to the Resurrection was not considered valid by the male disciples and therefore disbelieved. When considered from this perspective, the sex of Jesus is actually a boon to furthering the feminist agenda of mutuality and egalitarianism as noted here by Diane Tennis:

(While) maleness is explicitly a block to redemption, it is implicitly a real advantage. For who but a man could not only teach but also model in his being revolutionary relationships by becoming a servant? Only a man could

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118 Schneiders, *Women and the Word*, 60.

119 Ibid.
credibly give up power because only men had power. Jesus' maleness is not a weakness in the story; it is its strongest point.¹²⁰

In this configuration, Jesus becomes a liberating force against patriarchy rather than a model for it. The power imbalance which has been pronounced and practiced in His name is replaced with new possibilities of relationships of an egalitarian order between the sexes. In effect, His words and actions vis-à-vis women break the patriarchal mold, and become a liberating model, a new way of being-in-relation, for those in power and authority (i.e. men).

It sounds startling, but the prostitute will enter the kingdom of heaven before the Pharisees, tables are turned as the male religious leaders received no priority over a woman who engages in prostitution, but the opposite happens. Jesus' preaching of the reign of God is a powerful liberating force.¹²¹

Indeed, it has been suggested that the 'problem' is not that Jesus was male, but that more males are not like Jesus.¹²² If this were indeed the case, traditional christology would not have to be deconstructed from male interest turned ideology which has seemingly poisoned its very message.

According to Johnson, "Jesus-Sophia" has the power to transform the Christ symbol. The "fluidity of gender symbolism in Jesus-Sophia"¹²³ immediately breaks down the barriers to women which christology has

¹²¹Johnson, Consider Jesus, 108.
¹²²Johnson, She Who Is, 167.
traditionally held in place. For example, "Jesus Sophia" renders obsolete what hither-to has been seen as the "necessary ontological connection" between the male human being and a male god. "This foundational metaphor relieves the monopoly of Logos and the Son and destabilizes the patriarchal imagination." Jesus, even in his human maleness can be thought to be revelatory of God's grace imaged as a female. This has the effect of transforming Daly's quote ("If God is male, then the male is God") into: If God can be female, then the female can be God. In a word, females can achieve full humanity in "Jesus-Sophia" because in her they are deemed representative of the imago Christi. "Divine Sophia incarnate in Jesus . . . can be truly represented by any human being called in her spirit, women as well as men." This point speaks to the important distinction between the historical Jesus and the eschatological Christ. Only the latter divine manifestation can be realized by those in the Christian community and the particular insight of Christian feminists is that this is an option for women as well as men. Thus for Schneiders,

The Christ is not exclusively the glorified Jesus, but the glorified Jesus animating his body which is the Church. Christ said to Paul "Why do you persecute me?" because the literal fact is that the Christ is composed of all the baptized. This means that Christ, in contrast to Jesus, is not male, or more exactly not exclusively male. Christ is quite accurately portrayed as black, old, Gentile, female Asian or Polish. Christ is inclusively all the baptised.

124 Radford Ruether's phrase in Sexism and God-Talk, 117.
125 Johnson, She Who Is, 129.
126 Ibid., 165.
Simply stated, women are called to be equal partners with men in the life of Christ.

While the inclusiveness of Jesus is a theological truth on which the church is based, it is carefully guarded and prioritized by feminist theology in general and Johnson's "Jesus-Sophia" in particular, for His story shows that He signifies "love, grace, and shalom for everyone equally, and for the outcast, including women most of all."\(^{127}\)

Using the Wisdom tradition as a filter and focus for the gospel story adds new categories for understanding the meaning of Jesus' earthly mission: friendship, connectedness, compassion are the basis of his human relationships. The dualistic pattern of relating is replaced with a wholism, in which all are valued regardless of personal attributes (over which one has no control, anyway). As such Johnson is able to show that Sophia's "characteristic gracious goodness, life-giving creativity, and passion for justice" in Jesus provide for right relations with humans and all of creation. In its rejection of hierarchy in all its forms, this christology is instructive for other areas including justice for the poor, inter-religious dialogue and ecological care of the earth.\(^{128}\) Johnson's christology, therefore, has the potential to overturn the patterns of domination/subordination which has defined christology in the past. Thus it has shown that the core symbol of the Son, does not have the effect of reinforcing and legitimating male power and female submission. This places christology above and beyond sexism. In fact, Johnson shows that christology can be liberating at its roots when it operates out of an egalitarian framework. By truly including women in its very definition, it empowers them.

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\(^{127}\) Ibid., 161.

\(^{128}\) Johnson, "Redeeming the Name of Christ," 132.
The Disappearance of Wisdom Christology

O Come thou Wisdom from on high,
who orders all things mightily;
to us the path of knowledge show,
and teach us in her ways to go.
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

These lines represent one of the last vestiges of Wisdom in Christian consciousness: the second verse of the Advent hymn "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." It is retrieved annually in the weeks prior to Christmas.\(^{129}\)

The short life of Wisdom christology and its subsequent disappearance in the life of the church demands an answer. If this symbol is representative of a truly inclusive christology, then why has it not remained in the centre of Christian tradition? Johnson would sooner ask, why was it quashed? In fact, she shows how over time the female Sophia was replaced with the male Logos. Its decline began during the writing of the Gospel of John, under the dualistic thinking of Philo (late first century) and continued even into the modern era with Edward Schweitzer and W. Knox, who both supported the belief that Jesus was better represented by a male symbol than a female one.\(^{130}\) For Johnson, the suppression of Jesus-Sophia can be explained as a result of the increasing sexism in the Christian communities.

The above is but one of a number of possible explanations for the disappearance of "Jesus-Sophia" from traditional christology. Its presupposition is the feminist insight that history can be understood in

\(^{129}\)In *The Catholic Book of Worship II* this verse is omitted. (Ottawa: C.C.C.B., 1980)
terms of "winners" and "losers": that the idea, theory or interpretation which has the most political weight behind it, assumes a dominant position vis-à-vis others with which it is competing at any given time. It is "survival of the fittest" in theological terms. According to feminist theory then, the fact that Wisdom Christology did not prevail is not surprising. Because it did not support the firmly established patriarchal and androcentric culture which has virtually always dominated the Western world, it lost its hold. "Jesus-Sophia" might be understood as a pure revelatory moment, a unique part of the Christian past, not unlike Schüessler Fiorenza's "discipleship of equals." Although largely ignored or unnoticed, it survives in the memory of the church, a single precedent which was never given opportunity to be a lived reality. It survives as a fact of the early church, ready to be revived as a symbol of reform.
Chapter Three
Implications of Johnson's Christology for Church Renewal

The Importance of Renewal for the Church
This final chapter considers the church's response to women's christological concerns and the implications of Johnson's christology in the light of its own mandate for renewal.

Radford Ruether's question raised in the Introduction of this paper, "Can a male saviour save women?" has had no apparent effect on the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church which has always held as dogma that both men and women are equally saved by Jesus Christ. Seemingly, this dogma, by virtue of the fact that it is dogma - enshrined both in scripture (i.e. Gal. 3:28) and tradition (the Council of Chalcedon, 451 C.E. and through the sacrament of Baptism) - need not be justified, apologized for nor defended. Because any serious challenge of dogma implies misinterpretation at best and heresy at worst, the question is deemed a priori invalid and therefore unworthy for discussion. In my opinion, however, the mere formulation and persistence of the question is a portent to the church that its christology is less inclusive than it claims to be and on that basis warrants discussion, at the very least.

By extension, the church's reluctance to engage the concerns of the women's movement is noteworthy when contrasted with recent sweeping changes in its position on non-Christians, the Jews, and non-Roman Catholic churches. In matters of salvation, the church has historically emphasized its own authority in regard to the salvific will of God, owing largely to the influence of the third-century axiom Extra ecclesiam nulla solas ("outside the church, there is no salvation"), which was given later expression by
medieval popes and councils (Fourth Lateran Council, 1215; Pope Boniface VIII's "Unam Sanctum," 1302; Council of Florence, 1402). The Vatican II document Nostra Aetate reversed the emphasis: declaring that God's salvation extends to all, regardless of church membership. Further, individual religions were singled out and praised as containing that which is "true and holy" in and of themselves. For this reason, the church encouraged dialogue and collaboration with them. This conciliar act is considered a watershed event in its positive attitudes toward these religions, encouraging Catholic participation in inter-religious dialogue. It also represents a moment of self-criticism and subsequent change in the interpretation of doctrine. The church's initiative in nuancing its position on the salvation of non-Christians suggests that there is also potential for further development of its soteriology, one which considers the exclusion experienced by some of its female members.

Furthermore, the church has shown itself capable of confronting and repudiating its past tendencies toward discrimination, in the example of the Jewish people. The two thousand year old problem, namely the relationship between the church and the Jews, was also on Nostra Aetate's agenda, the events of World War II no doubt being a contributing factor. In fact the document's ostensible intention was to correct past errors it made regarding the Jewish people and to remove from Catholic teaching that which could cause hatred and contempt. In it, the church expresses its good will, acknowledging its indebtedness to its Jewish ancestors in the faith and recommending mutual understanding and respect between the two religions which share a "spiritual patrimony." It is for these reasons that the fourth

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chapter of *Nostra Aetate*, has been referred to as an "examination of the Christian conscience." Not surprisingly, *Nostra Aetate* is considered to be a milestone in the history of the relations between the church and the Jewish people, based on the fact that Vatican II is the first Ecumenical council to have considered the two thousand year old problem in such an explicit manner. It offers a hopeful sign that it is only a matter of time before the church recognizes its tendencies toward sexual discrimination. At that time, it will reject sexism in itself as vehemently as it has rejected its own anti-semitism.

Vatican II was also the setting of a change in church teaching with respect to Christian churches. Prior to the council, Roman Catholicism taught that it was the one, true church of Christ; Protestantism and Anglicanism were considered heretical. Thus when the church dedicated eight days of prayer for church unity, as it typically does for one week in January, (pre-Vatican II) prayers were offered for these other churches to "return" to the Mother church, i.e. the Roman one. In the conciliar document, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, however, the church broke with tradition in a dramatic way, by stating that the way to Christian unity was in a common movement toward Christ. Vatican II thus marked the beginning of a new era for the Roman church in its relations with all Christian churches, by including itself in the ecumenical movement which had already been in progress for over fifty years. The Decree took a necessary step toward building bridges by placing the discussion in the context of church renewal and personal conversion: "There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a

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Indeed in this decree the church set a precedent for any future divisiveness which might threaten its unity, such as may be occasioned by the Christian feminist movement, in its acknowledgment that "men of both sides were to blame" and in its call for common penitence, mutual forgiveness and prayer.

Although the women's movement is contemporary with globalism, the post-holocaust church and ecumenism, it has not received the attention and concern granted to these other world-wide movements. Clearly, time is a qualifying factor to consider in making the above comparisons of reform. The 'woman question' is a recent one for the church, compared to its centuries-old struggles with these outside groups: the church's encounter with non-Christian religions was stimulated during the "Age of Discovery" (i.e. the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries); Jewish-Christian relations are as old as the church itself; and the year 1054 C.E. marks the division of the Eastern churches from Western Christianity, followed by further division of Western Christianity at the time of the Reformation. Comparatively, the origin of the women's movement is contemporary with the struggle for the emancipation of black slaves in the United States in the mid to late nineteenth century, while the 'second wave' of feminism, demanding equal rights for women, is only thirty years old. An argument against such a comparison can reasonably be made based on the fact that simply not enough time has passed for the church to take a strong position on the demands of the twentieth century feminist movement.

Otherwise, the church's prioritizing of special interest groups is a possible indication that the church is threatened by the women's movement within its ranks. This would explain its avoidance of Radford Ruether's question thus far. In any event, the example of reform the church set for
itself in dealing with the challenges of globalism, the Jewish-Christian problem and ecumenism will prove instructive when it does finally confront the question of Christian feminists, whether by choice or of necessity.

Over thirty years ago, in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963) Pope John XXIII, identified the emergence of women into public life as one of the "signs of the times." Hereupon, spreading the Gospel in the remainder of the twentieth century would entail attending to the issues and concerns of women as a group. The encyclical provided support for dialogue with the women's movement. A subsequent development of Pope John XXIII's vision was Vatican II's pronouncement on sexual discrimination, in the document *Gaudium et Spes*. Although it is couched under the rubric of the essential equality of all persons and listed as only one of other forms of discrimination, nevertheless Vatican II unequivocally states that sexual discrimination is "contrary to God's intent" (par. 29) and, therefore, sinful in the eyes of the church. The document specifically notes as examples of discrimination, the rights and freedoms typically enjoyed by men which are at times and in various cultures denied to women, such as the choice of a spouse or vocation or the pursuit of education or cultural benefits.

Notwithstanding the obvious benefits to women which such a pronouncement carries, the church has been criticized by Christian feminists for maintaining a double standard on sexual discrimination - directing the message at society while exempting itself from it. Thus Mary Daly's comment in 1968:

At this point in history the church is in the somewhat comical position of applauding women's legal, professional

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and political emancipation in secular society while keeping them in the basement of its own edifice.\textsuperscript{135}

Pope John Paul II has arguably contributed further to the ambiguity of the church's attitude toward women by simultaneously encouraging the social, political and economic equality of women while reaffirming both the traditional position of the complimentarity of the sexes (\textit{Mulieris Dignitatem}, 1988) and the 1976 declaration of the inadmissibility of women to the priesthood (\textit{Ordinatio Sacerdotalis}, 1994). For Christian feminists, the message of these apostolic letters represents an explicit reinforcement by the Vatican of an already narrow and limiting view of women and their role in the church. Accordingly, Andree Fries, president of the U.S. Leadership Conference for Women Religious, has called for a more pro-active position on women's issues from the Vatican:

\begin{quote}
We have now a growing collection of church documents affirming the dignity, equality and giftedness of women. However, these documents offer no greater clarity or specificity about what steps the church will take to afford women roles that reflect that dignity.\textsuperscript{136}
\end{quote}

If Fries' comment is taken as representative of Christian feminists' opinion in general, then it points to a felt need for greater recognition of the full humanity of women in the church today, a recognition which women are increasingly enjoying in Western societies. As a group, women have made far greater gains socially, economically, and politically in the larger world, than they have in the church. A woman can theoretically assume the

\textsuperscript{135}Daly, \textit{The Church and the Second Sex}, 202-203.

highest position in society (president of a country), but their leadership in the church is restricted. The growing disparity of opportunities for women inside and outside the church can only be problematic for future generations of Christian females who have come to expect a certain equity with their male counterparts.

At one time, the church was the only vehicle open to women who wanted to use their talents beyond the home. The world was closed to them. Now the reverse is true. The world is opening and the church remains calcified in the traditional child/church/kitchen roles assigned to women.\(^\text{137}\)

One expects the church to be the moral watchdog for societal evils, a prophetic voice, as it surely is in the cases of poverty, euthanasia, abortion, and war. However, as pointed out by Daly, the church has thus far lagged behind its secular counterpart in promoting the equality of women to men. It has become a defender rather than a challenger of women's oppression.

The evolving notion of sin in the Catholic church at least allows for the possibility that the church is sexist. Although examples of both personal and social sin are found in the scriptures, theological teaching and religious practice in the past focused on personal sin almost to the exclusion of social sin. The latter refers to the evil produced by social structures which cause various forms of oppression and exploitation. A defining characteristic is that it is committed not by deliberation and free choice, but out of blindness, that is, as a result of being part of a sinful world. Social sin is therefore sin proper to a collective (a group, an institution, a people), rather than an individual. There is no personal culpability in social sin until individuals are

\(^{137}\text{Neu and Riley, Women Moving Church (Conference: Centre for Concern, Washington, D.C., 1988), 3.}\)
conscientized to their collusion in perpetuating a harmful system. The charge of a sexist church, therefore, falls not on individual priests, bishops and cardinals, but rather on the institution itself, left 'unchecked', by generations of like-minded clerics. In retrospect, the privatization of sin in the tradition has had a detrimental effect on the church because it led to a denial that the church as church could sin. It was above scrutiny. The recent acknowledgment of the existence of social sin, however, makes the church vulnerable to sin and therefore subject to critique.

According to church law and the theological category into which this charge falls, it is theoretically possible for the church to be guilty of sexism. Because the church's teaching on women is not a matter of faith and morals per se, it is beyond the scope of an infallible pronouncement. Hence it qualifies as an area in which the church can conceivably err. Infallible pronouncements made under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are irreformable, while church teaching in other areas is subject to challenge and change, as seen in the above examples of its relations with the Jewish people, Christian religions and non-Christians. Ultimately, the church is just as accountable to reform itself with respect to its position on women (if culpability can be established), as it was/is with these outside groups.

Taken together, the reality of social sin and the non-infallible nature of the church's teaching on women suggest that sexism is not an unrealistic accusation. The magisterium would be culpable of social sin (i.e. sexism) once it becomes convinced that its teaching and practices have been discriminatory of women. At that time, its only option would be to reform itself.

_Ecclesia semper reformanda._ As a divine-human institution, the church knows itself to be capable of mistakes, sin and evil. The ongoing task
of reform is to move the visible church ever-closer to the Kingdom of God on earth, the kingdom which is "already, but not yet." Indeed reform has always been basic to the church, from the time of the early Christian movement to Vatican II. St. Paul and Pope John XXIII, whose lives span the history of the church knew of its importance: the apostle wrote to the Romans (Rom 12:1) and Ephesians (Eph 4:23) about the need for spiritual renewal at the personal level; John XXIII, concerned with the stultifying institutional structures, called for aggiornamento, an updating. In-between these bracketing moments there have been numerous reform movements, most of whose agents have not been members of the official magisterium, (e.g. the mendicant reforms and the Reformation), the Gregorian reform and Vatican II being notable exceptions.

The church's most recent call to renewal is the Vatican II document *Unitatis Redintegratio* (par. 6) where the call was clear and direct. Indeed it has been referred to as a "clarion call" to the church to reform itself.\(^{138}\) It reads as follows:

Christ summons the Church as she goes on her pilgrim way to that continual reform of which she always has need, insofar as she is an institution of men here on earth. Therefore if the influence of events or of the times have led to deficiencies in moral conduct, in Church discipline or even in the formulation of doctrine . . . These should be appropriately rectified at the proper moment.\(^{139}\)

The message is clearly directed to the church as a people or a social system, yet neither does this passage nor any other of the conciliar documents give


\(^{139}\)Walter Abbott, 247.
specifics of how this is to be realized in church praxis. Thus, the question: How does the church reform itself? And more specifically for the purposes of this paper: How does the church reform its sexist tendencies? Perhaps one answer lies in the council's principal image of the church as "the people of God" and its call to an increased role of the laity, over half of whom are women.

Because the magisterium is composed of an all-male hierarchy, it is an unlikely candidate for initiating self-reform in its position on women and their role in the church. The lack of a female presence potentially hinders its objectivity where a judgment on women's issues is required. Indeed, the very human tendency of protecting one's self-interest may be fueling its motivation even at an unconscious level, with less than favorable results for those left unrepresented in the magisterium. It was established earlier that the church is fully capable of the social sin of sexism, however, owing to a blindness which is the nature of the sin, admission of guilt and self-reform in the near future at least, is improbable. The magisterium consists of men only; the problem of sexism is experienced primarily by women. It therefore falls to those outside the magisterium, who love the Gospel but are scandalized by the church, to effect change, or at least speed the process toward reform. Given that its very raison d'être is the equality of the sexes, the Christian feminist movement has the singular advantage of being able to serve as a corrective to the inherent male bias in the church. It provides the missing female piece in a theology which has tended to over-value the male.

Karl Rahner recognized the role of women in effecting change in the church when almost twenty-five years ago he argued that it is the task "of the church of women," and "not the church of officialdom" to provide "the
concrete model, the constitutive pattern of the life which is necessary for
women in the present age." For in so doing, they will be supported by
"the message of the Gospel and the power of the Spirit. More recently,
Francine Cardman has noted the potential of women to move the church to
reform in the following comment:

One way to understand the significance of the current
women's movement is to see it as a call to the church -
often from outside it - to embody in its own life the
principles of equality and justice enunciated at the
(Second Vatican) council.

Feminism, therefore, is a potentially useful and timely resource for the
church's ongoing program for reform. The criticism which Christian
feminists have of the church is that it has not, throughout its history,
promoted the full humanity of women. Generally speaking, the church
needs to reform itself in this regard.

Johnson's Christology as a Resource for Renewal

According to Johnson, the church as been profoundly ambiguous for
women's well-being - simultaneously a source of their oppression and their
spiritual sustenance. Despite the exclusion and subordination suffered by
generations of fore-sisters and fore-mothers these same women have been
sustained by the ineffability of the divine, which even Johnson can only

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140Karl Rahner, "The Position of A Woman in the New Situation in which the
Church finds Herself," Theological Investigations, v. 8, trans. David Bourke
141Ibid.
142Francine Cardman, "The Church Would Look Foolish Without Them": Women
and Laity Since Vatican II, in Vatican II: Open Questions and New Horizons,
121.
143Johnson, She Who Is, 9.
describe as the "something more" of Christianity. In a church where "voice, vote and visibility belong by law only to men,"144 the contribution of women has been missed in the defining of doctrine and the shaping of tradition but the richness of feminist theology shows women's capability of formulating their own experiences of God as members of the church. Indeed, the conciliar document Die Verbum unwittingly prophesied the Christian feminist movement with the following words:

For there is growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers who treasure these things in their hearts (Lk 2:19, 51), through the intimate understanding of spiritual things they experience.145

The message, therefore, is an encouraging one for women who are alienated by the church yet have a desire to speak their own truth. In fact, women have been contemplating and studying things spiritual, and growing in their understanding of them. Moreover, they have been gathering and theologizing in base communities and small circles of Womanchurch at least since their entry into theological schools only several decades ago.146

According to Johnson, "women are growing the church into a new moment of the living tradition."147 On the theme of women expanding the theological discourse, Ellen Leonard's image of "women birthing wisdom"148 is a fitting one for Johnson's personal contribution to the living tradition.

144 Ibid.
145 Die Verbum 8; Quoted by Johnson, She Who Is, 8.
146 Women were first admitted into major theological schools in North America, such as the Harvard Divinity School in the mid-1950s. Admission to Catholic seminaries generally took place in the 1970's.
147 She Who Is, 8.
148 In conversation, December, 1986.
In the Introduction of this paper, it was noted that the task of reform is to move the church from an imperfect (sinful) state toward a less imperfect (sinless) one. (One must nevertheless respect the fact that conduct, discipline and doctrine will never arrive at irreformable perfection.149) In my opinion, this is the essence of Johnson's theology for she has shown that church renewal requires a critical retrieval of the tradition. She believes that doctrines contain the truths of the faith and, ultimately, by constantly returning to these, the church has the possibility to purify itself.

Johnson proves herself a resource for the church by citing its teachings in all aspects of her theology, both in critique and reconstruction. Her critique of both the church and its christological tradition as sexist, is a serious charge and not to be dismissed lightly, if the church is to be faithful to its own truths. On this point she quotes Anselm in dialogue with his questioner Bobo: *nondum considerasti quanti ponderis set peccatum*, "you have not yet weighed the gravity of the sin."150 Indeed, her charge of sexism is that "it affronts God by defacing the beloved creature created in the image of God."151 Here she returns to both Hebrew and Christian scripture to make her point - it is a "precise and pervasive breaking of the basic commandment "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Lv 19:18 Mtt 22:39). Hardly a 'women's issue,' sexism affects all of humanity by prescribing roles and characteristics which are deemed appropriate for both sexes.

151Ibid., 9
Moreover, a sign to Johnson that christology is in need of renewal is that it has distorted Christianity at its source i.e. in its (self-interested) treatment of the doctrines of (i) God, (ii) Christian anthropology and (iii) soteriology. According to Johnson, christology has so emphasized the maleness of Christ that it has overshadowed the belief that (i) the female as well as the male can image God (ii) both women and men are made in the image of God and are equally included in the community of Christ according to the salvific truths of the scriptures and (iii) both women and men are saved by the humanity which Christ took on according to the Council of Chalcedon. On the basis of the disparities between its teaching and practice, Johnson has charged the church with both blasphemy and heresy. However, her reconstructive work shows that the church is capable of reversing the status quo. Christology, as well as the doctrines of the God, Christian anthropology and soteriology, can more truly reflect their original inclusive vision once the emphasis on Jesus' maleness has been put into perspective - as one of His many human characteristics.

Theology will have come of age when the particularity that is highlighted is not Jesus' historical sex but the scandal of his option for the poor and marginalized in the spirit of His compassionate, liberating Sophia-God. That is the scandal of particularity that really matters, aimed as it is toward the creation of a new order in wholeness in justice.\(^\text{152}\)

In order to help the church realize this vision, Johnson once again refers to what she considers to be the origin of its christological doctrine. By definition, "Jesus-Sophia" defies the all-male label which the Christ symbol has traditionally assumed, and further explodes the patriarchal and

\(^{152}\text{Ibid. , 167.}\)
androcentric traditions which the church has developed in his name. "Jesus-Sophia" represents mutuality and egalitarianism and as such can positively influence the church's consciousness and social order.

**Call to Conversion**

Owing to their sexual difference from Jesus and the emphasis given to Jesus' sex, women can experience the male christological symbol as a barrier to their dignity, faith and salvation. This situation is conceivably lost on men because their physical resemblance to Jesus blinds them to the importance of the question for women. However, this fact does not relieve the church of its responsibility to discern whether its christology is problematic for women.

Renewal, as a process, requires that the magisterium be vigilant and discerning. Only if the church is first aware of the "signs of the times," however, is it able to respond and dialogue with the various movements which are manifest in society at any given time. Frederick Crowe's comment that the "teaching church" has been stressed at the expense of the "listening church" applies well to its position on women:

> We are like a bird that has one wing hugely overdeveloped, while the other, though lack of exercise has been allowed to atrophy: we can hardly take flight on wings of eagles in that condition.\(^\text{153}\)

A willingness to listen to the concerns of its female members is required for the church to follow the advice of Pope John XXIII, namely to engage itself with the women's movement in its midst. A corollary to this initiative

would be an attitude of openness which meets alternative voices and new questions in a posture of humility. A lack of these qualities leads to scotosis, "a hardening of the mind against unwanted wisdom". Johnson notes that "any group is prone to have a blind spot for insight that would reveal its well-being to be excessive or founded on distorted assumptions." This has been Johnson's experience as a feminist theologian: "It is not uncommon for those whose certitudes and securities may be threatened by women's emerging theological speech to relegate it to the periphery." This is made obvious in a fairly blatant contradiction between the church's theory and praxis of pluralism. In his multi-volume *Sacramentum Mundi*, Rahner makes the following statement:

> There have always been "schools" of theology upholding contradictory opinions, starting from different assumptions and developing different patterns of thought. A pluralism of this type in theology is not new and it has always been a principle in the Church that it should be either tolerated or expressly approved of.

Here, Rahner represents the church as maintaining an attitude of openness and approval toward the variety of theologies which exist therein. One would, therefore, expect encouragement or at least toleration for its most recently developed school: feminist theology. And yet, there is a strong lack of appreciation for the two-decades of contribution from Christian feminist theologians in the mostly male academy. According to New Testament scholar Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, her continuing attempt to

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155 Ibid.
"write women back into the early church," has been largely marginalized or trivialized as "a women's issue" by male colleagues.\textsuperscript{158} Even as late as 1994, she made the point that "usually anyone identified with the 'feminist cause' is ideologically suspect and professionally discredited."\textsuperscript{159}

In Johnson's opinion, "scotosis" describes the church's position with regard to the women's movement, testified to by what I suggested above was an avoidance of the question posed by Radford Ruether twenty years ago. Radford Ruether's question, "Can a male savior save women?" need not be interpreted as a misinterpretation of christological doctrine, as a heresy or as a feminist threat. It is a gift, as all new questions are. However, due to blindness or pride, long-held tradition or lack of time, the church has not yet been able to receive or even to acknowledge the gift/question.

Feminist christology has made a strong case for a sexist church. Elizabeth Johnson has shown how this expresses itself in traditional christology. What is being asked of the church is that it reflect seriously on the truth of Johnson's critique with a view to righting any wrongs which its christology may have been the cause of and, further, to consider her retrieval of the church's own neglected tradition as a necessary step of purification. These moves will allow its christology to be inclusive of women in a way which could never have been anticipated in a patriarchal age. What is being asked of the church is a conversion from the sin of sexism. The Christian feminist movement is therefore a potential blessing on the church today. Anne Carr refers to it as "a powerful grace in its call for the church to be faithful to its own transcendent truth, to the deepest meaning of its symbol, its great tradition, and the new experience of over half of its

\textsuperscript{158}Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, \textit{In Memory of Her}, xvi.
\textsuperscript{159}Ibid.
faithful members."\textsuperscript{160} However, gifts, even divine gifts, can always be unacknowledged or refused.

**Conclusion**

The fact that Christology must be innovative in a new situation does not derive solely from the feelings of dissatisfaction to which an outmoded Christology gives rise. It derives from the very object of Christological study: Christ. If Christ could fail to be of novel interest in a novel situation, then he would not be Christ. Thus the reformulation of Christology in a new situation is nothing else but an expression of faith in the universal significance of Christ.\textsuperscript{161}

Every new question about Christ represents a new possibility for the church to learn more about this mysterious, ancient and inexhaustible symbol which is at the centre of the Christian church, and in turn, more about its earthly mission. Feminism is a relatively new movement in the history of the world and, therefore, holds much potential for the church. The church understands itself to be an imperfect institution in an imperfect world, able to sustain itself only through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Could the Holy Spirit be speaking through the Christian feminist movement? Could it be a prophetic voice, as it were, pointing to the sin of sexism, demanding a change of heart? The opportunity presents itself in the question "Can a male savior save women?" Johnson shows how christology can be more inclusive by responding to, rather than resisting, the question of feminist christology. In a word, the question and Elizabeth Johnson’s response have the potential

\textsuperscript{160} Anne Carr, *Transforming Grace*, 1-2.

to move the church forward in its ongoing christological task, to know, love and serve Christ better.
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