

**A Comparison of the Feminist Theological Positions of Mary
Baker Eddy and Rosemary Radford Ruether**

By

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Introduction

There is not the slightest doubt that women belong to the people of God and the human race as much as men and are not another species or dissimilar race.

Christine de Pizan¹

The simplest and most succinct definition of feminism could be: “The advocacy of the rights of women” (Bullock and Trombley 314). Christian feminism encompasses this definition but within the context of the Church and its theology or so-called “Christian Theology,” which is really “male theology”:

“Christian Theology” incorporates only the lived experience of relationships to God of Christian men. Its authors may intend their theology to be in service of the faith-life of both male and female Christians, but women’s experiences of God-relatedness are excluded. As a result, prior to feminist awareness of the masculinization of theology, women’s unique Christian faith perspectives were absent from Christian theology. (Clifford 29)

However, it is the Christian woman theologian’s charge to explore the woman’s perspective on faith in God revealed in Jesus Christ from the perspective of women’s experience and understanding (Clifford 29)

The discussion of Christian feminism requires yet another definition. We must explain what we mean by the “Church.” Here I am not referring to any single denomination, but to the Christian Church in general, to those churches that hold Jesus to

¹ Christine de Pizan, The Book of the City of Ladies, original ed. 1405. Jeffery Richards (New York: Persea Books, 1982) 187.

be the Son of God. Jesus himself founded the Church, but did not define its structure other than as the great law of “love”: Love one and another as I have loved you (John 15:12).”²

Feminism as a word was coined over the last one hundred years. The rise of the middle class in Western nations during the nineteenth century led to a reassessment of basic social institutions. Most women of the nineteenth century were not educated beyond the simple ability to read, write, and to do some elementary sums. But education, however meager, is a potent tool, and women were quick to see the opportunity it brought to their lives. Between the 1840s and 1850s many women dared to enter university and the professions as well.

The moral fervor following fast on the heels of the Evangelical movement in England made the moral obligation of faith a tool for social change. Women, who moved about in eager and complimentary groups, began to raise voices often from a Church setting to proclaim the moral issues they thought were in need of change and redemption.

In the nineteenth Century, religion provided a context in which women could organize and from which feminist impulses could be generated. Before there were women’s clubs, women’s schools, and women’s rights groups, women’s mobilization began in the churches. (Wessinger 89)

The World’s Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840 inspired Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott to call a meeting on women’s rights in the United States. That meeting came to be known as the landmark Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. The Church was a natural place for women for it was one of the few places women could come together as a group. In the sanctuary of the Church, woman felt empowered to

² Oxford Bible, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994.

justify much of what they dared to think, and they found the moral power to protest abuse and misrepresentation.

Christian feminism came of age in 1895. *The Women's Bible* (1895) was published as a critical examination of the Bible's teachings about women. The author, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, was one the major philosophers of the suffragette movement in the United States. She understood the Christian Bible as the source of the attitude toward women that they were inferior to men thus, critical reading of scripture served as the first place to understand the oppression of women in Western culture. As we are well aware today, feminists who have invaded the patriarchal realm of theology and Church have asked the ultimate question: are women equal in the eyes of God? If they are, what must be changed or challenged to allow them a fair participation in the clergy, theology, and the ministry of Church?

This thesis looks at how two different people deal with those questions. Although they are separated by 100 years, Ruether the theologian and Eddy the Church founder espouse similar feminist principles. While Eddy did not strive for a "feminist" Church, she expressed important and influential ideas about religion that created a new dimension in the Church with women as leaders and as healers. The field of professional healing remained almost exclusively male, Elizabeth Blackwell's pioneering medical degree in 1849 notwithstanding. It was Mrs. Eddy's genius to take the natural healing ability of women, combine it with the desires of many women for independence and bring it to a religious setting with which all women of the time felt comfortable.

As I hope to demonstrate, feminism for Eddy was interwoven with the prevalent ideas of her times: scientific discovery and the coming of a new age of medicine and

psychology. She bound them into a religion that attracted a disproportionate number of women, as it does today. We will explore the feminist principles at work in her writings and in her church structure that allowed women a new path to equality.

Ruether is one of the current leaders of women in the Church. She is a theologian, well trained in the patristic tradition, using this knowledge to expose the androcentrism in the Church. Although Ruether was raised a Roman Catholic, she has bravely exposed many of the Church's teachings on "women in the Church" and demanded new interpretations. But her most outstanding virtue may be the challenges she makes to the current Church as an institution where women and ministry are concerned.

This thesis consists of six chapters: Chapter One introduces Mary Baker Eddy and Rosemary Ruether within a context of feminist history. Chapter Two looks at the establishment of Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science Church within the context of her era, and Chapter Three examines whether Mary Baker Eddy is a feminist. Chapter Four places Rosemary Radford Ruether in her historical context, and Chapter Five discusses her as a Christian Feminist. In conclusion, Chapter Six will compare Ruether and Eddy and evaluate their contribution to feminist theology today.

The challenge inherent in this thesis is to try to reconcile the feminisms of these two different women from different times. Eddy, we will see, hails from the first wave of feminism that developed out of the suffrage movement of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. Ruether, however, belongs to the second wave of feminism that began with the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. This feminism occurs during a time when women are better educated than in previous times and they are joining the work force in record numbers. Catholic feminism also belongs to these secular

times but, in addition, it is a response to the Civil Rights and the Vietnam War. Initially, Catholic feminism received its permission to question the status quo from the Vatican II Council, and, in the end, this same Council brought it to an abrupt close. This second wave of feminism of the 1960s crosses into what is currently called Post-feminist times. Thus, a strong historical presentation will locate these women in the theological era they represent.

Chapter One: The Worlds of Mary Baker Eddy and Rosemary Radford Ruether

One who holds the view that women are less valued than men in societies that categorize men and women into differing cultural or economic spheres. A feminist also insists that these inequalities are not fixed or determined, but that women themselves can change the social economic and political order through collective action. Thus the feminist purpose is an active desire to change women's position in society (Definition of a feminist).
Gamble 230

The purpose of this chapter is to place Mary Baker Eddy and Rosemary Radford Ruether within their historical context. Mary Baker Eddy lived from 1821 to 1910 during the era of the first wave of feminism in the United States, when women were engaged in the battle to obtain the vote. She herself was not engaged in political feminist agitation, but she led her own feminist battles within the context of the Christian Science Church. Although Eddy was the very rare female founder of an international church, Christian Science, she was a contradictory figure in the history of feminism. On the one hand, she insisted on "equality" between the sexes. On the other, she was highly authoritarian and controlling. Her insistence on the equality of the sexes in her church appears in the by-laws that she set down in her *Church Manual* (89th edition); however, in practice, her authoritarian rule was absolute and allowed no rivals. Although she was aware of the women's movement in politics, Mary Baker Eddy did not bring issues like the vote, equality before the law, and education into the life of her Church. The Church she founded did not strike a revolutionary religious posture for feminism.

Rosemary Ruether is a Roman Catholic theologian who received a PhD in the classics and patristics from Claremont Graduate School in Claremont California in 1965,

a year of social upheaval in the United States. The Civil Rights movement, the war in Vietnam, and the women's movement, challenged the social status quo. Three years before Rosemary Ruether's graduation Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*³ was an instant best seller. In the same year, 1962, the Roman Catholic Church began Vatican II in the Basilica of St. Peter's in Rome. Vatican II closed in 1965, just as Rosemary Ruether was emerging as a woman theologian with a newly minted Ph.D. Ruether's view of the Church during her academic life paralleled much of the social unrest. Her view was canvassed in her first book, appropriately called *The Church against Itself: An Inquiry into the Conditions of Historical Existence for the Eschatological Community*.

The Roman Catholic Church is one of the oldest surviving institutions. However, by the 1960s it had become lax or autocratic in the way it dealt with new challenges of the time and with the influence of science on the modern psyche. It needed renewal, if not a purge. This was understood, but it came all at once. The laity and the established academic community of the American Church were unprepared for the changes. Pope John XXIII threw open the windows to make way for the new and to renew that which need to be renamed, reclaimed and vibrant to Jesus Christ in the modern world.

Ruether came to the academic scene when the secular culture was also going through rapid changes. Women demanded equality. The Civil Rights movement had made the concept of "oppression" a reality in everyday life in America. The war in Vietnam came into American homes with television showing Americans scenes of monks dousing themselves with gasoline.

³ Royalties of this book were used to found National Organization on Women (NOW), and Ms. Friedan would later serve as its president from 1966-70. See Davis and West, *Women Writers in the United States: A Timeline of Literary, Cultural, and Social History* 313.

Ruether countered what she saw around her with a theological salvo. Observing oppression and the Church's lack of action on the social issues, she was attracted to Liberation Theology that "constantly challenges us to search for appropriate relationships in social, economic, and political life" (Lang, *Dictionary of the Liturgy* 322).

Rosemary Ruether has become one of the most persistent and active voices in Christian feminism. In 1980, she wrote:

My intellectual questions have never been purely theoretical. I have in every case dealt with existential questions about how I was to situate my life, my identity, my commitments. I have never taken up an intellectual issue, which did not have direct connections with clarifying and resolving questions about my personal existence, about how I should align my existence with others, ideologically and socially.

("Asking the Existential..." 374-75)

She chided the conscience of the Christian Church on sexism, Anti-Semitism, and she has been a leader in the Eco-feminism movement and Liberation Theology. As Nicholas Ansell put it in his excellent critical work of Ruether's theological stand: "To say that Rosemary Ruether is a prolific writer is something of an understatement. To date, in addition to having written over five hundred articles and essays, she has either authored, co-authored, edited or co-edited twenty-five books" (3). Eddy and Ruether, although very much part of their different times, both sought inclusion within the Christian tradition.

Much of Ruether's work is based on exhaustive scholarly research. Her classical training is unmistakable in her scholarship and presentation, and was the source of many of her works dealing with her feminist appraisal of the Church. She pointed out, step-by-step, where the oppression came from and how it was used to keep women from participating in the church, past and present. She reaffirmed that androcentrism was not

just an idea or concern of women in the Church, but a development well-documented in the writings of the Church Fathers.⁴

Eddy, on the other hand, was not a scholar. She knew her scripture and used it deftly in her writings. She was a woman of her times who had attempted three marriages and suffered from very poor health. It was her quest for a cure to her own suffering along with revelation from Scripture that became the basis for founding her Christian Science Church. Her vision of religion was deeply influenced by her understanding of “healing.”⁵

Although Eddy founded the Church on what she considered to be Christian principles, she also wittingly or unwittingly encompassed many contemporary ideas of healing and parapsychology. Christian Science is a blend of several ideas that we shall explore in Chapters Two and Three of this paper. Eddy’s beliefs and theology were written into the now famous book of dogma for all Christian Science believers, *Science and Health with the Key to the Scriptures* (1875). Eddy realized the power of the press and written word to proselytize her religious and healing message. She exploited the media of her day by establishing and making herself editor of the *Journal of Christian Science* in 1883. This paper appeared on a monthly basis and was the voice of testimony for Christian Science healings. Renamed *The Christian Science Journal* in 1885, it was, “A monthly publication intended to shield her students from the ‘unorthodox’ teachings of rival scientists” (Numbers and Amundsen 422). This publication also relayed events in the Church. She also founded The Christian Science Publishing Society to enable

⁴ Ruether documented this historical past in such standard works as *Religion and Sexism* (1974), *Women of Spirit* (1978), and *Women and Redemption* (1998).

⁵ In 1881, she founded the Massachusetts Metaphysical College gaining legal credentials for a healing school.

worldwide evangelism through the printed word, including *The Christian Science Monitor* in 1908 (Numbers and Amundsen 424). *The Monitor* has become one of the major newspapers in the United States today. She met with fierce opposition from other Christian denominations in Boston, where Eddy decided to found her Mother Church in 1892. Other Protestant religions saw her as an obstacle to their attempts to gain new converts.

Among the many biographers of Mrs. Eddy since her death in 1910, the most prolific is Robert Peel who wrote *Christian Science: Its Encounter with American Culture* in 1958. He later produced a three volume set on Mrs. Eddy's life, *Mary Baker Eddy: The Years of Trial* (1971), *Mary Baker Eddy: The Years of Discovery* (1966), and *Mary Baker Eddy: The Years of Authority* (1977). Perhaps the most sensational biography of Mrs. Eddy in terms of its attacks on her work belongs to Georgine Milmine's, *The Life of Mary Baker Eddy* (1909), which first appeared in *McClure's Magazine* before it was published in book form.⁶

The Christian Science Church suffered many lawsuits, disputes, and scandals during Eddy's lifetime. These experiences made Eddy very cautious and protective of her Church. She personally controlled the archives of materials, which up until The Mary Baker Eddy Library of Life Long Learning opened in Boston in 2002, were only available to approved scholars who were church members.

Some excellent books deal with the background of Mrs. Eddy's times such as Stephen Gottschalk's *The Emergence of Christian Science in American Religious Life* (1973) and the more general account by Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers* (1965).

⁶ Interestingly enough, much of the work for this was done by Willa Cather. Mark Twain also wrote sarcastically about Eddy. (See Lee 67).

An updated version of the Meyer book may be found in Paul K. Conkin's *American Originals: Homemade Varieties of Christianity* (1997). The intellectual climate of the 1870s is well covered in Robert C. Fuller's *Alternative Medicine and American Religious Life* (1989).

To date there are no biographies of Ruether, for she is at this time only sixty-seven years old. She is the Carpenter Professor of Feminist Theology at the Pacific School of Religion, teaching jointly in the Theology Department of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. She has written two autobiographical reflections, *Disputed Questions on Being a Christian* and *Journeys: The Impact of Personal Experience on Religious Thought (in Baum)*. Her books on feminism and religion such as *Sexism and God Talk* (1983) have become classics in the field.

When comparing Eddy with Ruether one must keep in mind that Eddy belongs to the era of Feminism's infancy while Ruether works in the middle of the second wave of Feminism. These two remarkable women through sheer determination, and by their writings and foundations, have changed the boundaries of the Church's theological thinking on the rights of women, and have encouraged women to be seen and heard as both laity and clergy in the Church. In Chapter Two, we will see how the historical context shaped many of the ideas that Mary Baker Eddy incorporated into her Church of Christian Science. In Chapter Three, we will see how women were incorporated into her Church proper. Further, we will ask the question: In what way, if any, was Mary Baker Eddy a Feminist?

Chapter Two: Mary Baker Eddy and Christian Science

In the year 1866, I discovered the Christ Science or divine laws of Life, Truth, and Love, and named my discovery Christian Science. God had been graciously preparing me during many years for the reception of this final revelation of the absolute divine Principle of scientific mental healing.

Mary Baker Eddy (*Science and Health* 107)

Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy's name for her Church, may be seen as an oxymoron-Christian and Science. A Christian is a follower of Jesus Christ, held to the sacrificial law of love and bounded by a faith experience of a personal savoir. Science, on the other hand, involves observation and experimental investigation of natural phenomena. How did two seemingly disparate ideas—science and faith—come together and form a new religion? Christian Science emerged in the 1870s in the United States.

Fourteen years earlier (1859) saw the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of the Species*, a seminal work that was to have a revolutionary influence on both religion and theology. Darwin made the doctrine of the evolution of the species, previously an uncertain hypothesis, overwhelmingly probable by showing that natural selection, was an evolutionary mechanism. Because his theory convincingly replaced religious doctrines about the special creation of each species, its dissemination and acceptance marked a significant expansion of the role of empirical science within our culture (Wintle 148).

The theory of evolution led scientists and humanists alike to feel that science could be applied to the humanities and religion as well to nature. If man is part of the evolution of nature in his physical being, why not in his social, economic and religious (psychological) being as well?

The 1873 Mary Baker Eddy published her book *Science and Health*. Mrs. Eddy's use of the term *science* is clearly congruent with its general use in late nineteenth century thought, in which science was a prestige-laden word connoting the ideas of authority, universality and infallibility (Gottschalk 26). The word also connoted "provable" knowledge, another word that Eddy chose to serve as a natural companion to identify her new religion. She asserts in *Science and Health* that Jesus' miracles of healing were provable events. In the 700 pages of *Science and Health* the word "prove" appears more than a 120 times (*A Complete Concordance to Science and Health* 107). In *Science and Health*'s eighteen chapters we find only three dedicated to the scriptures and out of those three she gives only Genesis and the Apocalypse their own chapters. Provability is extremely important to her concept of healing and religion in general.

Science and empirical knowledge had eroded Protestant American culture. Challenges came from ministers who had found Calvinism wanting a more generous spirit. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82) a Harvard-trained Unitarian minister was instrumental in rejecting Calvinism. He left the hard line sin and predestination of Calvinism for a more organic and positive intellectual attitude to deal with the known world.

Transcendentalism, as expressed in the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, and Bronson Alcott, to name a few, was an amalgam of ideas drawn from several sources, the most powerful was the belief in "self determination" and confidence. This was a direct reaction to the Calvinism of an earlier American culture, the Calvinism of predestination, the gloomy picture of man and his sinful nature. Transcendentalism was also influenced by translations of Hindu and Eastern religious texts. Transcendentalists steeped

themselves in the teachings of the Buddha, the Mohammedan Sufis, the *Upanishads*, and the *Bhagavad Gita* (Tindall and Shi 549). The very word Transcendentalism itself suggests its own definition as something that transcends material ideas or values as opposed to anchoring them in concrete and logical “reason” of the Enlightenment (which had impacted the Eighteenth century). It claimed that “certain fundamental truths were not derived from experience, not susceptible to proof, which transcends human life, but are perceived directly and intuitively by the human mind” (Tindall and Shi 548). Emerson, the Unitarian minister, had found religion “cold and cheerless” (Tindall and Shi 548). He was perhaps most responsible for the optimism, self-reliance, and belief in the individual’s unlimited potential, that permeated the culture.

Emerson wanted to penetrate through rationalism to the inner being. It was this “inner being” that would become a pivotal point for the intersection of Science, religion and healing. Basically, however, Transcendentalist philosophy preceded what is now called “New Thought,” a response to the Calvinism of New England that attributed new powers to man as a created being, not depraved but part of the Godhead himself, exhibiting a new consciousness.

What was this new consciousness? In Europe the name of Franz Anton Mesmer (1795-1860) is important to defining it. For Mesmer, consciousness was a kind of animal magnetism, a phrase that became the subject of an entire chapter in Eddy’s *Science and Health*.⁷ Mesmer believed that passing magnets over the patients’ heads in an effort to supercharge their nervous systems would infuse them with its mysterious but life-giving energy (Fuller 3). But it was the healer who could store and transmit potent energies from

⁷ Chapter Five of *Science and Health*, entitled “Animal Magnetism Unmasked,” is dedicated to this concept, so important for Christian Scientists to understand.

his or her person to the patients. In other words, healing came from faith, from belief in the healer and from faith in the healing process itself.

Mesmer's most astute student was the Marquis de Puysegur, who took the new science of mind cure in another direction, to the subconscious mind itself. He "magnetized" patients into a sleeplike state called Mesmerism (hypnotism⁸). His subjects often preformed feats of telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition (Fuller 10). The remarkable phenomena of mesmerism implied psychological, not physical, causality (Fuller 11). In other words, Mesmerism pointed to the human unconscious.

The United States was a growing new country and it abounded in all kinds of "cures" and those who would "cure." Americans were in need of doctrines that would ease the burden of systematic inner-direction. In the period between 1800 and 1850, Americans evidenced what could only be described as a congenital susceptibility to a wide assortment of religious sects and utopian social movements (Fuller 15).

The positive thinking of transcendentalism, along with science, medicine, the emergence of the new science of psychology, and such social changes as women's suffrage, all strongly influenced and played an intense role in the development of these new religious faiths. Further, almost to the end of the 19th century, Americans were highly susceptible to a wide assortment of secular and religious cures and isms from new scientific concepts to unabashed hucksterism. Nineteenth-century medicine, theory and treatment, was an extremely uncertain business for all practitioners. No single sect was securely anchored in scientific knowledge, yet practitioners of all the sects wished to do something for patients in need. The solutions and philosophies, each claiming efficacy

⁸ The word hypnotism was coined by James Braid (1795-1860) author of *Neurypnology or the Rationale of Nervous Sleep Considered in Relation with Animal Magnetism*, (London: J Church, 1843). Hypnotism was called after the Greek god Hypnos, the god of sleep.

and pre-eminence, tell us a great deal about the unevenness of natural change and the human need to create order and meaning through “health-care” systems. To understand Mary Baker Eddy we must further examine this cornucopia of influences that, in turn, were reflected in innovative religions (Cayleff 5-6).

Let us begin with the development of mesmerism. By 1847 it was estimated that there were between twenty and thirty mesmerists lecturing throughout New England and more than two hundred “magnetizers” in Boston alone. Foremost among them, and most important for Mary Baker Eddy, was Phineas P. Quimby (1802-1866). Quimby advanced mesmerism by attempting to discover how the approach actually cured, as he was convinced of it. He concluded that mesmerism healed by teaching the patient how to “change his/her mind” in order to cure himself/herself. He eventually produced a manuscript from his observations, notes, and ruminations, lending it to interested readers, mainly his students. Mary Baker Eddy became one of his cured believers.

For the last hundred years, debate has raged about the extent to which Mary Baker Eddy incorporated Quimby’s ideas into her *Science and Health*. This is basically a debate about who got there first. While recuperating from a bad fall, Mary Baker Eddy assiduously read the Christian Bible and finally combined Quimby’s formulation about “mind-cure” with the Scriptures. Illness, she concluded, was in the mind, not the body.

Mary Baker Eddy was fully aware of the many “cures” in the air and their advocates, both spiritual and secular. She discussed and dismissed the extremely popular

phrenology that purported to diagnose an individual's mental and moral profile from the shape of the head, concluding that

To measure intellectual capacity by the size of the brain and strength by the exercise of muscle, is to subjugate intelligence, to make mind mortal, and to place this so-called mind at the mercy of material organization and non-intelligent matter. (Eddy, *Science and Health* 165)

She also considered vegetarianism, which was promoted by religious thinkers like John Wesley who believed that health and healing were an integral part of the gospel message. Vegetarianism also influenced the Seventh Day Adventists and the temperance movement. Eddy refers to homeopathy that used the same toxic substances that may have caused disease to cure it. Taking off from homeopathy Eddy (and Quimby) observed that placebos often cured better than medicine because the patient believed in the placebo. In other words they inferred from this that it was the mind not the medicine that cured. Hydropathy, a celebrated alternative cure consisting of water, ingested or applied externally, to relieve many illnesses (especially women's) and general discomfort. Mary Baker Eddy took note of this approach as well.

Traditionally women oversaw issues of the health and illness in private family life and were especially attuned to women's complaints and women's natural processes, like childbirth. However, in Mary Baker Eddy's religion, women were also most welcome in the public realm as healers or practitioners and were not discriminated against for their gender. Christian Science came along at the right place at the right time to allow women a voice in the church and a pathway to healing at the same time.

Mary Baker Eddy, regardless of what she took or understood of the cures and writing of Phineas P. Quimby, took what she saw as opportunity as well as a theological step towards a religion that was not like the church of Protestant sects. Her Christianity

was going to become scientific and modern, so she took what she had learned about healing from Quimby and refined it, returning, in a way, to the “primitive” Christian church and its spirit. In short, she was going to update the message of Jesus in a new scientific world. “The physical healing of Christian Science results, as in Jesus’ time, from the operation of Divine Principle, before which sin and disease lose their reality in human consciousness” (Eddy, *Science and Health* ix).

Eddy’s *Science and Health* is her reaction to the many forces that were emerging by the 1870s. Science was making gains in the area that had previously been religion’s territory. New ideas from the East had encouraged a more self-reliant and positive individual. Society itself was changing from an agrarian to an industrial urban population. Medicine was beginning a long climb to antiseptic surgery and knowledge based on research in its application to cure and disease. And the new science of psychology was emerging. William James wrote the first textbook on the subject in 1880. He gave the Gifford lectures on natural religion in Edinburgh in 1901 and 1902, in which he demonstrated how close psychology and religion were.

Eddy was not the only one to use many of Quimby’s ideas. Some joined Christian Science, but ultimately rejected the Mother Church, or perhaps more precisely Mary Baker Eddy’s authoritarian rule. They went on to found other new churches based on Quimby’s writings and ideas as well as Eddy’s. In 1885 Mrs. Melinda E. Cramer founded an alliance of New Thought groups that took in such groups as “Divine Science” “Unity,” “Home of Truth,” and “Universal Foundation for Better Living” to mention but a few (Braden 465).

It was Eddy, however, and her genius for administration, her keen insight into public relations, and her skilful use of the media that combined her religious precepts with news and testimony that helped spread the church. She created a Church that would perpetuate itself on her words and ideas. Her Church would be neither dogmatic nor challenged from a theological study of scripture as its structure does not allow hermeneutical or exegeses presentations. The service is unique to Christianity in that no sermon is preached at the service, only the readings of the week that are read aloud, each person listening to their own interpretation.

Her principle of equality in church participation (only an ideal at first) attracted a more “modern” type of thinker, male and female, with a contemporary outlook on life. Mainly of the urbane middle class, they willingly followed and supported Mary Baker Eddy in her Church. Mary Baker Eddy would die a millionaire.

Chapter Three

Mary Baker Eddy, Faith Healer or Feminist?

When in the early part of the Nineteenth Century, women began to protest against the civil and political degradation, they were referred to the Bible for an answer. When they protested against their unequal position in the church, they were referred to the Bible for an answer.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton *The Woman's Bible*

She rose to his requirement, dropped
The playthings of her life
To take the honorable work
Of woman and of wife.

Emily Dickinson

Mary Baker Eddy is often seen as one of the pioneers of religious feminism, basically for her use of the androgynous God called “Mother and Father God.” Her Church was one of the first of several religious institutions to grant equality to both men and women in the church structure. But was Eddy deeply committed to feminism? Eddy, as the founder of the church, never allowed any female to challenge her position or teachings. Several women grew in power and accomplishment in the church; Emma Curtis Hopkins (1853-1925) was one. Ms. Hopkins ultimately left the Church of Christian Science to found her own Church of Divine Science where women were not subjected to the authoritarian rule or tyranny of a “mother” founder like Eddy. In fact, Emma Curtis Hopkins is perhaps a more sincere feminist than Eddy because Eddy’s feminism was not so much an expression of equality as it was an instrument to express a

“scientific,” i.e. modern, understanding of religion. Further, Eddy’s feminism stemmed more from a belief that women could rule in a man’s authoritative world as well as men, rather than a feminism that questioned the legitimacy or appropriateness of that authoritative system.

I offer a poem that Eddy wrote and carefully rewrote till 1888. It first appeared in *Gleason’s Pictorial Drawing Room Companion*, dated 1853, and was revised several times. The poem is dated five years after The Seneca Falls Convention and the Declaration of Sentiments of 1848, which Elizabeth Cady Stanton made famous in her plea for equality in religion. Obviously, Eddy was thinking about woman’s rights as we can tell by the poem’s title, “Woman’s Rights,” if not always by its verse:

Grave on her monumental pile:
She won from vice, by virtue’s smile,
Her dazzling crown, her sceptred throne,
Affections wreath, a happy home;

The right to worship deep and pure,
To bless the orphan, feed the poor;
Last at the cross to mourn her Lord,
First at the tomb to hear his word:

To fold angels wings below;
And hover o’er the couch of woe;
To nurse the Bethlehem babe so sweet,
The right to sit at Jesus’ feet;

To form the bud for bursting bloom,
The hoary head with joy to crown;
In short, the right to work and pray,
To point to heaven and lead the way.

Mary Baker Eddy (Prose Works 388)

The poem reveals that Eddy still saw women’s work in its traditional sense. However, the last line and even perhaps the first stanza portray women as a force in religion. It is in the

religious area that women have been most taken for granted and kept on its margins by the very word of God. Granted that this may be a cryptic way of saying it, but remember the poem is called “Women’s Rights.” And she kept that title till the last printing in 1888. Again it is not an aggressive statement of support for women’s rights, but it does express the concept of women’s leadership in religion.

Suffrage was just one of the basic ways women could participate in the community in a political sense. But the equality of women in the Church was arguably a more radical goal. Certainly Elizabeth Cady Stanton believed that, as she said in the now famous “Declaration of Sentiments”:

Resolved, that woman has too long rested satisfied in the circumscribed limits which corrupt customs and a perverted application of the Scriptures have marked out for her, and that it is time she should move in the enlarged sphere which her great Creator has assigned her. (Seneca Falls July 19, 1848)

Mary Baker Eddy supported feminism in her writing and her church organization. However, she alone among women had ultimate authority. Nor did she share that authority with anyone, male or female. It may be noted that the first woman to sit on the board of Directors of the Mother Church was Annie M. Knott (?-1941) in 1919 (eight years after the death of Eddy). Susan Hill Lindley wrote an excellent summation of Eddy, calling Eddy’s feminism “ambiguous”: “Eddy’s ideas about women and religion are complex, even ambiguous, both in the context of her own time and in light of contemporary feminist theology” **(321)**.

Eddy worked just after the Civil War, when there had been some achievement, thanks to the suffrage movement, of legal rights to women. For example, the Married Women’s Property Act of New York was passed in 1848 and amended in 1849. But in

general women were still marginalized. Also, in 1849 two important events for women took place: The Seneca Falls Convention, where for the first time issues were raised about women in the social setting, and the graduation of Elizabeth Blackwell (1821-1910) from medical school as the first woman physician.⁹ Here, as the mid-century was approaching, there was a definite new wave of social ideas that were asking acceptance.

The economic growth and expansion of the United States would see a new and expanding middle class. The rise of better education for all, including women, led to a new awareness for women in general. (It was not until Sept 6, 1837, at Oberlin College, that American women were allowed a university education.) Women could not enter politics because they were not franchised. They could not enter the professions; although an elite few did make it to medical school, these women were the exception. Religion was society's only refuge for women, but it had clearly relegated women to the second sex, a status justified by the Bible.

However, religion was exploding with new energies and new ideas that fostered more personal and cerebral theologies and, in many instances, ideas about health and wellness. In some cases these new religions offered women an equal place with men for it was based on the genderless mind and not the gendered body. Madame Blavatsky's Theosophy and Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science based their religions on the "spirit" or "mind." The body is a mere shell enclosing the spirit, thus it has no determining power over our roles in the spiritual world. The Eddy and Blavatsky dates run concurrent with each other. Blavatsky would write her introductory explanation of her faith in *Isis Unveiled* (1877), and Mary Baker Eddy wrote her *Science and Health* in

⁹ Elizabeth Blackwell's book, *The Religion of Health*, published in 1871 contains the same health and religion concept as a theme that was current at the time and also developed by MBE.

1875. Both new religions offered something to women for then, as now, the majority of Christian Science and Theosophy membership is disproportionately female. This peculiar new moment attracted largely urban white women from the “gentile” classes who found in metaphysical healing not only relief from nervous and somatic disorders, but also the basis of a “spiritual philosophy of life as a whole” (Tumber 1).

Eddy was aware of the inequalities in society between the sexes and she spoke to these issues in her *Science and Health*. We see her feminist ire exhibited in her admonitions about the practical nature of marriage. Indeed, evidence from her own personal life and her three marriages suggests she understood these problems well. Her complaints are not about the abstract ideal of equality for women, but in actual situations. It is difficult to find other religious texts that are as realistic as Eddy’s discussion. She continues with an observation about marriage and the inequality between sexes in the bond of matrimony.

A dissolute husband deserts his wife, certainly the wronged, and perchance impoverished, woman should be allowed to collect her own wages, enter into business agreements, hold real estate, deposit funds, and own her children from interference. (62)

or

Civil law establishes very unfair rights of the two sexes. Christian Science furnishes no precedent for such injustice, and civilization mitigates it in some measure. Still it is a marvel why usage should accord woman fewer rights than does either Christian Science or civilization. (62)

Another of her quotes on marriage and women’s rights:

Our laws are not impartial, to say the least in their discrimination as to the person, property, and parental claims of the two sexes. If the elective franchise for women

will remedy the evil without encouraging difficulties of greater magnitude, let us hope it will be granted. (63)

Observe the words Eddy uses to express her interest in women's suffrage. For a start, she does not use the inflammatory word "suffrage," but calls it an "elective franchise," perhaps a less hostile term. Note also that she does not demand that women get the vote, but she "hopes" they get their rights if, significantly, that that can be accomplished "without encouraging difficulties of greater magnitude." What is Eddy saying here? She wants the injustice to be taken care of, but only if it does not create problems! These are hardly the words of a committed feminist. Eddy is a woman of her times, but apparently she does not want to get involved with the movement.¹⁰ She is not focused on equality of the suffrage movement, but she is cognizant of its goals.

Her goal was, therefore, not political equality. There was inequality enough in the Church. She also found much in the Old Testament to be male oriented, a sign of the oppression of women. She sees the text of the Old Testament as "male imaged":

The Jewish tribal Jehovah was a man-projected God, liable to wrath, repentance, human changeableness. The Christian Science is universal, eternal, divine Love, which changeth not and causeth no evil, disease, nor death. It is indeed mournfully true that the older Scripture is reversed. In the beginning God created man in His, God's image; but mortals would procreate man, and make God in their own human image. What is the god of a mortal, but a mortal magnified? (*Science and Health* 140)

Eddy found that all of scriptural history and tradition created the God of the past, unequivocally in the male image. The God of Christian Science, Eddy's God, was called

¹⁰ Please see letter from the Mary Baker Eddy Library for Humanity, dated Aug.28, 2003, enclosed as an addenda to this paper.

Father/ Mother God, he/she had the attributes of both genders. Here is her Lord's Prayer that she wrote for her members:

Our Father which art in heaven,
Our Father-Mother God, all –harmonious,
Hallowed be Thy Name.
Adorable One.
Thy Kingdom come.
The kingdom is come; Thou art ever-present.

Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.
Enable us to know, ---as in heaven, so on earth, ---God is
Omnipotent, supreme.
Give us this day our daily bread;
Give us grace to-day; feed the famished affections;
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And Love is reflected in love;
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil;
And God leadeth us not into temptation, but delivereth us
From sin, disease, and death.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, forever.
For God is infinite, all-powerful, all Life, Love, over all, and in All. (Eddy, Science and Health 16-17)

Mary Baker Eddy's concept of the Father-Mother God was not original. The Quakers had long ago absorbed this concept. Indeed, Mary Baker Eddy was exposed to a Quaker community as a child. However, the concept gained publicity in its Christian Science formulation and was used in the Christian Science service. The androgyny built into prayer certainly attracted a more liberal if not feminine membership.

Mary Baker Eddy's larger goal for her feminism was a functioning church open to both sexes for service and an equal understanding of healing. Her work was carried out in healing by church members who had taken the specific courses and had then been accepted by the Mother church as "practitioners," or healers. It is not surprising that

there are more female practitioners than male in the church. Healing is considered the natural arena of females as mothers and wives in the family. It was professional medicine that had traditionally marginalized women to the fringes of medicine, as midwives for instance. However, society was changing in nineteenth century, accepting the odd women doctor, producing more progressive and more educated people. Women themselves were asking for their rights to education and for the opportunity to use that education, equal to men (Whaley). Mary Baker Eddy's emphasis is not on the flesh in marriage as much as it is on the "spirit": "Then shall soul rejoice in its own, in which passion has. Then white-robed purity will unite in one-person masculine wisdom and feminine love, spiritual understanding and perpetual peace" (*Science and Health* 64). If there is a wish in Eddy it seems to be that through Christian Science we are going to evolve into a genderless society.

The divine Principle of the First Commandment bases the Science of being, by which man demonstrates health, holiness, and life eternal. One infinite God. Good, unifies men and nations; constitutes the brotherhood of man; ends wars; fulfils the Scripture, "love thy neighbour as thyself;" annihilates pagan and Christian idolatry,-whatever is wrong in social, civil criminal, political, and religious codes; equalizes the sexes; annuls the curse on man, and leaves nothing that can sin, suffer, be punished or destroyed. (*Science and Health* 340)

There is neither marriage nor burial ceremony in the Christian Science Church. Men and women can be both readers and members of the governing board of the Mother Church. There is no office that a woman is barred from in Christian Science; however, Susan Lindley, among other feminist critics have found Mary Baker Eddy a conservative when it came to feminism:

On the other hand, Eddy could be aligned with the “conservative” wing of nineteenth-century religious feminism, in so far as she seems to have endorsed a peculiar (and superior) nature and role for women, just as she raised few questions of the prevailing moral patterns and assumptions of her day. Yet although she argued for a broad and positive impact on society at large from the emergence of women and the feminine, her primary concern and vision were personal, even individualistic, and spiritual. Despite a secondary concern with issues like suffrage and economic rights for women, it is striking how limited were the practical and political implications of her form of conservative feminism. (328)

Another critic, Susan Setta, finds that Eddy has reduced sexuality down to the body, which according to Eddy’s view, does not exist. “If there is not matter, there can be no restrictive sex roles based on the body; if God is both masculine and feminine (in a spiritual sense, of course); men have no advantage over women of closer identification with the divine (289). Mary Farrell Bednarowski finds four theological characteristics common to women’s religious leadership, and Eddy falls right in line:

(1) A perception of the divine that de-emphasized the masculine...(2) a tempering or denial of the doctrine of the Fall; (3) a denial of the need for a traditional ordained clergy; (4) a view of marriage that did not stress the married state and motherhood as the proper sphere for woman and her only means of fulfillment. (209)

Eddy justifies her male and female God as she tells us in *Science and Health*; the ideal man corresponds to creation, to intelligence, and to Truth. The Ideal woman corresponds to Life and to Love. In divine Science, we have not as much authority for considering God masculine as we have for considering Him feminine, for Love imparts the clearest idea of the Deity (517).

Mary Baker Eddy is a reflection of her age that saw the emergence of the women’s movement, the use of science and scripture both to reinforce healing and to modernize the current culture by updating Biblical interpretations, and the incorporation

of new psychological healing methods. Her incorporation of equality in the Church was as much for theological reasons (to reinforce the concept of “spirit”) as for understanding secular political times in which she lived. She was not a feminist: her Church was not founded for the edification of feminist equality; it was founded for healing and praise of God.

Chapter Four

Rosemary Radford Ruether: The Historical Setting

When thou wert in the world, Lord, thou didst not despise women, but didst always help them and show them great compassion. Thou didst find more faith and no less love in them than men...We can do nothing in public that is of any use to thee, nor dare we speak of some of the truths over which we weep in secret, least thou shouldst not hear this, our just petition.¹¹

Teresa of Avila

Since women are becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as mere material instruments, but demand rights befitting a human person both in domestic and in public life.¹²

Pope John XXIII

The same kind of rhetoric that used to issue from Bella Abzug, Betty Friedan and Shulamith Firestone was heard by the Women in Church Conference, partially translated into theological jargon.¹³

Donna Steichen

The history of feminism as we have seen in the other chapters has been a slow progression of hard won victories. The women's movement was allied with the moral outrage towards slavery. Subsequently women's groups spoke of temperance and abolition and finally suffrage. The banners unfurled at Seneca Falls and by The Declaration of Sentiments of Elizabeth Cady Stanton led to organization and education of the female population about the aims of feminism. It was Stanton's understanding of the

¹¹ Mary Daly. *The Church and the Second Sex*. (Harper: new York, 1968) 99.

¹² Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, Encyclical of 11 April, 1963 n, 41.

¹³ Donna Steichen. *Ungodly Rage: The Hidden Face of Catholic Feminism*. Ignatius Press: San Francisco. 1991. p.128.

Church's treatment of women that impelled her to write *The Woman's Bible* (1895). It was a call to women to see that their oppression originated in the Church.

The first step in the elevation of woman to her true position, as an equal factor in human progress, is the cultivation of the religious sentiment in regard to her dignity and equality, the recognition by the rising generation of an ideal Heavenly Mother, to whom their prayers should be addressed, as well as a Father. (*The Woman's Bible* 33)

How offensive it was to Stanton that the Hebrew Bible would marginalize women as if by the very word of God. How could God, who is all love, justify a hierarchy on which women were second; were not men and women created in the image of God? She was one of the first to see that Christianity was at the root of women's oppression.

Stanton did not have a lot of support for her *Bible*, least of all from other women in the suffrage movement who feared that an attack on the *Bible* would ruin the chances of achieving their political goals. However, in the 1960s Christian feminists would reopen the questions that Stanton raised in her publication. Feminism lay dormant more or less after women's suffrage had been achieved, at least in America. What brought it back into question was a combination of events; most important for Christian feminism was the Civil Rights movement and the subsequent call to moral justice. The Civil Rights movement in the South demanded moral indignation from an entire generation. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was an ordained Baptist minister. The black Church's moral indignation was directed against segregation, to say nothing of the limited political voice of Blacks in the South.

The Church and the black community in the South had a unity and power structure of their own. Again, not unlike women in the early nineteenth century when the Church had housed women's organizations and had given them the ability to speak out, so too the Southern Church unified and gave meaning to the lives of black men and women under oppressive social conditions. Rosemary Ruether was one of the young catholic workers who became involved in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Dr. King was inspired by the Church, and in his now famous "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," ostensibly written to answer complaints of eight local bishops that he should not use the Church for political activism, he justified his behavior like this:

Perhaps I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual church, the church within the church, as the true ekklesia and the hope of the world. But again I am thankful to God that some noble souls from the ranks of organized religion have broken loose from the paralysing chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom. They have left their secure congregations and walked the streets of Albany, Georgia, with us. They have gone down the highways of the South on tortuous rides for freedom. Yes, they have gone to jail with us. Some have been dismissed from their churches; have lost the support of their bishops and fellow ministers. But they have acted in the faith that right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. Their witness has been the spiritual salt that has preserved the true meaning of the gospel in these troubled times. They have carved a tunnel of hope through the dark mountain of disappointment.

Ruether worked in the summer of 1965 with Delta Ministry in Mississippi. When the time came for her university teaching she chose a black university, The School of Religion at Howard University (Ruether, *Disputed Questions* 81).

Ruether embarked on her academic career at an interesting, complex time for the Church in the modern world. In October of 1962, Pope John XXIII called the Second

Vatican Council. The doors and windows swung open to a new breath of fresh air that brought all kinds of changes to the Catholic Church. The Church was shaken from the certainty of institutional history and dogmatic slumber. Vatican II made a sudden demand to meet the need to clarify the Church's meaning and mission in the modern world.

The Second Vatican Council pondered such important issues as the Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (1965); the Decree on Ecumenism (1964); Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People (1965); Decree on Renewal of Religious Life (1965) and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (1965). In three years the Vatican issued sixteen encyclicals that were meant to be new guidelines for the Church in dealing with the modern world. The most debated encyclical however was not of Vatican II makings. It was issued by Pope Paul IV, successor to John XXIII, who in 1968 gave us *Humanae Vitae* (1968) "On Human Life," denouncing all forms of birth control.

For religious women in the Church, it was a particularly difficult time. Many nuns took off the ancient habits in favor of a more modern dress or left convents altogether and entered life in an unfamiliar society. It was a time of confusion, and perplexity, and sometimes misunderstanding. The Catholic Church lost members, lost religious women, lost priests. The "aggiornamento," of the Church, literally meaning to throw open the windows to the breeze or a new beginning, was intended to encourage a docile membership into activism. Its goal was to create a dynamic communication between parish and Church. In retrospect, it had just the opposite effect. Instead of

opening communication, the majority of the faithful felt bewildered by the swift changes. The laity were confused. Statistics say more than any other item about the toll Vatican II had on the Catholic membership. In 1965, just after Vatican II, there were 1,575 ordinations of new priests in the United States, in 2002 just 450. In 1965, there were 104,000 teaching sisters in the United States, in 2002 only 8,700. In 1965 there were 49,000 seminarians in Catholic American seminaries; in 2002 there were 4,700 (Jones).

It was into this arena of uncertainty that Rosemary Radford Ruether graduated with her PhD from the Claremont Graduate School. It was 1965, the same year as the closing session of Vatican II. She married and started teaching at Howard University. Ruether's first book was a synthesis as well as a critical comment on what was occurring in the Roman Catholic Church in the United States at the close of Vatican II. In the book, appropriately called *The Church against Itself: An Inquiry into the Conditions of Historical Existence for the Eschatological Community* (1967), she reacts to the changes in her church with the critical eye of the scholar with a classical understanding of the historical church.

1968 was an important year for Christian feminism. Ruether published another book, *Communion of Life Together*, discussing birth control, which the Church decisively condemned in Paul IV's encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*. It was also the year of Mary Daly's *The Church and the Second Sex*. Daly's book reads like a legal brief on the anti-feminism, prejudice, and misogyny of Church fathers and on the doctrines that have silenced women's voices in the Catholic Church. It was hard hitting and attracted many

secular feminists as well as a new breed of Catholic women, encouraging them to think about their marginalization in Church matters.

Daly's book garnered much publicity. Since *The Woman's Bible* Christian women had been pondering, if not openly, their second-class religious status. Let us explore the place of their discomfort in the women's movement in general. The second wave of feminism began in 1950 with Simone de Beauvoir's (1908-1986) *Le DeuxiemeSexe* (*The Second Sex*). It was translated into English and became one of the fuses igniting the second wave of Feminism. The Civil Rights Movement in the South brought many social issues to the fore again, along with issues of justice and oppression. Women had entered into the work force both during and after World War II. Betty Freidan wrote the *Feminine Mystique* in 1962, which sold 60,000 copies the first year. With the proceeds from this book she founded the National Organization of Women (NOW) in 1966.

Ruether published her first book, *The Church against Itself* in 1967, the same year James Kavanaugh, a radical priest who was ultimately to leave the Church, published *A Catholic Priest Looks at His Outdated Church*. This book attracted much attention from both the Catholic and secular press, because it summed up the controversies of the times so well. This is the time of the last years of the Vatican II followed in 1968 by Pope Paul's *Humanea Vitea*. The Catholic community was dealing with the issues of birth control, women and the home, the nature of religious life for nuns and priests. Religious members began to question Church authority and governance as well as oppression. It is

from this wellspring of examination and redefinition of the Church that women theologians were trying to develop and redefine the role of women in the church. Many voices, Catholic and Protestant, were raised in the process: Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Schussler Fiorenza, Sally McFague, Letty M. Russell, to name but a few. They were all united in the perception that women were not equal in the eyes of Christian tradition and that the Church was patriarchal. It was the same argument that Elizabeth Cady Stanton had expressed in her *Woman's Bible*. Would this God who said he loved us make two sets of beings, one to rule over the other?

The year 1970 saw the opening of the decade with two books that became national best sellers and impacted many a discussion in academic circles concerning feminism and women in general. Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* and *The Female Eunuch* of Germaine Greer. In 1972, *Ms Magazine* was founded. That same year Ruether wrote her first book on *Liberation Theology: Human Hope Confronts Christian History and American Power*. The political and the religious were all melding into one objective.

The United States was in an upheaval over moral values, not only with Civil Rights, but the War in Vietnam, and then in 1973, *Roe vs. Wade*. The Supreme Court's decision on abortion came in the same year. Mary Daly would write the radical and sensational *Beyond God The Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* that appealed to a popular audience. Ruether countered with her own more scholarly book on Women's liberation, *Religion and Sexism: The Image of Women in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition* in 1974. The Catholic Church had asked the religious women of the

monasteries and convents to re-examine their orders and institutes in light of Vatican II. One of the great encyclicals of the Vatican Council was *Perfectae Caritatis* “Renewal of Religious Life” (*Perfectae caritatis*).

Religious feminists (Religious women or nuns) believed that ordination was the key to full female membership in the Church. Many of the more progressive women’s religious orders assumed that the Church would share its authority through ordination in the spirit of Vatican II. In 1974 the Women’s Ordination Conference (WOC) was formed. At its first major meeting held in Detroit in November 1975, twelve hundred people listened to addresses, celebrated “liturgies” and established organizational machinery: 90 percent were women religious (Steichen 347). The Vatican issued its own salvo, through the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, that dampened some of the women leaders seeking ordination, “The Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood” (Steichen 349). In no uncertain terms, they declared that women could not be ordained.

Infuriated by the Vatican declaration on women and priesthood, some two thousand participants gathered in Baltimore for WOC’s second major conference. There, Mary Hunt outlined the Church’s “feminist future.” Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza called on women to challenge the ecclesiastical establishment. (Steichen 349)

The WOC was allowed to meet with the National Council of Catholic Bishops to dialogue on the issue. One of the participants was Rosemary Radford Ruether during 1979-81.

In the ten years leading up to 1975 Christian feminists in the Catholic Church, mostly religious women and academic women theologians, underwent a distinct change from being dutiful children of the pre-Vatican Church to radical feminists. They joined other Catholics in the quest for an American expression of spirituality. One such new voice belonged to Father Mathew Fox, whose bestseller, *On Becoming a Musical Mystical Bear: Spirituality American Style* was becoming another bestseller in Catholic circles. It was a laid-back anti-intellectual, and anti-Rome, book, closer to the Rod McKuen school of poetry than institutional theological treatment expected by the Church. Fox was in favor of a “popular” religion, taking the people from where they were to a more intimate and participatory liturgy and Church.

In 1979 several more books by and about women showed that Catholic feminists were not so far behind the secular feminists. Among the most important books with ramifications in the Catholic Women’s Movement was Naomi Goldberg’s *The Changing Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religion*. It became a beacon of change for change and experimentation with liturgy and prayer. Many of the religious orders of nuns were searching for a new understanding of woman in the Church, and they turned to some odd places to redirect their interests and reference points. Goldbergs’ book talks about a return to the Mother Goddess; she speaks of witchcraft and how women were oppressed in the past so patriarchy could triumph.

This influence became very clear in the Women’s Ordination Conference held in 1985 at Mankato State University in Minnesota. Five hundred women gathered for the

fourth annual conference on “Women and Spirituality.” Its chaotic agenda combined “demands for priestly ordination and ‘inclusive’ liturgical language with neo pagan ritual magic....” (Steichen 29-30).

A startling majority of the women in attendance appeared to be Catholics: nuns, ex-nuns, students and faculty members from Catholic women’s colleges, parochial school teachers, staff members of Catholic bureaus and counseling agencies, parish administrators, laywomen from Catholic Newman Centers, even hospital chaplains. (Steichen 31)

Rosemary Radford Ruether gave the keynote address at this conference and was present for, if not an integral part of, much of the discussion and experimentation of this period. In this year, 1985, she published *Women-Church: Theology and Practice*, a unique book, even for Ruether. The book contains historical and theological reflections as well as women-centered liturgies, a few examples of which include the “Rite of Healing after an Abortion” and “Rite of Healing after a Rape.” Each rite is a complete worship service for the individual liturgy complete with sex sensitive prayers and language where “God and Goddess” are used together in many of the prayers. The rites are basically for women, because they were ignored by the patriarchal Catholic Church

The turmoil in the Church at this point was made evident by several advertisements appearing in *The New York Times* and calling for more freedoms for Catholic women. In 1984 and again in 1986 Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC)¹⁴ ran ads in the *New York Times* signed by seventy-six Roman Catholics, priests, nuns and

¹⁴ CFFC was originally founded in New York in 1970 as Catholics for the Elimination of All Restrictive and Contraceptive Laws. Its founding director, Father Joseph O’Rourke, S.J., was expelled from the Jesuits in 1974. (See Steichen. 322).

prominent lay people who supported free choice in birth control and abortion. The ads caused great consternation in the American Church hierarchy. In 1979 Sister Theresa Kane, president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious came to welcome Pope John Paul II on his American visit at Washington D.C. She knelt for his blessing and then ended her address as follows:

As women we have heard the powerful message of our church addressing the dignity and reverence of all persons. As women we have pondered these words. Our contemplation leads us to state that the church in its struggle to be faithful to its call for reverence and dignity for all persons must respond by providing the possibility of women as persons being included in all ministries of the church. (National Catholic Reporter)

The pope was not amused by Sister Kane's honest and gentle request for some sign that the Church would allow women a place of authority in the church. Her request fell on deaf ears.

By the late 1980's Rome had sent in Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger to cool the ardor of religious women and the more radical elements in the American Catholic Church. Father Fox was expelled from his order. By the early 1990s much of the experimentation in both liturgy and religious life had taken on some new structures. Although the altar was turned towards the laity now and many nuns wore modified street clothes; it was almost as if Vatican II had not taken place at all. Signs may have changed, but it was the same old male leadership in the Church.

Ruether has been one of the leading theorists of Christian feminism and has been deeply involved with religious women and laywomen in groups, panels, membership in many Christian feminist forums. Her books and essays have been adopted for use in Christian feminist theology courses, thus influencing a new generation of women theologians. But above all she remains active in both the actual struggle and as scholar. Her writings have guided much of the ferment in Christian women's dealings with the Church and its authority over women. In Chapter Five we will look at Rosemary Radford Ruether as feminist.

Chapter Five

Feminism and Rosemary Radford Ruether

The male represents wholeness of human nature, both in himself and as head of the woman. He is the fullness of human nature, both in himself and as the head of the woman. He is the fullness of the image of God, whereas woman by herself does not represent the image of God and does not possess wholeness of humanity.¹⁵

Thomas of Aquinas

When God is male, the male is God.¹⁶
Mary Daly

Rosemary Radford Ruether is among the most important Christian feminist theologians. She is a prolific writer with over 30 major works and hundreds of papers, to say nothing of the many conferences where she has been the main speaker. She is also a skilled editor and has presented a three-volume history of women in church history, unprecedented in American religious history. She has commented and written on Christian feminism, eco-feminism and Christianity, anti-Semitism and Palestinian rights

¹⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Q92, 1 and 2; Q99,2; Part 3, Supplement, Q39,1

¹⁶ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, (Beacon Press: Boston, 1973). 19.

and oppression, woman-church, and liberation theology; she has covered a virtual compendium of topics important to the late twentieth century Christian church.

She grew up in an ecumenical household with a strong mother who stressed a woman's right to have a dream other than motherhood or religious life because women are valuable for their dreams as well as their ability to procreate and nurture. Her mother had a multicultural bent as well. She had as Rosemary Ruether recalls that "the ability to feel at home with all types of people in many walks of life and levels of wealth and poverty was part of what was communicated to me by her sense of humanity" (Disputed Questions 21).

Ruether came to studying and writing on woman in the church after a solid grounding in the scholarship of the Fathers of the early Church. She knew scripture and Church history well and could easily trace its sexism to a androcentricism of its founders that continued in a direct line to its current teachings. What she did not find in her studies was a feminist or woman-centered theology because it had been erased.

So in the late sixties I began formal research on attitudes toward women in the Christian tradition. My classical and historical training was indispensable here. Since I already knew the sources and techniques for getting at the material, it was not difficult to document historic views toward women and sexuality. I have sometimes been asked where I found these sources, as though there were something mysterious about the vast panorama of material on sexism being gradually disclosed through feminist scholarship of the last decade. Of course, writings by women themselves or writings expressing alternative views to the dominant tradition have been dropped out of the official tradition, and their remains have to be dug up through careful detective work. (118)

Ruether's *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (1983), in which she clearly outlines her philosophy and her methodology was to become one of the classic works in the field of Christian theology.

The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women. Whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of woman is, therefore, appraised as not redemptive. Theologically speaking, whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption. (18-19)

In this book Ruether suggests some of the basic tenets of Christian feminism, "Within history, woman's subjugation is both the reflection of her inferior nature and the punishment for her responsibility for sin" (95). The concept of punishment for original sin, a sin perpetrated primarily through the temptations of Adam by Eve, is a strong theme that runs through most of her writings. Ruether, as well as Church feminists in general, contend that "original sin" is a male invention intended to keep woman in her place in the Church, a notion Elizabeth Cady Stanton made this very clear in her *Woman's Bible*, a hundred years before.

Ruether insists that the Church needs to be guided by its principles of equality rather than contemporary social mores because "eschatological feminism insists on equality in the Church, for the Church belongs not to the world but to the transcendent sphere of redemption" (95). This sphere of activity and redemption is part of the marginalized of the society in general, to which women belong. It was to this part of society that the Christ came, not to bolster the status quo.

Fundamentally, Jesus renews the prophetic vision whereby the Word of God does not validate the existing social and religious hierarchy but speaks on behalf of the marginalized and despised groups of society. Jesus proclaims an iconoclastic reversal of the system of religious status: the last shall be first and first last. The leaders of the religious establishment are blind guides and hypocrites. The outcasts of society- prostitutes, publicans, Samaritans – are able to hear the message of the prophet. This reversal of social order doesn't just turn hierarchy upside down, it aims at a new reality in which hierarchy and dominance are overcome as principles of social relations. (135)

Women in scripture play the part of these lowest of the low, the outcasts, the prostitutes and the ritually unclean: Jesus makes a point to seek them out.

Women play an important role in this gospel vision of the vindication of the lowly in God's new order. It is the women of the oppressed and marginalized groups who are pictured as the representatives of the lowly. The dialogue at the well takes place with a Samaritan woman. A Syro-Phoenician woman is the prophetic seeker who forces Jesus to concede redemption of the Gentiles. Among the poor it is the widows who are the most destitute. Among the ritually unclean, it is the woman with the flow of blood who extorts healing for herself contrary to the law. Among the morally outcast, it is the prostitutes who are furthest from righteousness. The role played by women of marginalized groups is an intrinsic part of the iconoclastic, messianic vision. It means that the women are the oppressed of the oppressed. They are the bottom of the present social hierarchy and hence are seen, in a special way, as the last who will be first in the Kingdom of God. (137)

The relationship between men and women has, according to Ruether, has been one marked by the domination through sexism. "Whether it is women, land, or ideas, the normal male mode of relationship is one of conquer or be conquered, dominate or be dominated. The 'other' is obliterated or reduced to an object of control" (179). Sexism, as Ruether has shown in several of her books, was espoused by the early Church Fathers

and continues through a long line of male philosophers. Augustine saw women as the deformed males, an idea he based on Aristotle's philosophy. Aquinas, in turn, based his teaching on Augustine's, perpetuating the chain that maintains the subservience of women in the Christian Church. More recent dictates of the Church, beginning in the late 20th Century may seem to acknowledge a more active role for women, but as Ruether is quick to point out, this new role is still inscribed within narrow limits.

If we look at Pius XII's address to the International Union of Catholic Women's Leagues in September of 1947, we first find an official image of females within the Catholic Church described in the traditional manner:

Catholic Women and Girls, formerly you would have thought only of worthily playing your sacred and fruitful role in the management of a wholesome, strong, and radiant home; or you would have consecrated your life to the service of God in the composure of the cloister or the apostolic and charitable works. (Pope Pius XII)

The document further notes that women have now entered into the world:

But now you appear abroad, you enter the arena to take part in the battle: you have not sought to do so, but courageously you accept your new duties; not as resigned victims not merely in a defensive spirit; you are determined to pass to the counter-attack and conquer. (Pope Pius XII, second paragraph)

These are strange words from the Vatican. The Church seems to realize that women are a force within the evolving culture, and although feminism is not mentioned by name and the norm of mother and religious person is still idealized, the Church also seems to recognize that there is a shift in the role of woman in the world. The concluding part of the address speaks to the increasing political nature of women who are "those among you

who have more leisure and, suitably prepared, will take up the burden of public life” (Pope Pius XII).

However, we soon come to understand that the function of this new political activism is not to seek gender equality. On the contrary, women are admonished to exercise their new-found freedoms in the “safeguard and care of the sacred interests of woman, by means of legislation and administration that respects her rights, dignity, and social function” (Pope Pius XII). No language here speaks to the equality of the sexes or the right of a woman to share in the authority of the Church. Women may be leaders in the outside world so long as they work to preserve the second-class status of women, but they still may not share in authority of the Church. This is the type of attitude that Ruether continues to fight from within her position in the Church.

Just a few years later, Pope John XXIII would say this about women in the world: “Since women are becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as mere material instruments, but demand rights befitting a human person both in domestic and in public life” (n 41). Again, as with Pius XII’s message, there seemed to be progress, at least in understanding some of the issues that women faced in the church, but there is still no call for women to share in the authority of the Church.

Ruether has advocated with her writings and her activism for women to be included in the Church authority and ministry. It is Ruether who has brought up the issues of language in a paternalistic Church and the development of new rites that

celebrate the woman as Church members. It is interesting to note that, in the 1995 Encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II, paragraph 99 contains some new wording quite out of the ordinary for the paternalistic Roman Catholic Church. The encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (“the Gospel of Life”) reads:

In transforming culture so that it supports life, women occupy a place in thought and action which is unique and decisive. It depends on them to promote a “new feminism” which rejects the temptation of imitating models of ‘male domination’ in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life and society and over all discrimination, violence and exploitation.(Pope John Paul II)

The words “new feminism,” are radical ones for a Church document. What do they mean, and what was old feminism? That the term feminism is used at all, I think represents progress for the Church. But it has not come without a cost. Rosemary Radford Ruether has been in the thick of the investigations and scholarly presentations that have challenged the Church to examine it.

Ruether’s work is continuously exploring new areas. Her feminism, chiefly concerned with gender equality in the church, has ventured as well into the environment or eco-feminism and to the relationships of non-Christian cultures to Christianity. Her work has awakened many third world women to action as they, too, begin to question their role within the Church. In short, Ruether’s work and writings have stimulated and suggested many new roles for women in the Church.

Her vision of the future Church is:

Whether we gather in living rooms, warehouses, or church buildings, the marks of the authentic Church are the same. The Church is where the good news of liberation from sexism is preached, where the Spirit is present to empower us to renounce patriarchy, where a community committed to the new life of mutuality is gathered together and nurtured, and where the community is spreading this vision and struggle to others (Sexism and Godtalk 213).

Yet, after all her criticism of the Church's oppression of women, she remains within the Church. In July of 1994, in *Sojourners Magazine* she answers the question of why she stays. She opens the article by saying that the Church had held other views in the past that have long since been outdated in society:

The case for the denial of women's full membership in the body of Christ, as well as earlier, now more or less discarded teachings justify slavery, racism, and anti-Semitism, we have not only corporate institutional abuse of large groups of people, but official teaching justifying such abuse. It is claimed to be the will of God, to be in accord with the intentions of Christ. (Ruether "Why")

Christ, she points out did not enter the church 2000 years ago, but enters our lives each day.

The good news that God loves us and is at work transforming our lives in Christ did not just enter the world once long ago. It enters a world 2,000 years later that continues to seize upon each new prophetic breakthrough of God's grace only to distort it into a way of justifying its apostasy. The majority of the church and its corporate tradition and practice is apostate, because most of the time individual and corporate humanity wishes to remain in distorted ways and justify them as God's will, rather than be open to real conversion. (Ruether "Why")

Despite Ruether's lack of success in gaining women entrance into the authority of the Church, she continues her writing and activism. Ruether's scholarship and writings

have made women aware of their status; they can challenge their institution and demand active participation within the structure of their worshipping communities.

Chapter Six

Comparison of the Feminist Theological Positions of Mary Baker Eddy and Rosemary Radford Ruether

Set up waymarks for yourself,
Make yourself guideposts;
Consider well the highway,
The road by which you went.
Return, O virgin Israel,
Return to these your cities.
How long will you waver,
O wandering daughter?
For the Lord will create a new thing on the earth:
A woman will surround a man,
The woman will overcome the warrior.

Jeremiah 31:21-12

It is difficult to compare two such historically diverse individuals. Mary Baker Eddy came from the late first wave of feminism in the United States while Rosemary Radford Ruether is currently from the second wave into the current post-feminist era. What holds them together as feminists? Eddy was more concerned with creating a healing Church than with the experimenting with or implementing radical feminism in her church. The brilliant construct of “Father-Mother” God has made many consider her church as a forerunner to a feminist position. Yet, the idea of the “Father-Mother” God was not new, though she was a pioneer in incorporating it into the service of her Church and making it the canon of her worship service. Her church is founded on a non-sexist approach to faith, a recognition that females must be equal to males. We must remember, however, that this was not a principle in practice; her church did not welcome women to

higher positions of authority until after her death. Although her “Our Father,” was changed into “Our Mother- Father God,” and although the service developed for the Christian Science Church does not depend on a male clergy, still, Eddy’s intention was not to promote gender equality nor was she committed to adopting a more feminine or cooperative managerial style. Yes, anyone can read the scripture in the service; however, the flaws in Eddy’s church do not lie with issues of equal authority or a less strict hierarchy but in a lack of development of dogma and theology. Further, the androgynous language that infuses her services was adopted to resemble an enlightened and modern church that reflects scientific thinking. These revolutionary reforms were not to overthrow an ingrained paternalistic power structure that with gender equality. This was what she saw in the Old Testament and she was going to avoid in her church.

Christian Science allowed its members into the actual science of healing and all members had equal access to any level of authority they could master. In short, the Church gave freedom and control of one’s own worshipping life and healing, to the individual member. Gender was not to the issue. Feminism is not the issue but, what is primary to Eddy is “equality” to religious experience.

Eddy was very aware of the inequality of women, as her chapter on “Marriage” in *Science and Health* demonstrates. But she was not a radical feminist. She had a practical sense of feminism. In other words, she did not propose a body of formal criticism that would link the church to the feminist struggle. We can see from her rhetoric that she is a conservative feminist at best. Her poem “Women’s Rights” is an excellent example of

how she thinks about “woman in church.” For Eddy women in leadership roles in the Church would ultimately bring about a change in society.

Ruether, too, thinks, that if women are granted leadership roles, that change will influence the entire society. This includes the earth and its ability to heal as well. Thus, at least in the abstract, women’s leadership in religion is one of the shared principles these two women had in common.

Both Ruether and Eddy see the past history of the Church in scripture in the same way. Eddy, for example, wrote

The Jewish tribal Jehovah was a man-projected God, liable to wrath, repentance, human changeableness. The Christian Science is universal, eternal, divine Love, which changeth not and causeth no evil, disease, nor death. It is indeed mournfully true that the older Scripture is reversed. In the beginning God created man in His, God’s image; but mortals would procreate man, and make God in their own human image. What is the god of a mortal, but a mortal magnified? (Eddy, *Science and Health* 140)

Is this not the same statement of Mary Daly’s “When God is male, the male is God” (*Beyond God the Father* 19). Or as Ruether observes in *Sexism and God-Talk* “Male monotheism has been so taken for granted in Judeo-Christian culture that the peculiarity of imaging God solely through one gender has not been recognized” (53). Or again, from the same reference:

Male monotheism reinforces the social hierarchy of patriarchal rule through its religious system. ...God is modeled after the patriarchal ruling class and is seen as addressing this class of males directly, adopting them as his “sons.” They are his

representatives, the responsible partners of the covenant with him, Women as wives now become symbolically repressed as the dependent servant class. Wives, along with children and servants, represent those ruled over and owned by the patriarchal class....Women no longer stand in direct relation to God; they are connected to God secondarily, through the male. (*Sexism and Godtalk*)

Ruether is a teacher and writer. Her objective is to make women aware of the patriarchal system that has manipulated women in the Church. Ruether is not founding a new church, although she will question and give herself the right to refuse participation in a sexist worshipping community. As an academic, Ruether's concern is with the re-examination of Christ's message found in scripture and manifested in the Church. It must speak equally to men and woman, and further allow participation of both genders in the authority and leadership of the Church proper.

Ruether and Eddy share other aspects of feminism in their attitude toward the use of language. Language in service and prayer is an important aspect of the Christian feminist's position. The Christian feminist feels that language is charged with the power to communicate to the Godhead. The words from Hebrew and Christian traditions have served to create and maintain a "Male God," one that reflects the sexist culture embedded in these traditions. It is thus appropriate for Christian feminists to restructure the language to reflect and include a female identified deity such as the goddess. Ruether believes that masculine language in worship represents a patristic system that oppresses women, which is why she chose to integrate the "God and /Goddess" into the prayers for and about women in her book *Woman-Church*. In a similar manner, Mary Baker Eddy opens her "God's prayer" with the words " Our Mother and Father God." Addressing the Deity as both genders displays the sensitivity to the understanding of gender and the God image.

However, Ruether goes farther by suggesting new forms of specifically female worship liturgies. And she has sought other historical points of reference, not necessarily exclusively Christian, for females in Christian worship. She has looked at the “goddess” principle, and the historical mother/goddess in early and pagan cultures, an uncomfortable position for the Christian Church in general. It was this questing during the late seventies and early eighties that often involved nonChristian religions that led to consternation and conflict with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Similarly, the preoccupation with the mother/earth goddess to protect the “Earth” itself and the birth of “Ecofeminism” often comes from outside the Christian tradition. Ruether addresses not only Western women, but women in the rising third world nations, Christian and non-Christian. She asks women of all faiths to be aware of their worshipping role and their lack of authority in their religious institutions. Her impact is global and her voice strident and important.

Ruether has become less confrontational in her writings in the last several books, perhaps because the Catholic hierarchy is unresponsive, but the influence of her original writings still challenges. Doctor Ruether’s sound historical study has made her an important figure and voice in women’s theology today. She has made women and female theologians aware of their second-class position in worshipping communities. Her writings are universal. Her name is synonymous with woman and Church in the modern world.

Eddy managed to produce a church based on egalitarian principles that eventually allowed access to authority for both males and females, but those principles were not her first concern. It took “time,” i.e. her death, before those principles were allowed to function as she had envisioned. She was not a revolutionary feminist. Her “Church” was her first concern. Feminism was there; equality would follow, if the foundation of her Church was accomplished.

Ruether, on the other hand, has demanded far more of the Church. The Catholic Church has always been slow and deliberate in making its institutional changes. Ruether has made it very difficult for the Church to ignore women’s issues. In fact, Ruether has created tension in the Catholic Church that remains unresolved and begging for honest dialogue. Women and their leadership role within the Catholic Church remains an open and unresolved issue and most likely will be so for some time.

In their own times and ways, Ruether and Eddy have made feminism’s voice heard in the Church and beyond. They have been pioneer advocates for and produced legitimate questions for Church authority and governance. What does the future hold for women in worship? How will the Church address the issues of equality and authority and language? Women today owe much to these women of faith who, called by the Spirit, challenged sexism in Christianity.

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