

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH APPROACH

2.1 FEMINIST THEOLOGY

2.1.1 WHAT IS FEMINIST THEOLOGY?

This study is undertaken from a feminist theological perspective and therefore starts with an exposition of this remarkable and exciting discipline.

“It is impossible to suggest an unequivocal, encompassing definition of what feminist theology is, apart from the fact that it is born out of women’s experience and commitment, and involves advocacy and engagement” (King in Sawyer and Collier 1999: 100). Ursula King further comments on the multidisciplinary of feminist theology, its rootedness in praxis and the multiplicity of methods and tasks. Feminist theology transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries and challenges the patriarchal gender paradigms where males are associated with superiority and dominance and females with inferiority and subordination (Ruether in Parsons 2002: 3).

Feminist theology developed from the secular feminist movement of the 1960s. This so-called second wave of feminism started with the publication of Betty Friedan’s book *The Feminine Mystique*¹. Feminism in the last part of the twentieth century was characterised by its political nature and “feminism’s commitment to material and social change has played a significant role in undermining traditional academic boundaries between the personal and the political” (Kemp and Squires 1997: 4). The early second wave feminist theory was predominantly white, Western and heterosexual, but this exclusivity of focus was increasingly questioned in womanist critique (refer to 2.1.3).

Where the crippling, subordinate sex roles of women in a predominantly male culture became a concern for secular feminists, women of faith also asked

¹ Friedan, B. 1963. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton.

questions about their situation in the church. Instead of “condemning injustices perpetrated against them in social, political and economic life, the church practised and still practices [*sic*] its own forms of discrimination against them” (Keane in Maimela and König 1998: 122). Marie-Henry Keane posits that the task of feminist theologians today is to criticise the abuses and discrimination in the church that affect women. They critique almost all the aspects of the church: the structures, the male biased doctrines, the sexist language and the systematic way in which women’s identity as the image of God has been warped. Although women make up the majority in the church (Porter 2002: 1, Sales in Porter 2002: 27, Mbwati in Mbuy-Beya 1998: 10 and Getui in Kanyoro and Njoroge 1996: 38)², their special giftedness and different perspectives are often marginalised or ignored.

Rosemary Radford Ruether (in Parsons 2002: 3) points out that most feminists see equality of roles and the removal of all aspects of women’s subordination as the aim of their work, and perceives the egalitarian stance as normative. Ursula King expands this aim by adding that women are linked to a “powerful vision of equality, justice, liberation and hope, rooted in a faith that knows of redemptive transformation and wholeness of being” (in Sawyer and Collier 1999: 100). Also, there cannot be a single, universal feminist theology, as there are only feminist theologies in the plural, which celebrate diversity and difference. This diversity does not imply a haphazard fragmentation and individualism, as the diversity, multiplicity and segmentation are seen as symptomatic of feminist theory and not as problematic.

2.1.2 DIFFERENT STREAMS IN FEMINIST THEOLOGY

Marie-Henry Keane (in Maimela and König 1998: 123) distinguishes between two different streams in feminist theology. These two streams developed after the sixties in answer to the question: “[A]re Christianity and Christian theology

² Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan (2001: 15) indicate that statistics show that women consistently make up between 60 and 71 per cent of congregations in all Christian churches. There is also some evidence that shows this proportion has existed throughout history. Sharon Potgieter (in Kanyoro and Njoroge 1996: 16) confirms the same percentage rating for South African churches. According to her more than 70 per cent of the South African church population are women.

irredeemably sexist, or can Christian symbols and patterns be re-imagined and restated in ways that properly value women?" (Bouma 2004: www.people.bu.edu). The first group, radical feminist theologians, represents the revolutionary feminists who believe that the Judaeo-Christian tradition is so male biased and patriarchal that it has to be rejected outright. Radical feminist theologians stand for a separatist approach that rejects male control entirely. Mary Daly, for instance, rejects Christianity and all patriarchal cultures and thinks of "feminist spirituality outside of and against 'phallogocratic' discourse" (Ruether in Parsons 2002: 9). Reformist feminist theologians like Rosemary Radford Ruether are more moderate in their approach and advocate mutuality between the sexes. They see patriarchy as evil perpetuated against women, but as something that can gradually be changed and transformed by the conscientisation of both men and women. Letty Russell tries to facilitate reconciliation between men and women, because human unity should eclipse divisions. Russell (1974: 62) holds that the division between the sexes damages the unity and the integrity of humanity because it is wrongly grounded. A third stream, apart from the two mentioned above, also exists (Clifford 2002: 33). Reconstructionist Christian feminist theologians see reformist feminist theology as limited and seek liberating grounds within Christianity, while supporting a wider reconstruction and transformation of both church and society.

2.1.3 WOMANIST THEOLOGY

The predominantly North American womanist theology developed from the lack of recognition and representation of black women in the white middle class feminist agenda. Alice Walker coined the term *womanist*. A womanist can be defined as "a black feminist who is responsible, in charge, outrageous, audacious, and courageous, who loves other women and appreciates black women's culture and history" (Kwok Pui-lan in Parsons 2002: 26). bell hooks points out that feminism is generally seen as a movement aiming to make women equal to men. She criticises this simplistic view, because implicit in this definition "is a dismissal of race and class as factors that, in conjunction with sexism, determine the extent to which an individual will be discriminated against, exploited, or oppressed" (in Kemp and Squires 1997: 23). Black women experience a triple bondage, due to

discrimination on the basis of gender, race and social status. Womanist theology shares both similarities and differences with white women's theologies and African women's theologies (refer to 1.7). Keane (in Maimela and König 1998: 132) points out that womanist theology originates from a reflection on woman's experience and cultural reality; that abstract ideas are not generally reflected upon; that there is not a sharp distinction between the secular and the sacred and lastly, that womanist theologians have created a new inclusive language and new symbols as expression and enrichment of theological language and imagery.

2.1.4 AFRICAN WOMEN'S THEOLOGY

African Women's Theology differs from Womanist theology because of a different context and agenda. African Women's Theology focuses on "redefining the nature of theology in terms of African women's experiences and re-analysing the relation between traditional theology and culture with reference to patriarchy as unhealthy contact point between the two" (Landman in Maimela and König 1998: 137).

African women are found everywhere in the church in Africa (refer to 2.1.1): they teach children and other women, sing in parish choirs, pray and build churches, but their presence is hardly noticed in decision-making structures. They are also kept out of any ordained ministries (Mbwiti in Mbuy-Beya 1998: 11). Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (2001: 1) note that "African women theologians have come to realize that as long as men and foreign researchers remain the authorities on culture, rituals and religion, African women will continue to be spoken of as if they were dead".

While western feminist theologians have the luxury of academic research, African women theologians remain faithful to their realities, and real-life stories become the substance of their theologies (Landman in Maimela and König 1998: 137). Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001: 10) also stresses the powerful tradition of story-telling: "African women accept story as a source of theology and so tell their stories as well as study the experiences of other women including those outside their own continent, but especially those in Africa whose stories remain unwritten". African theology therefore "starts from the context of African culture" (Cochrane in

Ackermann, Draper and Mashinini 1991: 24). Cochrane further expounds on the work and vision of the African women theologians. They work towards the sociological reality of equality and empower both women and men to translate God's Word into a new, different vision of redeemed humanity. African women theologians challenge power structures and unequal relations so that all people may become equal and partners. Women's liberation is dependent on a universal liberation from exploitative structures and domination. African women theologians also denounce the domination and superiority of First World culture over that of the rest of the world. They strive towards a global solidarity with the marginalised of the world (Cochrane in Ackermann, Draper and Mashinini 1991: 35).

According to Ruether (in Parsons 2002: 15) African women theologians bring together themes of inculturation and liberation. They critique the oppressive nature of traditional African cultures as well as the sexism of the Christian tradition. They evaluate and critique the negative impact of traditional practices such as polygamy, menstrual taboos, women's work roles and the treatment of widows, while also evaluating the impact of sexuality, reproduction and family life on the lives of women.

2.1.5 SPECIFIC METHODOLOGIES EMPLOYED BY FEMINISTS

Methodology is important because it enables the researcher to ask and begin to answer important questions. It can be defined as a set of linked procedures that specify how to reach a particular kind of analytical conclusion. "Methodology matters, then, within feminism, because it is the key to understanding and unpacking the overlap between knowledge/power" (Stanley in Robinson and Richardson 1997: 198). Liz Stanley also emphasises that feminist research should be researched by women, because there is a direct relationship between feminist consciousness and feminism (Reinharz 1992: 3)³. Shulamit Reinhartz (*Ibid*) identifies the following aspects that characterise feminist methodology and are also echoed in the methodology of feminist theology:

³ This assumption is representative of the modernist feminist standpoint theory, which presumes that only women can understand women's experiences.

- Feminism uses a myriad of research methods
- Feminism continues to critique nonfeminist scholarship
- Feminist research is guided by feminist theory
- Feminist research may be transdisciplinary
- Feminist research aims to create transformation
- Feminist research attempts to represent human diversity
- Feminist research often includes the researcher as role-player
- Feminist research is often interactive research
- Feminist research frequently defines a special relation with the reader.

Utilising the overarching methodology of feminist research, feminist theologians use certain strategies, approaches and perspectives to do their research. Some of these strategies will be discussed in 2.1.5.1 to 2.1.5.5.

2.1.5.1 RE-APPROPRIATION OF THE SCRIPTURES

According to Nicholas King (1998: 11), the Bible is supposed to be *Good News* for all humanity, but if it turns out to be bad news for any segment of the human race, it is bad news for all. The Bible is seen by feminist scholars as androcentric⁴, patriarchal⁵ and kyriarchal⁶. The different strains of feminism determine the way in which the Bible is regarded. Radical feminists reject the Bible for its androcentrism and misogyny, reformist feminists find the Bible itself liberating, but question the patriarchal interpretations of its texts, while reconstructionist feminists agree that although the Bible originated in a patriarchal context, it has potentially liberating elements for all oppressed people (Clifford 2002: 54).

⁴ *Androcentric* means that the dominant angle or view is the male point of view. King (1998: 15) points out that the collection of texts which make up the Bible, is strongly marked by androcentrism.

⁵ The word *patriarchal* refers to a society where the male head of the household controls everything. Many injustices arise because of the absolute authority conferred on men by a patriarchal society (King 1998: 15).

⁶ The word *kyriarchy* is derived from the Greek word *kyrios*, which means Lord. It is used in the Old Testament to refer to God and the New Testament to Jesus. Because it can also mean the male head of the house, it can encourage the male rule in positions of power and dominance in society (King 1998: 16).

Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) was the first woman to produce a “book-length challenge to male interpretations of the Bible” (Clifford 2002: 46), by creating *The Women’s Bible*. The object of this Bible was to revise texts and chapters referring to women and also to revise texts where women were made prominent by exclusion (Loades 1990: 19). This commentary had serious shortcomings, but was the antecedent of the current reconstructionist feminist approach to the Bible.

Noted Old Testament scholar, Phyllis Trible, is one of the earlier voices in contemporary feminist exposition of Biblical literature. She sees feminism as a critique of culture in relation to patriarchy, as “a prophetic movement, examining the status quo, pronouncing judgement and calling for repentance” (in Loades 1990: 23). Trible describes three methodological perspectives utilised by feminists to come to a new understanding of the Bible. The first approach leads to re-examination of the Bible, documenting misogyny historically and sociologically. This perspective attests to copious evidence for the subordination, inferiority and abuse of women in the Scriptures. The second perspective is an expansion and augmentation of the first: feminists discover and recover traditions that challenge the culture of subordination and misogyny in the Bible. Here neglected texts and themes are considered and familiar texts are re-read and re-interpreted. This leads to the re-appropriation of the female imagery of God and also to the accentuation of women who counter patriarchal culture. According to Trible, this perspective “functions as a remnant theology” (in Loades 1990: 26). The third approach retells stories of terror and abuse *in memoriam*, offering sympathetic readings of abused women. Her book *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (1984) is an example of feminist rhetorical theology. She reinterprets the stories of Hagar, Tamar, the concubine in Judges and Jephtha’s daughter, documenting misogyny poetically and theologically. Her aim is to ultimately create a biblical theology of womanhood rooted in the goodness of creation, inclusive of both female and male (in Loades 1990: 29).

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a key contributor to feminist biblical hermeneutics, sees the Bible as a source of women’s religious power as well as a

source of religious oppression throughout history. She uses a feminist-critical and historical-critical interpretative model as a basis for women's liberation and transformation. Schüssler Fiorenza challenges the old common sense reality maps of androcentrism and kyriocentrism and aims to help bring about a paradigm shift from a kyriarchal worldview to a radical democratic feminist worldview (Schüssler Fiorenza in Dietrich 2001: ix). She shifts authority from the Bible texts to the interpretive community which experiences God's presence in its liberation struggle. Alice Ogden Bellis describes Schüssler Fiorenza's model in more detail. Biblical interpretation as *process* is highlighted, focussing on four tasks: "a hermeneutics of suspicion, a hermeneutics of historical interpretation and reconstruction, a hermeneutics of ethical and theological evaluation, and a hermeneutics of creative imagination and ritualization" (in Meyers, Craven and Kraemer 2000: 27).

A hermeneutics of suspicion questions the patriarchal system of thinking where women are often excluded from the symbolic, public and social forms of communication and which devalues and reduces femaleness (Parsons 2002: 102). It further acknowledges that biblical interpretation is undeniably influenced by human subjectivity (Clifford 2002: 64), and feminist biblical hermeneutics therefore sets itself deliberately and expressly "against the 'value-free' and 'impartial' approach to biblical scholarship" (King 1998: 17). The feminist hermeneutics of suspicion argues that interpreters always bring their own convictions, assumptions and biases into biblical interpretation. According to Ackermann (in Maimela and König 1998: 354), a hermeneutics of suspicion is followed by a hermeneutics of re-vision, whereby nurturing values and visions can be found in texts and assist in the struggle for liberation and transformation.

2.1.5.2 CULTURAL HERMENEUTICS

Cultural hermeneutics is predominantly found in Africa, where traditional African culture and Christianity combine to oppress and subordinate women. African women's theology therefore has "the double task of challenging androcentric myths and practices in their culture and in Christianity" (Parsons 2002: 28). Mercy Amba Oduyoye finds that cultural hermeneutics enable women to view the Bible

through African eyes and help them find the liberating aspects within it. African women know and experience culture as a tool for domination and do not accept any biblical interpretation if it harms women, the oppressed and the vulnerable. African women theologians approach both culture and the Bible with a hermeneutics of suspicion and with a commitment to transformation. Musimbi Kanyoro (2002: 18) sees cultural hermeneutics as the first step towards an African woman's liberation theology. Women exist within a framework of culture and the Bible is interpreted from within that culture. Cultural hermeneutics allow the feminist theologian to address cultural issues from a critical gender perspective.

2.1.5.3 TRANSGRESSING THE CANONICAL BORDERS

The biblical canon was the product of a lengthy and intricate human process. The canonisation of the New Testament was finalised only in the fourth century C.E. although the books regarded as authoritative were mostly written and arguably completed by "the end of the first decade of the first century C.E." (Clifford 2002: 60). The issues surrounding the Old Testament canon are more complex and even today there is no consensus on what the composition of the Old Testament should be. Feminist theologians question the premise that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God, a product of God Himself. The axiom that the Bible is the result of direct intervention by God into earthly history and of God's dictating messages to chosen representatives, is seen as incongruous and unreasonable (Clifford 2002: 60). The Bible simply did not fall directly from heaven.

Instead, feminist theologians view canonical writings as products of androcentric hermeneutics. In transgressing the canonical borders, it is clear that a much wider variety of writings existed in early Christendom than is generally accepted (Jacobs in Muller 2002: 127). The Word of God is seen by reconstructionist feminist theologians as liberating and transformative, and it therefore follows that if the Bible fails to liberate, it is either interpreted incorrectly or not true. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (in Clifford 2002: 61) also notes that the Holy Spirit does not inhabit a collection of books, but rather resides in the individual or collective interpreters of the books. Anne Clifford (2002: 61) comes to

the conclusion that the “Christian community is not well served by limiting the inspired canon to the limited library of texts we know as the Christian Bible”

Feminist theologians therefore extend the Bible and include some of the so-called apocryphal material in their study of the Bible. Schüssler Fiorenza includes studies of texts such as *The Book of Sophia*, *The Book of Norea*, *The Daughters of Job*, *The Gospel of Mary (Magdalene)*, *The Acts of Thecla* and *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, in an attempt to liberate the Bible from the boundaries set by the fourth century misogynist church fathers (Landman in Njoroge and Dube 2001: 89).

2.1.5.4 RETELLING AND RECONSTRUCTING THE PAST

In addition to the re-appropriation of the Bible and the extending of the canonical perimeters, feminist theologians and feminist historians attempt to resurrect women’s history and women’s position in historical society. Christina Landman (1996a: 3) deems this necessary, because for centuries religious history books romanticised Christian women, which haplessly resulted in political and social stereotyping. The past experiences of women endow us with specific life situations as the inception of critical reflection. Resurrecting women from the past allows feminist theologians to override the male voices of history and to listen to different voices, advantageously widening the scope to allow for a more inclusive re-appropriation of the past. “We are listening to, and reading from, historic documents written by women and are quoting from them” (Keane in Maimela and König 1998: 129).

Reconstruction accepts that the androcentric biases of texts distort the real situation of women. Jenny Dines (in Isherwood and McEwan 1996: 19) proposes that this can be overcome by reading between the lines and utilising the historical-critical and sociological interpretative methods. Extrabiblical texts and archaeology can also be used to contextualise historical texts. The advantage of this method is that it upholds the Bible as source of inspiration and resource. Karen King (in Schüssler Fiorenza 1994: 63) promotes the contextualisation of texts and applies a hermeneutics of suspicion in her reconstructive work. This allows for freedom to

imagine the contexts and contours of beliefs and experiences. It also invites the reader to remap the hierarchical and patriarchal power relations and identifies configurations residing in the narratives.

Retelling has the advantage of not having to make the difficult choice between either rejecting the canonical text or accepting a particular interpretation. Texts can be re-appropriated within the richness of human experiences and situations. Retelling also addresses the restoration of androcentric and patriarchal texts for presentation as a common and inclusive spirituality. A hermeneutics of suspicion must therefore be applied to base texts as well as interpretations and retellings. Retelling invites the reader to a participatory and open process of interpretation, contributing to a liberative and transformative spirituality of wholeness.

2.1.5.5 STORYTELLING

One method which feminist theologians employ is the powerful tradition of storytelling. This method is both empowering and liberative, because it is “one of retrieving and reconstructing muted voices with a specific aim in mind: to liberate a modern audience of religiously oppressed women” (Landman 1999a: 3).

Isabel Phiri, Devarakshanam Govinden and Sarojini Nadar (in Phiri, Govinden and Nadar 2002: 4 - 9) name five reasons for telling stories. Firstly, this activity complements and expands African church history and serves as a reminder that African women played a substantial part in church history. Secondly, storytelling happens from women’s perspectives and consequently shapes and reshapes female identities and images. In the third place, it transforms and redefines women from passive observers to active participants in history. Fourthly, because many stories are painful, storytelling becomes therapeutic and helps with healing and becoming whole. Lastly, it projects into the future with the hope of transforming the values and attitudes in church and society.

Christina Landman (in Njoroge and Dube 2001: 90 - 91) elucidates the point that storytelling is a unique contribution to feminist theology by African women theologians. African women’s theology is characterised by relationality and

interrelated tenets based on mutuality and holism that allow for a narrative theology *par excellence*. Their theology finds expression in a ministry of storytelling, by deconstructing the obstacles between theological meta-language and literary language. Landman proposes that African theologians can contribute by writing a narrative commentary on the Bible, in which stories are told and retold so that the reader can make “some contextual identifications with them in terms of relations, inter-relatedness and social practice” (in Njoroge and Dube 2001: 90). This commentary can then extend into a wider ministry of storytelling, enriching the liturgy, kerygma and counselling of the church.

2.2 EPISTEMOLOGICAL PARADIGMS

The epistemological tenets of this study include postmodernism, social constructionism, poststructuralism, process thought and the manifestations of power. I will proceed with a general overview of these tenets.

2.2.1 POSTMODERNISM

“There is a postmodern world emerging. In this area of understanding, the conceptions of reason and knowledge initiated by the era of Enlightenment (c. 1600 - 1780) no longer provide adequate answers” (Herholdt in Maimela and König 1998: 457). Postmodernism is a reaction to and a condemnation of modernism, which is an era where science and knowledge reigned. Modernism lays claim to universal truth, reason and rationality. Lyon (in Janse van Rensburg 2000: 3) describes the era following the Enlightenment as a period when differentiation in labour and increasing urbanisation existed. Secularisation followed which resulted in alienation, exploitation and loss of direction. The ideals and expectations of modernism, unlimited growth, consumerism, material prosperity and individual freedom were promises not fulfilled. In reaction to a meaningless existence in an unsatisfying utopia, a paradigm shift transpired, from modernism to postmodernism.

Postmodernism experienced a philosophical development over a long period and is characterised by fluid discourses, unfixed interpretations, open-endedness, holism, pluralism, relationality and participation. Richard Tarnas (1991: 395 - 396)

describes the postmodern mind as having “an appreciation of the plasticity and constant change of reality and knowledge, a stress on the priority of concrete experience over fixed abstract principles, and a conviction that no a priori thought system should govern belief or investigation.” Human knowledge is subjectively influenced by multiple factors and the value of so-called truths must constantly be examined. Reality is a fluid, open process and is continually influenced by changing beliefs and actions.

Postmodernism also critiques the comprehensive dualism that modernism brought about. The idea that truth is bound to objective information, expounded by the empirical scientific method, created a split between subject and object. The subject hence exists in an alienated, external world. Marius Herholdt (in Maimela and König 1999: 216) contends that modernism lacks an overarching, epistemic framework that includes human subjectivity as a part of reality. Postmodernism, on the contrary, views the subject as an embodied agent, existing in a context which can never be fully objectified. The subject can never be disengaged from the world, which forms the context for all behaviour and beliefs. Reality is furthermore construed in the mind; thus all “human understanding is interpretation, and no interpretation is final” (Tarnas 1991: 397).

The deferment of the subject-object dualism has led to the idea that not one absolute truth exists. This in turn has led to the suspension of grand narratives, which represent traditional explanations about truths and values. These narratives supposedly depict constant truths that can always be applied to all people and situations under all circumstances. Postmodernism revolutionises the idea of grand narratives, as truth is thought to be relational, not fixed.

Deconstruction is a “fundamental critique of humanist discourses and their conceptions of subjectivity and language” (Weedon 1997: 158 - 159). Deconstruction is a strategy that exposes the myth of fixed, imperative and timeless structures. Jacques Derrida, an important exponent of deconstruction, believes that hierarchical oppositions will always imply that one of the oppositions

is negatively laden. Through deconstruction these oppositions can be reversed and the effects of discourses can be shown.

Postmodernism and feminism have had a mutually beneficial relationship. Richard Tarnas claims that feminist attitudes have brought to the fore “the most vigorous, subtle and radically critical analysis of conventional intellectual and cultural assumptions in all contemporary scholarship” (Tarnas 1991: 409). Feminists examined and continue to re-examine academic disciplines and human reality in order to show how meaning is created and sustained. They deconstruct centuries of social and intellectual male dominance so as to permit the modern mind to consider transformation and praxis orientation. Frances Klopper (in Landman 1996a: 51) holds that postmodernism has liberative possibilities and empowering prospects towards freedom and reconciliation. The conscientised postmodern woman would seek emancipation through the empowerment of all and by deactivating the dynamics of power to the benefit of all.

2.2.2 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Two theories are currently vying with each other in feminist analysis, namely essentialism and social constructionism. Essentialists emphasise the objectively definable reality of meanings, claiming for instance that the body has intrinsic, given and fixed meanings. Essentialists ascribe a universality and consistency to meaning. In contrast, social constructionism comprehends humans as active agents influenced by social relations in structuring or constructing meanings and values. Meaning is therefore fluid and particular. These two viewpoints are not necessarily polar opposites and can both contribute to feminist analysis. This dissertation will embrace the social constructionist worldview.

Social constructionism is primarily concerned with the analysis of discourse and the ways in which meanings are formed, sustained or suspended in communal interchange. Gergen (1985: 266) states that reality is constructed through language in relation with others. He also propounds that language fails to map an independent world and that all ascribed meanings can be otherwise. This idea of different meanings can lead to a sense of liberation, because many

contemporary categories of understanding lead to pain and suffering (Gergen 1999: 48). As representation gains meaning from interrelationships and coordinations between people, this also holds liberative possibilities. People, relationships and culture can change, not by refusing or rejecting existing given meanings, but by “the emergence of new forms of language, ways of interpreting the world, patterns of representation” (Gergen 1999: 49).

2.2.3 POSTSTRUCTURALISM

Structuralism refers to an interdisciplinary movement of thought that was popular in the 1960s and early 1970s. The Structuralists resurrect the work of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 - 1913), which looks at language as a whole to find meaning. He argues that language is an active and dynamic social force, relative to the user's intentions and context (Janse van Rensburg 2000: 16). The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss applies de Saussure's ideas to culture as a whole and finds that all human relations are controlled by overarching rules. He also finds that these rules centre around binary oppositions such as male/female, good/bad and subject/object. Structuralists believe that these binary oppositions are imperative and that a specific order can be identified in the way language and society function.

Poststructuralism emerged in the late 1970s, arguably superseding the earlier structuralism. Poststructuralism sanctions the idea that all perceptions, concepts and truth-claims are constructed in language. This theory aims at deconstructing binary oppositions. Chris Weedon (1997: 12) describes the necessity of poststructural theory in order to do feminist analysis:

“The analysis of the patriarchal structures of society and the positions that we occupy within them requires a theory which can address forms of social organization and the social meanings and values which guarantee or contest them. We need a theory of the relation between language, subjectivity, social organisation and power. We need to understand why women tolerate social relations which subordinate their interests to those of men and the mechanisms whereby women and men adapt particular discursive positions as representative

of their interests. This is the agenda which a feminist poststructuralism might consider.”

Chris Weedon (1997: 20) produces a specific version of poststructuralism, namely feminist poststructuralism. She does this because some fundamental poststructuralist assumptions about language, meaning and subjectivity are not comprehensive enough to accommodate feminist concerns. She defines feminist poststructuralism as “a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change” (Weedon 1997: 40). She explores language as a key feature of poststructuralist theory. Language is the common factor in the analysis of all social organisation. Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organisation are defined and challenged. Language is also the place where subjectivity, the sense of the self, is constructed. Subjectivity results from a range of discursive practices and the meanings thereof result in a constant site of struggle over power. Poststructuralist theory proclaims that gender is socially produced and variable in different cultures. Poststructuralist feminist theory advances from de Saussure’s more fixed view of meaning and subscribes to Derrida’s⁷ ideas of constant change and the concept of *différance* where meaning is produced by difference and deference. Difference indicates continuous transformation, while deference denotes the actual postponement of the meaning of the present. For Derrida, text is dynamic and constantly moves and changes. Meaning can therefore only be found in the dynamic ever-changing text and context.

Feminist postmodernist theory takes cognisance of the institutional and social context of textuality in order to address the power relations in daily life. Language offers various discursive positions from which lives can be lived. Individuals can therefore be agents of change and challenge the existing power relations within social institutions and practices.

⁷ Jacques Derrida is one of the most controversial philosophers of the twentieth century (Kearney and Rainwater 2000: 438) and proponent of poststructuralist deconstruction, challenging the structuralist approach of Lévi-Strauss.

2.2.4 PROCESS THOUGHT

During the latter part of the twentieth century a number of new approaches have emerged on the theological scene, including process and feminist theologies. Although these two theologies cannot be identified with one another, the common ground and precipitation of conjoint ideas are discernible. Feminist theologians find process thought valuable to undermine dualistic thinking (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 34)

Process thought is associated with Alfred North Whitehead, who theorised that the world is relational and interrelated and that everything is related to everything else. To search for absolutes is a central mistake. Static reality is rejected and all actuality is seen as a process. Life is part of the dynamic process of evolution with humans as co-creators of the universe. Human decisions shape the future of the universe.

Feminist theology possesses several parallels with process thought, the first being the understanding of subjectivity. Process thinkers assert that reality consists of concrete actuality, dependent on other actual entities, but still maintaining subjective integrity. Social relatedness constitutes an experiencing subject, which is shaped by past history and present context. Furthermore, creative freedom exists in experience in which the contingency of transformation and liberation is found. "This way of subjectivity offers feminist theology a compelling way to interpret the dynamics of relationality in the construction of female selfhood" (Davaney in Isherwood and McEwan 1996: 190). Women are therefore both products of history and also creative and transformative agents of new histories.

Secondly, feminist theology's concern with women's experience as the source and norm of theological reflection has often resulted in assumptions of commonality of experience. Process thought sees all experience as unique with an integrity of its own, thus suggesting that all experience consists only of singular and particular moments (Davaney in Isherwood and McEwan 1996: 191).

Particular experience does not hinder analogous solidarity, but leads to the ability to perceive other perspectives and incorporate them in one's own experience.

Process thought also changes the way in which God is perceived. John Cobb (1976: 8) describes a traditionalist view of God where God is perceived as lawgiver and judge, absent and independent from the world and seen as unchangeable, passionless and absolute. Moreover, God is comprehended as determining every little detail in the world and establishing an unchangeable order for the world. God is also characterised as sexually one-sided: "God is totally active, controlling, and independent, and wholly lacking in receptiveness and responsiveness. Indeed, God seems to be the archetype of the dominant, inflexible, unemotional, completely independent (read 'strong') male" (Cobb 1976: 10). Process theology rejects this view of God and rather refers to God and the world in mutual relation, where God depends on the world as we depend on God (Isherwood and McEwan 2001: 84). This view is also prominent in feminist theology. Isherwood and McEwan (2001: 84) further point out that the idea of the world as a process removes the stereotypes of female sin. If the world was never perfect, Eve could not have caused the Fall and women cannot be the perpetrators of chaos in God's perfect world.

Sheila Davaney (in Isherwood and McEwan 1996: 191) feels that the tenets of process thought may provide some helpful directions for feminist theological reflection, while Isherwood and McEwan (2001: 85) propose that process thought may provide a strand that enables women to experience a living and moving God, rather than the "fossilized, absolute God of patriarchal religion".

2.2.5 MANIFESTATIONS OF POWER

2.2.5.1 DUALISM

The prevailing dualistic anthropological worldview has developed over centuries and has had a profound effect on thinking, epistemology and Christian theology. Dualistic thinking "operates as a rigid either/or dialectic that polarizes certain

values and attitudes in reified stereotypes” (Armour in Ackermann, Draper and Mashinini 1991: 162 - 163).

Classical Greek thought left the world with a model of dualism. Theoretical reason is split from practical reason, flesh is split from spirit and emotion is split from intellect. Dualism is a theory or a doctrine that surmises that two independent principles are related. These bipolar dualities include aspects such as male/female, culture/nature, mind/body and rational/irrational. This dichotomy resulted in the split between man and woman: man was linked to what is masculine, rational, transcendental, immutable and godlike while woman was linked to what is impure, sinful, mutable, chaotic and evil. Carol Lombard (1992: 47) quotes Rosemary Radford Ruether in this regard: “De idee van de inferioriteit van de vrouw heeft hier haar wortels”. Ruether (in Isherwood and McEwan 1996: 42) explains that androcentrism distorts all dialectical relationships such as good/evil, nature/grace and body/soul by modelling them on the polarisation of male and female.

Dualism thus sees reality in pairs of opposites where ultimate value is assigned to the first of each pair. It also promotes separateness. Clifford (2002: 19) proposes that such hierarchical dualisms must be challenged because they result in opposing relationships and oppressive behaviour. Grace Ndyabahika (in Kanyoro and Njoroge 1996: 28) also mentions Sallie MacFague who challenged theologians during the 1992 Earth Summit to shift their theological emphasis from dualism to holism and from authority to participation and community.

2.2.5.2 PATRIARCHY

Patriarchy is a core concept in feminist social analysis. The word patriarchy literally means rule by a father or fathers. In her definitive work on patriarchy, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Gerda Lerner (1996: 238 - 239) distinguishes between a narrow and a wider definition of patriarchy. The narrow definition outlines patriarchy as a system which was derived from Greek and Roman law and where the male head of the household has absolute legal and economic power over his

dependent male and female family members. She argues that the limited definition excludes the patriarchal dominance before antiquity and the different forms of patriarchy in the modern age. She, rather, defines patriarchy as the “manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general” (Lerner 1986: 239). Patriarchy is an ideology that affects society as a whole. Men hold all institutional power and women are deprived of that power. Rosemary Radford Ruether (in Hessel and Ruether 2000: 98 - 103) holds that the creation of patriarchal dualism started with the Greek philosopher Plato’s premise that mind divided from matter is the first state of things. Christianity perpetuated the idea that the relation of the soul to the body is like the male controlling the wayward female and her passions. Women are prone to subversion and insubordination and must therefore be controlled. Man and male attributes were seen as normative and the female as a derivative auxiliary; therefore the female is everywhere subsumed under the male. Gabriele Dietrich (2001: 17) points out that patriarchy touches all aspects of life, because it involves access to property, education, other basic amenities, the division of labour and the use of violence to control women’s labour, sexuality and fertility. The concept of patriarchy is so pervasive and fundamental in both men and women, that it is little wonder that women participate willingly and unwittingly in the perpetuation of patriarchy in society.

The dismantling of the distortive patriarchal structures is one of the primary tasks of feminist analysis. Feminist theologians identify and critique the preferred position of men, seen as willed by God, and change it into a mutually inclusive model of egalitarian relations.

2.2.5.3 FOUCAULT, POWER AND BODIES

Feminists are irresistibly drawn to the work of French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault, focussing on his theory of power and its relation to the body. The Foucauldian focus on the body as a site of struggle is in line with the feminist view of the body as the site of feminist struggle. According to Foucault the body is the

place where power relations are most apparent. He contends that the body is a historically and culturally specific entity. Foucault analyses the interaction between bodies and institutions, looking at how discourse restricts perceptions.

In *Foucault and Feminism* (1992) Lois McNay explains the affinity that feminists have for Foucault's work. His theory of the body, which states that the sexuality of the individual is an instrument of social regulation, can be applied in feminist analysis without reverting to the essentialism and biologism which encumbers feminist definitions of the body. Furthermore, his theory of the body is "formulated around a notion of discursive practice rather than around an ideology/material distinction" (McNay 1992: 25). The discourses regulating female bodies are part of pre-existent, ancient beliefs about the nature of female sexuality. Feminists use Foucault's view that the sexual body is simultaneously the principal instrument and effect of modern disciplinary power to show that the multitude of oppressions of the female body are at the core of the maintenance of hierarchical social relations. But, just as the sexual body is a site for oppression and the application of disciplinary power, the sexual body is also the site of resistance to that power, because discourse can also undermine and expose power, creating the possibility to subvert that power.

Although many feminists appropriate Foucault's theories because they emphasise issues such as sexuality, subjectivity and textuality, some feel that his views are rather limited in certain respects. Catharine MacKinnon (in Kemp and Squires 1997: 352) contends that feminist theory conceptualises social reality and that it must sanction experienced empirical existence, not just historical texts as Foucault does. Sandra Bartky (in Weitz 2003: 27) criticises Foucault for not distinguishing between the male and female experience in society, because the disciplinary practices that engender docile bodies function more radically for women than for men. In addition to this Lois McNay (McNay 1992: 47) also points out that Foucault's understanding of individuals as docile bodies, pushes women back into the realm of passivity and silence. Regardless of these criticisms, Foucault and his theories remain an important source for feminist research and analysis.

2.2.5.4 WOMEN AND CULTURE

Incipient feminist theology tended to be characterised by middle-class European and American values with Eurocentric frameworks. Contemporary feminist theology has become a global movement, as women from different cultures challenge the patriarchal gender paradigm and its manifestations in church and society. The resulting cultural awareness has paved the way for intercultural critique and has highlighted the influence of culture on women.

According to Honderich (1995: 172) the word culture can be used in a wide sense, where it includes all aspects characteristic of a particular form of human life, or in a narrow sense, referring only to the values implicit in it. The narrow definition hence refers to social custom while the broader definition includes social, political and economic practices. Kwok Pui-Lan (in Parsons 2002: 23) cites Mercy Amba Oduyoye's broader definition of culture as "a people's world-view, way of life, values, philosophy of life, the psychology that governs behaviour, their sociology and social arrangements, all that they have carved out of their environment to differentiate their style of life from other peoples". Culture has therefore become a site of struggle, for people who have experienced colonialism, slavery and exploitation to reclaim their cultural identity. Unfortunately the fact remains that liberation from colonial oppression did not free women from marginalisation, abuse and inferiority.

Louise Kretzschmar (in Villa-Vicencio and Niehaus 1995: 94) indicates that women can experience culture in different ways, ranging from suffering and bondage to liberation. In Africa women experience a myriad of problems, including low self-esteem, customs and traditions, family expectations and structures, lack of education, violence, church doctrine and practices and the patriarchal interpretation of the Bible. African feminist theologians add to the list. Musimbi Kanyoro and Nyambura Njoroge (1996: xiv) refer to the devastation of female clitoridectomy, the death rituals that abuse and humiliate widows and the negative effects of taboos and rituals on women and children. Bernadette Mbuy-Beya (1998) describes how poverty forces many women into prostitution, how childlessness leads to rejection and destitution and how such practices indicate

plainly that a woman's only rights are obedience and procreation. The humiliating practice of hospitality, where a wife is given to a guest for company or to a surrogate for reasons of procreation, is highlighted by Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001: 101 - 102).

Gabriele Dietrich (2001) writes from an Indian feminist perspective and focuses on female infanticide, dowry deaths, chronic malnutrition and caste and class oppression. She connects the women's problem with the ecological question and capitalist practices in India. Fran Porter shows how the interplay between women, culture and society in Northern Ireland manages to marginalise women in the spheres of the home, society and politics. Women are often excluded from structures through prohibition, by being treated as irrelevant or by being ignored, frozen out or snubbed. Women are generally not taken seriously: they are patronised, belittled, ridiculed and ignored. She nevertheless comes to the conclusion that women in Northern Ireland have been conscientised to "know that the question of women is about identity, power and theology" (Porter 2002: 221).

Globally women are united in their opposition to patriarchy and sexism and are concerned with the affirmation of women's full and equivalent humanity. Kretzschmar (in Villa-Vicencio and Niehaus 1995: 97 - 104) draws attention to a few strategies for transforming culture, including the development of self-esteem, creating solidarity, the conscientisation of women and overcoming silence. She concludes that women need to investigate and analyse the experience of religion and culture and to examine how their faith relates to their cultures if they want to transform their churches and cultures. Women should also identify and challenge the obstacles that prevent the naming and transformation of oppressive perceptions and structures.

Teresa Okure connects the transformation and prosperity of Africa to the will of the women to arise: "For Africa will not arise unless its womenfolk, the mothers and bearers of life, arise. What an awesome thought! What a heavy responsibility on our part!" (Okure in Oduyoye and Kanyoro 2001: 230). Women theologians in Africa face this responsibility squarely. Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001: 110) refers

to a spirituality of hope and transformation. It is in the light of this spirituality that African women hope against all hope and struggle for freedom from patriarchy and other oppressive societal structures. They fight for the empowerment of women in traditional cultures and expand the parameters of theological reflection in Africa. For Mercy Amba Oduyoye the way forward is to evoke women's cultural heritage of strength, undo the oppressive effects of culture and work towards the full humanity of all people in Africa.

2.3 FEMALE BODIES AND THE EARTH'S BODY

In the following sections the relationship between theology and sexuality, the connection between religion and the feminine sacred and also the unique face of female spirituality will be explored. Ecofeminism will also be contemplated.

2.3.1 A THEOLOGY OF THE BODY

Since the start of the modern secular feminist movement, research has been undertaken about how the female body affects women's lives. This has resulted in a large, diverse literature and a new field: the politics of women's bodies (Weitz 2003: ix). Lisa Isherwood (1997: 33) confirms that secular feminists have done much to show how and where women's subjugation takes place and to conscientise them about their oppression. They aim to liberate women so that they can make choices free of stereotypes and societal restrictions regarding womanhood. According to Isherwood (*Ibid*) feminist theologians are actually dragging their heels in doing the same in their field. Both Isherwood (1997) and Christine Gudorf (1994) agree that the development of a sexual theology is much needed. Gudorf maps out why such a theology is imperative: "Our society is in a crisis over sexuality, in part because the churches have been paralyzed in fear of stepping away from the confines of the Christian sexual tradition to develop a responsible sexual ethic" (1994: 1). Society looks to the church for moral guidance because of the church's proprietary interest in sexual behaviour, but the lack of response from the church leaves society inadequately equipped to deal with sexuality.

Definitions of sexuality have traditionally embarked on the issue from a biological essentialist position where sexuality is connected to genital activity. Today feminists regard sexuality either from an essentialist or social constructionist point of view. Essentialists claim that sexuality is universal and objectively definable. The body therefore has intrinsic and constant meanings with a transhistorical and transcultural essence. Social constructionists view sexuality differently, seeing the body as an agent of human activity, influenced by social relations. Sexuality is thus a variable over time and among different cultures. Carter Heyward supports the social constructionist view when she suggests that sexual relations and feelings are shaped by historical forces - "the same contingencies, tensions, politics, movements, and social concerns that have shaped our cultures, value systems, and daily lives" (in Nelson and Longfellow 1994: 10).

The patriarchal view of sexuality also needs to be explained. Paul Avis (1989: 124) points out that biological sexuality procured a sacred dimension under patriarchy. Procreation between the active male and the passive female recipient had a parallelism analogous to divine creativity. There was no place for the psychological, relational and communicative aspects of sex under hierarchical patriarchy. There was no place for the sacred union, sacramental of God, between the sexual union of the rational male as image of God and the unclean female, only derivatively in the image of God.

Rosemary Radford Ruether (in Isherwood 1997: 75) speaks of patriarchy's colonisation of women's wombs, where the patriarchal fathers twisted reality to suit their own needs. With procreation the ultimate aim of women's existence, they aimed to replace erotic self-determination with reason and rationality. Christine Gudorf (1994: 29) points out that procreationism is not only a Roman Catholic problem but that it is deeply embedded in Western history and culture, perpetuated by the church. She launches a scathing attack on the failure of the Christian church to regard sexuality as a life-affirming source; the Christian tradition has rather "become responsible for innumerable deaths, the stunting of souls, the destruction of relationships, and the distortion of human communities".

Carter Heyward (in Nelson and Longfellow 1994: 12 - 15) explains how the Christian church, linked with Western history, played a decisive role in the formation of Western sexual attitudes. The church did this with an obsessive, proscriptive and erotophobic attitude that lasts up to today. The capitalist control over sexuality is even more destructive today, manifesting in the production of pornography, prostitution, rape and sexual exploitation.

Feminism has tried to overcome the bipolarism of patriarchal thinking, which encourages the male-female duality and consequently views sexuality as disruptive of social order. The dualistic vision played a crucial part in devaluing the body and contributed significantly to the subordination of women. Lisa Isherwood (2000: 21) posits that religion should liberate us from the bodily constraints that it has helped to construct and perpetuate. Feminist thinking attempts to do just that. Body politics addresses the whole oppressive patriarchal structure and confirms that bodies and experience do matter. Bodies are affirmed as self-directive agents in the divine process (Isherwood 1997: 80). Sexuality is defined in terms of mutuality and fluidity, characterised by relationship, friendship, moral responsibility, dignity, personal fulfilment, communication, pleasure, tenderness and respect. Carter Heyward (cited by Webster in Isherwood and McEwan 1996: 215) interprets sexuality as follows:

Sexuality is our desire to participate in making love, making justice, in the world; our drive toward one another; our movement in love; our expression of being bonded together in life and death. Sexuality is not only expressed between lovers in personal relationships, but also in the work of an artist who loves her painting or poetry, a father who loves his children, a revolutionary who loves her people.

Sexuality clearly transgresses the boundaries of eros and the divine. For Audre Lorde the recognition of the power of the erotic can bring genuine transformation in our world, for we do not only “touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society” (in Nelson and Longfellow 1994: 79).

Christine Gudorf (1994: 14 - 28) outlines aims and strategies for creating a new theological framework for sexuality. Apart from the fact that a more critical appropriation of the authority of the Scriptures and tradition must be followed, the silence surrounding sex must be overcome. Christian sexual experience incorporates a variety of destructive beliefs and practices and often keeps silent about sexual dysfunction. Christians must be freed from this oppressive theological tradition. True sexual intimacy offers great insight into God's love (*Ibid*: 26) and allows us to appreciate the Incarnation more fully and meaningfully (*Ibid*: 27). Our reactions to God's gift of love and salvation are responses to our embodied selves. This is in line with Beverly Wilding Harrison's (Nelson and Longfellow 1994: 252) idea of sexuality as a true gift of God that contributes to a more deepened and holistic sense of ourselves.

Rosemary Radford Ruether (in Isherwood 2000: 51 - 52) propagates a new practice, an *ars erotica* for church, society and moral culture. This would imply developing the potential for sexual enjoyment, while integrating it into a deepening shared friendship. In addition to erotic delight, sexuality would become an expression of love, commitment, mutuality and accountability. Such an *ars erotica* will contribute to the development of healthy cultural norms and values and truly bring together the three loves of *eros*, *philia* and *agape*⁸.

2.3.2 TRAVERSING RELIGION INTO THE REALMS OF THE SACRED

In *The Feminine and the Sacred* (1998), Catherine Clément and Julia Kristeva enter into dialogue about the sacred and the feminine in a series of honest and open letters. They explore the feminine experience of the sacred in diverse countries and circumstances. The authors find the sacred in both the ordinary and the extra-ordinary. Both agree that the sacred transcends religion and is the connection between life and meaning. Religion is a human construct, while the sacred both predates religion and transcends time and space. The sacred thus shatters order and ideology. The porousness of the female body, the profound experience of poverty and the ability to create life, give women a particular link with the sacred. The sacred is often found where restrictions are imposed. The

sexual female body may answer with insurgency to these prohibitions, which change over time. The sacred ultimately belongs to the private sphere and very often signifies revolt against the marginalisation and oppression of women through culture and society.

Feminists also transverse the confines of religion and tradition by resurrecting the female face of God. Daphne Hampson and Beverley Clack are in agreement “that the time has come for feminists to explore the concept of God *without* the shackles imposed by male-defined and male-determined Christian theology” (Clack in Sawyer and Collier 1999: 151). Today, women “are on a quest for the hidden, denied, forgotten or distorted and mutilated Feminine Divine” (Schaup 1997: 97). Caitlin Matthews confirms that the West is exiled from the Goddess. This lost Goddess is Sophia, the Goddess for our time. “By discovering her, we will discover ourselves” (2001: xxv - xxvi). This statement is in line with the view of Sophia as a symbol of female existential becoming (Raphael in Sawyer and Collier 1999: 145). Other theologians⁹ see Sophia as a self-existent deity. Not all feminists support the Goddess movement though; rather, they criticise the image of God as being one of stereotypically male imagery and re-imagine new inclusive imagery and metaphors of God. It is clear that one group works from within to change existing traditions, while others work to create new spiritual alternatives (Christ in Parsons 2002: 82).

Both groups nevertheless work as a reaction to the supposition that maleness is the norm for humanity. Mary Daly famously contends that “if God is male, male is God” (cited by Christ in Parsons 2002: 80). Exclusive male images of God, such as father, lord, king, judge and warrior, were internalised and embodied by the kyriarchal-patriarchal power structures and resulted in the hierarchical, clerical, male, absolutist and elitist model of the church (Grey 2001: 10,13). The search for a holistic vision of the Divine can be undertaken from many positions, but the attraction of Goddess theology and female imagery of God is that those who have suffered under patriarchy can be brought to a new, healing space where the

⁸ Sexual delight, friendship and mutual service

female body and sexuality are valued, where diversity flourishes and vilified and despised female bodies are revered (Grey 2001: 33). Sophia “does not abandon us; she shares the hardships and suffering. But beyond everything, she enables us to engage passionately with the wisdom inside us” (Matthews 2001: 380).

2.3.4 FEMALE SPIRITUALITY

Ursula King (in Isherwood and McEwan 1996: 219) argues that feminist spirituality is a rich tapestry of great variety. She defines feminist spirituality as “the awareness of women’s own power from within, of a new empowerment which can be nurtured to effect personal, social and political changes”. Contemporary women discover their own true selves and agency and their experience of sharing and bonding. They are creatively busy re-imagining and renaming the sacred, and recognise the interdependence and sacredness of all life forms. Spiritual resources for feminist spirituality include experience, inner strength and intercultural and interreligious inspiration. Feminist spirituality transcends the individualistic and confining resources of the Christian tradition and is characterised by community orientation, holism, empowerment and connectivity.

Ann Carr (in Collins 2000: 379) argues that spirituality is larger than a theology because it is all encompassing and pervasive. Spirituality is deeply personal, but can also be projected towards an inclusive societal context. Feminist spirituality is different from any other spirituality because it is incarnate in feminist consciousness. Carr distinguishes between women’s spirituality and feminist spirituality. Women’s spirituality is related to nature, to the personal, relational, emotional and universal. Feminist spirituality, divergently, is “a mode of relating to God, and everyone and everything in relation to God, exhibited by those who are deeply aware of the historical and cultural restriction of women to a narrowly defined ‘place’ within the wider human (male) ‘world’” (in Collins 2000: 383). Feminist spirituality encourages the autonomy, self-actualisation and self-

⁹ The word *thealogy* comes from the Greek words *thea* (Goddess) and *logos* (meaning) (Christ in Parsons 2002:79).

transcendence of all humanity and advocates a conscious struggle and liberation from ideologies suppressing the authentic freedom of the individual and group.

African feminist theology is characterised by an extremely pervasive spirituality, interspersed with references to concepts such as a spirituality of resistance, a spirituality of transformation and a spirituality of empowerment. African Christians, particularly women, have a difficult cross to bear: poverty, oppression, violence, disease, premature violent death, hunger, torture, humiliation and rape (Njoroge in Njoroge and Dube 2001: 78). In the midst of this, feminist theologians find a spirituality that calls for peace and the transformation of Africa (Njoroge in Njoroge and Dube 2001: 81), a spirituality of hospitality (Oduyoye 2001: 100), a spirituality of resistance and transformation (Njoroge 2000) and a spirituality of hope and empowerment (Njoroge in Kanyoro and Njoroge 1996: 13).

Nicola Slee (in Parsons 2002: 176, 185) points out that feminist spirituality is a very broad-ranging movement, incorporating many traditions, forms and movements. It would thus be correct to speak of feminist spiritualities, which critique, enliven and transform institutional forms of faith. She also highlights another emphasis in feminist spirituality, namely that of an ardent commitment to the liberation of the earth. The exploitation of nature and the oppression of women reinforced and supported each other in the confines of patriarchal dualism. The liberation of women should contemporaneously result in a renewed relation to the earth, an understanding of the earth as the body of God and the immanent presence of the Spirit at work in the entire creation (Slee in Parsons 2002: 181 - 182).

2.3.5 ENCOMPASSING ALL: ECOFEMINISM

When Gabriele Dietrich (2001: 13) writes that the women's question is very directly connected with the ecological problem, she echoes the basic belief of ecofeminists all over the world. The term *ecofeminism* was coined by French

writer François d'Eaubonne¹⁰ in the twentieth century. Ecofeminism analyses the interconnections between domination over women and domination over nature (Ruether in Hessel and Ruether 2000: 97). Women have traditionally been identified with nature, and nature with domination by man. There is an obvious parallel between the patriarchal oppression of women and nature. Ecofeminists see the system of thought and values constitutional of patriarchal systems as the fundamental cause of the ecological crisis. The fact that *Homo sapiens* is hierarchically placed higher than other life forms, means that the elevation of *Homo sapiens* has taken place at the expense of other life forms and the earth's resources. The patriarchal, hierarchical, dualistic worldview is ever present and endangering the future of the planet. Ecofeminism aims at a better understanding of the interconnections between the domination of women and earth so that healing and transformation can take place and the sacredness of creation can be reclaimed.

In *Longing for Running Water* (1999) Ivonne Gebara, a South American theologian, explores theology from an ecofeminist liberation viewpoint. She sees a definite link between religious doctrines and the devastation of the world's ecosystem. For her, ecofeminism is born in the struggles of daily life, culminating in a stance and an attitude against the forces that contribute to the destruction of human dignity. Ecofeminism favours interdependence and a relatedness that encompasses humanity, nature, the powers of the earth and the cosmos. The destructiveness pervasive in all societies can only change if recognition of relatedness to all that exists is created.

Gebara questions the role religion plays in our lives, because religion is often without mutuality, love and mercy. Religion often represents a world of perfection removed from our struggles and realities. She deplores the growth of violence and individualism worldwide. The environmental pollution and destruction of resources are linked to Western thought and hierarchical, patriarchal Christianity. Ecofeminism represents the restoration of the earth and the dignity of humans. A qualitative change and a different perception of reality are needed to break the

¹⁰ She introduced ecofeminism in her book *Le Féminisme ou la mort* (1974)

cycle of destruction. A respect for diversity, for the interconnectivity of all beings and divinity with creation and a respect for all life is needed. Humans have a moral responsibility towards the Sacred Body¹¹ of the earth and can turn from an ecological disaster to live an abundant life, which celebrates the inherent divinity and beauty of all creation. Humanity can be united by reconstructing human relationships and living an integrated life of justice and liberation.

Gabriele Dietrich (2001) approaches ecofeminism from an Asian perspective. She sees a close parallel between the perpetuation of social violence and the encroachment of foreign economic policies, globalisation, the destruction of the land and the sell-out of Indian sovereignty. Asian feminist theology deals with the day-to-day realities and increasing poverty of Asian women. The author advocates a production of life rather than production for profit in the light of the Earth as the Body of God. She postulates that the struggles of feminist theology are all about the affirmation of life and God's good creation. The vision for a new life and relationships includes decentralisation, diversity, plurality of cultures and systems of knowledge. The regeneration of the wounded and emaciated earth must become the task of the wounded and emaciated people.

In many contemporary societies, there exist a profound quest for a sense of the sacred and a search for meaning in a time of trepidation and destruction. The forms, thoughts and patterns of traditions and cultures can no longer supply the answers, so a re-appropriation of insights and wisdom is necessary. "Ecofeminism is a religious event challenging contemporary theology" (Ruether in Hessel and Ruether 2000: 122).

2.3.6 THE TOMB IN THE WOMB: HIV/AIDS

Ecofeminism holds that the human person is relatedness (Gebara 1999: 115). Nowhere is this idea better illustrated than in the horrific destructive pandemic that is HIV/AIDS. The epic proportions of HIV/AIDS in Africa are almost beyond

¹¹ The idea that the Earth is God's Body as a way of re-imagining the relationship between God and the Earth, was created by Grace Jantzen (in *God's World: God's Body*) and Sallie McFague (in *The Body of God*).

comprehension. HIV/AIDS is exacerbated by unhealthy political, economic, social and religious factors; consequentially HIV/AIDS cannot be curtailed unless an all-inclusive and holistic path to health is followed. Women are affected the most. Sam Pick (2002: 42) indicates that 70 per cent of all HIV-infected people in South Africa are women. Johanna McGeary (in Eaton and Etue 2002: 4) warns that a woman risks her life “in every act of sexual intercourse”.

Pick (2002) contends that HIV/AIDS is the biggest challenge that the church has ever had to face and that the church has yet to deal with it. It not only contests traditional theological perspectives such as sin, forgiveness, punishment, hope and the church as the body of Christ, it also focuses on human sexuality, morality and the meaning of life. He challenges the church to break the silence surrounding HIV/AIDS and to create a climate of love, acceptance and support for those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS.

Christina Landman (2003a) develops groundbreaking theological insights into the HIV/AIDS pandemic. She uses the concept of relatedness as healing in the face of suffering and death. She deconstructs the unhealthy discourses surrounding HIV/AIDS and develops positive discourses about sexuality and spirituality for the infected and the affected. For her a theology of relations means a radical redefining of relations between the infected/affected, God, Jesus and other people. A narrow view of a jealous, disciplining and patriarchal God will have a negative impact on the infected/affected, while a view of a caring, passionate and compassionate Father will positively influence the infected/affected. An understanding of Jesus as Saviour and Healer will restore and recover human dignity, while a broadening of perspectives and the development of a new communal consciousness towards suffering will lead to a more inclusive view of the HIV/AIDS infected/affected and encourage compassion, healing and acceptance. She also promotes a theology of agency, where people disclose their HIV-status and speak out against the negative circumstances that contributed to their infection and thereby fulfil a moral obligation towards society. Lisa Isherwood underwrites the idea of agency and confirms that “[b]odies learn the deepest

lessons and empowered women can be the teachers” (in Hayes, Porter and Tombs 1998: 363).

The theology of relations and agency expounded by Landman is consistent with the ecofeminist theologies’ view of renewing and re-imagining relations and being agents for healing change. Anne Clifford (2001: 254) sees agency for change translating into a transformative praxis “that reverences creatures, including ourselves, because all are of God and in God”. Ecofeminist responses to the predicament of HIV/AIDS are thus to live compassionately and seek justice for all the living, suffering and dying.