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# Martha of Bethany: Beyond the Stereotypes

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In the chapter on Mary and Martha in her book *The Window of Vulnerability*, Dorothy Soelle comments:

As I was rereading the story of Mary and Martha, I remembered my childhood. In our Lutheran church in a suburb of Cologne there was a stained-glass window with the legend: "Only one thing is needful!" There sat Mary at Jesus' feet, tender, delicate of limb, humble of mien. Leaning on the table, feet apart, a mixing-bowl in her hand, stood Martha, her other hand lifted in reproach. "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone?" (Luke 10:40). I remember that I could not stand that story.<sup>1</sup>

Theologian Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel writes in a similar vein:

When I think of "Martha", a picture from a children's Bible comes to mind. In it, Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to him, while in the background Martha is leaning against the kitchen door with an evil, mistrustful look on her face. As a child, I always felt sorry for anyone called Martha... There is something noble about "Mary". "Martha" was rather common. Mary had an aura of holiness, whereas Martha breathed cooking and the smell of the kitchen<sup>2</sup>

Numerous others echo the same sentiments; Martha is variously described as a "fuss-budget", a "monster-mother", a "jealous fault-finder". Such "Sunday school" images dominate the popular imagination.

The brief vignette recorded by Luke in chapter 10:38-42 captures the imagination but is somewhat less than satisfying—especially for women who generally find it easier to identify with Martha than with her seemingly more pious sister. The protagonists come across as caricatures rather than real people. This situation is unfortunate but not surprising: the

tradition of viewing the two women as “types” can be traced back many centuries, although the underlying symbolism has evolved.

### Martha in Early Christian Literature

The name “Martha” occurs three times in the canonical Gospels, and is used of only one person: the sister of Mary and Lazarus. Luke records the incident noted above, in which Martha assumes the active role of hostess to Jesus and his companions (10:38–42). John notes that Martha and her siblings lived in the village of Bethany (11:1) and that they were loved by Jesus (11:5); their special relationship with Christ is highlighted in the moving account of Jesus’ raising of Martha’s brother Lazarus from the dead (11:11–44). On a later visit by Jesus to his friends at Bethany, Martha is described once again as serving the meal, while Mary anoints her Lord’s feet with fragrant ointment and dries them with her hair (John 12:1–8). The anointing of Jesus is also described in Matthew 26:6–13 and Mark 14:3–9, but these Gospels indicate that it took place in the house of Simon the Leper. As a result some commentators have suggested that Martha, the hostess, was Simon’s wife or widow.

Although no further mention is made of her in the New Testament accounts, extant gnostic and apocryphal texts suggest that the figure of Martha played an important role in religious life and thought in the early centuries of the Christian era. Origen (ca. 185–254) discusses the various gnostic sects in his *Contra Celsum* (5.62) and records that some derive their name from Martha. The First Apocalypse of James and the Manichaean Psalm Book bring together the names of Salome, Mariam<sup>3</sup>, Martha and Arsinoe, and in both texts James is advised by the Lord to offer encouragement to the women. Martha’s name also appears in one of the longest extant gnostic texts, the *Pistis Sophia*, which dates from ca 250 A.D.; while she is not as prominent a figure as is her sister Mary, she comes forward four times to comment on the revelations of the Pistis Sophia, a female wisdom figure, and each of her explanations is commended for its excellence: by Jesus in Book I and by the First Mystery in Book II.<sup>4</sup> The second Greek version of the Gospel of Nicodemus notes that Martha,

Mary Magdalene, Salome and other virgins accompanied the mother of Jesus at her vigil at the foot of the cross. A Coptic fragment—probably dating from the first half of the second century—is of particular interest; it relates that Martha, not Mary Magdalene, was the first to tell the disciples of Christ's resurrection. When she was not believed, she returned and sent Mary in her place. However, Mary was not believed either, so Jesus was forced to go to the disciples to announce his own resurrection.<sup>5</sup> Such texts provide insights into the traditions of the early Christian church and Martha's place within them, although the full extent of her influence is difficult to evaluate.

For the most part, the writings of the earliest Church Fathers contain few references to Martha. Those which do occur generally refer to the gospel texts. For example, Tertullian, in his treatise *On the Body of Christ* (7.9), mentions Martha in passing, as one who, along with "the other Marys" accompanied the Saviour. A sermon of Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150—ca. 215) admonishes the rich man of Matthew 19, using Martha's behaviour as an example:

And he [the rich man] was capable of busying himself about many things; but one thing, the work of life, he was powerless, and disinclined, and unable to accomplish. Such also was what the Lord said to Martha, who was occupied with many things, and distracted and troubled with serving; while she blamed her sister, because, leaving serving, she set herself at His feet, devoting her time to learning: "Thou art troubled about many things, but Mary hath chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her." So also he bade him leave his busy life, and cleave to One and adhere to the grace of Him who offered everlasting life.<sup>6</sup>

This emphasis on the contrast between Mary and Martha proved an increasingly prominent theme in exegetical literature from the early third century onwards. Many of the variations in interpretation resulted from textual variants found in early manuscripts, in particular that of Luke 10:42—Christ's reply to Martha when she expresses concern about the fact that Mary does not help her with the preparation of the meal. She is gently chided for her anxiety, but early manuscripts are divided as to whether "one thing only is needful", "few things are needful", or whether the phrase should be omitted altogether.<sup>7</sup>

Origen's homily on the Luke 10 pericope, dating from the early third century, provided a model for later interpretations.

He wrote that Martha symbolized action and Mary, contemplation; neither action nor contemplation could exist without the other. Martha received the Word through her physical act of service; Mary received Him spiritually through her attentiveness to his teachings. Martha could also be seen as symbolic of the synagogue and the Old Testament laws, while Mary represented the Christian church, and the new "spiritual law" (cf. Romans 7:14). In addition, Martha was symbolic of the Jews, who observed the precepts of the law, and Mary, of the Christians, who "set [their] minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Colossians 3:2).<sup>8</sup> For Origen, Martha and Mary were representative of several contrasting concepts. His ideas were amplified in later interpretations; however, his identification of the two as "types" of the active and contemplative lives was particularly influential.

### Martha, the "Active Life"

Origen's thought was especially well received in monastic circles. Representative is the writing of John Cassian (ca. 365–435), who played an important role in bringing the ideals of Eastern monasticism to the West. Cassian himself spent ten or twelve years in Egypt and visited many of the anchorites. He expressed his views on the solitary life in his twenty-four *Conferences*, written between 420 and 430 and reputedly reports of discourses among Egyptian monks. He stressed such qualities as freedom from earthly ties, solitude and contemplation. Mary of Bethany was presented as a role model: for example, with respect to a monk's goal he noted:

To cling always to God and to the things of God—this must be our major effort, this must be the road that the heart follows unswervingly. Any diversion, however impressive, must be regarded as secondary, low-grade, and certainly dangerous. Martha and Mary provide a most beautiful scriptural paradigm of this outlook and of this mode of activity. In looking after the Lord and His disciples Martha did a very holy service. Mary, however, was intent on the spiritual teaching of Jesus and she stayed by His feet, which she kissed and anointed with the oil of her good faith. And she got more credit from the Lord because she had chosen the better part, one which could not be taken away from her. . . . The Lord locates the primary good not in activity, however praiseworthy, however abundantly faithful, but in the truly simple and unified contemplation of Himself.<sup>9</sup>

Augustine (ca. 354–430) referred to the Mary/Martha theme in at least twelve works. It is addressed at length in three: *Quaestiones in Evangelium in Luc 2.20*, Sermon 103 and Sermon 104. In these works, Augustine, like Cassian, emphasized the notion that Mary's response to Christ was preferable to that of Martha: she chose the one thing that was needful by focusing her attention on the One who brings all humanity into unity with Himself. However, Martha's activity was not held in total disdain:

For what, do we imagine that Martha's serving was blamed, whom the cares of hospitality had engaged, who had received the Lord Himself into her house? How could she be rightly blamed, who was gladdened by so great a guest? If this be true, let men give over their ministrations to the needy; let them choose for themselves "the better part, which shall not be taken from" them; let them give themselves wholly to the word, let them long after the sweetness of doctrine; be occupied about the saving knowledge; let it be no care to them, what stranger is in the street, who there is that wants bread, or clothing, or to be visited, to be redeemed, to be buried; let works of mercy cease, earnest heed be given to knowledge only. If this be "the better part," why do not all do this, when we have the Lord Himself for our defender in this behalf?... And yet it is not so; but as the Lord spake so it is. So mark; "Thou art occupied about many things, when one thing is needful. Mary hath chosen the better part." Thou hast not chosen a bad part; but she a better... The Lord then did not blame Martha's work, but distinguished between their services.<sup>10</sup>

Martha's activity was considered by Augustine as representative of life in this world, while Mary's foreshadowed that in the world to come:

Ye see then, dearly Beloved, and, as I suppose, ye understand already, that in these two women, who were both well pleasing to the Lord, both objects of His love, both disciples; ye see... that in these two women the two lives are figured, the life present, and the life to come, the life of labour, and the life of quiet, the life of sorrow, and the life of blessedness, the life temporal, and the life eternal... What Martha was doing, that we are now; what Mary was doing, that we hope for. Let us do the first well, that we may have the second fully.<sup>11</sup>

This and other passages in his works seem to imply St. Augustine regarded the *vita contemplativa* as a reward given only in eternity, and as something separate from *vita activa*, the temporal struggle to earn it. However, numerous other passages suggest otherwise. The contemplative life can begin on

earth, although it will only reach full completion at the end of this world.

These two broad avenues of interpretation—according to which the sisters from Bethany were seen as either representative of (a) alternative responses to God's Word, with Martha's role portrayed as the inferior one, or (b) progressive levels of spiritual development, with Martha's role considered inferior but necessary—dominated exegetical thought on the Mary-Martha pericope during most of the later Middle Ages.<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that there were not dissenting voices, ones which described Martha in more positive terms. A number of writers saw the two "lives" as complementary.

This notion had appeared as early as the fourth century. In his treatise on the gospel of Luke, Ambrose of Milan (ca. 339–397) distinguished between "intentio visionis", i.e. the quality of seeing or focusing attention upon something, and "actio", or action. He noted that the two did not occur simultaneously but that they were intimately linked (I,8). The one inevitably led to the other: if Martha had not first heard the Word, she would not have been spurred to service. Likewise, the contemplation of Mary later inspired her to act: John 12:3 describes how she washed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair (I,9). When considering the Luke 10:38–42 pericope specifically, Ambrose noted that Mary's attitude of contemplation was particularly commended by Christ, and that she thus served as an example for all believers (VII,85). However, Martha's service should not be held in disdain. Citing I Corinthians 12, Ambrose presented the image of the church as one body with many members, and each member had need of the others. Wisdom resided in the head and activity in the hands, but all parts of the body were held in honour (VII,86).

The interpretation of Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604) grew out of that of Augustine. Gregory maintained that progress towards and, to some extent, attainment of, the goal of perfection was possible in the earthly life, and was not reserved for some future realm. For Gregory the active life involved the exercise of the moral virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance, while the contemplative life was focused on the theological virtues: faith, hope and charity (cf. *Homilies on Ezekiel II*, iv, 4). Like Augustine, Gregory believed that the active life was necessary in this world, an essential counterpart

to the contemplative life. Moreover, he went on to suggest that it was possible to enter heaven by the pursuit of the active life alone:

For the two lives, the active and the contemplative, when they be preserved in the soul, are accounted as two eyes in the face. Thus the right eye is the contemplative life, and the left the active life...When thou are not qualified for the contemplative life by a fitting degree of discretion, keep more safely to the active alone, and when thou failest in that which thou choosest as great, be content with that which thou heedest as very little, that if by the contemplative life thou art forced to fall from the knowledge of the truth, thou mayest by the active life alone be able to enter into the kingdom of heaven at least with one eye.<sup>13</sup>

Still, the ideal state was the union of the two lives, based on the model of Christ Himself:

He set forth in Himself patterns of both lives, that is, the active and the contemplative, united together. For the contemplative differs very much from the active. But our Redeemer by becoming Incarnate, while He gave a pattern of both, united both in Himself. For when he wrought miracles in the city, yet continued all night in prayer on the mountain, He gave His faithful ones an example not to neglect, through love of contemplation, the care of their neighbours; nor again to abandon contemplative pursuits through being too immoderately engaged in the care of their neighbours; but so to keep it together in the mind, in applying it to the two cases, that the love of their neighbour might not interfere with the love of God, nor again the love of God cast out, because it transcends, the love of their neighbour.<sup>14</sup>

The two lives existed simultaneously in the Christian striving for spiritual perfection.

The intimate relationship between contemplation and action was analyzed at some length in the *Summa Theologiae* of the Dominican friar Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–1274).<sup>15</sup> He notes that there are many arguments to support the position that the contemplative life is superior to the active, but that “in some circumstances and in some particular respect the active life has to be given preference because of the needs of this present life”.<sup>16</sup> Also, “the practice of the active life is beneficial for the contemplative life in that it calms our inner passions, which are the source of the images which interfere with contemplation.”<sup>17</sup> In a later section of his treatise dealing with religious orders, Thomas argues strongly in favour of the kind of work “which flows from the fullness of contemplation,



such as teaching and preaching... this is better than mere contemplation. It is a greater thing to give light than simply to have light, and in the same way it is a greater thing to pass on to others what you have contemplated than just to contemplate." Those who engage in such activity have indeed chosen the "best part", followed in second place by those who engage in pure contemplation and finally by those who are merely "busy about external activities".<sup>18</sup>

The most radical interpreter of the Martha-Mary pericope in the later Middle Ages was Meister Eckhart (d. 1327), a Dominican preacher and mystic. He refers to the passage in several of his sermons, but his Sermon 86 is particularly original in its thought. The traditional interpretation is totally reversed: Eckhart proclaims outright that Martha and the active life she represents, is the more worthy of emulation. Martha is seen as the older and more mature of the two sisters. With respect to her request that Christ ask her sister to help her, Eckhart writes:

Martha did not say this out of spite. Rather, she said it because of endearment... We might call it affection or playful chiding. Why? Note what follows. She realized that Mary had been overwhelmed by a desire for the complete fulfillment of her soul. Martha knew Mary better than Mary Martha, for Martha had lived long and well; and living gives the most valuable kind of knowledge... Mary was so full of longing. She longed for she knew not what, and wanted she knew not what. We harbor the suspicion that dear Mary was sitting there more for her enjoyment than for spiritual profit. Therefore Martha said, "Lord, tell her to get up," because she feared that she would remain stuck in this pleasant feeling and would progress no further... Martha was afraid that her sister would remain clinging to consolation and sweetness, and she wished her to become as she herself was. This is why Christ said, "She has chosen the best part," as if to say, "Cheer up, Martha; this will leave her. The most sublime thing that can happen to a creature shall happen to her: She shall become as happy as you."<sup>19</sup>

He also explains that Christ named Martha twice to indicate that she "possessed completely everything of [both] temporal and eternal value that a creature should have".<sup>20</sup>

### **Martha, the Worker**

A number of the Protestant Reformers questioned the traditional stereotypes of Martha and Mary as "the active and the

contemplative lives". Both Calvin and Luther denounced the notion that worldly activity could be a means of justification. At the same time, however, both were soundly convinced of the value of work. This necessitated reinterpretation of the Luke 10 pericope in order to avoid any suggestion that God did not approve of those who engaged in an "active life".

Book Three of Jean Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559) examines "The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ: What Benefits Come to Us from It, and What Effects Follow". Calvin proclaims that the righteous are justified by God alone. Faith is the instrument for receiving righteousness and "faith rests entirely upon God's mercy without the assistance of works".<sup>21</sup> Whole chapters are devoted to the topics "Boasting About the Merits of Works Destroys Our Praise of God for having Bestowed Righteousness as Well as Our Assurance of Salvation" and "Works Righteousness Is Wrongly Inferred from Reward". Good works are, nevertheless viewed as "gifts from God from which [the saints] recognize his goodness and ... signs of the calling by which they realize their election".<sup>22</sup>

Calvin makes no specific reference to the Luke 10 pericope in the *Institutes*, but refers to it in his *Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke*. He notes that it does not refer to the dichotomy between a life of action and one of contemplation:

Now this passage has been wickedly perverted to commend what is called the contemplative life. But if we aim at bringing out the genuine sense, it will appear that Christ was far from intending that His disciples should devote themselves to idle and frigid speculations. It is an ancient error that those who flee worldly affairs and engage wholly in contemplation are leading an angelic life... But we know that men were created to busy themselves with labour and that no sacrifice is more pleasing to God than when each one attends to his calling and studies to live well for the common good.<sup>23</sup>

Good works are the fruit of righteousness, the signs of God's calling. Martha's hospitality is reproached only because she is over-zealous in her activity. She "goes too far and is extravagant" whereas "Christ preferred frugality and moderate meals, so that the godly housewife should not be put to a lot of work". Secondly, "Martha left Him and was busy with unnecessary tasks and so made Christ's coming useless so far as she was concerned... It was just as if someone received a prophet with

honour but did not trouble to listen to him, but swamped his teaching by a great and superfluous preparation." And finally, "Martha thought she was in the right in all this bustling activity and so despised her sister for her godly desire to learn."<sup>24</sup> Calvin concludes by noting that Christ's comment "Mary hath chosen the good part" does not imply that a comparison should be made between Mary and her sister, "as foolish and absurd expositors image. Christ is only saying that Mary has occupied herself in a holy and useful study."<sup>25</sup> The Christian is called to be receptive to God's presence and worldly distractions should not be allowed to distract him or her from this end.

Martin Luther's assessment of Martha is much harsher than that of Calvin. Several passages in his writings state explicitly that he sees her as the epitome of "works justification"; for example,

Where the question is how to become a Christian and how to be delivered from sin, death and the devil, I must not discourse on the righteousness of the Law, on good works, on obedience to father and mother, on the giving of alms, or on entering a cloister, etc. Here it is of prime importance for me to listen to none but the Preacher. Thus we hear Christ the Lord telling Martha in the Gospel (Luke 10:42): "One thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion. You, Martha, are anxious about many things; you are busy. It is fine to work, to manage house and home, to be a burgomaster, to be a servant, to be a pastor. But this will not attain the goal. Mary has chosen and found the right thing to do. She is sitting at My feet and listening to what I am saying. This is proper; this is the right thing. This is the secret, just hear Me. This alone does it. Later on Mary will also do what you are doing now, solicitous Martha. That will all be attended to in good season." For this reason it is so important to distinguish between the righteousness of works and the righteousness of faith.<sup>26</sup>

However, other passages in his works suggest that Luther considered "Mary-like" behaviour appropriate for men but not for women. If one examines his views of woman's "proper" role, the less praiseworthy Martha more closely resembles his "ideal" female—the housewife who tends to the domestic needs of her family and guests.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately Luther's tendency to downplay women's capacity to comprehend and appreciate the subtleties of the Christian faith was widely held, both in his own and subsequent times.

## Martha, the Unacceptable Woman

The majority of commentators on the Martha-Mary story in the last twenty years have been influenced, at least to some degree, by the women's movement. A new stereotype is now evident. Martha and her sister are frequently seen not merely as "types"—whose gender is immaterial—but as "female types".

Gail Ransom interprets the story as a modern parable presenting a challenge to women today. Her sermon in poetic form entitled "Chafing Dish, Apron Strings" views Martha in a way which is simultaneously sympathetic and damning:

My heart goes out to Martha. She and I are sisters, cut from the same fabric.

Anxious to serve.

Anxious about many things.

Attempting to show hospitality and warmth through what we do rather than who we are.

... Martha and I have much company.

Perhaps you.

Are you anxious about many things?

Attempting to dish out according to cultural requirements?

Serving systems which promise great favors for your obedience—high paying jobs, social status, a sense of belonging?

We Marthas can easily fool ourselves into thinking that we are serving society, progress, the common good—or, yes, even ourselves—through our frantic, fractured, distracted efforts.

... Better to pile up the packages, the cookie jars, the coffee mugs, the rock and roll, the TV set, the shopping malls, the Hallmark cards, the birthday gifts, the three-piece suits, the six-course meals—than face each other as merely human, fully present, ready to be touched, changed, moved by the presence of another, by the presence of an incarnate God.

But Mary did it. What a brave woman she was! Perhaps she knew her need so intensely that she could not do otherwise, only listen and learn, listen and learn, listen and learn as a parched sojourner thirsty for the Way.

... We are called to likewise, to leave our kitchens and chafing dishes, to unwrap our apron strings and sit at the feet of Jesus, God-with-us, to listen and learn, listen and learn.<sup>28</sup>

Interpretations of this type are disturbing in that they seem to advocate, intentionally or otherwise, that women's traditional

roles and activities—ones which many women have found and continue to find fulfilling—are unacceptable and outmoded.

Fortunately, other writers consider Martha within the framework of the “traditional” stereotype but present a more balanced view of her contributions to society. Ben Witherington, III considers the Martha-Mary story within its cultural context. He suggests that it has a sound basis in historical fact, i.e., the situation in first century Palestine, even though Luke has written and presented the narrative in his own language and style. He goes on to note that

while Mary is taking on the not so traditional role of disciple, Martha is engaged in what some would call “women’s work”—providing hospitality for her guest...[Jesus’] remarks [in response to Martha’s complaints] are neither an attempt to devalue Martha’s efforts at hospitality, nor an attempt to attack a traditional woman’s role; rather, Jesus defends Mary’s right to learn from Him and says this is the crucial thing for those who wish to serve Him. Jesus makes clear that for women as well as men, one’s primary task is to be a proper disciple; only in that context can one be a proper hostess... Martha’s service is not denigrated but it does not come first. One must reorientate one’s lifestyle according to what Jesus says is the “good portion”.<sup>29</sup>

Witherington, like Calvin, concludes that work, including that traditionally associated with women, is valuable as long as one’s priorities are in order. In his later discussion of Jesus’ women followers, he notes that

being Jesus’ disciples did not lead these women to abandon their traditional roles in regard to preparing food, serving, etc. Rather it gave these roles new significance and importance, for now they could serve the Master and the family of faith. The transformation of these women involved not only assuming new discipleship roles, but also resuming their traditional roles for a new purpose.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, from the tone of this, and other passages in his exegesis, one might draw the conclusion that Witherington views the traditional roles as the “best” for women.

A quite different interpretation of the Luke 10 pericope is offered by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who explores the Martha and Mary story within the context of the early Christian housechurch, i.e., the Lukan community. Like a modern-day Meister Eckhart, she sees Martha as a positive role model for women: she considers the relationship between Martha as host and Jesus as guest one of independent equals, while that

between Jesus and Mary is one of master and subordinate student. The Lukan Jesus' favouring of the "dependent" woman represents the evangelist's androcentric notions of what the role of women should be; the *silent* woman receives positive approval while the woman who argues for her own interests is silenced. It is also noted that "the text does not say that Martha is in the kitchen preparing and serving a meal but that she is preoccupied with *diakonia* and *diakonein*, terms that in Luke's time had already become technical terms for ecclesial leadership." Thus the treatment of Martha as recorded by Luke "appeals to a revelatory word of the resurrected Lord in order to restrict women's ministry and authority. Its rhetorical interests are to silence women leaders of housechurches who like Martha might have protested, and at the same time to extol the silent and subordinate behavior of Mary."<sup>31</sup> The real 'villain' in Schüssler Fiorenza's interpretation of the story is the storyteller: "it is not the Kyrios but the writer of Lk. 10:38-40 who promotes such patriarchal restrictions."<sup>32</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza concludes her analysis with two examples of a "hermeneutics of creative actualization": "alternate" versions of the Mary and Martha story "articulated in terms of women's contemporary experience", "feminist re-telling[s]...that allow us to discard the message that divides, subordinates and alienates one sister from another".<sup>33</sup> In these reconstructions both Martha and her sister are portrayed as leaders and disciples, women whose voices no longer need to be heard through the intermediary of male authority figures and who demand to be treated as equals by the men around them.

### Recovering Martha

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is only one of a number of modern commentators who have attempted to "rediscover", "resurrect" or "re-vision" Martha. In doing so, most move beyond the Luke 10 passage rather than considering it in isolation. Luke's story is considered in relationship to other texts which deal with the sisters from Bethany. Of particular importance in this respect is John 11. Earlier interpreters tended to consider it as the account of Jesus' miracle of the raising of Lazarus; however the passage can also be seen as the record of Martha's confession of faith in Christ, one which is comparable

to that of Peter in Matthew 16:16. As Raymond Brown has commented:

The most famous incident in which Peter figures during the ministry of Jesus (and his other claim to primacy besides that of witnessing the first appearance of the risen Jesus) is the confession he made at Caesarea Philippi, especially in its Matthean form (16:16): "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Already the disciples had generally confessed Jesus as a "Son of God" (no definite article in Mt. 14:33), but it is Peter's more solemn confession that wins Jesus' praise as a statement reflecting divine revelation. The closest parallel to that confession in the four Gospels is found in Jn 11:27: "You are the Christ, the Son of God;" and it appears on the lips of a woman, Martha, sister of Mary and Lazarus. (And it comes in the context of a major revelation of Jesus to Martha; it is to a woman that the mystery of Jesus as the resurrection and the life is revealed!) Thus, if other Christian communities thought of Peter as the one who made a supreme confession of Jesus as the Son of God... the Johannine community associated such memories with heroines like Martha.<sup>34</sup>

Other writers have "rediscovered" the Martha of legend, a woman whose cult was widespread in the later Middle Ages. The four extant Latin "lives" of the saint and their numerous vernacular versions, present "biographical" details not found in the gospels; these present the picture of a woman of great strength and accomplishment.<sup>35</sup>

To summarize briefly, all four texts begin with an account of Martha's family background, and include, to varying degrees, references to her activities as recorded in the New Testament. Next, all describe with differing amounts of detail the dispersion of the apostles after Christ's ascension, and, in particular, the journey of Martha to Provence with her sister Mary Magdalene<sup>36</sup> and other companions, their arrival at Marseille and their work of conversion among the people of the region surrounding Aix.

Central to all versions of Martha's life is the account of her battle with the dragon of Tarascon. This huge beast, half animal and half fish, had long terrorized the countryside, devouring passersby and overturning ships. It is described as a descendant of the mighty Leviathan, mentioned in the book of Job (40:23, 41:1) and of an animal known as the bonasus.<sup>37</sup> Because the natives had been unable to destroy it, they called upon Martha for help. She encountered the dragon in the forest, confronted it with a cross and holy water, and subdued

it, whereupon it was finally slain by the people. Subsequently, because the dragon was known as "Tirascurus", the name of the place was changed to Tirasconus or Tarascon.<sup>38</sup>

Following her victory over the beast, Martha lived in austerity at Tarascon, where she was joined by a group of disciples who formed a religious community around her. Martha performed many miracles, including reviving a young man who had drowned and the changing of water into wine at a banquet held to celebrate the dedication of her home as a basilica.

Martha was forewarned of her death a year in advance. On the eighth day before her death, she had a vision of angelic choirs bearing the soul of her sister Mary to heaven. Knowing then that her own death was imminent, she encouraged and instructed her companions. In the middle of the night before the day of her death those keeping watch fell into a deep sleep. A sudden violent gust of wind extinguished the lamps and a crowd of evil spirits gathered around Martha. The watchers awoke and rushed out to find a flame to rekindle the lamps. During their absence, Mary Magdalene appeared and relit the candles and lamps with her own torch. Christ himself then entered into Martha's presence and encouraged her.

On the day of her death, Martha was carried outside and placed on a bed of ashes. She asked that the account of the Lord's Passion be read to her and at the words "Father, into your hand I commend my spirit," she died. Her funeral was conducted by Christ and Bishop Fronto of Périgueux, who was miraculously transported to Tarascon when he fell asleep during a mass at his own church.<sup>39</sup> After Martha's burial, numerous miracles took place at her tomb, including the healing of Clovis, king of the Franks.<sup>40</sup>

Among those familiar with the legendary Martha, her image as one who defies dragons has captured in particular the modern imagination, just as it did in the Middle Ages. At that time, the story was likely interpreted literally, although the medieval mind would also have understood the dragon in an allegorical context, as symbolic of the devil or the forces of evil. Modern commentators have interpreted "the dragon" in a number of ways: it can be seen as symbolic of various kinds of forces which oppress. Dorothy Soelle, for example, speaks of Martha's spirit as being evident in all



strong women of my generation who act unflinchingly and struggle against the dragon that controls us. They have broken openly and unequivocally with the racists in South Africa; they stand in front of the big stores and they talk with the people in the little shops on the corner; they call on the bank directors; they say loudly and unambiguously what they think.<sup>41</sup>

Another path is to interpret the dragon/serpent imagery not in terms of something which is intrinsically evil but rather as symbolic of the earth and the forces of nature; Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel compares the Martha story with the well-known legend of St. George of Cappadocia, later patron saint of England, noting:

The new element in the Martha legend is that it is not a man here who is armored, armed, a hero, a soldier, who conquers the dragon: it is a woman. Another new element is that the victory is friendly, without violence. Martha conquers the dragon by spiritual means, without weapons, without armor, and in bare feet, and binds the dragon with her girdle, the sign of purity in a patriarchy and the symbol of eros and power in a matriarchy....In the matriarchal consciousness the dragon is a source of power which is in bondage; it represents elements that are unconscious, driving and impassioned—all of which are positive and are to be integrated into human existence....To make it understandable for us personally, and to put it in modern terms, the dragon is what we fear and therefore hate and normally try to suppress. The other, non-violent way to get along with our fear is to integrate it, to accept it as part of our personality.<sup>42</sup>

Or, as Moltmann-Wendel states elsewhere, in the Martha legend “a woman symbolizes the victory over the unconscious, death, the threat, and she has conquered the dragon in a new way. She has not trampled it down, but bound it. Martha marks the symbolic beginning of another way of dealing with evil: not its annihilation but its redemption.”<sup>43</sup>

Such interpretations are controversial, and may even be considered theologically suspect by some. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that they are thought-provoking. They provide but one example of the way in which the consideration of Martha’s “full story” and the examination of the many roles she fulfils—hostess/servant, witness to Christ, preacher/evangelist, spiritual leader, mystic and visionary, miracle worker—reveals her potential to teach lessons far beyond those drawn from the stereotypical imagery suggested by studies based on Luke 10:38–42 alone.

## Notes

- 1 Dorothy Soelle, *The Window of Vulnerability: A Political Spirituality*, translated by Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990) 93.
- 2 Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *The Women Around Jesus: Reflections on Authentic Personhood* (London: SCM Press, 1982) 18-19.
- 3 Mary Magdalene's name appears in gnostic literature in various forms: Maria, Mariam, Mariamne, Mariham.
- 4 Bk. I, ch. 38 and 57, Bk. II, ch. 73 and 80. See *Pistis Sophia*, ed. Carl Schmidt (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978) 123-125, 223-225, 327-329, 353-355.
- 5 See *New Testament Apocrypha I*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher and Edgar Hennecke (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959) 189-227.
- 6 Clement of Alexandria, "On the Salvation of the Rich Man" in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, IV (New York: Scribner's, 1913) 594.
- 7 See Aelred Baker, "One Thing Necessary", *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 27 (1965) 127-137 for a more complete discussion of the problem.
- 8 Origen, *Homélie sur S. Luc*, tr. Henri Crouzel (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1962) 521, 523.
- 9 John Cassian, *Conferences*, tr. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1985) 42-43.
- 10 Augustine, "Sermon LIV" in Philip Schaff (ed.), *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, VI (New York: Scribner's, 1908) 429-430.
- 11 *Ibid.* 430.
- 12 For a more complete summary of the exegetical literature on Mary and Martha, see Aimé Solignac, "Marthe et Marie" in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique*, X (Paris: Beauchesne, 1932), cols. 664-672; Charles Baumgartner, "Contemplation", *ibid.* II/2 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1953), cols. 1643-2193; and Mary Elizabeth Mason, *Active Life and Contemplative Life: A Study of the Concepts from Plato to the Present* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1961).
- 13 *Moralia*, or *Exposition on the Book of Job*, 6.57; cited Mason, 63.
- 14 *Moralia*, 28.33; cited *ibid.* 66.
- 15 Cf. II.II, Questions 179-182.
- 16 Tr. Simon Tugwell (New York: Paulist Press, 1986) 577.
- 17 *Ibid.* 582.
- 18 *Ibid.* 629-630.
- 19 Ed. Bernard McGinn *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986) 338-339, 342.
- 20 *Ibid.* 340.
- 21 Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 3.11.19, pp. 1, 748.
- 22 3.14.19, *ibid.* 786.

- 23 Jean Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke*, II, tr. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 89.
- 24 Ibid. 89-90.
- 25 Ibid. 90.
- 26 Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1959) 247; Cf. *Lectures on Galatians 1535*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1963) 214; *First Lectures on the Psalms I*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1974) 127; *Liturgy and Hymns*, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1965) 14.
- 27 See Merry Wiesner, "Luther and Women: The Death of Two Marys" in *Disciples of Faith: Studies in Religion, Politics and Patriarchy*, ed. Jim Obelkevich, Lyndal Roper and Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987) 295-308.
- 28 Gail Ransom, in *Spinning a Sacred Yarn: Women Speak from the Pulpit* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982) 159-161.
- 29 Ben Witherington, III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus: A Study of Jesus' Attitudes to Women and their Roles as Reflected in his Earthly Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 101, 103. However, Witherington's comments are somewhat contradictory. While maintaining that serving at table is a traditional female role, he also contends that in a Jewish context women were not allowed to serve at meals if men were in attendance (101, 112) and thus Martha's actions might be considered as radical as her sister's. Furthermore Adele Reinhartz, a Jewish writer herself, suggests that many of Witherington's assumptions about the role of women in first century Judaism are open to question; cf. "From Narrative to History: The Resurrection of Mary and Martha" in *"Women Like This": New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991) 165-166.
- 30 Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, 181.
- 31 Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "A Feminist Critical Interpretation for Liberation: Martha and Mary: Lk. 10:38-42", *Religion & Intellectual Life* 3/2 (Winter 1986) 29, 30.
- 32 Ibid. 32.
- 33 Ibid. 34.
- 34 Raymond Brown, "Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel," *Theological Studies* 36 (1975) 693.
- 35 See Diane E. Peters, "The Legends of St. Martha of Bethany and Their Dissemination in the Later Middle Ages" in *Summary of Proceedings: Forty-eighth Annual Conference of the American Theological Library Association*, Pittsburgh, June 1994 (Evanston, Ill.: ATLA, 1994) 149-164.
- 36 From the late Middle Ages Mary of Bethany has been identified with Mary Magdalene in western Christendom, although this association is not part of eastern tradition.

- 37 This unusual animal was described by Pliny in his *Natural History*, Book VIII, 15.40. It was a bull-like creature, noted for its ability to produce massive quantities of dung so pungent that it scorched pursuers like fire.
- 38 Up to the present day a festival honouring the victory over the dragon is observed in Tarascon; it features a large mechanical reproduction of the beast. Louis Dumont's *La Tarasque* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987) provides an ethnographic study of the ritual.
- 39 There are many chronological anachronisms in the Martha texts, including the reference to St. Fronto, a fourth-century bishop of Périgueux. The reference to the miraculous participation of a saint at Martha's funeral may have been grafted into her legend as a result of confusion between St. Martha and the fourth century St. Martin of Tours. The account of the latter's funeral, as recorded by Gregory of Tours in the first book of the *Miracles of St. Martin*, is very similar to that of Martha, with St. Ambrose of Milan officiating rather than St. Fronto.
- 40 Again, the Martha/Clovis connection may have resulted from confusion between Martha and Martin. The latter was adopted by the Merovingians as their patron saint following Clovis' conquest of Aquitaine in 507, and Gregory of Tours notes in his *History of the Franks* that it was Martin to whom Clovis paid allegiance.
- 41 Soelle, *The Window of Vulnerability*, 96.
- 42 Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *Humanity in God* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1983) 25-26.
- 43 Moltmann-Wendel, *The Women Around Jesus*, 46.