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Recommended Citation

Elisabeth S. Fiorenza, *Public Discourse, Religion, and Wo/men's Struggles for Justice*, 51 DePaul L. Rev. 1077 (2002)

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/law-review/vol51/iss4/6>

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PUBLIC DISCOURSE, RELIGION, AND WO/MEN'S STRUGGLES FOR JUSTICE

*Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza**

INTRODUCTION

Man enjoys the great advantage of having a god endorse the code he writes; and since man exercises a sovereign authority over women it is especially fortunate that this authority has been vested in him by the Supreme Being. For the Jews, Mohammedans, and Christians, among others, man is master of divine right; the fear of God, therefore, will repress any impulse towards revolt in the down-trodden female.¹

Simone de Beauvoir's observation that male power and authority has been encoded in civil and religious law and sanctioned as Divine right echoes the indictment made by nineteenth century suffragists, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and has become a "common sense" understanding in contemporary feminism.² Religion has been seen solely as patriarchal and repressive, whereas law, education, and politics have not been abandoned as sites of feminist struggles, although their oppressive character also has been recognized. This recognition has spurred feminists not only to criticize but also to reform and transform these cultural discourses.

However, feminists have not extended the same consideration to religion. The first part of de Beauvoir's statement has spawned a new field of research, Feminist Studies in Religion, which has shown that

* I want to thank Rev. Craig B. Mousin for inviting me and especially for patiently prodding me to revise the lecture for publication. I also am grateful to my assistant, Ms. Laura Beth Bugg, for polishing my text.

1. SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR, *THE SECOND SEX* 621 (1949).

2. Because not only in the United States but all over the world readers still react negatively when they hear the word feminist, I need first to explain what I mean by the term. While many agree with the goals of feminism, they do not want to be labeled as feminists because they associate the f-word, feminism, with bra-burning, men-hating, crazy wo/men. The press periodically reinforces this prejudice. For instance, from time to time news magazines or other mass media ask, "Is feminism dead?" and the answer is usually a resounding, "Yes." In my mind, the best definition of feminism is expressed by a popular bumper sticker which, tongue in cheek, declares: "Feminism is the radical notion that wo/men are people." This notion appeals to the centuries of democratic struggles for equal rights and full citizenship and against the subordination and exploitation of women. It asserts: wo/men are not beasts of burden, sex-objects, temptresses, or goddesses but full citizens in society and church with equal power, rights, and responsibilities.

all discourses of Western culture have been shaped by biblical religion, especially Christianity.³ However, the conviction that wo/men⁴ in religion supposedly “lack any impulse toward any revolt” has resulted in the widespread feminist assumption that anyone engaged in religious community and practice cannot be a true feminist. Hence, societal and Christian feminist groups often seem to work in parallel on similar issues but do not seem to know much about or reinforce each other’s projects.

This seems to be the case because, like de Beauvoir’s negative assessment of religion, feminist theory has been inclined to eliminate religion from its projects of reform and has denied the feminist agency of wo/men in religion. Consciously or not, de Beauvoir’s conclusion that the “downtrodden” religious female will not revolt against such divinely sanctioned oppression is still widely shared by academic feminists. It has framed the discussion in exclusivist terms and, in consequence, has been disastrous for contemporary feminism’s relation with biblical religions because it denies the feminist agency of wo/men who remain loyal members of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. If wo/men who remain active members in biblical and other religions allegedly suffer from “false consciousness,” it is surmised they cannot really be true feminists.

II. RELIGION AND THE REFORM OF SOCIETY

The Jewish feminist theologian Judith Plaskow has pointed to the widespread suspicion in Wo/men’s Studies that anyone interested in religion must be either co-opted or reactionary, and she has argued that such feminist suspicion is not justified.⁵ Feminists and Feminist Studies in the United States continue to see religion within an Enlightenment framework that views religion as a soon-to-disappear remnant of the “dark ages.” This suspicious attitude towards Feminist Studies in Religion is regrettable for several reasons.

Feminists need to engage in an interdisciplinary study of religion because religion has played, and still plays, a key role in both wo/men’s oppression and their struggles for liberation. Hence, a central task of feminist studies consists not only in understanding the implica-

3. See, e.g., Angela L. Padilla & Jennifer J. Winrich, *Christianity, Feminism, and the Law*, 1 COLUM. J. GENDER & L. 67, 67-116 (1991).

4. Because language is so important for self-understanding and the understanding of the world, changing androcentric language is one of the primary goals of feminist theology. I write wo/men in this broken form in order to indicate the debate around the subject of feminism, “woman,” which stresses the differences between wo/men and within wo/men.

5. See also, Michelle M. Lelwica, *From Superstition to Enlightenment to the Race for Pure Consciousness*, 14 J. FEMINIST STUDIES IN RELIGION 108, 108-38 (1998).

tion of religion in the ongoing exploitation and disempowerment of the majority of wo/men but also in their active participation in social movements for change. It also must not be overlooked that to a much greater extent than feminist scholars in other areas, feminists in religion have sustained strong connections to wo/men's communities and movements outside the academy.

Much of the work of Feminist Studies in Religion has been generated by and for grassroots wo/men inside and outside organized religions who search for feminist spirituality and politics of meaning for their lives. Conversely, feminist scholars in religion, for the most part, have continued to be practically involved and to participate in traditional religious groups, wo/men-church groups, or Goddess and spirituality movements that have critically challenged and enriched biblical articulations and religious formations.⁶

A. *Wo/men's Struggles in the Nineteenth Century*

First, a similar argument that feminists ignore religion to their detriment was made last century by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who advanced a multidimensional political argument. In an article published in the *Woman's Tribune* on February 7, 1891, she maintained a four-fold segmentation of the American social order into the areas of family, society, politics, and religion. By comparing these four domains to the four strands of a rope, Cady Stanton articulated a complex vision of wo/men's oppression:

Here then is a four-fold bondage, so many cords tightly twisted together, strong for one purpose. To attempt to undo one is to loosen all . . . To my mind, if we had at first bravely untwisted all the strands of this fourfold cord which bound us, and demanded equality in the whole round of the circle, while perhaps we should have had a harder battle to fight, it would have been more effective and far shorter.⁷

As it was for Simone de Beauvoir, so also it was for Elizabeth Cady Stanton: religion is an important strand in the rope of patriarchal oppression. Although in Cady Stanton's view every form of religion has degraded wo/men, it is especially biblical religion, she argued, that has kept wo/men in subjection throughout the centuries. Religion is an element in public policy and the process of wo/men's socialization. It makes hetero-sexism and other instruments of dehumanization, such

6. Judith Plaskow, *We Are Also Your Sisters: The Development of Women's Studies in Religion*, *WOMEN'S STUDIES Q.* 9, 9-21 (1993).

7. MARY D. PELLAUER, TOWARD A TRADITION OF FEMINIST THEOLOGY: THE RELIGIOUS SOCIAL THOUGHT OF ELISABETH CADY STANTON, SUSAN B. ANTHONY, AND ANNA HOWARD SHAW 23 (1991).

as race, class, and ethnic and national prejudice, appear to be normative and ordained by G*d.⁸ Religion shapes not only individuals but the law and all other public policy issues as well.

However, unlike de Beauvoir, Cady Stanton argued that no serious reform of society in the interest of wo/men's emancipation will be successful if one does not seek to advance the reform of biblical religion at the same time. If suffragists believe that they can neglect the revision of the bible and the reform of religion because there are more pressing political issues at stake, Cady Stanton insists they do not recognize the impact of religion and the bible upon society and especially on the lives of wo/men.⁹

Because biblical religion has a great impact on wo/men's lives and shapes American culture, Cady Stanton argued that wo/men must study religion and interpret the bible differently. The traditional biblical world view ascribed separate, specific, and immutable social roles to wo/men in both the private realm of the home and the public and cultural realm. It required the subordination and/or complementarity of wives to husbands in the home and of wo/men to men in society. Such subordination is based on the view that wo/men are the property of men. Male ownership is justified in and through the story of Genesis 3 as the consequence and punishment for wo/men having brought sin into the world. These basic patriarchy, or more so kyriarchy¹⁰ (i.e., lord, master, father, husband, elite male power), determined assumptions of wo/men's subordinate status as second-class citizens are inscribed in the scriptures and replicated in legal and political culture. They compel wo/men to be submissive to and compliant with male violence. They foster feelings of guilt and self-blame in wo/men who have been sexually abused, battered, or raped.

In publishing the *Woman's Bible*, Cady Stanton sought to interrupt the conservative trend in the Suffrage Movement and tried to force the National American Woman's Suffrage Association (NAWSA) to engage in public discussion of this conservative social trend with its narrow political focus on the ballot, rather than on complete emanci-

8. My way of spelling G*d seeks to mark and make conscious this inadequacy of our language about the Divine. G*d is "in a religious sense unnamable" and belongs to the "realm of the ineffable." God is not G*d's "proper name." Writing the word "G*d" in this fashion visibly seeks to destabilize our way of thinking and speaking about the Divine.

9. ELIZABETH CADY STANTON, *THE ORIGINAL FEMINIST ATTACK ON THE BIBLE: THE WOMAN'S BIBLE* (1974). See also, *SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES: A FEMINIST INTRODUCTION* (Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza ed., 1993).

10. For the elaboration of kyriarchy, see ELIZABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, *BUT SHE SAID* (1992); ELIZABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, *WISDOM WAYS* (2001).

pation from the “woman’s sphere,”¹¹ as the feminine ideology of true womanhood or the “White Lady” as it was called in the nineteenth century.

In response to those who contended that a suffragist critique of religion and the bible was a waste of time or a political mistake, Cady Stanton argued that one cannot reform one area of society without reforming all others at the same time. Because “all reforms are interdependent,” one cannot attempt to change the law, education, and other cultural institutions without also seeking to change biblical religions. In addition, Cady Stanton insists it is important that wo/men suffragists interpret the bible and redefine religion because religious authority is, and has been, used against wo/men struggling for emancipation. Not only men but also wo/men have internalized the bible’s misogynist religious teachings as divinely revealed.

Cady Stanton and her collaborators on the *Woman’s Bible* utilized historical-critical theological scholarship of the time for proving that the bible is the word of men who have projected their own selfish interests onto it. Texts that speak negatively about wo/men are either mistranslated, misinterpreted, antiquated relics of past time or not true because they contradict the principles of reason and science. Throughout the centuries, men were also the bible’s authoritative interpreters; therefore, wo/men must now claim their right to biblical interpretation and theological articulation.

In short, against the advice and opposition of her suffragist friends, Cady Stanton asserted the political importance of wo/men’s biblical interpretation and religion. Hence, she deserves our respect and honor, although we must not forget that she also was shaped by the limitations set by her race and class privileges and could not quite overcome them. As Toni Morrison so forcefully has argued, racial (and I would add misogynist and heterosexist) ideology does not just have “horrific results on its objects” but also on the mind, imagination, and behavior of the masters who perpetuate it.¹²

Just as other Anglo-Saxon suffragists and social reformers, Elizabeth Cady Stanton was very much determined and limited by her social status and class position. To support her argument that elite wo/men’s suffragists would buttress the numbers of Anglo-Saxon voters, Cady Stanton resorted to anti-immigrant sentiments and anti-Catholic prejudice. When she exhorted American wo/men of wealth

11. For this interpretation, see Kathi L. Kern, *Rereading Eve: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and The Woman’s Bible, 1885-1896*, 19 *WOMEN’S STUD.* 371-83 (1991).

12. TONI MORRISON, *PLAYING IN THE DARK. WHITENESS AND THE LITERARY IMAGINATION* 11 (1992).

and refinement, she did not shy away from appealing to ethnic and racial prejudices: “[I]f you do not wish the lower orders of Chinese, Africans, Germans, and Irish, with their low ideas of womanhood, to make laws for you . . . demand that woman, too, shall be represented in the government.”¹³

Moreover, unlike Clara Colby for instance, Cady Stanton did not concern herself with labor problems and the different needs and struggles of African-American and Native American wo/men. Finally, the *Woman's Bible* uncritically repeats many of the anti-Jewish patterns and stereotypes prevalent in Christian popular and scholarly discourse of its time. However, Cady Stanton was right in insisting that to reject biblical religion as totally patri-kyriarchal would be to give up on the reform of a very important part of society.

African-American wo/men had already stressed the importance of religion as a source of empowerment and vision for change in the nineteenth century. In contrast to elite white wo/men, the point of departure for African-American wo/men was neither the struggle for wo/men's individual emancipation and personal self-development nor the indictment of biblical religion. Rather, African-American wo/men heard and read the bible and used the Christian symbol-system in the context of their experience of slavery and liberation. The womanist ethicist Katie Cannon has pointed out that in the last century, racial slavery was the socio-political context not only of African-American but also of white mainstream biblical interpretation. She identifies three ideological constructs that made it possible for white Christians to justify chattel slavery of Africans. As property, slaves were not seen as fully human; as Africans, they were classed as heathen savages to be saved through enslavement; and as Christians, white or black, they were expected to believe that slavery was divinely willed in the bible.¹⁴

Within this context of slavery and in resistance to it, African wo/men used the bible and Christian religion as (1) a “language” to express their hope for justice and (2) a “matrix” for the transformation of the self-understanding and self-esteem of those who had suffered from institutionalized enslavement. As with white suffragists and black men, African-American wo/men sought not only to resist the oppressive elements of Christian religion and the bible but also to gain valorization and authentication from them.

13. BARBARA HILKERT ANDOLSEN, *DAUGHTERS OF JEFFERSON, DAUGHTERS OF BOOT-BLACKS: RACISM AND AMERICAN FEMINISM* 31 (1986).

14. Katie Geneva Cannon, *Slave Ideology and Biblical Interpretation*, 47 *SEMEIA* 9, 11-12 (1989).

However, unlike white wo/men and black men, African-American wo/men spoke from a doubly disadvantaged location. As blacks, African-American wo/men had to address white audiences who doubted the human capacity of African-Americans for learning and religious salvation. As wo/men, they had to address audiences, black and white, who questioned both their ability to exercise authority and the legitimacy of their speaking in public.

To do so, African-American wo/men, such as Sojourner Truth, Amanda Berry Smith, Jarena Lee, Julia Foote, Maria Stewart, or the Quaker Elizabeth (of whom we know only her baptismal name), derived their religious authority not primarily from the bible and church teachings but from mystical experiences in which they encountered G*d or Jesus directly. It was this confidence in the privileged nature of their relationship with the Divine that allowed African-American wo/men to claim their own authority and to transcend the limits imposed upon them by the kyriarchal gender-race-class system of slavery.

The struggles of both African-American and Anglo-Saxon wo/men in the nineteenth century demonstrates that the struggles of wo/men in religion for their full citizenship are not just inner-church or purely intra-religious issues. Rather, they must be understood in terms of their socio-political location and function in an international context of globalization. We must not forget that religious ideas and discourses are embedded in socio-political situations, and they sustain or combat certain trends and aspirations of their societies. As Gregory Baum has observed, thinking is inevitably marked and molded by its historical location: "Ideas will have a relation to the existing social reality; they either draw attention to the unjust conditions that cause human suffering or, conversely, they withdraw the mind's attention from these problems and their human consequences."¹⁵

In the face of global cultural and religious fundamentalisms,¹⁶ feminists in religion contend that theological debates on wo/men's ordination, for example, are significant not only for religious communities. Rather, theological discourses are always implicated in structures of domination. Theological discourses collude in the production and maintenance of systems of knowledge and the media discourses that either foster exploitation and oppression or contribute to a praxis and

15. Gregory G. Baum, *Remarks of a Theologian in Dialogue with Sociology*, in *THEOLOGY AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES* 11 (Michael Horace Barnes ed., 2000).

16. For the fundamentalistic tendencies in Roman Catholicism, see John Darcy May, *Catholic Fundamentalism? Some Implications of Dominus Jesus for Dialogue and Peacemaking*, in *DOMINUS JESUS* 112-133 (Michael J. Rainer ed., 2001).

vision of emancipation and liberation. Hence, it is of paramount importance that feminists critically study religion not just as an oppressive discourse but also as a possible resource of power and strength in wo/men's lives.

B. *Wo/men in Religion*

Second, if feminists in law, education, or politics do not want to lose the gains that were made for wo/men in the past three decades, they have to learn how to distinguish between different forms of religion rather than entirely reject religion as oppressive. They have to learn how to support wo/men's struggles for justice within religious communities. They also must study feminist theological discourses in order to better understand the mindsets, belief systems, and social behavior of religious wo/men who are their students, clients, or defendants. As the feminist philosopher Caroline Ramazanoglu has pointed out, millions of wo/men appreciate religion as a source of meaning for their lives. Hence, she argues that feminists cannot afford to disregard the fact that religion still remains

the dominant factor in the personal identity and cultural location of millions of women around the world. If religion is one of the most important and immediate factors which enables a woman to know who she is, and to give meaning to her life, an international feminist movement cannot afford to ignore religion.¹⁷

In a similar fashion, Pakistani feminist Farida Shaheed has argued that Muslim feminists must operate within the religious belief system of Islam if they are to be effective. Feminist teachers, lawyers, or activists cannot and should not make religious wo/men choose between feminism and their personal religious beliefs if they want to effectively advocate legal, economic, or any other type of reform. In short, a "women's movement needs to be perceived as rooted in the cultural reality of the society in which it operates [D]iscriminatory laws sanctified through Islam cannot be effectively countered with arguments which deny or discard Islam."¹⁸ The same observation could be made with respect to Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, or Buddhism.

Feminists in biblical religions have played a major role in wo/men's struggles for justice. They have developed feminist theologies and studies in religion on the basis of their involvement in a feminist

17. CAROLINE RAMAZANOGLU, *FEMINISM AND THE CONTRADICTIONS OF OPPRESSION* 151 (1989).

18. Farida Shaheed, *The Cultural Articulation of Patriarchy: Legal Systems, Islam and Wo/men*, 6 S. ASIA BULL. 43 (1986).

movement that seeks to change the relation of domination and subordination. Hence, from the outset, feminist theology and studies in religion have made an explicit connection between feminist critique and social change. Feminist theology and studies of religion have become a variegated and vibrant field of inquiry that has moved from analysis and critique of male texts toward reconstructing wo/men's heritage inside and outside hegemonic religious traditions, as well as focusing on the constructive transformation of patriarchal traditions and the creation of new ones.

Wo/men's theological voice and religious authority have been developed through critical reflection on experience, consciousness-raising, and the articulation of feminist theology as a critical theology of liberation committed to feminist struggles for changing and transforming biblical religions. In the past three decades, feminists have been, and still are, engaged in multiple and variegated studies and struggles to change the hegemonic discourse of religion.

Some of these struggles include the following: the struggles/studies for equal rights and access to sacred power that seek to undo centuries of exclusion from ordination; the struggles/studies for reproductive rights and sexual self-determination; the struggles/studies for the rights of differently abled wo/men for wo/men's bodily integrity, moral agency, and personal authority; the struggles/studies confronting all forms of violence against wo/men that keep in place the colonialist exploitation of wo/men; the struggles/studies that seek to abolish or change death-dealing institutions and the languages of hate; the struggles/studies against exploitative power and sacralized hierarchical structures; the struggles/studies for envisioning and reconstructing radical democratic religious and civil communities that can repent and undo the horrors of colonialism and other forms of wo/men's oppression; the struggles/studies for wo/men's theological education and teaching authority that seek to overcome centuries of silencing in theology, biblical religion, and society; and the struggles/studies for a new sacred language and communal rituals that reclaim the authority of religious naming as the power of the word and sacrament of well-being.

In short, these are all struggles/studies for a different kind of spirituality and liberating praxis that seek not only to envision and name the Divine anew but also to bring about relations of justice, equality, and well-being for all. Because emancipatory struggles in religion are part and parcel of societal and cultural discourses, feminists in religion argue on spiritual grounds for the radical democratic rights of all people; thereby, they contribute to the overall radical democratic feminist

struggles for equal citizenship and full decision-making powers in society and religion.

At a time when public discourse deploys biblical religion for denying wo/men's basic rights of sexual self-determination, economic equality, and full citizenship, it is crucial for feminists to recognize the interconnectedness of all wo/men's struggles for liberty, equality, and well-being with wo/men's struggles in biblical religions for authority and full citizenship in churches, synagogues, and mosques. To neglect religion as a positive source of empowerment and hope in creating a better future for wo/men would be to relinquish religion to the ownership claims of reactionary fundamentalism and traditionalism.¹⁹

C. *Feminist Struggles in Religion*

Third, feminist theorists have consistently overlooked feminist movements in biblical religions when discussing the Second Wave of feminism, although fundamentalist right-wing movements again have made religion central to public discourse. Because many white feminist scholars remain convinced that religion is the primary enemy that keeps wo/men in oppressive situations, they have neglected to study feminist theologies and religious studies. Hence, feminist work in religion has had very little impact on their own critical analyses, theories, and transformative practices. Therefore, societal feminist movements and theorists have not been able to articulate bodies of knowledge and strategies for successfully counteracting the impact of fundamentalism on society, politics, and law.

In the past decade or so, right-wing movements around the globe have either insisted on the figuration of emancipated wo/men as signifiers of Western decadence and modern atheistic secularism or presented masculine power as the expression of divine power.²⁰ The socio-political context of globalization and its attendant exploitation

19. Cf. SHIRLEY ROGERS RADL, *THE INVISIBLE WOMAN: TARGET OF THE RELIGIOUS NEW RIGHT* (1983); SARA DIAMOND, *SPIRITUAL WARFARE: THE POLITICS OF THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT* (1989); HANS KÜNG & JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN, *FUNDAMENTALISM AS AN ECUMENICAL CHALLENGE* (1992); HANS KÜNG AND JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN, "FUNDAMENTALISMEN," *BEITRÄGE ZUR FEMINISTISCHEN THEORIE UND PRAXIS* 32 (1992).

20. See Division for the Advancement of Women, United Nations, *International Standards of Equality and Religious Freedom: Implications for the Status of Women*, in VALENTINE M. MOGHADAM, *IDENTITY POLITICS & WOMEN. CULTURAL REASSERTIONS AND FEMINISMS IN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE* 425-38 (1994); Rebecca E. Klatch, *Women of the New Right in the United States: Family, Feminism, and Politics*, in MOGHADAM, *supra*, at 367-88. Most of the contributions in *IDENTITY POLITICS & WOMEN* are on women and Islam in different parts of the world. But see Sucheta Mazumdar, *Moving Away from a Secular Vision? Women, Nation, and the Cultural Construction of Hindu India*, in MOGHADAM, *supra*, at 243-73; Radha Kumar, *Identity Politics and the Contemporary Indian Feminist Movement*, in MOGHADAM, *supra*, at 274-92.

has engendered a resurgence of the religious right and of global, cultural, and religious fundamentalisms claiming the power of naming and defining the true nature and essence of religion.²¹ Right-wing, well-financed think tanks are supported by reactionary political and financial institutions that seek to defend kyriarchal capitalism²² in the name of religion. The interconnection between religious antidemocratic arguments and the debate with regard to wo/men's place and role is not accidental or of merely intra-religious significance.

Presently, the struggle against wo/men's second-class citizenship, for instance, centers in Roman Catholicism and some Protestant churches, especially those in the two-thirds world, on the question of the non-ordination of wo/men and the right of wo/men to determine their sexuality and reproductive powers, whereas in liberal Protestant churches, it focuses on the issue of same-sex marriages or the ordination of homosexuals. However, I do not want to suggest that only Christian religion and theology are such a site of feminist struggles. To the contrary, similar but different issues are raised by feminists in Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism. In consequence, not only biblical religions but also other major world religions are undergoing intense critical scrutiny by feminists. All religious belief systems and institutional practices are experiencing the growing pains of feminist revisions.²³

Nevertheless, like the First Wave, the Second Wave of the societal white wo/men's movement has continued to neglect or reject religion as totally oppressive and self-alienating to wo/men. Hence, the work of feminist scholars in religion, as well as that of religious activists, has not been sufficiently recognized and utilized as a resource in feminist struggles for justice. Because cultural feminist theorists generally seem to know little about feminist theories and struggles in religion or, if they do, are only aware of the critical assessment of religion, they are not able to build on the work of religious feminists and reinforce each other's projects for transformation. Hence, they are not able to cause a ripple effect of change and to strengthen the powers of

21. See generally, HANS KÜNG & JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN, *FUNDAMENTALISM AS AN ECUMENICAL CHALLENGE* (1992).

22. For an excellent critical analysis of the involvement of religion in this global struggle, see PENNY LERNOUX, *CRY OF THE PEOPLE* (1982); PENNY LERNOUX, *IN BANKS WE TRUST* (1986); PENNY LERNOUX, *PEOPLE OF GOD: THE STRUGGLE FOR WORLD CATHOLICISM* (1989); ROBERT B. REICH, *THE WORK OF NATIONS* (1992); Joan Smith, *The Creation of the World We Know: The World-Economy and the Re-creation of Gendered Identities*, in MOGHADAM, *supra* note 20, at 27-41.

23. See generally, PAULA M. COOEY, WILLIAM R. EAKIN & JAY B. MCDANIEL, *AFTER PATRIARCHY. FEMINIST TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE WORLD RELIGIONS* (1991).

resistance and renewal. Nor are they able to support their struggles with religious resources that have inspired and shaped the struggles for justice.

D. *Feminist Studies in Religion*

Fourth, the liberal feminist's rejection of religion as repressive and "false consciousness" has affected the work of feminists in religion. It has sparked divisions between biblical and post-biblical feminists, Jewish/Christian feminists and the Goddess movement, and feminist theologies as confessional and feminist studies of religion as objective academic studies. In the feminist discourses of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this feminist either/or attitude towards religion has been symbolized by two biblical images: Eden/home and exodus/margins. These images suggest that wo/men in religion have only an either/or choice: either affirm religion as good because it is one's home²⁴ and family to whom one owes absolute loyalty, or move out of religion into the desert of marginality and the promised land of radical feminism, leaving behind the fleshpots of Egypt slavery and bondage. Because post-biblical feminists have judged biblical religions to be intrinsically oppressive and totally misogynistic, apologetic feminists have defended them as liberating and intrinsically good for wo/men.

Whereas, for instance, the wo/men's ordination movements in Christianity and Judaism have affirmed their desire for religion as home and claimed equal rights for the daughters of the house with the sons of the house, post-biblical feminists have called for the exodus of wo/men from the bondage of patriarchal churches and institutionalized religions into the "other world" of feminist spirituality. However, more recent critical feminist thinking has sought to transform this either/or exclusivist choice between feminism and religion into a dialectic between oppression and struggles for justice.

For instance, feminist literary critic Susan Gubar has pointed to the rich, critical work of Jewish feminists in religion, writing during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, that "analyzed particularly vexed areas of Judaism for wo/men," although she confesses she did not read them. "By an accident of birth, I was a Jewish feminist, but by virtue of that very fact I could not conceive of becoming a feminist Jew, a label that would have struck me as a contradiction in terms."²⁵

24. For an excellent problematization of the feminist desire for home, see LAURA LEVITT, *JEWS AND FEMINISM: THE AMBIVALENT STRUGGLE FOR HOME* (1997).

25. Susan Gubar, *Eating the Bread of Affliction. Judaism and Feminist Criticism*, in JEFFREY RUBIN-DORSKY & SHELLY FISHER FISHKIN, *PEOPLE OF THE BOOK. THIRTY SCHOLARS REFLECT ON THEIR JEWISH IDENTITY* 15-36 (1996).

In the process of reasoning out this contradiction, however, Gubar reformulates it not in terms of an either/or choice but in terms of “both/and” when she points out that

[f]or many feminist critiques, moreover, Jewish devotion to the text and education has been supplemented by the equally long history in Judaism of a strong commitment to each individual’s social responsibility Yet exactly such a concern about social and political justice would underscore the exclusion of [wo/men] from, in Ostriker’s words, the ‘questions and answers twining minutely like vine around the living Word.’²⁶

This jarring contradiction between wo/men’s exclusion from the Word and the Torah’s call to social justice, Gubar concludes, “may have spawned not only the feminist movement in Judaism but feminism itself as well as feminist scholarship.”²⁷ In preparing her article, Gubar sent a questionnaire to leading feminist theorists and confirmed what she suspected all along: Jewish experience and thought have

profoundly shaped the evolution of feminist thinking in our times. Still, even now the vexed relationship between Judaism and feminism seems to mean that the pleasure I and many of my contemporaries can receive from our heritage will always be mixed with sorrow, the pride with grief, the joy with anger, sweetness with bitterness, honey on the tongue with tears in the eyes.²⁸

In a similar fashion, Islamic feminists are developing discursive strategies that claim both their religious heritage and their rights as Muslim wo/men to freedom, justice, and equality:

The most important feature of contemporary Muslim wo/men’s struggle for rights is that they reject the proposition that they cannot be *both* free and equal with men *and* good Muslims at the same time. This they deny. On the contrary, they insist that a woman becomes an authentic Muslim when she has achieved freedom and equality as an individual citizen.²⁹

26. *Id.* at 27.

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.* at 15.

29. MAHNAZ AFKAMI, GRETA H. NEMIROFF, & HALEH VAZIR, SAFE AND SECURE. ELIMINATING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN MUSLIM SOCIETIES 7 (1998) (emphasis added). See also, Miriam Cooke, *Multiple Critique. Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies*, in LAURA E. DONALDSON & KWOK PUI-LAN, POSTCOLONIALISM, FEMINISM & RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE 142-60 (2001).

III. RADICAL DEMOCRATIC IMAGINATION: THE EKKLESIA OF WO/MEN

In my own work, I have sought to overcome the dualistic feminist alternative of “either religious or feminist” by seeking to conceptualize a vision that could both include and transcend the understanding of religion either as home or exodus. Doing so, I built on the discussions of radical democracy in feminist political theory³⁰ and critical legal studies³¹ that seek to reconceptualize legal discourses as a site of political struggles. By introducing the radical democratic notion of the “ekklesia of wo/men” as an alternative religious symbolic concept to “exodus and paradise/home,” I sought to theoretically reframe the feminist either/or binary towards religion that reinscribes the dualistic division between religion and culture, religion and democratic rights, or religious and secular wo/men’s movements.

“Ekklesia” is best translated as “democratic congress” of full decision-making citizens. Democratic equality, citizenship, and decision-making power are constitutive of the notion of ekklesia. However, because the Greek word *ekklesia* is also determined by a Christian language context and is usually translated as “church,” I prefer not to translate it so that the term can function as a signifier that must be actively decoded in order to know what the Greek word actually means. Theoretically, the symbolic concept of the “ekklesia of wo/men” seeks to develop a “democratics” as the horizon for feminist struggles both in religion and society at large. I have borrowed the term “democratics” from Chela Sandoval, who has theorized it as one of the methods of the oppressed and delineated it in the following way:

With the transnationalization of capitalism, when elected officials are no longer leaders of singular nation-states but nexuses for multinational interests, it also becomes possible for citizen-subjects to become activists for a new decolonizing global terrain, a psychic terrain that can unite them with similarly positioned citizen-subjects within and across national borders into new, post-Western-empire alliances [T]he new countrypeople [of this imagined community] who fight for egalitarian social relations under neocolonial postmodernism welcome citizenry to a new polity, a new homeland. The means for entry is “the methodology of the oppressed,” a set of technologies for decolonizing the social [and religious] imagination. These technologies . . . are guided by democratics, the practitioners’

30. See, e.g., SEYLA BENHABIB, *DEMOCRACY AND DIFFERENCE: CONTESTING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE POLITICAL* (1996); CHANTAL MOUFFE, *DIMENSIONS OF RADICAL DEMOCRACY* (1992).

31. See, e.g., MARY FRUG, *POSTMODERN LEGAL FEMINISM* (1992).

commitment to the equal distribution of power Love as social movement is enacted by revolutionary, mobile, and global coalitions of citizen-activists who are allied through the apparatus of emancipation.³²

As a white Christian wo/man, I am somewhat hesitant, however, to claim “love” as a revolutionary force and an “oppositional social action as a mode of ‘love’ in the postmodern world.”³³ Although I am well aware that numerous U.S. third world feminists have eloquently written about the power of prophetic love in struggles for justice,³⁴ I cannot forget the function of “romantic love” in the oppression of wo/men nor the anti-Jewish Christian valorization of the “God of love” over the “Old” Testament “God of Justice.” To mark the oppressive history and negative potential of love, I would prefer to speak of “just love” or “loving justice.” In consequence, the democratics of the ekklesia of wo/men must be equally informed by the following insight of Patricia Hill Collins:

Rather than being seen as yet another content area with Black feminist discourse, a concern with justice fused with a deep spirituality appears to be highly significant to how African-American women conceptualize critical social theory. Justice constitutes an article of faith expressed through deep feelings that move people to action. For many Black feminist thinkers, justice transcends Western notions of equality grounded in sameness and uniformity. Elsa Barkley Brown’s discussion of African-American women’s quilting (1989) points us in the direction of conceptualizing an alternative notion of justice. In making their quilts Black women weave together scraps of fabric from all sorts of places. Nothing is wasted, and every piece of fabric has a function and a place in a given quilt [T]hose who conceptualize community via notions of uniformity and sameness have difficulty imagining a social quilt that is simultaneously heterogeneous, driven toward excellence, and just.³⁵

Like Cady Stanton’s image of the “fourfold cord” or Hill Collins’ concept of “the social quilt,” the democratics of the oxymoronic construct “ekkleisia of wo/men” seeks to name a feminist space where citizen-subjects fight for justice and egalitarian relations that recognize the unique difference of each and every one. This feminist space is one in which the so-called “secular” and “religious” wo/men’s movements can be conceptualized not as opposites or never-meeting parallels but as a radical democratic, spiritual, decolonizing space and

32. CHELA SANDOVAL, *METHODOLOGY OF THE OPPRESSED* 183 (2000).

33. *See, e.g.,* FRUG, *supra* note 31.

34. Audre Lorde, Bell Hooks, Toni Morrison, Cornel West, June Jordan, Gloria Anzaldúa, Maria Lugones, Merle Woo, Alice Walker—to name just a few.

35. PATRICIA HILL COLLINS, *FIGHTING WORDS. BLACK WOMEN & THE SEARCH FOR JUSTICE* 248-49 (1998).

feminist public and as a “congress” of diverse wo/men’s groups and feminist movements working together for change and transformation of both society and religion. If, just as legal or political feminist discourses and movements, religious feminist discourses and movements were recognized as common feminist sites of political struggles over not only sex differences but also other forms of domination, such as racism, colonialism, or capitalism, then the split between both societal and religious and biblical and post-biblical feminisms could be overcome in the diverse struggles for religious and political rights, the equalization of power, and the changing relations of domination inside and outside religion.

A. *Defining the Ekklesia of Wo/men*

First, “Ekklesia of wo/men” is not simply a feminist symbolic construct intended to overcome the dualistic split between religious and societal wo/men’s movements and a democratics for decolonizing the cultural and religious imagination. Rather, “Ekklesia of wo/men” is also a descriptive historical term developed in terms of my own Christian liberationist theological framework, a term which, however, could also easily be elaborated in terms of other religious egalitarian visions. The root meaning of ekklesia derives from the classical institution of democracy that, in theory, promised freedom and equality to all its citizens but, in practice, granted such rights only to elite, propertied, educated male heads of households. Hence, the ekklesia understood as radical democratic congress of citizen-subjects has never been fully realized in history because neither the French nor the American democratic revolutions fought for wo/men and disenfranchised men to become fully empowered decision-making citizens. The struggles of the disenfranchised for full citizenship and civil rights in the past three hundred years have sought to correct this and to realize the vision of radical democratic equality.

In early Christian literature, the expression “ekklesia” (i.e., the Greco-Roman democratic assembly) is the very name for the Christian community.³⁶ The very self-description of the early Christian communities was a radical democratic one.³⁷ The ekklesia, understood as the forcefield of Divine Wisdom-Spirit, is a “new creation” in which the Spirit-empowered people are all equal but not the same. They all share in the multifaceted gifts of Divine Wisdom-Spirit with-

36. The word “synagogue” has a similar valence and means the “congregation of the people of G*d.”

37. This is not unusual. Most organizational sociologists point out that most religions have such an egalitarian self-understanding in the beginning.

out exception: Jews, Greeks, Barbarians, wo/men and men, slaves and free, those with high social status, and those who are nothing in the eyes of the world.³⁸

Only when one realizes how fundamental this radical democratic spirit was to the self-understanding of the early Christian communities can one appreciate the break in Christian self-understanding that took place when the church adopted the administrative organizational structures and legal institutions of the Roman empire, which were monarchical-hierarchical.³⁹ Although the word *ekklesia* is usually translated in English as “church,” the English word “church” is derived from the Greek word *kyriake*,⁴⁰ not from the Greek term *ekklesia*. The translation process, which has transformed *ekklesia*/congress into *kyriake*/church, indicates a historical development that has privileged the kyriarchal/hierarchical form of church. Hence, the rendering of the Greek word *ekklesia* with “church” promotes a Christian self-understanding that is derived from the kyriarchal model of household and state in antiquity, which were governed by the lord/master/father of the house to whom free-born wo/men, dependents, clients, workers, and slaves were subordinated as his property.

Because my religious–social location is within the Catholic community, I will illustrate such a kyriarchal understanding with reference to it. The Roman church is determined by hierarchical structures, represented by men, and divided into a sacred two-class system of the ordained and the laity, connoting second-class citizenship. It is ironic that in defense of the Roman imperial structures that crucified Jesus, the hierarchy over the last century insisted, over and against democratic forces within the church, that monarchy is the G*d-given order and, in this century, that the Roman Catholic church is not a democratic community. Hence, wo/men have no rights to full citizenship and church office.

Whereas in the last century, the Roman Catholic hierarchy defended monarchy as the governmental form willed by G*d for society, in this century, official church teaching has advocated human rights and democratic freedoms in society but insists that these do not apply to the church. For instance, Pope Leo XIII rejected all “modern liberties,” the freedom to worship, the separation of church and state, free-

38. See ELISABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, IN MEMORY OF HER 160-99 (10th Anniversary ed. 1994).

39. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *A Discipleship of Equals: Ekklesial Democracy and Patriarchy in Biblical Perspective*, in E.C. BIANCHI & R. RADFORD RUETHER, *A DEMOCRATIC CATHOLIC CHURCH. THE RECONSTRUCTION OF ROMAN CATHOLICISM* 17-33 (1992).

40. I.e., belonging to the lord/master/father.

dom of speech and the press, the liberty of teaching, and the freedom of conscience because the people were the “untutored multitude.”⁴¹ While Pope Leo recognized that there is true equality insofar as we are all children of God, he denied that there is any equality in society and culture. “The inequality of rights and of power proceeds from the very Author of nature, ‘from whom all paternity in heaven and earth is named.’”⁴² He pointed out that “the abilities of all are not equal, as one differs from another in the powers of mind or body, and there are much dissimilarity of manner, disposition and character.”⁴³ Hence, he argues that “it is most repugnant to reason to endeavor to confine all within the same measure and to extend complete equality to the institutions of civil life.”⁴⁴ Here, difference is not understood as giftedness but construed as inequality. While the present Pope no longer upholds these antidemocratic sentiments for society, he still maintains them for the Roman Catholic Church by insisting on the non-ordination of wo/men and forbidding any public discussion of it.

B. *The Expression Ekklesia of Wo/men—a Linguistic Tool*

Second, the expression *ekklesia gynaikôn*, ekklesia of wo/men, is a linguistic tool and theological means of conscientization. It seeks to bring into public consciousness the masculine overdetermination of ekklesia in malestream political discourses and religious representations. Because the signifier “woman” is still used to draw exclusive boundaries in societal democracies and biblical religions, it is important linguistically to mark the difference between democracy and church as Roman kyriarchal institution and as ekklesia, the congress of decision-making citizen subjects. Hence, I have introduced the notion of the ekklesia of wo/men as a means of conscientization that articulates a radical democratic imagination.

The notion of the “ekklesia of wo/men” is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. Qualifying “ekklesia” with “wo/men” seeks to lift into consciousness that church, society, and religion are still governed by elite white men who have been exclusive of wo/men and other servant-peoples for centuries. It seeks to communicate a vision that connects struggles for a more democratic and just church with global, societal, and political democratic movements for justice, freedom, and

41. Charles E. Curran, “What Catholic Ecclesiology Can Learn from Official Catholic Social Teaching,” *op. cit.*, 105.

42. Pope Leo XIII, *On Socialism*, in E. GILSON, *THE CHURCH SPEAKS TO THE MODERN WORLD: THE SOCIAL TEACHINGS OF LEO XIII* 193 (1954).

43. *Id.*

44. *Id.* at 130.

equality. These movements have emerged again and again throughout the centuries because of the disparity between the professed vision of radical democratic equality and the actual reality of domination and subordination in society and church experienced daily.

Whenever I mention “wo/men” to qualify ekklesia, I use the term in the generic sense so as to include men because, in English, the word wo/men phonetically includes men, “she” includes he, and “female” includes male. It is well known that grammatically masculine language systems understand male terms as both generic and gender-specific. Wo/men, therefore, must always think at least twice, if not three times, in order to adjudicate whether we are meant by so-called “generic terms,” such as “sons of G*d,” “mankind,” “brothers,” or “the government of men.”

To use the term “wo/men” as an inclusive generic term goes against the linguistic grain of Western societies and churches. Such a use of the term “wo/men” as inclusive of men invites men to learn how to “think twice” and how to adjudicate whether they are meant. It invites them to experience what it means not to be addressed explicitly. Changing language patterns is a very important step toward the realization of the new consciousness of radical democratic equality because the limits of our language are the limits of our world.

Thus, the notion of the “ekklesia of wo/men” is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. It seeks to enunciate a vision that connects wo/men’s struggles in biblical religions with global, societal, and political movements for justice, freedom, and equality. These movements have emerged again and again throughout the centuries, I submit, because of the disparity between the professed vision of radical democratic equality in church and society and the actual reality of domination and subordination, which they experienced every day.

In sum, the oxymoron “ekklesia of wo/men” seeks to articulate a radical democratic ethos. Because throughout the centuries democracy has been an elite male institution, it is necessary to qualify ekklesia with wo/men as long as wo/men remain second-class citizens in society and religion. By adding wo/men to ekklesia, I want to lift into consciousness that malestream church and society have been, and still are, exclusive of wo/men not only in positions of leadership and power but also in academic knowledge production and religious and cultural meaning making.

C. *Societal and Religious Wo/men's Movements*

Third, the ekklesia of wo/men seeks to forge a link between the societal and religious wo/men's liberation movements and to overcome their dualistic split into religious and secular. If dehumanizing and misogynist religious values and mindsets inform cultural assumptions about wo/men and public policy, then it is important to articulate radical democratic religious values and visions to replace this kyriarchal ethos in the public imagination. Ekklesia of wo/men articulates a vision of radical equality for creating a world of justice and well-being. It wants to name the vision of justice and salvation that feminist movements seek and biblical religions share.

Such a rearticulation of biblical religions in terms of radical democratic equality is necessary if religion is to become an influence and power for radical democracy. The ekklesia of wo/men seeks to realize this vision of G*d's renewed creation by working for a radical democratic society that does not have any hungry, strangers, or outcasts but cherishes the earth and struggles in solidarity with those who are oppressed by racism, nationalism, poverty, neo-colonialism, and heterosexism.

Wo/men are ekklesia, the assembly of free adult citizens who have the right and duty to decide our own and our children's religious future. Ekklesia as the decision-making assembly of full citizens insists on the ancient Roman and medieval maxim: That which affects all should be determined by every one (or in Latin, *quod omnes tangit, ab omnibus judicetur*). Through struggles for change and liberation, the vision of the ekklesia, of G*d's life-giving and transforming power for community, becomes experiential reality in the midst of structural sin, of the death-dealing powers of oppression and dehumanization.

Thus, it is misleading to translate this contradictory expression, "ekklesia of wo/men," as "wo/men-church" because in the process of translation, "ekklesia" tends to lose its radical democratic meaning. While the translation, "wo/men-church," makes the connection between wo/men and church, it is not able to hold together the meaning of "ekklesia" as both democratic assembly and church as political and religious. As a result, the intended radical political valence of the term is lost. Yet, the goal in qualifying and circumscribing "ekklesia" with the term "wo/men" has been precisely to raise into public consciousness the fact that neither the church nor society are what they claim to be: ekklesia; that is, the democratic congress of equal decision-making citizens who are wo/men.

The qualification of ekklesia with the term “wo/men” does not only serve as a linguistic tool for indicating how a diversified and pluriform non-dualist wo/men’s movement is to be imagined. It also seeks to signify the multiple forms in which the ekklesia of wo/men is lived today in order to presage the rich diversity of the radical democratic ekklesia of the future. Wo/men are not the same nor do they have an essence in common that makes them different from men. There are as many differences between wo/men and within wo/men as there are between men and wo/men. Wo/men are not determined just by gender but also by race, class, ethnicity, culture, age, sexual preference, and religion. Identity is not stable, but changes over the course of time. Hence, the oxymoron “ekklesia of wo/men” should not be understood in the cultural terms of femininity as promoting the ideal of the White Lady but as modeling a plurivoiced feminist movement for change.

Such feminist diversity of ekklesia is exhibited in worldwide wo/men’s movements in religion and radical democratic feminist grassroots movements around the globe. In the context of Roman Catholicism, the ekklesia of wo/men is partially realized in alternative communities and ministries, in the recognition of salvation beyond Christian parameters, through engagement in inter-religious dialogue, and in the appreciation of the spiritual resources and practices of other religions. To quote Mary Hunt,

In each instance what is in play is not only a new practice, but, of greater importance, evidence of a new sense of shared power. No longer must Catholics be “right” to be spiritual, nor must Catholics guard their bread and wine from those whose interpretations of eucharist are not precisely the same. Rather, feminists have brought a new sense of openness, a new sense of hospitality, born of having suffered the lack of it at home. These changes result in a broader sharing of power and a deeper recognition that diversity is finally catholic.⁴⁵

In an ecumenical context, the struggle for the ekklesia of wo/men has shifted from a focus on ordination to the struggle against the politics of exclusion. Now that wo/men are ordained in liberal Christian and Jewish denominations, wo/men’s leadership suffers from backlash and is eroded by the restructuring of ministries in ways that marginalize and de facto exclude wo/men. What is at stake is no longer just the place of wo/men in various religious communities but their feminist future,

45. Mary E. Hunt, *We Wo/men Are Church*, in ELISABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA & HERRMAN HAERING, *THE NON-ORDINATION OF WOMEN AND THE POLITICS OF POWER* CONCILIUM 111 (1999).

their religious imagery, practices, discourses—together with the future of the surrounding social structures and sanctions governing men's and wo/men's places. In short the backlash is a barometer indicating that the pressures brought to bear on religious and social structures of male power and privilege are shaking the foundations.⁴⁶

Thus, the ekklesia of wo/men understands itself not just as a movement to change church and religion, but it sees its work as part and parcel of all social movements for changing relations of domination. As Hedwig Meyer-Wilmes has observed,

One could even say that the ekklesia of wo/men is a postmodern concept It takes for granted the achievements of modernity: it is grounded in an egalitarian view of structures, a multiplicity of [liberatory] images and a concern to make the ekklesia visible in different [social] formations⁴⁷

D. Ekklesia of Wo/men—a Radical Democratic Vision

Fourth, the radical equality of the ekklesia of wo/men is theologically grounded in the conviction that all wo/men are created in the image of G*d, each and every human being is precious in Her eyes, and all have received multifaceted gifts and powers. In all our differences, wo/men represent the Divine here and now because wo/men are made in the Divine image and likeness. Everyone is made in the image of Divine Wisdom, who has gifted and called every individual differently. The Divine image is neither male nor female, white nor black, rich nor poor, but multi-colored, multi-gendered, and more.

As a richly gifted people, the ekklesia of wo/men presages the world-community in which religious, racial, class, and heterosexual markers no longer signify and legitimate status differences and relations of kyriarchal domination and subordination. As a pilgrim people, the ekklesia of wo/men may fail again and again, but it continues to struggle to live in fullness and realize its calling to be the radical democratic society in process.

Such an understanding of the ekklesia of wo/men envisions society and religion as a reciprocal community of support, a dynamic alliance of equals. Its principle and horizon is a radical democratic vision and movement that creates community in diversity, commonality in solidarity, equality in freedom and love, and a world-community that appreciates the other precisely as the other. Such a conceptualization of

46. Melanie A. May, *Tracking the Ways of Wo/men in Religious Leadership*, in SCHUSSLER FIORENZA & HAERING, *supra* note 45, at 90.

47. Hedwig Meyer-Wilmes, *The Diversity of Ministry in a Postmodern Church*, in SCHUSSLER FIORENZA & HAERING, *supra* note 45, at 80.

the ekklesia of wo/men seeks not only fullness of being, all-encompassing inclusivity, but also dynamic multiplicity and the convergence of many different voices. In Christian terms, it is foreshadowed in the image of Pentecost where people from different regions and cultures can understand the Spirit in their own languages, an image that invites Christian wo/men in the power of the Spirit to struggle together with wo/men from other religions and persuasions for the realization of the ekklesia of wo/men.

However, when I first began to theorize the ekklesia of wo/men as an alternative image and a mediating radical democratic biblical symbol, I was unaware that the suffrage movements already had employed the symbol of democracy as a religious-biblical symbol in its struggle for justice. Mary Pellauer's dissertation on the religious thought of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Anna Howard Shaw has made a convincing case that these leading suffragists spoke of democracy in religious terms.⁴⁸ Although they choose quite different political and religious paths, Pellauer argues that their struggles against misogyny and for justice are positioned within an ethos shaped by the conjunction of their socio-political analysis and religious-moral perspective. She points out that Anna Howard Shaw can even speak of the "gospel of democracy:"

The democracy of the gospel must permeate the democracy of our land and we must learn that as the hand cannot say to the foot, or the ear to the eye—"I have no need of thee." Neither can the educated say to the uneducated—"I have no need of thee"; nor the rich to the poor—"I have no need of thee." Each has need of the other; each must live and grow together, or else the survivors must be chained to the diseased and corrupt body of the outcasts. We cannot separate ourselves from them.⁴⁹

The dissertation of Karen Baker-Fletcher makes a similar case for the African-American educator and suffragist Anna Julia Cooper. Baker-Fletcher points out that equality and freedom were not simply physical states for Anna Julia Cooper but political-spiritual realities.⁵⁰ Cooper believed that democratic progress was "a shadow mark of the creator's image" derived "from the essential worth of humanity."⁵¹ Cooper envisioned a future for humanity governed by the principles

48. MARY D. PELLAUER, *TOWARD A TRADITION OF FEMINIST THEOLOGY. THE RELIGIOUS SOCIAL THOUGHT OF ELISABETH CADY STANTON, SUSAN B. ANTHONY, AND ANNA HOWARD SHAW* (1991).

49. *Id.* 260.

50. KAREN BAKER FLETCHER, *A SINGING SOMETHING. WOMANIST REFLECTIONS ON ANNA JULIA COOPER* (1994).

51. *Id.*

of equality, freedom, and democracy, which were ontological universal aspects of human nature. She asserts "that progress in the democratic sense is an inborn human endowment—a shadow mark of the Creator's image, or if you will an urge-cell, the universal and unmistakable hall-mark traceable to the Father of all."⁵²

Like her white compatriots, Anna Julia Cooper understood democracy in religious terms. However, Cooper broadens the suffragist ethos of struggle for full citizenship when she insists that democratic equality and freedom are G*d-given, inborn, ontological capacities of every human being regardless of race, sex, class, and country. Against theories that claimed democracy, equality, and freedom as the property of the superior races of western European civilization,⁵³ Cooper insists that these were inherent in the fact of being human and, hence, could never be suppressed. The key metaphor for G*d in Cooper's religious discourse, according to Baker-Fletcher, is a "Singing Something" that in every nation cries out for justice. As Baker-Fletcher puts it,

What makes one human is one's inner voice, the voice of equality and freedom that is directly traceable to God. The voice of God, in this sense, sings through the human spirit and calls humankind to action, growth, development and reform. There is movement involved in the act of vocalization.⁵⁴

While the notion of the "ekklesia of wo/men" is theorized quite differently and speaks to a different rhetorical situation and historical context,⁵⁵ it nevertheless is a part of and continues this radical democratic nineteenth century suffragist tradition. This submerged feminist intellectual tradition of radical democratic religious agency and emancipatory biblical interpretation, in which my own work is rooted, has claimed and continues to claim the authority and right of wo/men

52. ANNA JULIA COOPER, *EQUALITY OF RACES AND THE DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT* 5 (1945) (quoted by Baker Fletcher).

53. Like other Anglo-Saxon suffragists and social reformers, Elizabeth Cady Stanton was very much determined and limited by her social status and class position. She not only expressed anti-immigrant sentiments by arguing that the suffrage of women of her own class would increase the numbers of Anglo-Saxon voters, but she also appealed to ethnic and racial prejudices when she exhorted: "American women of wealth and refinement, if you do not wish the lower orders of Chinese, Africans, Germans, and Irish, with their low ideas of womanhood to make laws for you . . . demand that woman, too, shall be represented in the government." HILKERT ANDOLSEN, *supra* note 13, at 31.

54. BAKER-FLETCHER, *supra* note 50, at 192-93.

55. For discussion of this theoretical context, see ANNE PHILLIPS, *ENGENDERING DEMOCRACY* (1991); JUDITH BUTLER & JOAN W. SCOTT, *FEMINISTS THEORIZE THE POLITICAL* (1992); JOAN COCKS, *THE OPPOSITIONAL IMAGINATION. FEMINISM, CRITIQUE AND POLITICAL THEORY* (1989); MARY LYNDON SHANLEY & CAROLE PATEMAN, *FEMINIST INTERPRETATIONS AND POLITICAL THEORY* (1991).

to interpret experience, the bible, tradition, and religion from their own perspective and in their own interests.

This tradition has insisted that equality, freedom, and democracy cannot be realized if wo/men's voices are unraised, unheard, and unheeded in the struggle for justice and liberation for everyone, regardless of sex, class, race, nationality, or religion. Although this feminist tradition of wo/men's religious authority and agency remains fragmented and has not always been able to completely overcome the limitations and prejudicial frameworks of its own time and social location, its critical knowledge and continuing vibrancy nevertheless remains crucial for contemporary radical democratic struggles in society and religion.

