
IS A SELF-RESPECTING CHRISTIAN WOMAN AN OXYMORON?

Reflections on a Feminist Spirituality for Justice

By Carter Heyward*

Thank you for inviting me. I'm honored to be in this company—to be with Katie Finney again; to have learned so much from your responses, questions, and workshops; and also to have received gifts from my sister-lecturers: Rosemary Ruether's astute leadership in envisioning the future work of Christian feminists; Carol Christ's courage and passion in opening to many of us new vistas of womanpower; Kathy Green's challenging probing of Jewish feminist experiences and questions; and my colleague at the Episcopal Divinity School, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's brilliant discerning of possibilities for textual interpretation which does justice to women's lives.

The planners of this conference have put together a provocative agenda. There is however a major omission from the speakers' roster. None of us is Black, Hispanic, Asian, or Native American. In late 20th Century U.S.A., we should be aware, at least, that any conversation about "Feminism and Religious Experience" which takes place in the context of a nearly all-white group is a very limited conversation indeed and a testimony to the roots and effects of a racism which continues to plague us all.

Tonight I'm doing something I've only done two or three times before: singing and chanting a little in the course of my presentation. I do this for two reasons: First, to try to bring you into the composition of this written piece. As I

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Earlier versions of this presentation were given at the University of North Carolina (sponsored by Episcopal chaplaincy), Greensboro, N.C., March, 1985; at a CREATE JUSTICE! conference (sponsored by an Ecumenical Lesbian/Gay Task Force), Rochester, N.Y., April, 1985; and at a workshop on "Power, Justice, and Community" at Kirkridge Retreat Center, Bangor, Pa. September, 1985. My special appreciation to Charles Hawes, Linda Brebner, and Bob Raines for having asked me to think about connections between self-respect, justice, and spirituality; and to Beverly W. Harrison and Dorothee Sölle for helping me shape this presentation.

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worked on it, I found myself spontaneously humming and singing old hymns, chants, and songs by Holly Near and Meg Christian. The music became a source of the presentation itself. Second, I believe that art, music, and other nonexpository forms of communication often convey a more wholistic spirituality than the spoken word. I hope that the music may add a dimension to what I'm going to say and that it will round out some of the flatness of my words, which may otherwise seem tiring, especially here at the end of a very good—and very long—day. Please sing or hum with me, and do not worry that our tunes may be different. Feminism is, after all, a cacophony of diversity!

Start here!

(Chant)

There is nothing sweet here
and nothing bitter
tonight today
only the pungent odor
of salty faith
rooted watered opening
turning and turning
opening and rooted
we are making
revolutions.¹

It is fashionable today, in much of the Christian church, to immerse oneself in "spirituality" *instead* of in work on behalf of justice. The fruits of the Spirit are relished by individuals as special gifts which can be enjoyed most fully in the privacy of one's own prayer-life. The political clutter and clamor of justice-making is portrayed as the special interest of those who are still stuck in the 60's. More and more "spirituality" denotes the lofty aims of God and "justice" the grubby work of human beings. Even religious feminists are apt to stumble into this dualistic pitfall, in which such aims as wholistic health and psycho-spiritual growth are set apart from, and take precedence over, any serious involvement in the collective work, struggle, and conflict which is vital to social transformation.

My presentation is rooted in the tension between the individual person's spiritual pilgrimage and the historic, now global, liberation movement for justice. In particular, I am concerned here with *justice for women—feminist justice*. I am interested in a *feminist spirituality*, in which individual women and men, who are committed to the daily well-being of *all* women, may be more fully empowered to struggle for, and celebrate, the small changes which enhance the survival and dignity of

every woman as well as the larger vision of justice. This global vision beckons us into solidarity with all women and other marginalized people, which means men who are oppressed on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, class, sexual preference, disability, nationality, or age. Lest this vision appear so broad as to be beyond our capacity to view in concrete, daily terms, we should keep in mind that it is precisely in the small places of our lives and those of others that the vision is seeded. We cannot envision "justice" if we set our sights pretentiously and arrogantly on what "the whole world" ought to look like. For surely as U.S. history should make abundantly clear, we do not and ought not all look alike, act alike, believe alike. The people of Iran, China, Nicaragua, South Africa and the United States are different people with various cultures, languages, and gods. And so may it be forever in the multi-textured tapestry of creation and history.

Justice does not mean "oneness" or "unity" in the sense of "sameness." It does mean the creation of the conditions for mutual respect among all persons; hence justice involves, concretely, the creation of religious, national and cultural societies in which every person has ready access to food, shelter, medicine, education, work, and leisure time. Every woman, as well as every man, is entitled by birth to respect—the respect of others as well as self-respect. Thus, justice-making is, by definition, a feminist movement.²

"Respect is, in fact, a synonym for non-sentimentalized "love." I employ the term "respect" here in order to give substance to the meaning of "love" as something more than simply "affection" and something altogether other than "charity." In order to clarify connections between the individual's spirituality and the feminist liberation movement for justice, I want to focus my remarks on *self-respect*, which I take to be a primary psycho-spiritual aim of any authentic spirituality.

What does self-respect involve? In what ways does our prevailing cultural ethos support, or impede, self-respect—for women, and for men? As a Christian, I am particularly interested in the role of the church in creating or abrogating the conditions for self-respect—especially women's self-respect. I invite you to join me in exploring this terrain, which, I trust, may carry us on toward places in which we will be able to envision horizons of justice.

(Chant)

We shall respect our neighbors
Just as we respect ourselves

And in so doing
 We shall respect our God
 Which is an honest way
 Of stating the sacred truth
 Which men have obfuscated
 By telling us
 That we must love the Lord
 Our King and Master
 And, still, if we are able
 Our neighbors as ourselves.

A self-respecting woman is one whose life is rooted in a sense of her own positive value. She acts in a knowledge that she is as valuable a member of the human family as anyone else, and no more so. She acts on the basis of cooperative, rather than competitive expectations. She has nothing to prove. She owes no explanation, no defense, certainly no apology for her strong self-love. A self-respecting woman is one who has come into a creative liberating power, and she knows that this power which many feminists call God is in fact ours, not simply hers. A power which is shared, collaborative, common. A self-respecting woman lives among us as someone proud, someone humble, a woman grounded and vulnerable, able to be touched. A sister whose resources are available to us, a woman reserved, able to withhold as well as to give, able to receive or to reject whatever is given to her. A self-respecting woman knows that whatever genuinely enhances her own well-being enhances us all, and whatever does her no good, pays her no true respect, is bad for the whole human family.

A self-respecting man could be characterized in the same way. Thus, in an important sense there is little difference between a self-respecting woman and a self-respecting man. To be either is difficult in our society. Neither women nor men are rewarded for living on the basis of a radical awareness that each and every person is valuable. Each person's creativity, and work, and relationships. No more and no less than any others. Any man or woman whose way of being among us reflects such an assumption is perhaps an anomaly in the vast, increasingly impersonal social order which has been constructed over 200 years as the stage in which the drama of advanced patriarchal capitalism is to be played out. Ours is a far cry from the world in which Adam Smith offered his vision of capitalism as a just socio-economic order in which every man, that is to say, every white, ostensibly heterosexual, propertied male, had a right to his own little castle, his house, his family, his trade, a chicken in his pot. Capitalism, Smith and

other enlightened philosophers in Europe and the United States believed, would create the conditions for self-respect among white men with access to economic privilege. Few then or now seemed to grasp the ways in which community would be broken, and human responsibility obfuscated, by the presupposition that every man has certain inalienable rights: specifically freedoms of mind and movement, which must remain unfettered by, and take precedence over, all other possible goods including the basic social conditions for a humane society.

And so it is that the rights of “man”—the white propertied male—take precedence over the civil rights of black people, the equal rights of women, the dignity of sexual nonconformists, the economic rights of the working classes, and most basically, the ready accessibility of survival resources for the whole human family. The failure, and I think it was a failure, of the white male architects of the United States Constitution, to foresee the fundamental flaws in a society founded essentially on freedom as a privilege for individual white men, rather than on justice as our arena of collective responsibility to one another, has been compounded in our century by the effects of a phobia which has held us in its grip: the doctrine of anti-communism. Those who continue to this day to shape our nation have been so hamstrung by this doctrine that the basic conditions for self-respect have been all but eliminated in our society, even for privileged white men.³

Self-respect is not a personal virtue, something which anyone can somehow find or create, if she or he turns inward and tries. Self-respect is a spiritual pilgrimage which cannot be made easily, if it can be made at all, without certain basic conditions for the journey. Food, shelter, education, medical care, meaningful work, leisure-time, and the encouraging of open minds are basic conditions for self-respect. As such, they are human rights which should be available to all. No one should have to earn them. No one should have to prove that he or she deserves them or is eligible for them. I am describing basic conditions for a just and decent human world.

(Sing)

“Why are our history books so full of lies?
No word is spoken of why the Indian dies.
Or that the Chicanos love the California land
Why do our books all say it was discovered by one
white man?
That’s just a lie, one of the many,
And we’ve had plenty.

I don't want more of the same.
No more genocide in my name."⁴

It's difficult for a man, regardless of his race, his religion, or his sexual preference, to be a self-respecting person in this society: similarly difficult for a woman of any color or culture. But there is a difference, and those who tell you that there is not speak lies. For example, that a woman can do anything she wants. That any woman who really wants to can make it in our society. That the Equal Rights Amendment is redundant. That women have it good. Or that any woman can have self-respect. Those who deny or downplay the pervasive effects of sexism and heterosexism in our society are running from something. Those who say that they don't have an opinion on women's rights. Or that they're neutral. Or that it doesn't make any difference to them, have aligned themselves *de facto* with the mighty forces which are intent upon keeping women of all colors, classes, cultures, and patterns of relational bonding, in our various subordinate places. As Bishop Desmond Tutu said recently in New York City, "Whenever people say to you, 'In this situation, we are neutral,' you can always know that they have taken a decision to side with the powerful."⁵ A self-respecting man, be he black or white or brown or red or yellow, is swimming against strong patriarchal currents—what Mary O'Brien calls "the male-stream" of competitive hegemony,⁶ the public world of profit-oriented expectations, in which a gentle, open-minded man, who is committed to a more fully human society as the condition for his and others' self-respect, is likely to be dismissed, treated as if he were not a real man, trivialized, held in contempt, red-baited, fagbashed, jailed, otherwise brutalized. But the one thing he has going for him, especially if he is white, is a tenet built into the civil and religious structures of the United States: that a real man has not only a right, but moreover a responsibility, to work as hard as he can in full public view for himself—his livelihood, his family, his own well-being. As I've noted, this male prerogative is interpreted still today by legislators and judges as largely a white privilege, something that can be earned by those people, usually white males, with access to economic resources. Nowhere is this clearer than in the current Administration's efforts to turn back the clock on the small positive gains in affirmative action which have been made over the last 20 years.

A self-respecting woman today, regardless of her race, culture, class, or sexual preference, does not merely swim against the male-stream: by the very fact of her self-respect in sexist society, the self-respecting

woman's activities and ideas generate such turmoil, cause such serious disturbance in the male-stream, that it is likely to become a drowning pool, an undertow which will most certainly suck down and destroy even the most able female contender, if she attempts to ford these mighty currents by herself, alone. The difference between a self-respecting man and a self-respecting woman in our society, is that unlike the man, the woman has no civil or religious mandate to struggle in full public view for herself. Within the limits of any particular political regime, whether it's Roosevelt's, Carter's, or Reagan's, for example, a woman is welcome to work publicly on behalf of others—husbands, employers, students, children, patients, refugees, or the massive corporate entities peculiar to advanced capitalism. But a woman is not encouraged by any dominant civil or moral custom to work, struggle, or speak publicly on her behalf. Since self-respect goes hand-in-hand with the person's commitment to act on behalf of her own well-being, as vital to the public good, a self-respecting woman represents, quite literally, a contradiction to the general public consensus of what constitutes the good society. She represents its demise, and is actually, for that reason, the bad woman. Thus the feminist movement, increasingly a movement for all women of all races, classes, cultures, and religions is, I believe, the most fundamentally threatening social force in this nation today. Not because it signals equal pay for equal work, the drafting of women, homosexual marriages, unisex bathrooms, or the undoing of discriminatory insurance policies, but because each of these bits and pieces is but one in a whole tapestry which is our society, our life together, our economic system, our political sensibilities, our religious assumptions and beliefs.

Please fantasize with me for a minute. Suppose all affluent, or economically relatively secure women, most of us white, were to step down publicly from the pedestal which has been used not to protect us from the world of white men, but rather white men's public world from us. Suppose we were to say to the men in our lives, "To hell with your sexist, racist, classist privilege. We don't want to be your ladies or your queens. We don't want our daughters and sons to be your princesses and princes. We don't want your money, your silent or your not-so-silent rage, your anxiety, your ulcers. We want our own lives (which is not to say, necessarily, that we don't want you, or that we don't love you or that we don't want to be with you)." Suppose also that poorer women, white women, many black racial/ethnic women as well, were to insist publicly upon the conditions which would enhance their self-

respect and that of their children. Suppose all these mothers, lovers, workers, sisters, daughters and friends were to state publicly that they will live and work neither beneath nor above men of whatever race, ethnicity, or class. Suppose lesbians and straight women were to begin publicly to set the conditions for how and with whom we will love, live, marry or not, have sex or not, procreate or not, and raise children or not. Suppose that every woman were to announce publicly that she will not bring children into this world until they are guaranteed the conditions which will enable them to grow and thrive in self-respect. Suppose too, that every female worker, every nurse or doctor, secretary or executive, maid or lady of the house, caretaker of someone else's children or of her own, student or teacher, parishioner or priest, inmate or warden were to say publicly to our congresspeople, senators, courts, and president that we will no longer be privatized nor divided among ourselves. No longer women set against women, no longer women unable to share stories, secrets and dreams. No longer women kept from organizing on behalf of our own lives and the lives of those who will inherit the earth from us. Suppose that each and every battered woman were actually to leave the house. Each abused child actually to be given refuge. Each victim of racial or sexual harassment actually to be given comfort and advocacy rather than blame. Suppose all such women and children, whose numbers are legion, were actually to organize themselves publicly to fight back. Suppose, finally, all of these women and children, women-workers, women-lovers, wives, mothers, sisters and daughters, poor and more affluent women, were to march on Washington. Suppose we were to come without guns or sticks or stones. Suppose our only weapon was our passion for justice. Suppose we were marching, singing for our lives, moving slowly down Pennsylvania Avenue towards the barricades which protect the White House from the public. Suppose we came singing, publicly declaring our celebration of a God in whom women's creative liberating power is steeped.

(Chant)

"God is our shepherd, we shall not want. She
maketh us to lie down in green pastures.
She leadeth us beside the still waters. She
restoreth our soul. Yea, though we walk
through the valley of the shadow of death, we
will fear no evil, for she is with us. She
prepareth a table before us in the presence
of our enemies. She annointeth us with

oil. Our cup runneth over. Surely goodness
and mercy will follow us all the days of our
life and we will dwell in the presence of our
God forever.”

What do you suppose would happen if we came? I am clear that such womanpower would not be met kindly. We would be seen correctly as a subversive, terrorist, revolutionary movement, because we would together embody an unspeakably terrible assault on the “rights of man” upon which the nation has been built. If we were to refuse to leave until we had a concrete, unequivocal guarantee of justice for all in this society, we would be either carried off to asylums, mowed down by horses, dogs, sticks, or guns, or we would have to become the new government of the United States. A fantasy indeed, but it is in fact what the feminist movement is all about. It is also what self-respecting men and women in our society, including its religious institutions, are all about: movement toward a transformed social order, a just world, a time and a space in which the conditions which generate the possibility for self-respect for all people are basic human rights, available to all.

(Sing)

“I have dreamed on this mountain since first I was my
mother’s daughter,
and you can’t just take my dreams away.
Not with me watching, no you can’t just take my dreams
away.”⁷

Feminism has been rooted historically in women’s self-respect. Self-respect is itself rooted in an awareness that every other person is as valuable as we are—that is, in our love for others, those most unlike us as well as those most like us. Feminism is a commitment to participate in creating justice for all people of different races and cultures and classes and religions. It was not coincidence that the early feminist movement in this country in the nineteenth century was also an abolition movement. Such women as Angelina and Sara Grimke and Sojourner Truth pressed relentlessly for abolition of slavery and its effects, as well as for the equal rights of women, black and white. It should not surprise that, as years wore on, amidst fierce resistance among white men to the aims of both abolition and suffrage, some white feminists abandoned the movement for black rights to work on behalf of white female privilege, thus allowing themselves to be co-opted by the white male agenda, which divides all oppressed people in order to defeat all oppressed people.⁸ This is still today an issue in the

feminist movement, though less so now than ten years ago, as white feminists have begun to acknowledge and attempt to deal with our racist and classist behavior. The more honest we are with one another across race, ethnic, and class lines and the more inclusive feminism is of *all* women's well-being, the more potent a social force we will become. The current Administration, with its broadside attacks on all races, classes and cultures of women: on black, Hispanic, other racial and ethnic groups; and on gays and lesbians has begun to radicalize the feminist movement. We are today a less white, less affluent, less college-educated, less upwardly-mobile movement than even five years ago. We are also necessarily both underground at times, and involved frequently in political movements which have not been particularly feminist in the past. I refer to such movements as peace work, the struggle to get the United States off the back of Nicaragua, and out of the way of the liberation movements in South Africa, El Salvador, Guatemala, the Philippines, Chile, and the list goes on.... These liberation efforts are strengthened increasingly by participation and leadership of feminist women and men. Audre Lorde, in a presentation in Cambridge last year, asked, "What does it feel like to be a citizen of a country which is on the wrong side of virtually every liberation movement in the world?"⁹ It feels outrageous to me. It feels exhausting. And it feels good to be connected to women and men throughout this nation and this world who are committed to living our lives, which may mean dying our deaths, on behalf of that justice in which many of us first learned to believe from this nation's ideals, however flawed, and from our various religious heritages. Thus, I stand here in historical continuity with both the American Revolution of 1776, and my particular religious community, the Christian Church, as I witness to the power and presence of a God whose thirst for justice is unquenchable. It is she who moves the struggle. She who demands a voice

(Sing)

"God of grace and God of justice,
On Thy people pour Thy power,
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
For the facing of this hour.
For the facing of this hour."¹⁰

What's happening around us today may not be too far from what was happening some 50 years ago in Germany. Hitler is not likely to return to planet Earth as a little goosestepping man with a moustache. He is

more likely to come to us in the shape of our own social, including our religious, institutions in which we are led to believe that only those who think right, act right, look right, and believe in the right god are deemed worthy of respect and life. I am not as frightened of Jesse Helms, contemptuous of both God and humankind as he is, as I am of the Democratic Party's efforts to clean up its image by keeping women on the bottom, gays in the closets, racial/ethnic minorities on the street, and "God" safe in the church. I am not as scared of Jerry Falwell, bowing as he does before the idols of our generation, as I am of mainline Christian churches' preoccupation with a privatistic, individualistic spirituality which signals a quiescent attachment to a God who will not disturb us. Were I to chronicle the fall of this nation, writing of these things 200 years from now, I suspect I would conclude that the first and final enemy of the U.S. people was not communism, nor militarism, nor even nuclear bombs or the greed upon which advanced capitalism is built, but rather the passivity, the sense of utter powerlessness which the church engenders among its people by preaching and teaching bad theology, and which renders our numbers virtually impotent in the face of mounting evil.

How, then, can a self-respecting man or woman be a Christian? This is not a rhetorical question, nor a simple one. I am happy to say that many of the seminary students whom I am privileged to come to know in my work wrestle profoundly with this question, and the most compassionate and courageous among them do not find easy answers. More to the point is the question of how a self-respecting person can participate willingly in an institution which historically has not taught its people self-respect. To the contrary, Christian people have been taught to be self-effacing, self-negating, self-emptying, *especially if we are women*. The most notable Protestant theologians of the past generation—for example, Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich—reinforced the self-denying character of the historical tradition by insisting, with the early Fathers, that pride is a sin. As Valerie Saving and Judith Plaskow, two feminist theologians, have noted: for most women, pride in one's self and one's work is something we need to seek.¹¹ Pride is a moral good. Our lack of pride may well be our most egregious sin. Good Christian men throughout Christian history, have lifted a theological assumption—that pride is wrong and loss of self, right—out of its social-historical context and spoken of it as if it were the eternal Word of God, the Truth. We must lose ourselves in order to find ourselves? This is Gospel? The Good News? For a battered woman or gay man, an abused child or hungry black citizen? Good news for

Nicaraguan peasants and Ethiopian children? Until the human social order generates the basic conditions for self-respect, it is an unfair, unrealistic, immoral expectation for us to lay upon persons the mandate that they should give themselves away, lose themselves or live for others. Like Reinhold Niebuhr, good Christian gentlemen have failed to perceive the extent to which pride is a sin specifically of those who shape and govern religion and society, those who do indeed posit themselves at the center of the world of God. This is pride: putting oneself at the center, around whom everyone and everything else must revolve. It is a sin, but it is specifically *not* the sin of those who must struggle at the margins for their own names, dignity, rights or lives. No theological truth can be simply created in the minds of white propertied men and laid on everyone else. All theological truth, all teachings about God, salvation, sin, and so forth, must be determined by those *about* whom and *to* whom it is meant to speak. White straight, Euro-American men can speak only for themselves. White men and women cannot theologize for people of color. Men cannot theologize for women. The Vatican cannot theologize for the poor of Brazil or Nicaragua.¹²

Those on the bottom—historically, those least empowered in the church and the world—are called by God to lead the way in discovering theological truths for our generation: theological truths and moral imperatives. It is not that women can speak for men. Or black people for whites. It is simply that poor people, people of darker shades and ethnic groups, women, lesbians and gay men, and members of religious minorities have what liberation theologians call an “epistemological privilege”—the privilege of actually *knowing* God first, and therefore the ability to lead others to God. Knowing God first, because God lives and moves always at the bottom of the heap. God is *with* the poor and marginalized. God struggles in prisons, closets, and on the streets. Those who are at the bottom of the barrel in any culture, religion, nation, society or economic situation have the privilege of naming God because *only they* know the name of the God who struggles to resist oppression. God groans for breath and life and self-respect with and among those who have been cast out, marginalized, in every situation, from the center of our public life together. When met by the God of the margins, those who hold religious and civil power can, and usually do, reject this God as a phony or a lie. But they cannot take her away from those who know and love her. We speak our own theological truths. This is the heartbeat of feminist liberation theology.¹³

The Vatican and other patriarchal religious voices are correct in their

perception that such theology threatens traditional hierarchical church structures. Whenever the poor are taken seriously, the policies and privileges founded upon the accumulation of private capital are most assuredly threatened. Whenever women's lives are taken seriously, the policies and principles which are dedicated to the perpetuation of white male control are indeed challenged. Whenever the real daily lives and dreams of common folk are taken seriously as authoritative in the knowledge and love of God, traditional hierarchical arrangements of ecclesiastical power are in serious trouble.

If I thought for a moment that the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury, or any single person, group, or convention of Christians had the power either to ask or answer my most urgent moral, spiritual questions, I would not stay in the church for five more minutes, for I regard such mind-body control-tactics as fundamentally immoral precisely because they disempower us. They trivialize our capacity to stand and be counted on behalf of God's creation. To relinquish our moral agency and the critical necessity of becoming self-affirming, self-respecting people who can assume responsibility for shaping our lives in the world is to give up the purposefulness and creative power of being human in God's world. It is in fact to lose our souls. And so, we must, if we are self-respecting, say no to the wielding of moral and spiritual authority over us. This does not mean that each of us is accountable to no one but him or herself. God forbid. It *does* mean that for every human person, our communities of moral and spiritual accountability include, but are not limited to, the religious institutions to which we belong.

I am, for example, no more accountable, by my ordination vows, to the Bishop and the Episcopal church, than I am by my baptism to all those many women and gays who no longer go to church because they feel as if their lives do not matter, in no small part because men with ecclesial authority don't know what to make of feminists or self-affirming lesbians and gay men. I am no more accountable by my baptism to Christian women and men than I am by my birthright as a citizen of this planet, to those Jews who died in Auschwitz, in no small measure because good Christian people like myself chose the way of silence. A self-respecting person can be a Christian only insofar as she or he understands well that Christian faith, like all religious faith, must serve first in the spirit of a Native American spirituality, the health and sacred happiness of the "two-leggeds, four-leggeds, wingeds," and the creatures whose bellies hug the earth.¹⁴ We are not accountable finally to our institutional authorities but to God's world, and to helping make it just.

(Sing)

"O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be Thou our Guide while life shall last
And our Eternal Home."¹⁵

In this Spirit, I am *delighted* to be a Christian, despite the disreputable name the Moral Majority has given us all. I am delighted to be a Christian because the Jesus story is a powerful source of memory for me. Not that Jesus is or was God; I do not believe that it is that simple. Not that Jesus is The Way, much less the only way, to God, because I do not believe it is that simple. Certainly not that Christianity has a leg to stand on when it comes to teaching truth or practicing virtue. I am a Christian because early on I hung on to the story of Jesus and his friends as having something to do with my life, my values, and my God. It is a story which can be, and is, read in many ways, some of them reprehensible. Thanks in no small part to my parents, and others responsible for my early religious education, the Jesus-story came through to me not as a story of obedience to authority. The Jesus-story was not a story of basically wicked people. It was not a story about right belief or conformity to commandments. The Jesus-story was not the story of a male god or a patriarchal Lord. Jesus was our brother. Jesus was our friend. I heard the Jesus-story as a love story, a tale about people taking people seriously, an image of life as we should live it together: a call to solidarity, our daily lives spilling over with concern for one another; advocacy for the poor, anger at hypocrisy and empty rituals and what I would later hear Adrienne Rich call the "lies, secrets, and silence" which glue us together in societies dominated by unjust power-relations.¹⁶ I heard the Jesus-story as one of compassion for those who are wounded. I heard the story as an invitation to marginalized people, outcasts, nonconformists, different sorts of people, all those sitting outside the gates of our public, consumer-oriented lives. By the time I was in elementary school it was clear to me that the Jesus-story stood in stark opposition to racism, specifically, in the early 50's, to racial segregation of schools, bathrooms, stores, buses—and churches. That churches were segregated seemed to my young consciousness most extraordinary and entirely wrong.

All of which is to say that the church taught me something *in spite of* its own institutional sin and gave me a message which many of its leaders obviously did not mean for me to hear: that *Justice is another name for God*. The very God whom we call Love. Now I take this

message very seriously, not that I live it very evenly or very well. I believe that Justice is God's name, and that there is no higher good than this, nothing more beautiful, nothing any truer than justice: right, mutual, reciprocal relation between and among all people; between people and other living creatures; between creatures and the wellspring of our passion for justice. I am delighted to imagine myself standing alongside all who struggle for and celebrate justice in great and small places of our lives, whether we are Christians, Jews, Muslims, Wicca Wimmin, Humanists, Feminists, Womanists, Atheists, Socialists, Communists, or simply good old secular Capitalist folk, who try to stand with the oppressed as best we can. I count myself among them. If our goal is really justice, our struggle is one, moved along by the power of the same Spirit. I am delighted to be a Christian and, as such, a person morally challenged to stand with those whose lives are broken by white supremacy, male-gender superiority, homophobia, anti-Semitism, economic exploitation, discrimination against the elderly, the young, the sick, the handicapped people in our society, imperialism in its many forms (national, religious, cultural, ethnic imperialism). I am delighted to be a Christian who, thanks to the *feminist* movement, has discovered her vocation as theologian, teacher, priest, preacher, writer, and lesbian activist on behalf of justice. Nothing has given me more pleasure than to come into a shared sense of purpose and vocation and power alongside many women and men of diverse racial/ethnic/religious backgrounds who are committed to doing what we can to help turn this society around (Latin American liberation theologians call it "conversion")—so that all children, women, and men will have access to food, shelter, education, work and leisure-time.

I am delighted to be a part of an institution where there are so many beautiful soul sisters, women struggling for life, for self-respect, for justice for all. I enjoy working alongside these women, our celebrations of woman-power, our resistance to evil. I take pleasure in being a priest of Christianity insofar as the religion we celebrate is becoming a justice-seeking, woman-affirming, earth-centered, sensual, body-celebrating faith—which it is, *insofar as we are shaping it so*. I cannot love a God of domination and control, a Deity who demands obedience, a body-denying, woman-hating, people-punishing projection of our least secure, most self-denying images. I lust after worship, to stand, to sing, to dance, to play in the source of compassion and justice, in the One who is the root of our revolutionary patience, who is the deep-flowing waters of our sexuality, the juice of our intimacy, the source of our love which is at once human and divine if it is one. Yet surely the Father still

reigns in our sanctuary as in our nation and our world. For Christian feminists, the exclusive male-male bonding between father and son—as symbolized historically by the reified relationship between God and His Christ—will no longer do. We are beginning, in a fundamental way, to recreate the church. This is how I understand the roots of a Christian feminist spirituality for justice as well as the task of Christian feminist liberation theology.

Nothing is sacred if it serves to denigrate women, gays, Jews, Palestinians, blacks or others, or to secure the structures of oppression in the world and our religious institutions. Only a *radicalized* church will do, a church converted, a church turned round, a church denouncing much of its own history. This struggle will extend far beyond our lifetimes in this world. I stay because I was once there, a woman-child who heard the Jesus-story and got a message about God as justice. I stay because many sisters are still there. I stay because the church, at its best, is a sanctuary for refugees, an organizational base for feminists, an advocacy-agency for hungry people, cold people, abused women and children, gay men and lesbians, alcoholics, AIDS victims. I stay because to walk away right now would seem to be abandoning a burning house with loved ones still in it. As long as I have breath and strength and desire to struggle creatively in the church (and I may not always have those things), I will stay to help extinguish the flames of injustice. I am enough of a political hardhat to want to use whatever leverage we have as a Christian voice to turn this nation around. It seems to be both the most critical place I can be politically—for example, speaking and writing as a lesbian priest on behalf of gay and lesbian people—and also the best I can do pastorally among people of the world and church, for, as Gustavo Parajón, a Baptist pastor in Managua, asked some of us, “What can be more pastoral than to be for justice and life?”¹⁷

Whether we are in any religious institution is of less consequence, finally, than whether we commit ourselves to acting on behalf of the oppressed. Not patronizingly, not charitably, but actually putting ourselves on the line with marginalized, trivialized, outcast people, standing with them, and if we *are* them, standing up to be counted ourselves. This is, I believe, the essence of any Christian spirituality which is rooted in justice.

To be silent in the face of lies—whether they are about others or about ourselves—what greater lie than this? To be passive in the face of injustice—what greater evil than this? History is littered with the bodies of those broken as the world watched. Whether we are religious or

irreligious; whether we are steeped more in secular or sacred sensibilities; whether we are Jewish, Muslim, Christian, post-Christian, partly Christian, non-Christian, or anti-Christian, the question we must ask ourselves and one another is: What are *we* doing about the fact that the U.S. government is on the wrong side of every movement for justice, liberation, and self-respect in the world, both at home and abroad? I end with a couple of verses from an old hymn written by a former captain of a slave-ship. A white Christian man, who had been converted. I sing these few lines in honor of my father, Robert Clarence Heyward, another white Christian gentleman who was converted, more and more, to justice. He died last year and he loved this song. Please join me if you'd like to.

Thru many dangers, toils and snares
We have already come
'Tis grace that brought us safe this far
And grace will lead us home.

When we've been there ten thousand years
Bright, shining as the sun
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we first begun.¹⁸

Notes

1. From my book, *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation* (Pilgrim), 1984, p. 151.
2. See Beverly W. Harrison, *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, (Beacon), 1985, for clarification of connections between women's well-being and other dimensions of justice.
3. Several helpful resources on the relation of economic exploitation to the overall texture of social injustice in the United States are Zillah Eiseustein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* (Longman), 1981; Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (Random House), 1981; and Amy Swerdlow and Hanna Lessinger, eds., *Class, Race, and Sex: The Dynamics of Control* (G.K. Hall), 1983.
4. From Holly Near, "No More Genocide," *Hang In There!* Redwood Records, P.O. Box 40400, San Francisco, CA 94140, 1973.
5. From a sermon given at Union Theological Seminary, New York, NY, October 25, 1984, as quoted in the *Union News*, Jan., 1985, Issue No. 3, p. 2.
6. See Mary O'Brien, *The Politics of Reproduction* (Routledge and Kegan Paul), 1981, p. 5F, for use of term "male-stream"; also Beverly W. Harrison, *Our Right to Choose: Toward a New Ethic of Abortion* (Beacon), 1983.
7. From Meg Christian, "Mountain Song," *Face the Music*, Olivia Records, Box 70237, Los Angeles, CA 90070, 1977.
8. See Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*; also, Bell Hooks, *Ain't I Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (South End Press), 1981; Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press), 1983; and Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color* (Persephone Press), 1981.
9. Audre Lorde posed this question at a presentation sponsored by the Women's Theological Center, in Cambridge, Ma., Jan. 18, 1985.
10. Adaptation of "God of Grace and God of Glory," Harry Emerson Fosdick (1978-1969), *Rejoice in the Lord: A Hymn Companion to the Scriptures* (Eerdmans), 1966.

- 11 See Valerie Saiving Goldstein's classic essay, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *Journal of Religion* (April, 1960), reprinted in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. by Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (Harper and Row), 1979. Judith Plaskow has further expounded this theme in *Sex, Sin, and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (University Press of America), 1980.
- 12 This, of course, is a central thesis in Gustavo Gutierrez's *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, trans. by Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Orbis), 1973, and in the many subsequent works in liberation theology.
- 13 Resources in feminist liberation theology include Rosemary R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk—Toward a Feminist Theology* (Beacon), 1983; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (Crossroad), 1983; Sharon Welch, *Communities of Solidarity and Resistance: A Feminist Liberation Theology* (Orbis), 1985; Dorothee Sölle, with Shirley Cloyes, *To Work and to Love* (Fortress), 1984; and Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God* (University Press of America).
- 14 I first heard the terms, "two-leggeds, four-leggeds, and wingeds," used by Mike Myers at the Theology in the Americas Conference in Detroit, 1980.
- 15 Verse of "O God, Our Help in Ages Past," based on Psalm 90, Isaac Watts (1674-1748), *The Hymnal 1940* (Episcopal Church Pension Fund), 1940.
- 16 See Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (W. W. Norton), 1979.
- 18 Verses of "Amazing Grace," John Newton (1725-1807), *The Methodist Hymnal* (United Methodist Publishing House), 1966.