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# Feminist Christians - A Conflict Resolved?

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a textual study of feminist Christian and sociological perspectives and is complemented by a small oral history project, which has been carried out using a feminist methodological framework.

The research focuses on some strategies worked out by a selected number of Christian feminists in three different denominational groups as they individually negotiate traditional Church structures of beliefs and practices. I identify several specific ways in which these women deal with the dissonance and conflict they acknowledge and encounter as a result of their retaining their Christian beliefs and practices alongside feminist perspectives. Their theoretical approach to the Christian tradition is situated within the scholarly frameworks developed by Christian feminists thinkers explored in this thesis. In particular Ruether and Fiorenza, who have written substantially about the experience of feminists remaining within the church and attempting to remedy the patriarchal practices and belief systems that have disempowered women for two millennia are used to understand the choices of the interviewees. I name this approach 'reformist' and contrast it briefly with a second broad strategy, sometimes called the post-Christian or 'revolutionary' approach. Mary Daly exemplifies this position and argues that there is no place for women within the androcentrism of Christianity and its misogynist practices.

Principally a study of feminist approaches to gendered religious experience, this research

explores how and why some selected feminist Christians in New Zealand live with (or decline to live with) the conflict their feminism presents to their Christianity. The fieldwork is situated within an examination of sociological perspectives on the social roles and functions of religion. Specifically, I discuss a range of differing views about the extent to which religion both benefits and disadvantages groups marked by gender. The gender analysis central to this thesis is established through a discussion of how differing feminist approaches to gender relations influence both feminist sociology and feminist Christian thinking.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The irony of an introduction to this thesis is that it has been written, as I am sure many are, at the end of the research project. There are several important reasons for this.

One is that the research process evolves and changes like living entity over time. The research process involves more than setting out a question or thesis and then answering it. My experience has been that the process of researching the thesis topic has informed the thesis itself. That is, the question has changed as I have carried out the research. My original query “Feminist Christians - A Conflict Resolved?” has transformed itself as I have begun to appreciate the complexities and the processes involved when feminists choose to remain within Christianity.

The question I first asked myself when embarking on this project was, of course, the “why” question. Why am I doing this? What does it matter? Is this an important part of my feminism, or anyone else’s for that matter? These questions have been addressed throughout the course of the research and writing process.

## **WHY FEMINISM AND CHRISTIANITY/RELIGION?**

Feminism examines women and their lives/views/existence/status/relationship with the world.

In the context of western, white, colonial culture in Aotearoa/New Zealand in 1997, feminism

concerns itself with women and their relation to living in this particular culture. An important and formative part of this colonial inflected culture is defined by Christianity. A deeper look at what feminism in this context means and how it is theorised appears in Chapter Three.

Why study religion? Precisely because I am a feminist. In an examination of issues of gender it is impossible to overlook the influence of religion. Both gender and religion (feminism and Christianity) “are closely interrelated as our perceptions of ourselves are shaped by and deeply rooted in our culturally shared religious and philosophical heritage, even when this is rejected” (King, 1995:2). In my cultural context it is impossible to ignore the influence of (past and continuing, active, passive and rejected) the Christian church, both the institution and the psychological and spiritual effects and influences thereof. As King has argued,

“Religion has not only been the matrix of cultures and civilizations but it structures reality - all reality, including that of gender - and encompasses the deepest level of what it means to be human” (King, 1995: 4).

As a feminist who is interested in exploring and critiquing culture and its influence on the gender category ‘woman’ I agree with King that it is impossible to examine what makes male and female in both their human commonness and gender difference without examining and acknowledging the important role that religion plays in both forming our structured identity as one of two possible gender categories, but also as a critical formative influence on our personal self-hood and unconscious being. I take King’s point that even feminists/women such as myself

who have rejected Christian beliefs and value-systems cannot reject what has been a life-long process of identity formation and understanding of the world and society in which I live, exist and am defined. What has significantly shaped my self cannot be excised because I no longer want it to be so. Who I am and, to some extent, continue to be, is inevitably shaped by the Christian influences on social institutions around me. It is, therefore, important to me as a feminist to examine this important cultural, personal, psychological and spiritual part of my culture.

### **WHAT IS RELIGION?**

What do I mean by “religion”? In the context of this study, I view religion as a source of meanings and as a series of understandings and rituals that aim to structure and explain human interactions and the environment. For the purpose of this work, I have examined various meanings institutionalised by religious thinking into religious traditions. In the context of this study, the specific religion I examine is Christianity (hence my use of religion/Christianity) I am not attempting to explore other cultural contexts, constructions or meanings of religion outside the one I have experienced and continue to experience. The question of *what religion is* is dealt with in some depth in Chapters One, Two and Three.

## **WOMEN AND RELIGION**

This thesis explores the relationship between three women and their religious beliefs and practice (in this case, Christianity). How women are religious is an important issue in this thesis. Are there, for example, distinctive ways in which women tend to ritualise or symbolise? How is the position of women in society related to their position in religion? If women's position in society is reflected in religion, how is this expressed? How do women operate as religious agents, actors and innovators? Does religion assist them in resisting oppression in patriarchal society or does it enforce the patriarchal social mores and reinforce the oppression they find in other social structures, both private and public? The religious experience and expression of women is within the context of centuries of androcentric interpretation when they are Christian. How does this affect their attempts to re-interpret and recreate Christianity into a non-patriarchal system of belief? Is it, in fact, possible to do so? In this thesis I explore these questions through interviews with the women and through analysis of key texts by feminist theologians and feminist sociologists.

The involvement of each of these women in a Christian sub-group, the way in which these groups operate, and the way in which each of these women design, develop and express their spirituality is explored. In each interview I discuss with the women both the content and explanation for these beliefs. I also explore with them what their beliefs prompt them to do in terms of both social action and religious practice, and examine how they negotiate traditional church practice in terms of its conflict with these practices, actions and beliefs. Each of the

women critique the traditional Christian church structure in terms of their own feminist approach to both religion and society.

I selected women who were known to me indirectly. That is, I had never or only briefly met each one of them and had no previous history with them in terms of any type of relationship. They were known by friends to be feminist Christians and were accessed by me through an intermediate contact with whom I do have a relationship. The issues associated with choosing interviewees is explored more fully in Chapter Four. The process of inviting each interviewee to join the project is also fully outlined there.

## **THE STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS**

The connection of Christianity and feminism has been addressed in this thesis by my examination using a textual analysis of the relationship between the two. The intersections and points of conflict have been well theorised by both feminists who chose to depart Christianity and those who wish to continue to embrace it in some form or other. These theoretical viewpoints, along with an examination of why addressing Christianity is important for feminism, are contained in the first chapter of this thesis. I begin by discussing the connections between women and religion, move through an introductory explanation of feminism itself in order to contextualise my approach to the research, and then begin to examine how Christianity is diversely viewed by feminists. The analysis deals with the spiritual or experiential aspects of Christianity. The structural aspects are dealt with in later chapters. I focus at some length on the work of Mary

Daly in particular when discussing the importance of religious symbolism and signage. Her critique has been at the forefront of the exile from Christianity for many years and form an important part of an understanding of the history of the relationship between Christianity and feminism in the Second Wave, and I use her work to introduce the body of work written by those feminists who have sought spirituality outside of Christianity due to their views of it as being untenable for feminists to remain within the Christian church. This leads into the second part of the chapter which deals with feminists who have chosen to stay within the Christian church on the basis that the religion, whilst unacceptable to feminists in its current form, is able to be reformed to the extent that it augments feminism itself by making a place for women and women's voice in a non-sexist environment. For theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, working within the framework of Christianity to reform it from its patriarchal nature has been the work of a lifetime. It is also a work they carry out because they believe it is important for women that they do so. These two feminist critiques are in agreement as to the patriarchal nature of the church in its current form. They diverge in their views about what can be done.

This discussion of the nature of religion and its impact on women, particularly in the context of the Christian church, is followed in Chapter Two using a sociological analysis. This chapter, therefore, deals with the structure and social functions of religion and the Christian church in the context of the societies in which they are present. Rather than looking at religion as something that is both personal and experiential, a sociological perspective looks at human behaviour in society with a focus on the societal structures that order and maintain societal

cohesion. In this Chapter I explain the key features of a sociological view of religion. This chapter introduces Chapter Three where feminist sociological theories with regard to religion are discussed. In particular, feminist analyses of the church as a patriarchal institution are examined from different feminist theoretical perspectives, each of which is explained. In particular, theories relating to public and private patriarchy are seen as important in this analysis, and the theoretical perspectives of Sylvia Walby in particular are examined in some depth.

The contextualisation for the interviews that form the second part of this thesis begins in Chapter Four, where feminist research methodology in general is discussed and leads on to specific details of the research method undertaken in this work. As part of this chapter, the ‘problem of speaking for others’ and the question of ‘truth’ are addressed. It is at this point that I, as a feminist researcher, become more present in the text. This follows my understanding of feminist theoretical approaches to oral history work. It is at this time that I become not only more present but more engaged with subject as the research moves from being textually based to being based in the articulated experiences of women. Issues of power within the interviewing situation and issues of friendship are examined, along with some discussion of the use of the feminist empathetic ear in an interview situation. The interviewees are also introduced at this point, and interview specifics outlined (questions asked, interview locations, and consent).

Chapter Six contains an analysis of the information provided by the interviewees. Each

interview has answered the same five questions with regard to the nature of their involvement in Christianity and these answers are compared and contrasted. They are also examined in the context of the theory covered in the earlier three chapters and their answers highlight some of the theoretical approaches already covered. This chapter is also one of engagement, as I wrestle with textual theoretical approaches, interview transcripts, and my own role in both the interview processes and the analysis of interview material. The major part of this chapter looks at how the interviewed women deal with the problem of their commitment to Christianity in the light of their feminist views. I identify the various strategies by which these women negotiate the problem. And, finally, I look at how the women live with the unresolved conflicts that they are surrounded by. This is, perhaps, the single most important part of this thesis, although it was not apparent to me at the commencement of this work that this would be so. Indeed, it is through a process of my engagement with both texts (written theoretical and oral historical) that I revisit the thesis itself and challenge my own assumption that feminist Christians somehow resolve the conflicts they are presented with.

The final chapter involves a review of **findings** of the oral history element of the work and revisits some of the theoretical approaches discussed in earlier chapters that seems more appropriate to the lives of the interviewees. It is of interest that the psychoanalytic approaches to the theorising of religion and womanhood seem to be the ones alluded to by the interviewees.

I also summarise the strategies these women practice in order to continue to live within a Christian context. These range from confrontation through to acceptance and also lead to the creation of alternatives. This chapter re-visits the work in terms of assumptions I have made

at the beginning and wisdom I have gained through the process of knowledge gained through a theoretical study and through the gathering of oral history research. I point out here the relationship and relative importance in this study of the two. I finish this chapter, and the thesis, by signposting issues that this work has raised which might usefully become the subject of further research and study.

## **THEMES**

There are a number of themes in this work and these will be threaded throughout the thesis.

An important theme is that of how women live with conflict. It was not clear to me at the beginning of the thesis that these three women did live with conflict with regard to their feminism and their Christianity. I had hopes of discovering from them some way of resolution to the intersection of feminism and Christianity. I discovered this not to be the case. All the women, as expected following a review of the feminist theory on the matter, do find that their feminism and their Christianity conflict. It is what these women did about the conflict that has informed this study. That is, I have explored with these women ways in which they negotiate the conflicts they live with. I begin this thesis by setting up the basis for that conflict, and I explore through these women's lives ways in which they negotiate it. It has been an exciting process to learn about women and conflict in this context. This theme of conflict and negotiation will recur throughout the following chapters.

A second theme has been with regard to the polarised feminist views with regard to what to do about the problem of patriarchal religion. Feminists have reacted in many ways to Christianity, in both their theory and their actions. Mary Daly, for example, not only condemns Christianity at its very core but led a literal exodus from the church in 1971 when she delivered a sermon at Harvard Memorial Church. "Sisters. Our time has come," she spoke. "We will leave behind the centuries of silence and darkness. Let us affirm our faith in ourselves and our will to transcendence by rising and walking out together" (Daly, 1977:271). And they did.

There are, of course, many who have not literally nor figuratively walked out of the church. Some women of intellect and power have continued to work within both the institution and the mind set of the church, attempting to reclaim both. I am comfortable with my description of feminists with regard to Christianity as being either reformists or revolutionaries as I believe this description encompasses both ends of the polarity, although it fails to distinguish those positions in between. The theoretical framework has been applied here because I am studying a particular group of women who fall clearly into one of those two categories. The women in this study have chosen to remain actively aligned with and involved in the traditional Christian church. They have done this, in each case, by becoming part of a feminist sub-group within each main denominational structure. For this reason I have no hesitation in calling them reformist in terms of their behaviour towards the institution of the church. This is the reason I continue to use the polarity framework, and I believe it to be a useful one for this study.

A third theme that occupies a sub-text of the research is the meaning of 'feminist'.

Although I describe the commonly accepted descriptions of categories and stances of various feminist perspectives, I am also aware that feminism encompasses shades of meaning and defies simple description. Indeed, each of the three women interviewed described what the term means to them differently, although there were common aspects with some widely-accepted descriptions of the term. I have come to understand feminism as a fluid notion that exists not outside each and every woman who is aware she is a woman but deep within, both consciously and unconsciously. Feminism, an awareness of our gendered selves and our position in society, is a part of our journey through life, and it forms part of the way we negotiate many of the conflicts that beset us including, for some, the conflict between their awareness of themselves as women and their religious belief and practice. What it means to be a feminist underlies my research method, my interviewing praxis, my interpretation. What it means to be a feminist underlies much of the conflict within these Christian feminists. It is also apparent in every aspect of the reform versus revolution debate, as one feminist argues with another not about religion, I suspect, but about what it really means to be feminist.

The role of the unconscious in the formation and maintenance of our psychological selves is another thread that runs through this work. Starting with Mary Daly's exploration of the power of naming, through Carol Christ's exposition of the power of symbols, clearly brought out in the interviews, the role of the unconscious or subconscious is a persistent one in this thesis. I have looked at not only what people do - women, feminists, theorists, practitioners - but attempted to explore why they do what they do. It becomes apparent in the first chapter

of this thesis that I am exploring motivations, moods, subconscious and unconscious forces that compel or impel us towards certain kinds of behaviours. Nowhere is this more apparent than when I explore theologian Daphne Hampson's view of the impossibility of a Christian feminism through feminist re-reading and interpretation of scripture. "One can read feminist content into scripture, but she (Hampson) feels that such efforts are only made by women who have already decided to maintain their Christian allegiance and who are thus faced with having to derive the feminist present from a patriarchal past" (Madsen, 1994:491). I ask again the question "why?" I have been forced to look at the role the women's formative pasts have had in their present position as a result of what the women told me in the interviews. In this regard, I fear this thesis raises more questions than it answers. Perhaps some can never answered because they are unknown even to ourselves.

As a feminist researcher I have laid considerable importance on the experience of women. I do not privilege other texts above my interview transcripts. But doing so has created difficulties, not only where what the women have said to me resonates with what the theorists have said, but where they do not. A feminist approach creates interpretation difficulties such as these. They appear throughout this thesis.

Finally, the problem of bringing a feminist approach to any research is also a recurring theme. I ask myself, as a feminist interviewer, how important is my role as interviewer in eliciting certain responses, one way or another, from the interviewees? As Susan Grogan (1994:109) has rightfully posed an important question when she asks "It would be utterly misleading to

suggest that what I am doing is allowing a person to speak for themselves. This is my selection of themes and labels, my organisation of them, my attribution of significance to them". As a feminist researcher I apply these comments equally to all my texts, not just the interview situation. I am left asking myself if I have spent a year of my life researching myself. It this thesis about Anne Duncan? It goes beyond that, but I recognise that this is my organisation of themes and my interpretation.

The thesis does not attempt to present a comprehensive review of all feminist literature of the subject of religion in general and Christianity in particular. I have selected some theorists, some feminists, some commentators, some women who were willing to be interviewed, and I have, as Adrienne Rich (1979:187) so beautifully expresses it, sought the pattern that lies under the weave of the carpet. There is no truth. But there can be greater levels of understanding. It is my sincere hope that this thesis brings a greater level of understanding to any who might read it. It will not bring truth, just perspectives. Mainly, I suspect, they will be mine.

The thesis is a snapshot, in time, of how I thought, how I interpreted, how I responded, how I interviewed. It is a snapshot frozen in time for each of the women who contributed for the interviews. I strongly suspect that they have moved along in their journey, re-thought some issues, re-defined their meanings, re-organised their practice. I am changed for meeting them, and they for meeting me. It is the nature of things to be so, and a feminist researcher in particular needs to understand this. As I stand at the door at the end of the long corridor that has been this thesis and step out into the sunshine, I see I have already changed. Were I to re-

write it today it would be a little different. My experience in carrying out this research has changed me, as building knowledge always must.

## **CONCLUSION**

And thus it is done. I invite you to travel with me on this journey. I began with a simple question- "Feminist Christians - A Conflict Resolved?" and ended with an entirely different set of questions with regard not only to how the conflict is negotiated by why these women, but why they chose to do it at all. I regard this thesis as a journey of knowledge, a process by which textual information is gathered and ordered, and is measured against women's experiential knowledge and found wanting. Textual theories do not fully explain, for me, how and why these women stay within Christianity. The questions raised here could, perhaps, be the beginning of another thesis.

My thanks to the women who gave of their life-knowledge in order to help me on this journey. Their lives have informed the process of this feminist knowledge, as women's lives always do.

## CHAPTER ONE - FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF CHRISTIANITY

### INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

In this chapter I outline a number of feminist critiques of Christianity. I identify two schools of thought about the issue of a feminist reaction to Christian church practices and beliefs. I argue that there are feminists who abandon the church and Christianity altogether, and feminists who stay within the church /Christianity intending to reform it to be less patriarchal into both its forms and expressions. Whilst feminist thought contains many variations in its analyses of Christianity, I have chosen to view such critiques as belonging to one or other of these schools of thought. There are other approaches to these themes and even alternative views altogether, but I do not deal with them in this thesis. The thesis is concerned with examining some specific ways in which feminist Christians remain within the structure of Christian church practices and beliefs and how they explain their decision to do so. In this context I have contrasted those who stay in the church with those who leave it. By **the church** I mean both a structure/organisation with specific religious practices and a set of personal convictions (beliefs). For example, a Christian structure/organisation might be the Presbyterian Church. A belief might be a personal view that Jesus died to save humankind from sin and separation from God. The structures may vary somewhat, as might the beliefs, but I use the term 'church' in the context of this study to describe a general set of institutionalised religious practices and beliefs centred around the person of Jesus Christ and the textual record of his life, the New Testament of the Bible.

It is an exploration of the decision of some feminists to stay within the church that fuels this inquiry. I can see no benefit in being part of such a patriarchal structure and belief system. I am a non-Christian feminist whose critique of the church points to its androcentric character in terms of both its practice and belief. The Christian church is, in my view, anti-women. It is a social organisation that excludes women from full participation. It is a belief system centred in a trinity of male figures, dominated by God the Father. This is, as I will go on to elucidate in this chapter, a commonly-held feminist critique of Christianity.

I explore why a feminist would chose to remain involved in the Christian church (both organisation and beliefs). I start by examining the body of work which argues that feminists must leave the church behind in order to free themselves from its oppression. I then contrast this with feminist thought that argues for staying within the Christian church practices and beliefs. I then explore how three particular feminists have elected to stay in the church and explore their reasons for doing so. My feminist theoretical framework is set out in the following pages and the subsequent discussion is framed within a 'reform' versus 'revolution' debate.

The nature of the relationship between feminism and Christianity is often characterised as one of conflict or dissonance. It is a relationship that may be difficult, impossible and full of tension (Christ, 1979; Daly, 1973; Ruether, 1985). My discussion of this tension and the ways it is individually negotiated forms the basis of this research. Firstly, I present a textual investigation and critique in which the textual study<sup>of</sup> the writings of feminists and feminist sociologists are

discussed. What these theorists have to say about the conflict between these two approaches forms the basis for the main theoretical part of this study. In particular, I have analysed the ideas of theorists such as Sylvia Walby, Mary Daly, Carol Christ, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Themes within their writing have then been taken up in the oral history component of the research. In this section, the lives and Christian practice of three feminists living in Wellington, New Zealand in 1997 are investigated in the context of their negotiation of Christianity and feminism. Each of these women describe themselves as feminist. Each of the three belongs to and works with a Christian sub-group that operates under the auspices of a larger mainstream denomination (the Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church and the Anglican Church).

The context of this study is the cultural and historical development of both Christianity and feminism in Aotearoa/New Zealand. I have also drawn upon theorists working mostly in America and/or Britain or both.

## **A HISTORY OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN AOTEAROA/NEW ZEALAND**

It is sometimes thought that Christianity in Aotearoa/New Zealand has not existed long enough to have a history of its own (Nichol, 1983:7), but arguably it is important for this thesis to present a short study of such Christian history as does exist in this country. This discussion enables an examination of feminist critiques of New Zealand Christianity by New Zealand feminists, and facilitates a fuller appreciation of the situation of the women who are involved

in the oral history section of this thesis - women who are still actively involved in institutionalised Christianity in New Zealand today. I do not intend to exhaustively survey the religious plurality in New Zealand but to overview the place of Christianity in New Zealand.

Christianity in New Zealand has been shaped by the missionaries who first brought it to our shores in the nineteenth century. The initial impact was on the Maori societies already present. What exactly the impacts were has been much debated. For instance, it has been asserted that missionaries forced Maori culture to change because of its embeddedness in British culture (Oliver, 1960; Yate 1970). Missionaries such as William Hall and John King of The Church Missionary Society were first sent to New Zealand in 1806 and brought with them the stated aim of “introduc(ing) the knowledge of Christ among the natives; and, in order to do this, the Arts of Civilised Life”(CMS Proceedings, 1820-12, Vol 3:104). Clearly religion and culture were intertwined for these men. The missionaries were not only working in the area of religious activity, but were “closely involved at all stages in the extension of European political control, trade and settlement” (Owens, 1983:19). Owens goes on to define the impact of the missionaries on Maori society as follows: “social detachment, social involvement and indirect influence” (Owens, 1983:25-29). The missionaries brought with them not only Christianity but a culture surrounding these beliefs and practices that caused major change to the status quo. It may be true, as Owens posits, that the missionaries themselves created a series of social changes in a way that was unexpected, even to them (Owens, 1983:35).

The missionaries in early New Zealand (that is, 'early' in the sense of the missionaries' arrival) brought with them a strongly competing denominational culture. "The story of the Christian church in colonial New Zealand is, from the start, a story of competing denominations" (Arnold, 1983:77). Arnold attributes this "untidiness" to the rivalry and denominational fragmentation of the churches from whence the missionaries came - the churches in Scotland, Ireland, England and Wales. The Catholic Church, for its part, declared New Zealand a part of the Prefecture Apostolic of the South Seas Islands and sent a group of French missionaries who landed in 1838 "to evangelise the pagans. Their first aim was the conversion of the Maoris" (Roach, 1983:117). They were followed by numbers of Irish Catholic missionaries who laboured to build churches and schools in the newly colonised land. As more missionaries arrived so did more European settlers, with the population of immigrants equalling that of the indigenous Maori (59,000) by 1858, with the Catholic Church by 1900 "very much a colonial European one, based mainly on Catholics of Irish origin" in spite of its early French history (Roach, 1983:121, 131). The nineteenth century was a "time of great missionary desires, dreams and ventures" which saw much activity in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Roach, 1983:112).

Settlement within New Zealand followed, in many cases, the missionaries and the denominations they brought. For example, the French Catholics set up a settlement in Akaroa, the Scottish Free Church Presbyterians in Otago and Anglicans in Canterbury. Each of these denominations brought with them different emphases in both religious practice and social service. For example, the Presbyterian Church has a long history of involvement in social issues as a result of their "social gospel" (Barber, 1983:145).

At the turn of the century some Presbyterian leaders seized upon the social gospel with enthusiasm and began implementing a programme based upon its tenets. These Presbyterians planned to rectify the morals of the nation by training the young Christians in Christian doctrine and ethics. They supported reform of laws governing the liquor trade with the intention of reducing poverty, lessening the number of cases of brutality by drunken husbands, and decreasing arrests for drunkenness. They opposed gambling because they believed it contradicted the idea that wealth was held in trust for the public good. They demanded the repeal of legislation they considered to be morally unsound (Barber, 1983:145).

The Catholic church, by contrast, concerned itself with a 'plan of parish' as follows: "church, presbytery, school and convent" (Roach, 1983:131). The dissent between the sects and denominations that came to New Zealand led to vigorous recruitment efforts, with Methodism in particular competing with the Anglican church. This competition was an important formative influence on both the structure and nature of church denominations as they grew over time in their new country (Arnold, 1983: 88f).

An Established Church, such as there had been in England, did not emerge in New Zealand. There was no one church which could take the pre-eminent position of being able to speak for all New Zealanders nor rule over all New Zealanders as had the Anglican Church in England. The influence of denominationalism was strong. As Lloyd Geering (1983:169) has described "they were so concerned with denominational tress that they were not aware of any Christian

forest". This has been an important aspect of the development of religion in New Zealand and is illustrated by the education debate, part of which was the setting up of the Education Act of 1877 which put in place a national system of education that was to be free, secular and compulsory. In an environment where education had been, for the most part, set up and maintained by churches, this Act reflected broad principles with regard to education that many denominations would agree with. The Catholic church, however, did not. This resulted in the Catholic church setting up and running its own system of education. They did not like the 'secular' clause in the Act. This situation remains to this day.

The Anglican church also set up some of its own schools. The major result of church tension was, however, to lead to a secular education system in which and through which most New Zealanders were to be educated. Lloyd Geering (1983:171) makes an interesting argument with regard to the overall pattern of religions in both New Zealand and throughout the western world when he argues for a trend of secularisation that has been in progress for 500 years. His examination of the churches in New Zealand in the light of this view has led him to the conclusion that "to claim New Zealand is a Christian country (in the traditional sense) is steadily becoming more problematic as each year goes by" (Geering, 1983:171). Recent census data continues to indicate a trend away from church-going as a habit for many New Zealanders. The nature of religion in New Zealand today is a religiously pluralistic society which has emerged from a history of missionary activity, denominational pluralism and secular education. Many New Zealanders claim no religion at all, at least according to how they describe themselves in the census. They are described as 'individualists' by Geering (1983:171f). He has attempted

to track movement out of the traditional denominations and has found that only a small proportion leave churches for other sects or denominations, with most simply leaving the traditional practice of Christianity altogether. He states “New Zealand is steadily becoming non-religious” (Geering, 1983:173). He goes on to contend (1983:177) that this does not mean we are less spiritually interested or aware. In New Zealand, where “the great majority have joined the amorphous mass of the un-churched” (1983: 177) those who remain in traditional Christian practice are a minority and feminists are an even smaller minority within that.

Where “the natural environment provided an idyllic context into which colonial settlers began to carve a nation” (Veitch, 1983:188) there has been a comfortableness with secularity that has led to the form of religious practice that is now in evidence. New Zealand today is largely secularised. In agreement with Geering, Veitch points out that this does not point to a lack of spirituality but to a lack of interest in traditional church practice and belief. This is a position that may have helped feminists in terms of their efforts to make the church gender-neutral by introducing the use of non-sexist language, deconstructing the image of god the Father etc. There has been a significant move out of the churches. Geering states that in 50 years the numbers responding to the census question on religion with vague or non-committal terms has gone from 6.2% in 1930 to 22.5% in 1980 (Geering, 1983:172).

I suspect this trend has continued through into the late nineties where we now find ourselves. What are the implications for Christian feminists? If there are fewer in the churches, as there unquestionably are, then those who remain are able to voice their opinions as *some among few*,

as opposed to *some among many*. This may be a part explanation as to why feminists stay in the churches - if they see change they are likely to be heartened and wish to continue to put their energies into reform. If the situation were different and most New Zealanders went to church and participated in traditional Christian religious practice, then feminist church-goers may find the process of reform more difficult.

New Zealand churches today, in terms of their moves away from traditional practice and patriarchal structure, are led by the Protestant churches. They have made significant structural reforms including the ordination women. The Presbyterian church is currently debating the issue of the ordination of gays and lesbians into their ministries, with the Methodist church in November, 1997, ordaining an openly gay minister. These churches have also moved to embrace non-sexist language in their prayers and liturgies but this has often been on a parish by parish basis. This is a trend that has been noted in recent church surveys such as the 1996 work on lesbians in the Christian Church (Duncan, 1996) in which I concluded that the response a lesbian, for example, would get from any church she wished to attend or join would vary from church to church and depended on factors such as location (urban/rural) and culture (European/ Pakeha/ Polynesian/ Maori) rather than the denomination of the church (Duncan, 1996). This was also found to be true for Catholic churches, where a directive towards non-sexist language use has been issued by church authorities but where some parishes (or at least some services in a particular church) have been practising the use of inclusive language for some time while some are failing to do so at all.

There are also a number of feminist groups associated with traditional church denominations. In Wellington, where this study takes place, there are three. It is from each of these three that women have been invited to join this research through interview. The Presbyterian Church of St Andrews operates a gay and lesbian feminist group known as Galaxies, the Anglican Church of St Peters accommodates a feminist group called Ex-Alt and a feminist group known as Sophia operates within the Catholic Churches of Wellington.

## **AN INTRODUCTION TO FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF CHRISTIANITY**

In this section I overview feminist approaches to religion and characterise how some feminists have criticised some of the key features of Christian belief and practice.

Feminism is concerned primarily with the lives of women. Feminist critiques of the construction of knowledge are therefore fueled by an understanding of 'woman' as one part of a binary oppositional gender category system. According to this view all humans are categorised as either male or female. Feminist debates are divided on how much of this gender-identity is culturally constructed and how much is biologically based. Gender has been described as "the way members of the two sexes are perceived, evaluated and expected to behave" (Schegal, 1990:23) meaning that not only are gender categories defined as being distinct but there is a value system implicit in this definition. In a binary-oppositional system such as the male/female gender categories that operate in our society, not only are male and female different they are opposed and asymmetrical. That is, one is better than the other. A rudimentary feminist analysis

is quick to point out that in our societal context male is regarded as better than female. Our society is based on a system of male dominance which has been called patriarchy. Phyllis Tribble (1973:7) has defined feminism as a “critique of culture in the light of misogyny”. She is expressing a belief in the universality of patriarchy. Indeed, she is almost implying that without the conceptualising of patriarchy as an explanation for women’s social inequality there would be no feminism and that a central aim of feminism is a more equitable world for women and men.

The feminist research methodology used in this thesis is shaped by the epistemology I have just described. King has described feminism as “both a new academic method and also a social vision” (King, 1995: 18). Therefore, this thesis reflects and builds on both a feminist research methodology and a feminist epistemology. This thesis is not the work of a ‘detached observer’ for within it I contextualise my material existence as a pakeha tertiary trained feminist and the social vision that forms part of my identity and research approach. Feminism motivates, guides, inspires and encompasses this work. As King describes it - “feminist critical work is investigatory and transformative in character” (King, 1995:41).

The impact of feminism on this study deliberately and “fundamentally calls into question the basic assumptions of the prevailing organization of knowledge, its claims to universality, objectivity and value neutral detachment”(King, 1995:19). As a feminist researcher I acknowledge both personal motivations and agenda. This issue of the conflict between feminism and Christianity is one that has (and continues to) affect me personally. I am not a Christian because for me its conflict with feminism is unresolvable. For the women in this study

(and for many feminists) feminist criticisms of Christianity have not meant abandonment of their religion but a re-shaping, re-thinking and re-aligning of their views and beliefs. The ways in which feminist Christians attempt to (or believe they have) resolved this conflict is the subject of this study. The thesis is a personal journey that I undertake in the hope of gaining further self-knowledge. As King points out, “the study of religion, especially of religious experience, involves one’s own subjectivity and reflexivity” (King, 1995:20). As she also notes, not only religion but the scholarly discipline of religious studies remain “thoroughly androcentric in its key concepts and paradigmatic perspectives of inquiry” (King, 1995:24).

Feminism since the 1960s has tended to universalise the category ‘woman’. This is no longer accepted within feminist circles and the notion of *difference* is one which must be taken into account. By attempting to describe women’s experience in terms of its commonality, the “enormous variety (of experience) is subsumed” (Plaskow and Christ, 1989:3). As Judith Plaskow points out (1989:5) “women’s experience is as diverse and complex as the experience of the human race. I have taken cognisance of this. My study, whilst confined in terms of participation to New Zealanders of European origin (women born in New Zealand of European/Celtic heritage) who are adults, middle class and educated at tertiary level, has attempted to resist the temptation to over-generalise by noting only the commonalities in these interviewed women’s lives and experience. Whilst recognising that diversity is part of our womanhood, I also continue to use the gender category ‘woman’ being of the view that the commonalities are sufficient to legitimise such use.

The debate about how Christianity can be negotiated within a feminist critique has polarised feminist theorists of religion. As I have stated, writers/theorists fall into two general categories: those who argue for the reform of Christianity from within by feminism, and those who argue that Christianity is antithetical to feminism and unable to be reformed, needing therefore to be abandoned. Theorists such as Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ (1979) have moved towards the development of religions for women based around a goddess(es). They argue for the necessity of moving away from religion based on male images. Carol Christ argues that women “need the goddess” as a religious symbol “because religion has such a compelling hold on the deep psyches of so many people” (Christ, 1979:71). In choosing to contextualise this study within a framework which sees two basic and opposing views I do not accept that the two basic oppositional views on the subject of feminisms’ reaction to Christianity distort the variety of approaches. I have chosen to limit the range of the study for the purposes of this research.

Feminist theory has identified Christianity as a social institution, part of the social structures that order our society and maintain the subordinate status of women. In particular, feminist sociologist Sylvia Walby (1990) has described the institution of the church as one of the six sites of public patriarchy in our culture. These will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two.

Other feminists have viewed Christianity as an expression of spirituality (Christ and Plaskow, 1979; Downing, 1979). These theorists have been influential in feminist thinking with regard to their views on the nature of human spirituality/religiosity and what it means in the context of feminism. Such theorists argue that all human beings have a spiritual side to their nature and

a need for spiritual expression via ritual and symbol. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (1979) for example distinguish between the basic good of spiritual expression as an important and meaningful part of human nature and the institution of the church which has corrupted spiritual practice and immersed it in sexism, denying women's spirituality and full membership of society. They argue that "religion is deeply meaningful in human life" and that "traditional religions of the West have betrayed women" (1979:1). They also conceive of the need for religious expression as fundamental to both human-ness and woman-ness, stating "the history of sexism in religions shows how deeply sexism has permeated the human psyche but does not invalidate human need for ritual, symbol and myth" (1979:1). They are referring here to both Christianity and Judaism, the main religious influences in American culture. In their work they have sought to understand how religion works to "produce powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations" (Christ, 1979:2). They have recognised the importance of the subconscious, the functions of myth and symbol, and the meaning of dreams. Other feminists such as Christine Downing (1989) have recognised and described the importance of the myth and symbol of religion in creating our sense of self and of well-being. "We need images and myths," she states, "through which we can see who we are and what we might become. The psyche needs images to nurture its own growth, for images provide a knowledge that we can interiorise rather than apply" (Downing, 1989:119).

The typology of the imagery we are immersed in is critical in the formation of our selves, as women and as human beings. If this is symbolism and myth reflects the dominant paradigm of patriarchy, Downing argues that we will internalise it in such a way that it becomes a part of our

psyche. That is, not so much something we learn but something that is integral to our view of our self and the world, a part of our constructed psyche and individual being.

## **A REVOLUTIONARY FEMINIST APPROACH**

Feminists who view religion as a powerful force in human imagination and existence see the removal of male dominated imagery as important. "Because religion has such a compelling hold on the deep psyches of so many people, feminists cannot afford to leave it in the hands of the fathers" (Christ, 1982:72). Christ is arguing here for a need for the demise of the male figure of god from the consciousness of all women if they are to be free from the power of patriarchy in the institution of not only the Christian church but Christian society and culture.

In her view women need a goddess in order to fully affirm, experience and express their women-ness. Mary Daly, a radical feminist and theologian, with reference to the male god of Christianity argues that "if God is male, then the male is God" (Daly, 1973:19). She stresses the power of the male symbol of god on the psyches of both men and women.

The importance and significance of the religious symbolism of Christianity and its power over the way we think and act as human beings is identified by these theorists. Christ, in her argument, quotes anthropologist Clifford Geertz' social theory of religious symbolism. "Religion," Geertz writes, "is a system of symbols which act to produce powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations" (Christ, 1979:2). In response to the view that religion and religious imagery are so important in creating our own view of ourselves, feminists in this school

of thought argue for the abandonment of Christianity by feminists because it is altogether unsalvageable for women. Carol Christ is of the view that women's spirituality is about women having/reclaiming/taking power. She believes that "at the heart of the spiritual quest is the quest for women's power" (Fiorenza, 1983:19)<sup>1</sup>. For these women, the reclaiming of the spiritual power of woman-ness cannot occur within a Christian context. Women re-claiming themselves and their spiritual power must occur outside of the constructed patriarchal institution of the Church.

The abandonment of all man-made theologies, including Christianity, is argued by Mary Daly who urges "it would be unrealistic to dismiss the fact that the symbolic and linguistic instruments for communication - which include essentially the whole theological tradition in world religions - have been formulated by males under the conditions of patriarchy. . . . Therefore, attempts by women theologians to merely 'up-date' or to reform theology within acceptable patterns of question-asking are not likely to get very far" (Daly, 1973:22). In her view the sexist symbol systems created in patriarchy do not enable women to create realistic self-images but rather false ones that are not based on their experience of life, culture and self. Daly (1971:1) states that patriarchy "does not simply exist outside women's minds, securely fastened to institutions we can physically leave behind," but is "also internalised, festering inside women's heads".

Daly believes that reform of Christianity is, therefore, impossible and urges women to have the "existential courage to confront the experience of nothingness" that will be theirs if they reject

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<sup>1</sup> This is Fiorenza's summation of Christ's views.

the cultural and religious symbolism and theology embedded in patriarchy (Daly, 1973:23). It is a step she sees many women as being unable to take due to the security created by these societal structures which both frame and limit our world and self view. She argues that reformists are ultimately going to be unsuccessful. She calls reformism dangerous. "The more immanent danger then," she states, "is that some women will seek premature reconciliation, not allowing themselves to see the depth and implications of feminism's essential opposition to a sexist society" (Daly, 1973:25-6). So, in as much as feminism and Christianity are in conflict, it would appear from this theorist at least that Christian feminist reformism and feminism (Mary Daly's at least) itself are in opposition.

Daly is one of the most influential theorists in this area and her writings deserve considerable attention. One of the most important aspect of her theorising, in my view, is the importance she gives to the centrality of the image of "God the Father" in the thoughts and understandings of the human mind in western society. She describes the image of God the Father... "a great patriarch in heaven, rewarding and punishing according to His mysterious and seemingly arbitrary will. The symbol of the Father God," she continues "has made mechanisms for the oppression of women appear right and fitting" (Daly, 1973:13). What she is saying here is that Christianity has legitimated the oppression of women by convincing adherents that it is ordained by God that it is natural or 'normal'. This legitimisation has spread to the wider society of the western world, one in which Christianity has for the large part become the state religion. Although Walby argues that this is a process of the institutionalisation of patriarchy, Daly points to the validity that is given to patriarchy by having the backing and endorsement of none other

than God. What more could a patriarch ask than to have divine blessing on an earthly order? “If God in ‘his’ heaven is a father ruling ‘his’ people,” Daly argues, “then it is in the ‘nature’ of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male-dominated” (Daly: 1973:13). Again, she states “the myth (of male superiority) takes on cosmic proportions since the male’s viewpoint is metamorphosed into God’s viewpoint” (Daly, 1973:47). She centres her call for the liberation of women from patriarchy to be based in “the death of God the Father”. Daly (1973:25) in fact, goes on to argue that liberation not just for women but for all humanity is linked in to the death of these type of religious symbols.

In particular, the image of Adam and Eve is one that she identifies as important in the “modern psyche” in defining the nature of men and women (Daly, 1973:45). In portraying Eve as the temptress and the one who leads to the downfall of man, the Christian myth of Adam and Eve in the garden is not consciously recognised as being an important symbol. It is, as Daly puts it “not given serious weight in the modern consciousness” (Daly, 1973:44). Yet the Adam and Eve symbolism retains its power in our minds and in our views. It has, as Daly argues, “a persistent impact upon society” (Daly, 1973:45). This image of Eve has found its way into the sub-conscious of every woman in western, Christian culture. Women today are still carrying the weight of “original sin” by way of internalised guilt and blame. In this aspect, Daly argues, women are complicit in their own oppression. For the modern woman, “original sin” is “inherited through the socialisation process” and through it women are “condemned to live out the role of the Other. It becomes the religious duty of women to accept the burden of guilt” (Daly, 1973:49). Daly’s answer to this is to “move to androgynous being” (Daly, 1973:50).

She proposes the creation of a new cosmos, an *anti-church* (Daly, 1973:138). This anti-church is the anti-thesis of the current world, a world in which *being* replaces *non-being*. She describes this as a religious struggle as well as a social and psychological one, both collectively and individually. This is a theme that Daly develops in her later works - *Gyn/Ecology* (1979) and *Outercourse* (1992).

In summary, for Daly the problem of the oppression of women in patriarchy must be rooted out at its very core, which is, in fact, women's very core. That is, it requires a transformation in the individual psyche as well as a transformation of culture. This involves "a realization that there is an existential conflict between the self and structures that have given such crippling security. This requires confronting the shock of non-being" (Daly, 1973:24). Here Daly addresses the theorists I have called the Reformists. In her view it is critical that all patriarchally-constructed and maintained thought processes be discarded, even those that we have made integral to our own existence as human beings. It is a radical refusal to accept the human being we have created (through images that have been created for us by patriarchy) that will bring the liberation of not only women but all humanity. If a change in societal consciousness refuses to accept the patriarchal symbolism of God the Father as plausible then the religious symbolism itself will lose its power over the human psyche (Daly, 1973:15). If this does not occur, we are doomed to patriarchy forever. "The divine patriarch castrates women as long as he is allowed to live on in the human imagination" (Daly, 1973:19). She is calling for a radical exorcism of the mind and psyche.

In acknowledging the importance of religious symbolism and mythology, feminists such as Carol Christ and Mary Daly have then argued for the importance of removing the myth and symbolism that surrounds our lives as women from the context of Christianity. Not only have Christian myths and symbols “outlived their usefulness” but some feminists argue that they never were useful to women. “Once one recognises the importance of religion then an enormous sense of injustice must follow at the discovery that religions are sexist and that they continue to exert a powerful influence on society” (Christ, 1979:3). This “lies at the heart of feminist criticisms of religion,” according to Christ. This is what she identifies as each woman’s private pain. This is the pain of exclusion, the pain of never being fully human, the pain of recognising that you will never be in the image of God because god is male. This is a critique that started with the obvious discriminations and exclusions against women and the clearly misogynist teachings and texts, and led to feminists such as Christ and Daly saying clearly and loudly that as long as the image of god was male, then religion was sexist. Daly (1971:542) speaks of the “mystification of roles” which takes place where the husband, representing God, takes a position of dominance over the wife. This subordination takes place not only in the private sphere but is reproduced publicly in the position of women as the *Second Sex* in wider society. This has also led to the creation of sex-role stereotyping and the ensuing ‘caricaturing’ of human beings into one of two gender type identities.

These types of feminist analyses involve more than a critique of religion. They seek to explain the structure and functioning of the society in which the religion is present. It is rather a chicken and egg sort of argument, I think. That is, did the society create the religion, or the

religion create the society? This point will be taken up in Chapter Two where a sociological analysis of religion is discussed.

What were the effects of this kind of feminist critique of religion? The recognition by 'revolutionary feminists' (as I call them) of the importance of the influence of religion in shaping our psyche and formation of individual selves and collective femininities has led to attempts to defeat the sexism of the Christian and Judaic traditions. They have done this in two main ways. Firstly, some feminists create expressive spirituality for women completely outside of a Christian or Judaic tradition. Carol Christ (1979) for example creates a religious environment intended to empower women through the use of goddess symbols and rituals of the cycles of nature based in a re-discovery of women-ness outside of a patriarchal context. This is because of her view that sexism needs to be rooted out at the deepest level of sub-conscious thought and replaced with women-empowering and self-liberating images that will change the lives of women at all levels of functionality. It is not possible for such feminists to continue to be part of the Christian church. The political agenda of Daly, for example, is to argue that the "women's movement will present a growing threat to patriarchal religion less by attacking it than by simply leaving it behind" (Daly, 1973:56). This is a political stance and it is also a spiritual declaration of independence. Feminists in this school have abandoned any wish to redeem anything out of Christianity or their Christian heritage. They simply want to move on to something that they believe to be better for them and for all women. Daly argues

The Christian tradition is by no means bereft of elements which foster genuine

experiences and intimations of transcendence. The problem is that their liberating potential is choked off in the surrounding atmosphere of the images, ideas, values and structures of patriarchy (Daly, 1973:57).

Daly points out that what seem at first glance to be liberating theologies and real experiences of God (or transcendence) for women in Christianity are not so. As long as Christianity is situated in patriarchy these experiences and heritages cannot bring true liberation for women.

Feminist critiques have concentrated on the importance of women's experience of religion. This involves women recognising their own experiences (as opposed to the experiences they are supposed to have under the patriarchal Christian model) and re-claiming their right to themselves and their experiences. They attempt to recognise the "false consciousness created by male ideology" (Christ, 1979:6). Paralleling the political consciousness of the Second Wave of feminism in which women got together to share their experiences without the judgement of patriarchy, this view has been captured by Christ. "In consciousness-raising groups every women's experience is heard, and judgement is not immediately made as to whether certain feelings are good or bad, appropriate or inappropriate. Often this speaking leads to a discovery of shared experience" (Christ, 1979:6). For feminists who recognise the importance of the spiritual side of our selves as women, political moves to end patriarchy include the need to end the spiritual and psychic patriarchy of Christianity. When Christianity is put aside, women such as Carol Christ and Mary Daly have sought to "transform or re-create" the culture in which we exist. "Naming women's experience thus becomes the model not only for personal liberation

and growth, but for a feminist transformation of culture and religion” (Christ, 1979:7).

The critical element in this school of thought is the assertion that it is essential for the liberation of women that Christianity be abandoned. As Christ expresses it -

Is feminist theology genuinely liberating? Have those feminists who stand within Biblical traditions noted for their sexism adequately freed themselves from sexist theology? And have those feminists who reject biblical traditions adequately transcended the dualisms of patriarchal theology, or are they simply glorifying the denigrated side of the polarities that patriarchy created? (Christ 1979:9).

There have been and continue to be tensions within feminism with regard to feminist critiques of Christianity. Can the Christian tradition really be reformed? Is doing so going to truly liberate women? “Do feminists need the past?” Christ asks. “And if so, what past do they need?” (Christ, 1979:11). This search for a past has taken feminists such as Christ to the rediscovery of ancient goddesses and deities, to the natural mysticism of the cycles of nature and the rhythm of women’s bodies in menstruation, birth and menopause. This is a direct repudiation of Christian notions of ‘man’ having power over nature. This has led to the eco-feminism of the 90s and a commitment to caring for the earth rather than having power over it and destroying it. Carol Christ (1989:315) writes that “we have lost the sense of the earth as our true home and we fail to recognise our profound connection with all beings in the web of life.” The problems of the last decade of this century, she argues, are “not only social, political,

economic and technological, but (are) at root spiritual.” A Christian patriarchal culture that has exercised power over our consciousness has had at its core a separation of humankind from nature - mankind stands, with God, outside and above nature in what has been described by Christ as an “ontological separation by virtue of personal moral will” (Christ, 1989:315). Feminist spirituality, she argues, calls for connectedness.

### **STAYING WITHIN AND REFORMING - THE OTHER OPTION**

Some feminists remain within the Christian Church because they believe that in its essence Christianity is a good thing: it has simply been corrupted from its original non-sexist form by patriarchy. Rosemary Radford Ruether, for example, states that -

Women in contemporary churches are suffering from linguistic deprivation and eucharistic famine. They can no longer nurture their souls in alienating words that ignore or systematically deny their existence. They are starved for the words of life, for symbolic forms that fully and wholeheartedly affirm their personhood and speak truth about the evils of sexism and the possibilities of a future beyond patriarchy” (Ruether, 1985:4).

She firmly believes that it is within the church itself that women will find true liberation. Underlying this line of thought is a belief in an essential truth contained within Christianity. The task for feminists, therefore, is to recover this truth and return it to its proper position. That

is, strip it of that which has altered it from its pure form that brings liberation for all humanity. These women have been referred to as *reformists* and this is the term that I apply to them.

Rosemary Ruether agrees with Mary Daly in her views of the nature of the contemporary Christian church but contends that the “exodus from patriarchy” is enabled through renewal within the context of Christianity rather than a departure from Christianity altogether. Ruether’s argument is based in her belief that historically the Christian Church is an important institution underpinning social arrangements and the Christian community has always co-existed despite tension and contradiction. The community of believers has not been ruled by social hierarchies as the institution has, and “the church as spirit-filled community thus believes itself called into an exodus from the established social order and its religious agents of sacralization” (Ruether, 1985:22-3). She differs from the feminists already discussed, however, by arguing that the *institution* is not all that the Christian church is. She argues the true church - the community of spirit-filled believers - “demands an alternative social order in obedience to God. The basic Christian communities are thus the ecclesial expression of liberation theology” (Ruether, 1985:22-3,25). Furthermore, Ruether acknowledges that institutionalisation of the church is legitimate and that without it the church could not have survived throughout history (Ruether, 1985:33). What Ruether is describing is the subject of this thesis - that feminist groups have attempted to create new praxis and new language in keeping with what they hold to be the essential truth of Christianity, non-sexist and non-patriarchal. It is a conflict that she believes to have existed throughout the history of the Christian church and one that is very active today (Ruether, 1985:42).

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza also agrees with Daly that “the Bible still functions today as a religious justification and ideological legitimization of patriarchy” but she argues that feminists “cannot afford” to abandon the Bible and biblical religion (Fiorenza, 1984:xi,xii). This is in spite of the fact that “today’s patriarchal right-wing forces in society lace their attacks against women’s rights and freedoms... with biblical quotations and appeals to biblical authority” (Fiorenza, 1984: xii). Her argument is based in her view that “we have to reclaim biblical religion as our own heritage because our heritage is our power” (Fiorenza, 1984:xiii).

Fiorenza acknowledges the unrelentingly patriarchal nature of the Bible. She also regards the texts as constructed inevitably within a patriarchal context and therefore reflecting the patriarchy in which they were created. “Certain scriptural texts are patriarchal in their original function and intention” (Fiorenza 1984:xiii). Not only are they patriarchal but they also legitimate other forms of oppression such as racism, slavery, anti-semitism and colonialisation. Fiorenza argues that feminist biblical reform must function not only to end misogyny but to end other unjust oppressions. It is an argument based in a call for justice. As she states “a critical feminist hermeneutics challenges biblical scholarship as well as Christian ethics that can elaborate the oppressive political impact of the Bible because such a hermeneutics acknowledges that concrete demands for justice have primary in the logic of Christian theological discourse” (Fiorenza, 1984: xxi).

I interpret this argument as distinguishing between the theological discourse (or primary truth) of Christianity and the misunderstood, corrupted texts of the Bible. In other words, although

Christianity is a pure and just religion, the accepted meanings given to the central text of this text-based religion often reflect the sexism of patriarchal societies that foreground Christian values. Her answer to the call for the liberation of women from patriarchy in Christianity is for feminists to reclaim the Bible through a feminist interpretation. The truth is still there, she argues, but it has been lost in the text and textual interpretations that have prevailed in the Christian church. A re-reading will reveal it. “The critical rereading of the bible in a feminist key and from women’s perspectives is in the process of uncovering lost traditions and correcting mistranslations, of peeling away layers of androcentric scholarship and rediscovering new dimensions of biblical symbols and theological meanings” (Fiorenza, 1984:1). This is what King has described as the Three Rs - “rereading, reconceiving and reconstructing” religious traditions and texts (King, 1995:14). In the process of historical reconstruction, for example, the past is reconstructed with a feminist “historical imagination” (King, 1995:15).

What we have inherited as Christian tradition and interpretation was originally constructed using an androcentric historical imagination; to reconstruct it using a feminist one is no less legitimate. I am reminded here of the old saying that history was written by winners. In this case the voices of women have been diminished if not silenced in the Christian historical record. When they were heard in the text they have been misinterpreted in order to minimise the impact and influence of women. Fiorenza points to all history as being written within a “frame of reference..determined by (our) own philosophical perspectives and values...All historiography is a selective view of the past” (Fiorenza, 1983:xvii). And yet, in spite of this, she is passionate in her view that we cannot disclaim the past nor dissociate ourselves from it. To do so, she

argues, would mean feminists were “ahistorical and apolitical.” She accuses feminism of “too quickly conced(ing) that women have no authentic history within biblical religion and too easily relinquish(ing) women’s feminist biblical heritage” (Fiorenza, 1983:xix). Her argument is based in her view that to not have a history is, in itself, a form of oppression. She regards history, even androcentric history, as a source of energy and vitalisation for any oppressed group. The way to change our histories as being the story of winners, she argues, is to re-write that history, not to discard it. She cites the examples of Alex Haley and his work in the writing of *Roots*, a re-claiming of history for him and his family. She also cites Judy Chicago and her work as a feminist artist who “underlines the importance of women’s heritage as a source for women’s power” (Fiorenza, 1983 xix). Chicago herself has said “all the institutions of our culture tell us - through words, deeds and even worse silence - that we are insignificant. But our heritage is our power” (Chicago 1996:241-251).

Fiorenza argues that women’s heritage appears in the bible but is not contained in traditional readings of the text. It must, therefore, be uncovered in a feminist reading. For example, she has analysed the story of the anointing of Jesus before his death as it appears in all four of the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) of the New Testament. The four stories differ. “It is obvious,” she states, “that the redactional telling of the story seeks to make the story more palatable to a patriarchal Greco-Roman audience” (Fiorenza, 1989:29). Mary of Bethany did not anoint the feet of Jesus because -

if the original story had been just a story about anointing of a guest’s feet it is unlikely

that such a commonplace gesture would have been remembered and re-told as the proclamation of the gospel. Therefore, it is much more likely that in the original story the woman anointed Jesus' head. The anointing of Jesus head must have been understood immediately as the prophetic recognition of Jesus. It was a politically dangerous story (Fiorenza, 1989:29-30).

This is an example of the type of re-reading and re-constructing that feminist Christians such as Fiorenza are involved in. Women's heritage is in the bible, they argue - it just needs to be uncovered through an informed reading. A knowledge of the historical context, religious, political and social, is required for one to fully and truthfully re-read the texts of the New Testament, but a re-reading can and will reveal a heritage and history of women that would not otherwise come to light. Fiorenza and others like her have spent many years uncovering, re-interpreting, contextualising and creating new meaning out of these religious texts in a way that creates a heritage for women where there was none. This is a process that she argues is important not just for women but in order that the full message of the gospel be heard and understood. "I attempt to reconstruct early Christian history as women's history in order not only to restore women's stories to early Christian history but also to reclaim this history as the history of women and men" (Fiorenza, 1989:30). Furthermore, she states that a feminist re-reading of biblical texts is inspirational for feminists. In her view Christianity contains a feminist vision of equality of men and women (Fiorenza, 1983:xxiv).

Other historians such as Eleanor McLaughlan, a former Associate Professor of History at

Andover-Newton Theological School, argue that our Christian past as a society and as individuals “can be usable” to bring emancipation and equality according to the biblical promise that ‘in Christ all are one’ (McLaughlin, 1979:93). She poses the question “The Christian Past, Does it Hold a Future for Women?” in her contribution to the 1979 work edited by Christ and Plaskow - *Womanspirit Rising*. In it she proposes a “revisionist’ history” - one that “examines Christian history with a new set of questions that arise out of commitments to wholeness for women and for all humanity”. This revisionist interpretation “redresses omissions and recasts interpretations” (McLaughlin, 1979:95). Her view of Christianity itself is one of a radical and reforming movement and within the context of this type of understanding of the church she re-reads Christian texts from the point of view of the powerless - those whom traditional church history has omitted. This group includes women. For example, McLaughlin attempts to recover the history of medieval women and their *ordinary* lives through the reading of written prayers, records of visions and writings about lives of female saints. She uncovers (1979:95f) what she believes to be record of “a time when women stood beside men in relatively equal numbers as the spiritual elite and models of Christian piety, a time when women’s experience and the language of women’s experience informed prayer and even theological formulation”. She uses, by way of example, the *Life of Christina of Markyate* and the *Revelations of Divine Love of Julian of Norwich* to illustrate that the spiritual elite of the Church were both male and female, and were equal. It was a time when “all agreed holiness was no respecter of sex” (McLaughlin, 1979:11).

McLaughlin goes outside of the Canon of scripture in her search for the words and records of

the lives and experiences of women. This is common to other Christian feminists such as Fiorenza, who has stated in a recent publication that part of a feminist critique of Christianity involves challenging the contents of the current Canon of scripture. She “seeks to transgress canonical boundaries in order to undo the exclusionary kyriachal tendencies of the ruling canon” (Fiorenza, 1994:8). For Fiorenza the traditional New Testament canon reflects androcentric bias in the selection of texts to be included. “Feminist biblical scholarship” she states, “cannot remain within the limits drawn by the established canon” (Fiorenza, 1994:8). For McLaughlin, going beyond the bounds of the accepted canon is vital, for women’s voices are contained mostly outside of the canon. The canon as we know it contains no record of what she believes was a time when women and men were equal - “the recovery of that history restores to us a part of our tradition long hidden, a tradition in which women in their pursuit of wholeness or holiness were empowered and empowering members of their society” (McLaughlin, 1979:105). For her, to uncover the real past is her task. Doing so, in her view, will bring empowerment to Christian women of today.

Another who works in this area of re-interpreting and reclaiming historical texts is Elaine Pagels. Like Ruether she believes that the early Christian church was basically egalitarian. Her investigation of the lost tradition of Gnosticism is an attempt to recover the history of this time. Her argument is that what we have inherited as Christian tradition and history is but one view and a minority one at that. In particular, the views of Paul (the most well-known misogynist in the early church) were, she argues, in the minority until they were endorsed by Rome. The social forces of the time conspired to remove women from both the experience and the power

of Christianity because of the position of women in wider society at the time. "Social and cultural forces converged," she states, "to suppress feminis~~t~~ symbolism - and women's participation - from western Christian tradition" (Pagels, 1979:117).

Fiorenza's work in the area of models of biblical interpretation is also important to consider. If one is to re-read and re-interpret biblical texts with feminist "lenses" (Fiorenza, 1983:xxiv) then it is necessary to understand the models of biblical interpretation that have been used. These models have implications for a feminist interpreter of biblical texts. She outlines four models that, in her view, summarise historical biblical interpretation. The first she calls the *doctrinal approach*. This view reads the Bible dogmatically as the word of god-given textual format. It "insists on the verbal inspiration and litero-historical inerrancy" of the Bible. The Bible is the Word of God. The second model is that of *positivist historical exegesis*, which "seeks to achieve a purely objective reading of the texts and a scientific presentation of historical 'facts'." This model is openly confrontational with doctrinal readings. The third model is that of *dialogical-hermeneutical interpretation*, which is similar to the second model except that it takes into account the involvement of the scholar in the reading. In other words, it acknowledges the cultural, political and societal context in which the historical texts were written. The fourth model is that of *liberation theology*. In this reading it is accepted that "all theology, willingly or not, is by definition always engaged for or against the oppressed." In this model, the understanding of the use of texts to legitimise oppression is explored (Fiorenza, 1983:5-7). Such a reader was Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1974) the co-author of the Women's Bible. She was clear in her reading of biblical texts that they were used and interpreted

politically to legitimise the oppression of women in her social setting. The Bible has been used both in this way by feminists such as Stanton, who argued for the emancipation of women based on biblical texts, and by those who sought to continue the oppression of women, justifying the status quo through the use of other biblical texts. These readings are all in the interpretive model of liberation theology.

An example of liberation theology is the work of Phyllis Trible. An example is her reinterpretation of the creation myth, an important symbolic story in our culture. Phyllis Trible re-reads Genesis 2-3 with a feminist interpretation and challenges the imagery and myth that validate the oppression of women and create a view of women as the tempters of men who can and do lead to men's downfall into sin and sexuality. She argues that we, as feminists, "no longer need accept the traditional exegesis of Genesis 2-3" (Trible, 1979:81). This text is interpreted as a liberatory model. "The Yahwist narrative tells us who we are (creatures of equality and mutuality); it tells us who we have become (creatures of oppression) and so it opens possibilities for change, for a return to our true liberation under God" (Trible, 1979:81).

Nelle Morton, a feminist theologian, bases her rationale for feminists to stay within and reform or re-invent Christianity on an understanding of the power of images that is remarkably similar to Carol Christ's. However, for Morton, this realisation leads her in an entirely different direction. In discovering for herself the power of images, she argues "I hope feminists will take another look at theology and the images it projects. It is not enough to walk away. We must make it our business to know step by step how religious images create political and social

structures” (Morton, 1985:xxxiii). For Morton, knowing is empowering. “Until we understand the imagery and symbolism of the whole patriarchal theological system,” she states, “we cannot understand our own bondage or know where or how to begin to break that which binds us” (Morton, 1985:xxxiii-xxxiv). Morton also analyses the effects of the consciousness-raising feminist groups of the Second Wave, as did Carol Christ. It is a process that has brought many women to a place in their lives where they “refuse to allow men to do their theological thinking” (Morton, 1985:20) and begin to define their own lives and selves in terms of their own experience in a new language that rejects the generic use of male words. Morton then begins to look at the significance of the power of naming, much as Mary Daly has done. She concludes that it is not so much the language but the image that carries power. “Images,” she states, “are infinitely more powerful than concepts”. She sees images as being powerful in an unconscious way - “Images... have a life of their own. They cannot be controlled” (Morton, 1985:20).

Feminist approaches to reclaiming and reinterpreting history encompass the area of textual analysis, as shown. Merlin Stone’s approach has been to uncover female deities of the past both through textual and archaeological evidences. She contends “the Christian emperors of Rome and Byzantium closed down the last goddess temples” (Stone, 1979:130). Her work is confined to the mostly pre-Christian era and up to about 500AD and re-examines historical evidence with regard to the period of time before the appearance of the Christian tradition, a tradition that sought to remove all traces of goddess imagery and worship and replace it with a monotheist, misogynist one.

Feminists in these *reformist* schools of thought have researched a Christian or pre-Christian past for women. They have done this because of their overriding belief that women's history is present and can be reclaimed through re-discovery, re-interpretation and revision of the texts that were written throughout history. The histories they write as a result of their research are histories of the writings, lives and experiences of women in the context of Christianity and in western culture. It is their view that this re-visioning of history will serve to inspire Christian women of today as they face patriarchal structures within the institution of their religion.

In summary, for many feminists re-claiming history is an important part of efforts to be freed from patriarchy. Whether this is done by re-reading, re-interpreting or re-inventing our written history, these approaches aim to put the voice of women back into the historical record.

## **SUMMARY**

I have argued that there are broadly two main feminist approaches to Christianity. Whilst feminists agree on the patriarchal nature of the religion, they are not in agreement about what to do about it. How to effectively free us from a history that has silenced and oppressed us? There are two main options. To abandon our heritage because we do not believe it and we do not want it, or to reform our heritage so that it can no longer oppress us. The debate amongst feminists is whether to reform or abandon Christianity. This debate mirrors a much wider debate within feminism itself. Liberal feminists, as will be discussed in Chapter Two, argue for the liberation of women by reforming the structures of society. Other feminists (radical and

psychoanalytical in particular) argue that reforming at this level will not be effective as the roots of patriarchy go deeper than the structures and institutions of any society.

I have overviewed the choices available to feminists when feminism confronts Christianity. It is important to have an understanding of this framework before I go on to look at why the three feminists interviewed as part of this research remain in the Christian church. It is clear that they do not have to. Many feminists have chosen to walk away from the church.

The strident voices of Mary Daly, Carol Christ and others call for feminism to abandon the Christian church. Opposing them are the voices of Fiorenza, Ruether and others who remain firmly within the Christian church and heritage, negotiating the patriarchy therein in a number of reformist, reinterpreted, re-inventive ways.

In Chapter Two I discuss sociological perspectives on the Christian church. In this approach the church is seen as a structure or organisation in society, much as other structures such as the State, education, health and employment systems and structures.

## CHAPTER TWO - THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

This chapter reviews the elements of a sociological approach to social organisation and within it the place of religion as a determinant of social values and behaviours. I look at how the structures of religious organisation including ritual and rite, the sacred and the profane, and denomination and sect, can be evaluated sociologically in terms of their meaning and their function.

There is value, as I see it, in understanding religion from a sociological perspective. In this approach religion is viewed differently from the perspectives of believers. A sociological perspective steps outside the belief system of a religion and asks such questions as what is the purpose of religion and religious belief?

It is important to understand how the function of religion as religion is embedded in the culture that surrounds us and influences us. In this chapter I build upon a sociological approach to examine the church from the perspective<sup>f</sup> of an outsider who studies religion from within the dynamics of its relationship with other aspects of society and culture.

As a feminist non-Christian seeking to understand why feminists chose to remain Christian, I looked in Chapter One at motivations on the level of personal experience. I now turn to a study of social motivations and group organisation. I want to understand religious involvement in cultural terms in order to ascertain the part played by Christian churches as social structures.

A sociological approach to religion asks some of the same questions as a feminist critique but it does not stress the oppressive effects of unequal gender relations. In seeing Christian feminists as members of society who incorporate dominant cultural values around them, I come to this chapter taking a feminist sociological perspective and maintain that the sociological focus on social organisation of institutions and individuals into groups may assist us to understand this.

## **INTRODUCTION**

“Until recently,” writes sociologist Anthony Giddens, “the churches rivalled, and frequently surpassed, monarchs and governments in the political power they wielded and in the wealth they managed to accumulate. The priesthood maintained a monopoly over the skills of literacy, scholarship and learning” (Giddens, 1989:450). It is for this reason that the church has become the focus of feminist sociological attention.

Like feminists, sociologists have critiqued Christianity in particular and religion in general by viewing the church as a patriarchal institution whose role, like other institutions in society, is to create and maintain patriarchy by subordinating and marginalising some groups like women, ‘non-white’, the poor and so on. In Chapter One I looked at feminist perspectives with regard to religious images, history and psychological impacts on perceptions of individuals and group

experiences. Now I explore the institutional aspects of the Christian church. This is in keeping with the themes of this thesis which see the church as both having spiritual and/or psychological importance as an expression and agent of patriarchy as well as providing structure and practice to the teachings of Christianity. Arguably, patriarchy is expressed through the structure of the institutionalised church and is more readily observed and measured than are the deeper forces at work in terms of our own psyches and understandings. It is easy for a feminist to describe the church as patriarchal, for example, when all officer holders of this institution are male.

Any further questions with regard to how much and in what way the institutionalised church has been changed by feminists and whether or not this has made any difference to the lives of individual women needs to be prefaced by an overview of feminist sociological perspectives on the institution of the church. Whilst keeping in mind that the institution of the church is only part of the Christian tradition it is, nonetheless, important to understand how the institution of the church functions in society and what effects this has. The church is an organisation. It is a physical building. It is a set of rules that are written down and can be read. It is the singing of hymns and passing of collection plates, the hearing of sermons and the donning of robes.

## **WHY SOCIOLOGY IS CONCERNED WITH RELIGION**

Morris Ginsberg defines sociology as “the study of society, that is, of the web or tissue of human interactions and interrelations. It is concerned with all that happened to human beings in virtue of their relations to each other” (Ginsberg, 1947:1). Sociology according to Jackson

“studies social structure (groups, associations and institutions), social function and social control (how structures work) and social change (short and long term)” (Jackson, 1974:7).

It is a study of how they function to shape and reflect the choices and lifestyles groups of people living in social contact and relationship. For Johnstone, sociology is “the study of the interaction of people in groups and of the influence of those groups on human behaviour generally and on society’s other institutions and groups”(Johnstone, 1983:5-6). Thus sociology is concerned with the influence of groups on human activity and look at how a person is socialised throughout their lives into the performance of the modified behaviour that is required for membership of and function in this group (1983:6).

Sociology’s systematic understanding of religion is built upon generalised and categorised aspects of religion as it is socially expressed and performed. Whilst it is agreed that the form of religion varies enormously, sociologists argue that the impetus to be involved in religion is universal. “The universality of religion is not to be found in the forms of religious belief and practice, for there is an endless diversity of such forms,” writes sociologist Arnold Green (1972:334). Similarly, Chinoy writes “so varied are the beliefs and practices that are identified as religious that they do not lend themselves to simple characterisation” (Chinoy, 1967:351). He is referring here to the enormous diversity in the *practice* of religion. It is perhaps more possible to refer to the universality of religion in terms of its *social functions*. “The universality of religion is not based upon the form of belief and practice, but upon the social functions which religion universally fulfills” (Green, 1972: 334-5). Differing practices of religion may still serve the same function in society. Whether one mourns death by waving a branch or by climbing

a hill, the sociological function of the religious practice is still to ritually mourn the loss of a loved one through death.

The sociology of religion is concerned with two main questions. Firstly, why have religious beliefs and practices been so central to culture and society and, secondly, why this has expression taken such diverse forms (Hamilton, 1995:1). Sociology views religion as a “more or less coherent system of beliefs and practices concerning a supernatural order of beings, forces, places or other entities: a system that for its adherents has implications for their behaviour and welfare: implications that the adherents in varying degrees and ways take seriously in their private and collective life” (Johnson, 1961:392). A sociological perspective sees religion as dealing with the supernatural forces that are perceived by people in society to be real and powerful, forces that can and do affect their lives often in ways that seem to be beyond their control. Religions are systems set up to both attempt to understand and to be able to influence these supernatural forces. It has been argued that humans are universally destined to frustration by life in a world that will always deny them, in some part, the things they might need and wish for. As Green argues, the self ‘can only bear so much frustration’. Enter - faith. Through religious faith people are able to rationalise their life and being. “Faith feeds on subjective need, so that religious goals compensate those who find their worldly lot intolerable” (Green, 1972:335). In particular, religions offer ways to rationalise death. “Man is born, he suffers disappointment in the midst of all hopes and achievements, and he dies. Religious explanations of death... make every man’s life more important” (Green, 1972:335). Religious explanations offer a scheme within which a system of personal meaning and

importance can be created and a hope that one's death is not without meaning.

Religion is studied as a social institution in terms of its connection with other social institutions. Roland Robertson states that "religion is culture" (Robertson, 1970:3). Wuthnow also expresses this when he states "religion is a cultural system that provides meaning and purpose in some ultimate sense by creating a conception of reality that can be regarded as sacred, holistic, or transcendent" (Wuthnow, 1988:473). Religion, in a sociological view is concerned with meanings, purpose and reality. For sociologist Eriche Goode, religion arises out of a human need to make sense of the world we live in and of our lives within this world. It serves to answer questions that science cannot. That is, the question *why?* (Goode, 1974:353). Religion serves to provide answers to "experiences falling outside the realm of everyday reality" (Wuthnow, 1988:474).

For the sociologist religion is a system that is used to gain a coherent understanding of the world and our place in it, both as an individual and a member of society. Religion not only helps us make meaning but it constructs what we see and understand through a process of symbolism. Religion creates an "all encompassing vision of reality" (Wuthnow, 1988: 474) that is constructed "through the use of symbols" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). This view is based on the assumption that "humans require a meaningful (i.e. orderly, comprehensible) reality, both in order to orient themselves psychologically to the world and in order to sustain social relationships" (Wuthnow, 1988:474). In this analysis, the construction of meaning based on a set of symbols is something that is created in order to give a coherent framework to our

function both as individuals and as members of a co-operative society. The important point here is that *what this system is* is irrelevant. What matters is that we need meaning so we create it. “Religion creates, as it were, models of moral order that can be visualised and experimented with symbolically, enacted in ritual or in idealised religious communities, and implemented as a way of reconstructing social relations” (Wuthnow, 1988:475). Which symbols are used and how they are used depends on what symbols circulate socially at any given time.

Disruptions in moral and social order provide opportunity for the emergence of new interpretations of old symbols or for the emergence of new symbols. “Modern religion is resilient and yet subject to cultural influences; it does not merely survive or decline, but adapts to its environment in complex ways” (Wuthnow, 1988:475). The meanings able to be created appear to be related to the kinds of social environments we inhabit. As Wuthnow states “some correlations probably exist between kinds of religious patterns and different kinds of environments” (1988:475).

Sociological analyses of religion have primarily arisen out of studies of the history and social impact of Judeo-Christianity. As Robertson (1970:17) expresses it “the category *religion* is one that has arisen in socio-cultural contexts where the Judeo-Christian tradition has predominated”. This is also because sociology itself as a discipline has been formulated and developed within the context of western intellectual culture, which is influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition.

## **SOCIOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS OF RELIGION**

Hill defines three stances from which the phenomena of religion might be observed. Firstly, he describes the stance of an observer who sees religion as an “autonomous, self-regulating segment of human experience and activity which is above the influences of the social environment” (Hill, 1973:16). For such an observer, he argues, there is no scope for the empirical study of the phenomenon of religion. A second stance might be that which views religion as entirely constructed within and out of societal forces. It does not, therefore, consist of anything which is ‘unreal’ and therefore unmeasurable. This stance discounts the events of religion which defy empirical proofs. The third stance is one that lies between the previous two. It is a stance in which the sociologist takes into account the forces in and from a society which help form and define the religion, but within which it is acknowledged that the beliefs of adherents to the religion form an important part of the religious activity. These beliefs are not empirical. They are ‘faith’ and therefore ‘unreal’ to the sociological observer (Hill, 1973: 16-17).

## **WHAT DO SOCIOLOGISTS LOOK FOR WHEN THEY STUDY RELIGION?**

Karl Mannheim’s approach to religion identifies essential elements of religious experience as a way of ordering any sociological analysis of the social aspects of religion. Mannheim maintains that the four “spheres of religious experience” are “personal communication with God, personal relationships, the pattern of social life and religious behaviour” (Mannheim,

1943). Glock has summarised the social experiences of religious belief and practice as “the experiential (subjective religious experience or emotion); the ritualistic (specific practice expected of religious adherents); the ideological (the actual beliefs held by adherents); the intellectual (knowledge of basic tenets of belief); the consequential (the secular effects of religious belief, practice and experience)” (Glock, 1984:354). This analysis enables sociologists to examine how different functions and attributed meanings fit together within a religious context to give authority and form to both the religion and its adherents’ participation.

A feminist researcher recognises the limits of this approach. In a religion where God is male, such as Christianity, an approach such as this will not provide a researcher with much information about female religious experience. Whilst sociology is extremely useful in enabling us to view from a distance the social impacts of religion and how it influences social structures and mores, it cannot necessarily enable us to see the full picture. This can only be achieved by adding a feminist perspective. That is, a feminist approach adds to the sociological approach in order to elucidate on female and other minority perspectives. This point underlies this discussion of sociological approaches here.

## **CONSIDERING THE IMPACT OF RELIGION IN SOCIETY**

As an influential social institution never separate from the values and experiences of its constituents, studies of religion take cognisance of the intricate relationships between different social groupings and the belief systems they become involved in. For example, Johnson (1961:

400) argues that “social position helps to determine what kind of religious belief people are attracted to”. A function of religion is clearly to steer and order the process of change in society. Religious values and rituals both reflect and shape society’s organisation and visions. Sociology recognises that “religion performed a strategic function within a society, shaping the meaning content of the culture and supporting social control and societal integration” (O’Dea, 1976:1). A feminist critique also takes cognisance of the importance of religion in human society. Fiorenza (1984) for example, argues that the role of religion in shaping society, particularly historically, is one that is important to understand in terms of understanding our present situation. Christ (1979) recognises this power when she argues that religion is too important to be left under patriarchal control. There would be little dispute from feminism with regard to the role of religion and its power in society. This is precisely why it is of concern to feminism.

The sociologist not only *defines* religion but *also examines the impact* of religion on social development. There is a tension within the understanding of the social significance of religion - does it gratify and unite, or it is divisive and catastrophic? (Green, 1972:336). That is, a recognition of the power and force of religion in society is followed by an asking of the question - to what end? For some sociologists it promotes positive social change (Jackson, 1974:17). That is, religion is an important cohesive force in creating and maintaining a just society. For others religion legitimates social inequality (O’Dea, 1976; Green, 1972). A feminist critique would take this view also, as feminism argues that the Christian religion acts to maintain the unequal gender relations characterised by patriarchy.

I will elucidate further. The types of impacts and effects of religion with which a sociological approach concerns itself can be summarised as belonging to either one of two main streams of thought. Firstly, religion can be analysed from the viewpoint of its beneficial function in and to society. This *functionalist* approach sees religion as an institution in and of society, one of a number that serve society and benefit its members. Durkheim, for example, saw religion as a cohesive and beneficial force in society. "Religion," he argued, "is the worship of society itself. In the act of worship, through religious rituals, society's members renew their bonds with one another and with society" (Durkheim, 1915). Loyalty to a religion common to a society brings the group together through commonality of purpose. "Religion contributes to the stability, the cohesion and the survival of all societies by binding a society's members together and making them loyal to it" (Goode, 1984:353).

Durkheim viewed social life as "inherently religious" and saw religious celebrations as "celebrations of life" (Robertson, 1970:13). Hans Mol's study of the sacralisation of identity in society argued that religions are dependent for their survival on their ability to "motivate individuals, to constrain as well as co-opt recalcitrant groups, to reform as well as to reinforce the social whole" (Mol, 1976: 184). That is, a religion is a powerful force in forming and maintaining our individual identity as well as influencing the function of a group of individuals in a society. In his view religions reflect the society in which they are embedded. They also "reflect, reconcile and sublimate the strains and stresses of the society" (Mol, 1976:184). This results in a strengthening of social solidarity. He makes these observations on the religion of the western world, Christianity: "in all of its various forms it encourages the values that

strengthen the social whole. Self-denial, loving thy neighbour, being balanced, meeting expectations, being charitable, just and kind are all values which build a stronger society” (Mol, 1976:197). For a feminist thinker, the stability and cohesion of society is not necessarily viewed as a beneficial thing when it maintains unequal gender relations. The reinforcing of the social whole is a destructive thing when this social whole denies women’s experience. The worship of society is anathema to the women who have no voice in it. In particular, when women’s experience of religion is one of exclusion and pain (Christ, 1979) then the power of cohesion that religion brings is oppressive. This approach does not allow a researcher to find out much about women’s experience of religion.

The second stream of thought about the function of religion in society is quite different. Conflict theorists, like Marxists, argue that religion is one of the ways that the elite in any society gain and maintain power. The institution of religion is seen as a tool to ensure benefit for some and detriment to others. Karl Marx, for example, argued that “religion exists because it helps the ruling elite keep the masses docile, controllable and exploitable” (Goode, 1984:354). Marxist approaches see religion as serving the goals of the elite in two ways. Firstly, it teaches that the existing social arrangement is not only fair but sacred. Religion legitimises the status quo. Not only is it fair and right that the rich are rich and the poor are poor, but it has been ordained by god that it is so. To attempt to change the social order is to spit in the face of god by defying his sacred order. Religion also functions indirectly by focusing the attention of the believer on the future in heaven (where s/he will get their just reward) rather than on the here and now. For Karl Marx religion helped the ruling class and not society as a whole. He saw

religion as “manifestations or reflections of the socio-economic infrastructure, particularly the relations between the classes” (Robertson, 1970:12). In Marx’s view an end of exploitation would see an end to religion. Early sociology did, in fact, predict the demise of religion and the replacement of it as a system of meaning with secularization (Wuthnow, 1988:474). A feminist Marxist approach would also view religion as a tool in the hands of the elite to keep power from others. In this case, power is in the hands of men and it works to maintain the oppression of women. That is, feminist Marxism overlays a gender critique to this argument. It considers not only class but adds an understanding of unequal gender relations that operate with the same dynamic.

Sociologist Harry Johnson argues that religions “tend, on the whole, to support the existing institutional structure and hence to legitimise the positions of those whose wealth and power are held in accordance with the political, economic and other institutions” (Johnson, 1961:396-7). Johnson (1961:396) viewed religion as acting to support the status quo. That is, religion “does more to strengthen the social order than to change it”. It is important in the context of this argument to look at the effect of Calvinism and its relationship with capitalism. Calvinism is a part of Protestantism, which is a part of Christianity. Weber in particular has pointed out the way in which Calvinism in particular and Protestantism in general have worked to allow the rise of capitalism in western society. He argues that “Protestantism provided an essential source of the dedication to one’s occupation and the unremitting pursuit of gain that marked the spirit of capitalism” (Weber, 1930). It was the attitude towards the world generated by Calvinism in particular that made capitalism take hold and flourish. It was Calvin’s stress on

a person's calling in life, that is, the occupation in which one had been placed by God, that saw the development of the work ethic that characterises much of Protestantism. If your job is seen as what you are called to by God, then working hard and doing well in your calling (job) is what God requires of you. This dedication to the task ordained by God grew out of the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination, a view that saw one's life as predestined to either godliness with heaven as its end or damnation with hell as its end. In order to ensure you were predestined to heaven one ensured one behaved in a godly fashion. That is, "reassurance could be found (by the believer) by behaving as if he were saved, by adhering steadfastly to the religious life: namely, by following those rules of behaviour that have come to be labeled the 'Protestant Ethic' - industry, sobriety, thrift, restraint and the avoidance of fleshly pleasures" (Chinoy, 1967:368). Weber, in fact, in his analysis, tried to show that modern capitalism developed only in the West precisely because of this factor. The effect of Calvinism in the early colonial days of New Zealand has already been described in Chapter One.

## **THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE**

Emile Durkheim, another of the founding *fathers* of modern sociology, defines religion as being "a system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, which unite their adherents into a kind of moral community" (Durkheim, 1915:47). Elaborating on the meaning of both "sacred" and "moral community" Erich Goode explains that "the *sacred* is infinitely beyond and above everyday reality. It generates reverence, awe, and a sense of mystery. The opposite of sacred is the profane - whatever is ordinary, everyday, secular. Thus the *moral community* of like-

minded believers is central to religion. All religions have followings, membership with common identities, practices and worldviews that bind people together and set them apart from other groups” (Goode, 1984:352-3). A common understanding of sacred and profane is an important part of the community of belief.

A feminist critique would identify the sacred as lying within a male-defined view of the world. The feminist argues that the “normal, everyday” is not, in fact, secular. The normal and everyday tend to be the world that women inhabit. Cooking, cleaning, child-rearing are all traditional roles assigned to women in a Christian culture. This definition of sacred and profane carries an inherent value judgment on the everyday work of women, contrasting it with the “awe and mystery” of the sacred, “above and beyond every day reality” (Goode, 1984:353). A view which ignores the everyday ignores the world of most women. Durkheim’s view of religion which compares and contrasts the sacred and the profane is an illustration of the dichotomous, binary oppositional view of the world that dominates androcentric thought. A feminist critique views this heaven and earth split as an unacceptable way to analyse religion, although an understanding of how this dichotomy operates forms part of a feminist critique of how social relations operate within patriarchal Christian society.

## **RITUAL**

Religious actions are often deemed significant to both sociologists and adherents. It is useful to examine some sociological explanations of ritual, although I argue that they are limited by

a tendency to universalise and to ignore the fact that gender and class may affect an individual's being permitted to participate. Most forms of Christianity are deeply ritualistic and so are many forms of feminist Christian belief. All the women involved in this study were involved in groups with practice ritual of some kind. For example, the alternative feminist group that one of the interviewees was involved in meets regularly to celebrate both Christian and non-Christian rituals, such as solstice and Christmas. These ritual meetings use both Christian approaches and other practices taken from pagan or goddess practices. The mix might be, for example, the singing of a Christian hymn followed by the giving of a flower and affirmation of a person's worth to the group. The other groups that women in this study belong to also ritualise. The Goddess Movement in New Zealand self-consciously creates its own rituals based on the seasons of nature and of women's lives (Rountree, 1993). Because of this it is important to look at how ritual has been understood by sociologists.

Rituals are characterised by actions that are designed to appeal to the non-rational or supernatural, either to manipulate or to worship. Ritual has been characterised in general terms by Johnson (1961:408-10) as:

1. Often involving the manipulation of tangible sacred objects
2. The performance of ritual is part of the religious system for attaining salvation
3. Ritual is often happy or even joyous
4. Ritual is goal-directed (instrumental) but it is also expressional. That is, attitude of the adherent is important in a ritual.

5. Rituals tend to be bound to a particular form over time
6. Ritual is distinguishable from moral action.

Ritual “not only affirms certain attitudes but also confirms them” (Johnson, 1961:412). Certain practices are viewed by religious adherents as being useful in terms of both expressing and accessing their religion. The adherent gains from ritual a structured means of both practicing their religion and expressing their religious personhood. A set of actions serve to structure the adherents religious expression and these actions are continued over time, having the effect of contributing to the structure and permanence of the religion itself.

For Wuthnow communication is the chief function of ritual. “Like verbal utterances,” he states, “rituals are behavioural acts that explicitly or implicitly express something about (the) actors relations to one another” (Wuthnow, 1988:493). The actions of ritual are ordinary and often simple. However, in the religious context they are significant and meaningful. Wuthnow argues that rituals “assist in clarifying the moral order” and are often created during times of uncertainty or change (Wuthnow, 1988:493). Ritual is also seen as a way in which a religion’s belief are perpetuated through generations of believers. Durkheim (1915) has described ritual as “collective effervescence” and he viewed ritual as generating enthusiasm in groups. Wuthnow takes this analysis further commenting that ritual not only creates enthusiasm but also channels it to reinforce religious belief and to help stabilise a religious system (Wuthnow, 1988:494-5).

Ritual, in Mol's view, is almost a microcosm of the society in which it exists. "Rites," he states "articulate and reiterate a system of meaning and prevent it from being lost from sight. They act out and sacralise sameness" (Mol, 1976:233). Rituals are an important part of enforcing religious order on the individual, reminding the individual of their place in the social order as authorised by religion. Ritual both reinforces and enforces order by directing energy towards group activities rather than individual and thereby strengthening the cohesion of the larger group. Ritual, in fact, can be said to represent society itself (Mol, 1976:233f) by both explaining and defining what society is. Religious practice is an expression for many in a society of what that society itself should represent and how it should function.

Ritual as "an externalised emotional patterning of act and relation that becomes particularly important in times of personal or communal crisis" (O'Dea, 1976:57). Life-changes such as giving birth or menopause for women may become a primary focus of religious experience. An example of this type of ritual practice are the rituals that have been created by women in New Zealand to celebrate life changes. Juliet Batten (1988) documents some of these rituals. They involve the use of objects of nature, chanting and other ritualised actions, and are often centred around either a cycle of the earth (such as spring or Solstices) or an important time in a woman's life cycle, such as after giving birth (entrance into motherhood) or menopause. Whilst some of these characteristics resemble the Johnson analysis, some do not. For example, there does not appear to be any part of the ritual that is involved with attempts to attain salvation, but rather to empower women in everyday activities.

## HOW SOCIOLOGISTS SEE RELIGION AS ORGANISED GROUP OBJECTIVES

For Wuthnow, religious organisations co-ordinate religious energy (resource) in order that individuals may participate in the attainment of goals or objectives as a group or community. The religious organisation is “a system for drawing in resources, a relatively stable system of processing these resources, and a set of goals or tasks to which processed resources are committed” (Wuthnow, 1988:405). In his analysis, the two main types of organisation of religion are the *church* and the *sect*. The church, as a large organisation, tends to be conservative and universal in its basic structural form in any society. Churches tend to reflect and promote the dominant values in a society. Sects, on the other hand, can be described as relatively small groups that challenge both dominant values and structures to some degree. They “renounce the idea of dominating the world” (Jackson, 1974:17). They have more local rather than global objectives and often a personalist or individualistic focus. In Goode’s model the organisation of religion is defined by the categories of charisma, cults, sects, ecclesias and denominations, depending on how specific functions and roles are enacted and socially sanctioned or held to be important (Goode, 1984: 357f). This is a variation on Wuthnow’s and Jackson’s ideas outlined above.

This view is not dissimilar from Rosemary Radford Ruether’s concept of women-church (1985). She also identifies a tension between the traditional church institution and the community of believers. She sees the historic Christian Church as an important institution underpinning

social arrangements, whilst the Christian community co-exists despite tension and contradiction. The community of believers has not been ruled by social hierarchies as the institution has and “the church as spirit-filled community thus believes itself called into an exodus from the established social order and its religious agents of sacralisation. This demands an alternative social order in obedience to God. The basic Christian communities are thus the ecclesial expression of liberation theology” (Ruether, 1985:22-3,25).

The distinction between sect and church might also be an important one when considering Christian feminism, as the groups that the Christian feminists in this study belong to are all sub-groups that function within a church setting and have clearly stated goals that differ from the church they are located in. For example, S. in her interview describes the *church* as ‘run by the boys’ and yet describes *her group* as a place where leadership is shared between members on a rotating basis with no reference to the gender of the person. These sub-groups challenge the church. For example, one of the interviewees, P. describes the sexist language of the church as offensive and yet states that she cherishes the inclusiveness of her group both in terms of language and participation. All three women spoke of their groups as being able to meet their particular and personal needs, needs they identified as being different from those that drive the church and needs that are not met within the traditional church.

## **SECULARIZATION**

A study of the sociology of religion would not be complete without some comment on the

secularisation of religion that has occurred in the modern western world. Chinoy states "In the modern Western world, where religion has lost or relinquished its claim to govern in detail large parts of man's daily life, many people have found secular solutions to problems that might once have generated a religious response" (Chinoy, 1967:363). This is the process known as secularisation and it is associated with modern western rationalistic thought and the rise of science in our culture. Hurd has described the secularisation process in America as a process in which the Church has "lost their sole emphasis on 'religion' in its narrow sense. Religion itself has become more secular. There has been increasing compromise with worldly values" (Hurd, 1986:78). Hurd points to both the secularisation of the Church's activities and the secularisation of the Church's theology. Western society has moved away from a church-dominated view of the world. The separation of church and state has, in some ways, presented an alternate set of views or beliefs to which members of a society may adhere. Within the churches themselves there has also occurred a liberalisation or secularisation of theology, a change in the views of the church with regard to the society in which it is embedded. This process has forced some churches to retreat into a small corner of society, according to Hurd. In this "corner of society" the church may become sectarian and reject the values of the society in which it exists. Secularisation has been describes as "the process whereby religious thinking, practices and institutions lose social significance" (Wilson, 1966). The secularisation process is characterised by a "decline in participation in formal church rites of passage such as marriage, baptism etc, and by the reduced power, wealth and influence of the church as an institution" (Court, 1987:217). This is exactly what Geering and Veitch (1983) have described as having occurred in New Zealand.

In his model Geoffrey Hurd describes three concurrent process with regard to religion and the church in western culture. They are the secularisation of society, the secularisation of the church and the church unity movement. These three broad changes reflect the sociological changes brought about through both urbanisation and industrialisation. It has been argued that these changes have led to the era of a new religious consciousness for some members of western society. This has seen the uprising of new religious movements that are not always directly related to God and his divinity such as 'New Age' concepts of crystals, essential oils, etc, or the pseudo-psychological groups such as EST and Encounter. These movements have been identified by Hurd as "stemming from a disillusionment with modern industrial society" (Hurd, 1986:81). These types of quasi-religious groups are often centred within the cult of the individual. That is, the emphasis might be on, for example, personal development, or a personal journey of re-birth. "These movements offer personal experience, self-knowledge. In this they are well-adapted to the highly individual ethos of the modern world" (Hurd, 1986:81). Some of these new religions are embedded in fundamentalist Christianity, for example, the charismatic movement.

The issue of whether or not the secularization of religion in western society lessens or alters the influence of the church is an interesting one. Richard Bellah (1980) has coined the phrase 'civil religion' to describe the process of the movement of the institute of the state into the role the church held in a pre-secularised society. Secularised societies have formed state institutions in dealing with the problem of the moral right of existing political authority by offering them legitimacy. "A distinct set of religious symbols and practices may arise that address issues of

political legitimacy and political ethics but that are not fused with either church or state” (Bellah, 1980:xi) This is civil religion. He argues that the “idea of a non-religious state is very modern and very doubtful” (Bellah, 1980:5) A religion, even when secularised, may still act to legitimise the state. This can operate through the provision of a “national sense of ethic” (Bellah, 1980:20) which dictates whether certain behaviours are acceptable or not. An example of this is the legal constraints of certain sexual activities and behaviours such as male homosexuality which was until recently illegal in New Zealand. Bellah (1980:16-18) also points to the role of civil religion in creating and maintaining a national identity. Religion can contribute to the character and legal code of a society even though the religion itself is not a set of beliefs held by a number of members of that society. The words of our national anthem state “God of nations at *thy* feet, in the *bonds* of love we *meēt*, hear our voices we entreat, God defend *our free* land. This is an important point to grasp as I go on to look at why feminists remain within the Christian church. If the church is more than a set of religious beliefs, if it incorporates aspects of our nationalism, citizenship and culture, then reasons for continuing to call oneself Christian can be understood within a different framework than a purely religious evaluation of what the church is and what it represents.

Religious beliefs and practices other than Christian need also be to discussed here. There are feminist ritual-making groups in existence in New Zealand (Rountree, 1993). They might be described in terms of sects, but I think are might also be understood as part of the secularisation process. A movement away from god to the Goddess (or goddesses) takes religion not only out of the traditional churches but specifically out of the hands of men. A feminist involved in

the goddess movement is involved not only in celebrating nature in the world around her but also in the power she has within herself. This contrasts with Christian views of god as centred outside of the self. Ritual practices differ from traditional church practice, although there are some similarities (as discussed earlier).

There are also other feminist alternatives to traditional church practice and Christian belief that might also be viewed as secularized. The groups to which the women in this study belong have moved away from traditional church practice whilst still being associated with the traditional church. They are not under church control in practice although they might ostensibly be so. In the interviews N.S. for example, talks of her religious group as making its own rules and practices, although it officially functions under Catholic Church authority. She tells of the group's decision to change the title of its leader in order to reflect their egalitarian and community life and practice as distinct from traditional church hierarchical view of management of a church groups. Thus, the Mother Superior became the Congregational Leader. This group also decided to change their attire about twenty years ago and move out of their traditional habit, somewhat to the dismay of some sectors in the traditional church. To this N.S. replied "people get the impression that the bishops and the priests have the final say. They don't have any say whatsoever".

There are also feminist voices operating within the traditional church. This may be on a parish by parish basis. St Andrews on the Terrace, for example, is a Presbyterian church in inner Wellington. They have recently licensed a lesbian feminist to preach, although this stance is

not shared by most Presbyterians in New Zealand. At this church inclusive language operates and a Gay and Lesbian group is active. Their dissonant stance within the Presbyterian church has been highlighted by the recent visit to St Andrews of Bishop John Spong, a radical American author and commentator who no longer believes in the basic tenets of traditional Christian faith - the virgin birth and the death and resurrection of Jesus, to name a few. This church is strongly feminist in many of its religious beliefs and practices, yet it still operates within and under the auspices of New Zealand Presbyterianism.

## **SUMMARY**

As a feminist non-Christian I am seeking to understand why feminists chose to remain Christian. Having outlined the debate with regard to feminist responses to Christianity in Chapter One, I have moved on to look at social factors that might affect this choice. This has meant developing an understanding of what the institution of the church is in terms of how it functions in society from a sociological perspective.

There is no disagreement within sociological approaches that the church is a powerful force in society (Giddens, Hill, Chinoy, Hamilton, Johnson). There are, however, two differing views within sociology with regard to the way the church functions in society. Durkheim, Mol, Robertson and others argue that the function is a beneficial one for all members in a society. Others (Marx, Weber, Johnson) argue that the institution of the church acts to the benefit of some whilst at the same time acting to the detriment of others. A feminist perspective is more

likely to take this second approach. This will be fully discussed in the next chapter.

The importance of ritual in religion has also been discussed and the division between church and sect explored, particularly in light of Ruether's description of women-church. The question of secularisation has also been covered, with the New Zealand situation in particular being discussed. The extent to which the state takes over some of the functions of a church when secularisation occurs has also been discussed as I have briefly discussed nationalism and the law in New Zealand in the light of Richard Bellah's concept of civil religion (1980).

A feminist sociological analysis enables an exploration of women's experience and it is important to incorporate into this study. Feminist sociology is indebted to traditional sociological thought and it is for this reason that I have explored traditional sociology

This chapter frames my inquiry about how feminists have analysed the social impact and influence of religion in society. This will be continued in Chapter Three where I move to looking at feminist analyses which provide the context for an examination of how Christian feminists function within Christianity and looks at some reasons given for their continuing to be involved in the institutionalised Christian church.

## **CHAPTER THREE - FEMINIST THEORY AND THE SOCIAL INSTITUTION OF THE CHURCH**

This chapter looks at feminist critiques of the social institution of the church, following on from the groundwork laid in the previous chapter. Here I will review relevant aspects of feminist theory and look at how a range of feminist theoretical approaches differ from conventional sociological approaches to the study of religion.

Ursula King has argued that “women’s position in religion is often a reflection, however oblique, of women’s status in society.” She adds “social scientists have frequently pointed out that religious systems both reflect and reinforce cultural values and patterns of social organisation” (King, 1995:15). Walby (1990:91) in discussing socialization theory, describes masculine and feminine identities as arising within socialisation which “proceeds with a set of rewards and punishments, ranging from changes in tone of voice to physical chastisement. Thus, little girls are more likely to be told to be quiet in circumstances where little boys would be expected to be boisterous”. My interest is not so much in how socialisation occurs but how social processes produce gendered persons and how religious ideologies importantly help shape the socialisation process.

Later in this thesis, when I analyse what the feminist Christian women who took part in the interviews have said, I will contextualise their views within the feminist theorising covered in this chapter. For example, when S. says she belongs to “a church run by the boys” it will be

analysed in the context of feminist theorising about the patriarchal nature of the institution of the church and the role it has in maintaining that power inequality. When she later goes on to talk about the exclusion of women from the priesthood and what a change might mean for her and other women, her comments will be interpreted in the context of Sylvia Walby's arguments on public and private patriarchy and the effects of women moving into more public positions within both the church and society. I also critically analyse what these women have talked about as being their roles in education within the church as part of a tool for reform in the context of feminist critiques of the views of liberal feminism.

Another theme in the thesis is an examination<sup>f</sup> of the meaning of the word feminist. This chapter contains a comprehensive overview of the main taxonomies of feminism. This is useful shorthand for when we later look at how the interviewees describe their own understanding of feminism.

## **THE DIVERSITY OF FEMINIST THEORY**

The recognition of diversity within feminist thinking on almost any aspect of social theory is now commonplace. Whilst it is true that all forms of feminism are concerned with gender and in particular with the nature of 'women', it is also true that there are many different emphases in the articulation of feminist thinking about how to remedy women's social and psychological subordination. Feminist theory fundamentally seeks to explain the unequal position of women in most social environments and cultures. The feminist perspectives I will discuss here and

throughout this thesis are based upon 'western' or European theories of the individual and society. I have imbibed many of these perspectives and theories because I have grown up in a European inflected colonial culture. Although Aotearoa/New Zealand has tangential relations to both the United States of America and Britain, the similarities in terms of the structure of society are marked, despite the different colonial history of society in Aotearoa/New Zealand. As a New Zealander of Irish/Scottish descent, I feel able to closely align myself with feminist theorising developed in other western countries since it remains influential within New Zealand feminism.

There are a number of feminist descriptions of patriarchy. This is because, as Rosemary Tong points out, "there are many (feminist) theories and perspectives, and each feminist perspective or theory attempts to describe women's oppression, to explain its causes and consequences, and to prescribe strategies for women's liberation" (Tong, 1989:1). Feminism is, therefore, far from united in its view of why patriarchy occurs and what keeps it in place. In this thesis I take what is described as a radical feminist view and I discuss what this means later in this chapter.

In spite of the differences in feminist thought, some postmodern theorists such as Judith Grant (1993) have identified the most basic 'core concepts' in feminism in order to identify possible meeting points in the varieties of feminism - that is, what areas find agreement amongst feminist thinkers and what underlying principles are present in all feminist thought. Grant also argues that the central concepts within feminism thinking are necessarily unstable, in the sense that they are representations of or shorthand versions of a range of views whose meanings and

applications are constantly being debated (1993:4). Grant (1993:4) proposes three core concepts. These are: “(1) ‘Woman’ (2) experience, and (3) personal politics” as the basis for a feminist epistemology; a world-view “that would account for gendered differences in knowledge implicit in the idea of gendered experiences” (Grant,1993:42). A feminist epistemology is based in an understanding of women’s lived experience and their personal politics about social change and is an explicit rejection of the traditional male assumption that one can be a ‘detached observer’ in order to analyse society and arrive at strategies for social change. The belief in scientific detachment has been described by Dorothy Smith (1987:70) as “a mode detached from the everyday world of being. In it ‘we’ takes on a universal character” identified by feminists as representing a male-only view. Universalising, in this context, is ‘male-ising’. Catherine MacKinnon (1989) indicates that the notion of subjectivity must also come under scrutiny because not only do men create an aligned objectivity, but they also create a woman’s subjective self as well. The significance of this idea is that all ‘truth’ in our culture is derived from and reflects this perspective. MacKinnon states all male power and aggression exist apriori. Her argument is that males define femaleness, particularly in terms of female sexuality. “We are all measured by a male standard for women, a standard that is not our own” (MacKinnon, 1989:118).

In spite of the range of thinking within feminism, it is important to turn to looking at how each school of feminist thinking about religion is useful to this study.

## LIBERAL FEMINISM

Liberal feminism formed the philosophical underpinnings of the First Wave of feminism at the end of the nineteenth century. Liberal feminism is particularly important in this thesis because the women who participated in this research generally took a stance that could be typified with this label. Liberal feminism “focuses on those structural impediments to women’s progress” towards equality in society. It is based in the view that “a person’s biological sex should in no way determine his or her psychological and social gender”(Tong, 1989:31). That is, ‘gender’ should not be the sole basis for social differentiation of individuals. It should neither be a measure of a person’s worth nor should it determine how nor where a person spends their life. It should not determine what they do with their lives or how much choice they have in any matter concerning their life. The roots of liberal feminism lie in a view of human beings as rational and having a capacity for morality. The value of personal morality, value and worth, and individual autonomy is seen as imperative to self-fulfillment. A liberal feminist view of the world sees a ‘just’ society as one allowing individual and personal fulfillment for all members of that society. As Tong expresses it, “our whole system of individual rights is justified because these rights constitute a framework within which we can all choose our own separate goods, provided <sup>that</sup> we do not deprive others of theirs” (Tong, 1989:11). This sort of liberalism is evident in the constitution of the United States of America, a document that preeminently enshrines personal rights and freedoms. Liberal arguments are clearly seen in the work of Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) who argued in the eighteenth century that women were as fully capable of rationality and moral responsibility as men. In her view, the reason they did not operate with

moral responsibility in society was due only to lack of social opportunities (Mill, 1929:1). In the New Zealand context these liberal feminist views underpinned much of the arguments in the fight for women's suffrage. For example, Kate Sheppard's notes in the *Prohibitionist* of 1892 read thus: "Person includes female" (Sheppard, 1892).

Underlying some of the feminist politics of the Second Wave was a strong belief that woman could and should achieve the same social status as men if they were given the same opportunities. This is the core argument of liberal feminism. It emphasised reform of social institutions through lobbying for 'equal rights' based legislation such as anti-discrimination and equal employment opportunity. A primary focus for liberal feminists is, therefore, the issue of women's access to education and employment. Whilst this approach has been criticised as failing to deal with deeper issues of gender inequality, it has provided the impetus for a number of (particularly First Wave) feminist actions altering society in order to allow women access to these institutions.

Liberal feminism has been criticised by some feminists because of its emphasis on personal rights over an analysis of the social mechanisms that create inequalities and because it tends to aim for a social system that de-emphasises the significance of gender differences. Political theorist Jean Bethke Elshtain (1981) argues that liberal feminism has three major flaws. "(1) its claim that women can become like men if they set their minds to do it; (2) its claim that most women want to become like men; and (3) its claim that all women should want to become like men, to aspire to masculine values". What she is pointing to here is that liberal feminism

equates *human* virtue with male virtue, and they are not at all the same.

Alison Jaggar (1983) explores this further in her critique. She targets the heart of liberal humanism (substantially adopted by liberal feminism) as being based on the view that humans are rational, individual and autonomous agents. This is, she contends, a “fundamentally male conception” (Jaggar, 1983:40). She sees liberal philosophy as emerging with the growth of capitalism and argues that it developed in response to “demands for democracy and political liberties that often expressed deeply held moral convictions about the inherent equality of *men*” (Jaggar, 1983:27). Liberal feminists have “demanded that the prevailing liberal ideals should also be applied to women”. Jaggar (1983:33) points out that liberalism is based in a view that *man* is both rational and individual, and that society is comprised of a group of individuals - (“human individuals are ontologically prior to society”). Humans in society compete for a limited resource (those of the society and the environment) and each are concerned with their own needs/wants/ rights. A liberalist, therefore, is concerned with “devising social institutions that will protect each individual’s right to a fair share of the available resources while simultaneously allowing him or her the maximum opportunity for autonomy and self-fulfillment” (Jaggar, 1983:33). Liberal feminism, she argues, has been concerned with applying these liberal principles to women as well as men. For Jaggar this is a relatively straightforward task - simply requiring men to become convinced that women are also rational beings.

Liberal feminism, according to Wearing (1996:10), fails to account for the continuing of the oppression of women through gender segmentation in the labour force and fails to recognise

that inequality continues to be created through such structures. "Liberal feminism," she states, "does not recognise that men and women do not begin equally in families... gender is continually being constructed in the workplace through gender segmentation and the segregation of the labour market" (Wearing, 1996:10).

The arguments of Jaggar and Elshtain are particularly interesting in the context of this thesis. They argue the issue of reforming institutions in order to allow access to women and whether or not this does, in fact, advance the position of women in society. Their words are almost echoed by N.S. when she is discussing the institution of ordination in the church during her interview as part of this research. Her joy at discovering women were able to go through seminary and be ordained was short lived. She quickly realised that "they hadn't changed the seminary - seminary had changed them". The liberal feminist approach of reforming institutions underlies the ideologies of all three women interviewed in this research, for all three work within institutions and "demand democracy and political liberties" (Jaggar, 1983:27) and equality of opportunity for women. The approach is challenged by N.S.

And I went to Tauhara, to that conference there, and.. women from all over, and I thought, funny, these women aren't happy. They're very unhappy. What are they unhappy about? What have they gained? Become ordained women but only in terms of what the male church will permit them to do. I began to realise, that they went to seminary to become ordained. Oh my God! They went through a formation which was male-dominated. They never changed the seminary when they went to it. The

seminary changed them. And I thought, ordination's not going to do it (N.S. 1997).

Elshtain's critique of liberal feminism - that it is based on an assumption that "most women want to be like men, to aspire to masculine values" (Elshtain, 1981) - echoes these sentiments. The liberal feminist argument that a person's gender should not determine how nor where they spend their life, nor what they do with their lives, nor how much choice they have in any matter concerning their life confronts the gender segregation of the church, particularly in the area of ordination which is primarily and historically only available to men. Religion is viewed as a social institution in this model, and the way to create equality for women is to make the institution gender-neutral in terms of church positions and responsibilities.

Sylvia Walby (1990) criticises liberal feminism for its view that patriarchy can be dismantled by changing institutions. Her comments are particularly interesting in view of her critique of the church as one of the six sites of patriarchy in society. She has described patriarchy as a "dynamic system in which men give up an activity only when they no longer wish to undertake it" (Walby, 1990:173). In tracing the history of modern Britain, she comments that the social changes effected by both the First and Second Waves of Feminism as having backlash effects in which "if women do win a victory, then patriarchal forces will re-group and regain control over them in a different way" (Walby, 1990:173). She traces this change and counter-change of the dynamic of patriarchy in two spheres, distinguishing between public and private patriarchy and interprets historic events from the period of the industrial revolution forwards as a general move away from private patriarchy and towards public. In making this observation

she distinguishes between degrees and forms of patriarchy. “Degrees of patriarchy refers to the intensity of oppression on a specific dimension... forms of patriarchy refers to the overall type of patriarchy as defined by the specific relations between patriarchal structures” (Walby, 1990:174). What she is pointing out here is the importance of distinguishing between the two. In the context of her historical analysis she is careful to draw our attention to the change in form that patriarchy takes while arguing that the degree of patriarchy present in our current social context (speaking here of Britain in 1990) has not lessened. As she points out, with the move from private patriarchy to public “women are no longer restricted to the domestic hearth, but have the whole society in which to roam and be exploited” (Walby, 1990:01). Patriarchy has not, she argues, lessened. It has simply adapted itself to exploit women in new and diverse ways. Thus, rather than being excluded and thus dominated (in the private sphere) women are admitted but segregated in the public. The nature of this segregation is to oppress women by paying them less, working them harder and longer, offering them less job security and denying them access to decision-making. If one is to accept Walby’s analysis of form and degree then patriarchy is still as much in control of women as it was when women were confined to the home. The degree is the same: the form has altered. As she states it “in the public form of patriarchy the exploitation of women takes place at all levels, but women are not formally excluded from any. In each institution women are disadvantaged” (Walby, 1990:178-9).

It is interesting to consider this critique when considering the institution of the church and its exclusionist practices with regard to public positions of power for women. With regard to the institution of the Christian Church Walby theorizes that women as just as oppressed within the

modern church as they were in the historically exclusionist Christian church. That is, the form has changed, but not the degree.

Women are undisputably entering the institution of the church in new and different ways. Not only are they involved but they are taking on roles traditionally denied them. For example, on Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> April 1997 a lesbian was licenced to preach in the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand at St Andrews Church in Wellington. This move is a major step towards the full ordination of lesbians in the Presbyterian Church in Aotearoa/New Zealand, a church that already ordains women. Women clergy are also accepted in other mainstream institutional churches in New Zealand. But what difference is this making? It is dismantling patriarchy?

## **MARXIST FEMINISM**

In the late 1960s Marxist feminists sought to explain inequalities in society by emphasising the effects of class location determined by economic factors. Whilst Marx himself had written little about the position of women in society, he saw all class positions and social inequalities as derived from the relations of ownership of capital (and the right to make social meanings) and the means of production. That is, Marx explained oppression as being based in who controls capital (Wearing, 1993:11). Marxist feminists, therefore, explain women's oppression in society by stressing these same economic effects. As Tong (1989:39) expresses it "Marxist feminists believe that class ultimately better accounts for women's status and functions." In this analysis capitalism reinforces patriarchal oppression of women, and is not in itself "a result

of the intentional actions of individuals, but as the product of the political, social and economic structures associated with capitalism” (Tong, 1989:39). Thus “men’s domination of women is a by-product of capital’s domination over labour” (Walby, 1990:4). Marxist feminists explicitly reject liberal theories of human nature and replace them with a view of human being as having their human-ness defined and expressed in terms of what their productivity<sup>is</sup> in society. “We are what we are because of what we do” (Tong, 1989:39).

Marxist feminist theorising analyses the family as “fundamental to the gender division of labour and the abasement of women” (Wearing, 1993:12). Gender difference are, therefore, entrenched in how capitalism operates and what is needed to promote the interests of capital and productivity. That is, “the sex difference becomes translated into gender oppression because of the capitalist system of commodity production and social organisation” (Wearing, 1993:12). For Marxist feminists, gender oppression is embedded in class oppression.

Marxist feminism has also been criticised in three major ways. Firstly, it is clear that gender inequality existed before the rise of capitalist economies and there is little evidence in non-capitalist societies that women fare any better than they do in capitalist ones (Scott,1976). Secondly, Marxist theory is male focused and despite how it can be extrapolated to explain the subordination of women, it does little more for women than seemingly describe their inevitable marginality. Thirdly, Marxist feminists have been accused of failing to address sexual difference itself as a basis for power inequalities (Wearing, 1993:13-14).

A Marxist approach would view religion as a state institution involved in maintaining control of wealth and power through social relations. A feminist Marxist view would be similar, with an added recognition of the second class social status of women within this model of capitalist relations, with gender oppression embedded in the class oppression that exists in a commodity-based, capitalist society. For example, an institution such as the Catholic church in Ireland would be viewed as a part of a governing system that continues to outlaw abortion and thus limits the freedom of choice that women have in terms of childbearing. This acts to disempower women in a society where a church in which only celibate males hold power enforces legislative control through political influence. Marxist societies, for this reason, disband state religion by making it illegal. An example of this is the Soviet Union when it operated under Marxist principles in the twentieth century.

## **RADICAL FEMINISM**

Radical feminists see the cause of social inequality as rooted in the nature of gender itself. They generally assert that patriarchy is a social system independent of any other type of social relations. For the radical feminist 'patriarchy' refers to men exercising power over women. Radical feminist analyses include examination of 'private' aspects of women's lives. In their analysis, the private is as politically important and significant as the 'public'. That is, patriarchy in the home where it is, for the large part, unseen by society at large, is just as important a site of patriarchal oppression of women as are the public structures that oppress women in society. A radical feminist account of patriarchy takes into account issues of sexuality and the

ownership of women's bodies. This view sees male control included in the particular uses of gender discourses, maintaining that gender categories - male and female, and what each means and how it is expressed -are essentially an exaggeration of social significance of biological differences between men and women to ensure that men always have the dominant roles and women the subordinate (Tong, 1989:96).

Kate Millet (1970) was a feminist writer who critiqued the concept of patriarchy and gender construction in this way. Through a process of socialisation in which intimidation is a major part, women are taught gender roles that are acceptable to men, the power-holders. As Millet expresses it "intimidation is everywhere in patriarchy" (Millet, 1970:43-46). Sexual conduct is prescribed by men. Sexual desire is, therefore, primarily a male-centred construct, with sexuality being a major site of men's domination over women. Heterosexuality, therefore, is compulsory (Rich, 1980). As Walby (1990:127) states "heterosexuality is an important patriarchal structure." The socially constructed roles of male and (subordinate) female are then validated in a male argument that they are 'natural' and derive from the biological differences between the sexes. This is important in the context of this work as I am arguing that the institution of the church is a part of this creation of a reality in which women are 'naturally' inferior to men. The church argues that this sexual differentiation is, in fact, ordained by God. With God himself legitimising misogyny the patriarchal male has, it would appear, licence to reign supreme in western society. In this radical feminist critique male violence is seen as the root of this control and male violence is a system of dominance, not a series of isolated incidents of men out of control in society.

Radical feminism has been criticised by other feminist theorists as assuming essentialistic notions of male and female-ness, and of universalising them as a basis for social organisation (Walby, 1990:3). That is, radical feminism assumes universal patriarchy based on universally acknowledged gender categories. There are certainly pitfalls inherent in this approach. The category 'woman' arguably creates a "false universalism which cannot understand historic change or take sufficient account of divisions between women based on ethnicity and class" (Walby, 1990:3). More fundamentally, the basis of feminist knowledge is the category 'woman'. That is, "the notion of gendered experience suggests a universal female experience" (Grant, 1993:42). This assumption raises questions about whether or not a universal 'woman' experience exists. As Grant argues, "real women are divided by the cross-cutting experience of other oppressed peoples (Africans, Americans, Latins, lesbians etc). Further, the very nature of experientialism suggests that all of these groups have equal claims to defining their own realities" (Grant, 1993:42). Therefore, radical feminism finds itself under siege from those who will not subscribe to views of an essential femaleness and those who will not allow the development of a feminist epistemology for reasons of its failure to account for both the sexual specificity of women from men and differences between women.

Radical feminism would be quick to point out the role of religion in maintaining and legitimating not only the essential nature of the biological differences between the sexes but also the patriarchal relations that exist between them. An example of this is the disenfranchisement of women from the vote. Here women are excluded from direct influence in the politics of their society though being unable to vote. This is a power division based solely and entirely on

gender.

Mary Daly (1973) expresses a radical feminist critique of the church when she calls for the death of god the father. What she is demanding is an end to religious legitimation of man as being in the image of god - a god that is male, male that is (as) god. Religion is critiqued as a social institution that enforces gender inequality at the most basic level - that of human belief and emotion. A radical feminist analysis would also point to the role of Christian ideology in the creation of sexuality. In particular, the madonna-whore dualism which underlies male-devised sexual desire is directly attributable to Christian mythology and iconography. In this view women are seen as either sexual and thus dangerous to men, or as asexual mothers who nurture men. Women are limited to one or other of these roles purely on the basis that they are women. Women are unable to exist 'in the image of god' as men do and are forever excluded from the priesthood of those who are closest to god and who hold power in the church.

### **A DUAL SYSTEMS APPROACH - SOCIALIST FEMINISM**

A combination of these theories is brought together by a dual-systems approach, a dominant viewpoint within socialist feminism which brings together aspects of Marxism and radical feminist thinking and maintains a dual focus on how economic and patriarchal forces combine to enforce the continued oppression of women. Tong (1989:17) attributes the development of socialist feminism to "dissatisfaction with the essentially gender-blind characteristic of Marxist thought". Unlike a Marxist analysis which describes what has occurred (capitalist

separation of the workplace from the household) socialist feminism attempts, as Heidi Hartmann has said, to explain why “particular people fill particular places” (1981:41). Some see patriarchy and capitalism fused into one system of capitalist patriarchy (for example, Zillah Eisenstein, 1981), while others conceptualise the two systems as separate and analyse their relational effects (Hartmann, 1979). Socialist feminism analyses women’s oppression by considering both class oppression and male privilege as authorising sexism and economic oppression. It also attempts to understand how the two forces work together and reinforce each other (Wearing, 1993:18).

Judith Grant argues that socialist feminism developed as a strategy for dealing with the problems of universalism and difference found in radical feminism. “The solution suggest by socialist feminism,” she states, “was to talk about women in their myriad existences and to search for a material grounding for the notion of male domination” (Grant, 1993:45). She describes socialist feminism as developing “explicitly in contradiction to early radical feminist ideas which were insensitive to differences among women and overly essentialist”.

Socialist feminists acknowledge some universal female experiences (such as mothering) but see them as socially produced. A socialist feminist view would see religion as a way of enforcing socially engineered gender systems whilst maintaining class structure in a model in which the forces of capitalism and patriarchy conspire to continue the oppression of women. An example of this would be the power the Catholic church exercises in denying women the right to control their own fecundity through contraception and/or abortion. This also restricts women’s access

to and involvement in paid employment.

This analysis would pay attention to class as well as gender and would consider the role of wealth in the creation of an unequal society. For a socialist feminist, oppression of women will cease when patriarchal relations are no longer sustained by a capitalist society. Religion would be viewed as a social institution operating to serve both the interests of men and capitalists. An example of how this operates would be in the historical keeping of literacy within the ranks of those in power within the church. For example, a priest might be the only person in a village able to read. In this way those outside the elite class of those who were educated were likely to remain so because they were unable to participate in commerce to the same degree as a literate person.

## **PSYCHOANALYTIC FEMINISM**

Psychoanalytic feminism has its roots in the works of Sigmund Freud, who theorised that all children go through certain, distinct psychosexual stages in their development, stages that reflect the different experience of sexuality between girls and boys. How children experience these stages and if they move through them all or their development is arrested at one or another of them determines the adult male or female's sexual identity and 'normality' (Tong, 1989:139). Freud's theorising is probably best known for his ideas about penis envy, a psychosexual experience that girls have when they realise they do not have a penis and they want one. Betty Friedan and other Second Wave feminists such as Shulamith Firestone (1972)

and Kate Millet (1970) were angered by this type of androcentric thinking and targeted Freud in their writing and in their feminist critique. Friedan, for example, criticised Freud's biological determinist stance that 'anatomy is destiny' and his view of sexuality as centrally important in women's lives (Friedan, 1974:93). Emerging feminist psychoanalytic theorists rejected this essentialism (Horney, 1973:54) while later thinkers such as Dorothy Dinnerstein (1977) and Nancy Chodorow (1978, 1989) sought psychological explanations for both the behaviour of women and their oppressed position in society from a feminist perspective.

Dorothy Dinnerstein theorises that women and men have a pathological need to continue the dysfunctional gender arrangements that characterise patriarchal society. This describes men's need to control women's lives, and women's need for their lives to be controlled by men (Dinnerstein, 1977). This is based in an understanding of psychological behaviour that lies beneath the surface of our socialised selves.

Nancy Chodorow is concerned with why women want to mother. Whilst rejecting essentialist notions and explanations for this phenomenon, Chodorow theorised that the mothering aspect to women's selves came from the pre-Oedipal stage of psychosexual development. She attempted to theorise the phenomenon of mothering in both psychosexual and socialisation terms (Chodorow, 1989). The key element, in this context, of Chodorow's theorising was her ideas of children's psychosexual development through several distinct phases, drawn from the thinking of Sigmund Freud. This feature, in fact, typifies the thinking and theorising of psychoanalytic feminism.

Emotions and motivations are also explained in this model through a psychoanalytic approach. For example, Tong (1989:172) describes psychoanalytic feminism as providing “persuasive explanations of (women’s) need to love and be loved” through an understanding of the psychological forces that operate within each of us.

These theories have found some popularity due to their highlighting of the need to understand what is occurring in our lives as women not only on a surface level, but at the levels beyond conscious thought. However, they have been critiqued for their “lack of total explanation for female subordination” (Tong, 1989:172).

The interviewees who participated in this research spoke in terms of underlying forces of motivation that resonated with psychoanalytical theories. For example, P. spoke of the impossibility, in her view, of escaping the early years of cultural and psychological conditioning that she received. “Give me a child til he’s seven, they say, and he’s yours for life. Well, I started Sunday School when I was four, so I’m hooked for life”. S. spoke of her need to be connected in community to others, to share her spiritual life. “If I left (the church)” she states, “who would I pray with?” And again she discusses her loyalty to the church and wonders at her own decision to stay. She sees herself as “conditioned to loyalty” as part of her womanhood. The appearance of statements such as these surprised me and made me consider further the arguments of the psychoanalytical approach.

## POSTMODERN FEMINISM

No account of feminism since the Second Wave can be complete without a review of postmodern feminism. Tong has pointed out the “uneasy relationship” of postmodernism with feminism due to feminism’s need to explain through theory when it is this theorising itself that continues to support the oppression of women. “Because postmodern feminists reject traditional assumptions about truth and reality,” states Tong, “they wish to avoid in their writings any and all reinstatiations of phallogocentric thought” (Tong, 1989:217). Postmodern thought, however, has been influential in feminist thought and it is important in the context of this thesis and the arguments it presents to understand this approach.

Firstly, though, it is important to introduce postmodernism itself. Deconstruction theorist Jacques Lacan contended that every society is regulated by a “symbolic order” which is internalised in every member through language. This symbolic order is a “series of interrelated signs, roles and rituals” that, in fact, create social structures through the circulation and sanctioning of values, understandings and representations (Lacan, 1977). Internalising the symbolic order is a process that occurs through childhood as children are taught the systems of meaning that structure their existence through language. Jacques Derrida, another French postmodern theorist, took this thinking further to suggest that language itself *creates* meaning, rather than interpreting it. That is, there is no essential truth nor transcendental meaning in anything - it is all assigned or created (Derrida, 1978). Postmodern feminists agree with these two theorists that the symbolic order is difficult but necessary to change.

Postmodern feminism challenges normative values and views about the world we live in. Whilst their theorising challenges our basic notions of ourselves and the world we live in, they seek, as Tong has expressed, to “offer women the ultimate freedom - freedom from oppressive thought” (Tong, 1989:223) by destabilising gender categories as being either dualistic or oppositional. For some, the notion gender has little or no meaning since the relations referred to as ‘gender’ are seen as constantly unstable in and between different historical social settings. Drawing on the deconstructionist theories of Derrida (1976), the discourse analysis of Foucault (1981) and the postmodernism of Lyotard (1978) postmodern feminists challenge the central concepts of feminist theory, which they criticise as being essentially an Enlightenment philosophy.

Walby, in her critique of postmodernists argues that they “have made some valuable points about the potential dangers in theorizing gender inequality at an abstract and general level. However,” she continues, “they go too far” (Walby, 1990:16). Postmodernists challenge feminists to re-think generalisations and taken for granted analyses of sexual differences and they particularly wrench us from our tendencies to universalise and essentialise. However, to deconstruct a coherent critique of society based on a view of ‘woman’ as a category distinct from other categories may possibly de-construct feminism itself and this is a consideration that feminist thinkers who oppose this approach point out (Walby, 1990).

A postmodern feminist approach would view religion in terms of its role in our psychological and subconscious development and internalisation of systems of meaning. This approach

would be likely to reject liberal feminist reformism as not going far nor deep enough. A postmodern feminist would point out the dangers of over-simplifying an analysis of religion through essentialistic and Enlightenment thinking. Religion, in this view, would be critiqued in terms of its essentialist approach and its concepts of the universalism. "Deconstruction is antiessentialist not only in viewing the search for universal definitions as useless. He or she questions two of the assumptions that almost everyone holds: that there is an essential unity of self through time and space termed *self-identity* and that there is an essential relationship between language and reality termed *truth*" (Tong, 1989:219). Religion, in its claim to hold a universal truth, would be totally rejected by postmodernist thought as being part of a symbolic order imposed upon society that needs to be deconstructed. This is not an easy task, as the only tools we have to deconstruct it as the language that has been used to build it. A postmodern feminist approach rejects "the phallogentric drive to stabilise, organise and rationalise our conceptual universe" and Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous, in particular, offer instead a "profound feminism in the sense that they offer to women the most fundamental liberation of all - freedom from oppressive thought" (Tong, 1989:223). These three French feminist postmodernists have been very influential in western feminist thought. Helene Cixous is a "critic of literary style", Irigaray a "psychoanalyst seeking to liberate women from male philosophical thought" and Kristeva takes an approach that argues "that identification with biological definitions of sex by identifying feminine with the biological female and masculine with the biological male" is to insist on certain language use imposing differing symbolic order which "forces men and women into patriarchy's straitjacket" (Tong, 1989:223,226,229). Although different, these three French feminists have been described as "sharing a common desire to think nonbinary,

nonoppositional thoughts” (Tong, 1989:233).

Religion is a way of thinking that needs to be deconstructed, in this view, in order for both men and women to be free from its oppressive systems of constraint such as binary opposition. The Christian church is an organisation structure that enshrines this world view and is part of the oppressive forces of this system.

## **SUMMARY**

In this chapter I have reviewed the meanings of feminism and looked at the major feminist schools of thought. I have done this in order to contextualise the discussion to take place in later chapters where I discuss the interviewees’ views of feminism and the institution of the church. As will become clear, the feminists in this survey tend towards liberal feminist thinking. They also bring up issues with regard to collusion and subversion, issues Sylvia Walby (1990) discusses in what I consider to be a lucid and enlightened manner. I question, as does Sylvia Walby and at least one interviewee whether admitting women to the priesthood (or ordination) in any way progresses the cause of women in the church. Does it lead to an advancement for women, or does it, in fact, contribute to the continued second class citizenry of women within the Christian church? These are important issues for women who chose to stay within the Christian church.

The women interviewed in this study are all well educated, not only in a traditional academic

sense, but also in feminist thinking and in Christian feminist thinking. They indicate that they are aware of these types of issues and this leads further into the debate of whether or how they resolve the conflicts presented to their feminism by their Christianity. Part of the exploration of the ways they participate in church life centres around the way they view their actions.

Feminist thinking is not one but many and yet strands of feminist thought can be brought together in a general sense in order to bring a particular perspective. In this chapter I have outlined what those main streams of feminist thought are and have applied these theories to a critique of religion, giving examples of how each might operate. I have presented a number of very different critiques of religion from feminist perspectives. These are important because they indicate the variety of feminist responses to the problem of Christianity.

In the next chapters I will examine the lives of a number of feminist Christians through oral history (via interview). What they say in these interviews will be viewed in the light of the theory that has been covered in these first three chapters. In this way the interviews can be interpreted against the vast body of feminist and sociological understandings that form our body of current knowledge. This will make the interviews more meaningful and will provide more insight into not only how feminist Christians negotiate the dissonance between the two camps they each have one foot firmly planted in, but why they chose to do so at all.

## CHAPTER FOUR - THE INTERVIEW METHODOLOGY

This thesis now moves into its second section. Having outlined current theorising in the areas of feminism, sociology and the sociology of religion, I now undertake a series of interviews designed to complement the textual study. These interviews are with feminist Christians. In the interviews they talk about how they define both feminism and Christianity, whether they experience any conflict between the two, and how they resolve or negotiate any difficulties in both the practice of their feminism and/or their Christianity.

As a feminist researcher I bring a particular approach to the process of both interviewing and analysing interview material. It is important before proceeding to the interviews themselves to outline how I design a research procedure that will give practical force to the proposal to explicate the social relations implicit in the organisation of women's everyday lives" (Smith, 1987:181). I want to "construct a textual analysis that will instruct (my) everyday knowledge of how the world works" (Smith, 1987:182).

### INTRODUCTION TO FEMINIST RESEARCH METHODOLOGY - ISSUES

The basic critique of feminism is based on the **differences** in society between men and women. "Feminism argues, indeed is founded upon, the view that women are different from men" (Stanley, 1992:241). In particular, feminism looks at the inequalities between men and women, seeking not only to explain why this is so but to change *what is* into what feminists

believe to be *what should be*. This is done typically through a study of both individual agency or choice and social structures as they function to create and sustain gender difference in society. Conventional values usually assume a unified gender category 'women', a "stable and unified notion". This "way of looking a society intersects with stratified notions of class, gender and ethnicity that assume fixed, stable, universal categories" (Wearing, 1996:3). In approaching the feminist research method, it is necessary here to review the influence not only of traditional feminist and sociological views of categories such as gender (as outlined) but to acknowledge and examine the contribution to the argument<sup>that</sup> has been made by post- structuralist thinking, for post-structuralism attempts to deconstruct these linguistic categories and this way of thinking, seeing identity and subjectivity as fluid and changing. Feminist poststructuralists such as Helene Cixous (Tong, 1989:223) have described what they see as a paradigm shift occurring in feminist thought in the last two decades. This thought challenges universalising and generalising, and must be borne in mind when developing and refining a feminist method of research and theorizing. For example, the ways in which women live with considerable dissonance around personal beliefs and practices can be insightfully explored through post-structuralist perspectives which focus on contradictions and the effect of shifting meanings within dominant ideas.

Part of this critique is also to challenge traditional notions of gender itself. Jan Cameron (a feminist sociologist) makes the case for the artificiality of the imposition of one of two gender categories on any individual in her review of gender verification for female athletes. She states "the male/female distinction is also political (that is, it is embedded in power relationships)... and

it is based on an assumption that women do not perform as well as men” (Cameron, 1993:21).

Jane Gilbert identifies sexual difference “not as some kind of essential feature of the bodies of human beings, but as something which is both produced from and which contributes to the ‘political unconscious’ of dominant cultural discourses” (Gilbert, 1994:1). And others question the division into two and only two gender categories. Are there, in fact, only two sexes they ask? Some argue for five, or twenty five, moving away from our commitment as western thinkers to the idea of only two sexes, seeing this as a system of binary oppositionals that is maintained due to the interests of the state and the legal system. Anne Fausto-Sterling argues there are, in fact, “biologically speaking, ...many gradations running from female to male, and depending on how one calls the shots, one can argue that along the spectrum lie at least five sexes” (Fausto-Sterling, 1993:21). What are the implications for feminist research of this challenge to the biological basis of sex in our society, and, indeed, to notions of categories of any type which we use to identify ourselves, if they are no longer seen as coherent and stable?

Feminist theorising has also been challenged, particularly in the last twenty years, about its tardiness to recognise the variety of specific **differences among** women. This has derived from influential feminist voices amongst lesbians, working class women and women of colour. Black feminists such as bell hooks have pointed out the difference between white feminists and black feminists in America. Historically, she states, white feminists have continued to hold racist views and supported racism in America. In most modern, American feminist writing, she argues, “the white woman’s experience is made synonymous with the American woman’s experience. It is fundamentally racist for books to be published that focus solely on the

American white woman's experience in which that experience is assumed to be *the* American woman's experience" (hooks, 1981 :291). This is what Liz Stanley has describes as "black feminists speaking to the white centrism and chauvinism of supposedly 'universal' feminist theorising" (Stanley, 1992:241). Similarly, lesbian voices have been raised in the same argument.

Having identified differences that exist between women in feminism we then face what Linda Alcoff has describes as "the problem of speaking for others" (Alcoff, 1991). She argues that feminist recognition of this problem arises from two sources. Firstly, she states, "where one speaks from affects the meaning and truth of what one says, and thus one cannot assume an ability to transcend one's location," and, secondly, "involves a recognition that, not only is location epistemically salient, but certain privileged locations are discursively dangerous" (Alcoff, 1991:7). In particular, she is pointing out here the danger of those in privileged positions speaking for those who are in less privileged - the very thing bell hooks warned of. Alcoff argues that the practice of the less privileged **being spoken for** can lead to continued and increased oppression for the less privileged being spoken about.

## **THE NEED TO CATEGORISE?**

For feminists carrying out social science research, questions have persisted for some years in feminism about the need to categorise identity position, perspectives and strategies. A feminist researcher acknowledges her engagement in the activity of social science research. In

particular, she recognises that she is present in the interview situation in a way not traditionally acknowledged by male-stream science. To acknowledge her presence it has been deemed requisite to describe her presence in order to attempt to gauge her influence. This has proven difficult. The question must be asked here, as I proceed into interviewing, who am I and how do I affect what is about to happen? For there is no doubt that what is about to take place would not be taking place without me. The women I speak to, the things they say, the analyses and interpretations I give to what they say and how they say it, would not have said/thought/been recorded without my energy and activity. I am the catalyst. I am making this research/ thesis/ interview happen. As such I am becoming part of their lives and experience, as they are becoming part of mine. It is the interaction between these women and myself that is the basis of this study. It is what they say to me, and what I ask/say to them that is providing the 'stuff' of this work. As such, I am as much a part of this research as they are.

One way to attempt to understand the part I play in this interaction/process is to attempt to describe myself to you, and let us both think about how the person I have described as me will and has affected the process. The problem lies, however, in how I describe myself to you. And, indeed, in how I describe myself to myself. The problem is *how* and *how much* and *when to stop*.

“What is a literary critic, a black woman critic, a black feminist literary critic? The adjectives mount up, defining, qualifying, the activity. How does one distinguish them? The need to articulate a theory, to categorise the activities is a good part of the activity itself to the point

where I wonder how we ever get around to doing anything else” (Christian , 1985:x).

## **FEMINIST RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES - MY APPROACH**

Feminist praxis, the practice of feminism, creates interesting and challenging questions in the field of social science research. For the feminist researcher, such as myself, how to carry one’s feminism into practice in the field of social science research is particularly problematic due to the androcentric bias present in many current and past social science research practices. By this I am referring to an epistemology of rationality, a ‘science’ of objectivity, and a myth of interviewer detachment. As Stanley has described, the empirical approach present in much social science research is not adequate for the feminist researcher. “Feminism dispute(s) ‘the evidence’, ‘the facts’ and ‘technical expertise’ and by doing so denied the positivist insistence that only one reality exists” (Stanley, 1983:9). For the feminist, importance is placed upon knowledge that is felt and believed. That is, “experientially-based knowledge” (Stanley, 1983:10).

This approach leads to an acceptance of a multiplicity of experience and thus many realities of experientially based knowledge. Bearing this in mind, I approach this exploration of feminism and Christianity in terms of setting out to understand the differing experience and thus ‘truths’ of each of my interviewees. I also bear in mind my own experience and my own knowledge based upon this experience. This acknowledgment of the place of experience in formation of knowledge needs to be contextualised in what Ann Oakley has described as a social science

setting in which women's experience is ignored. (Oakley, 1980) This has led to a misrepresentation of women in social science research and has been described by Liz Stanley as a "distortion" (Stanley, 1983:15). In particular, a feminist critique identifies this distortion as acting within a system of binary oppositionals in which woman is treated as 'other'. That is, woman is 'other' than man. This type of practice attempts to generalise the experience of men to the experience of a population as a whole. It also contributes to stereotypic representations of women that do not represent the actual experience of women. This has been described by Chetwynd as being able to be corrected "by simple attention to the fact" (Chetwynd, 1975:5). That is, when researching women a researcher needs to look at what it is that the women they are researching actually experience rather than "assum(ing) that all female experience is at the other end of a bi-polar scale from that of males" (Stanley, 1983:15). Implicit in this type of androcentric approach that has passed for 'science' in the past is the attribution of differential power to male-ness when compared with female-ness in any analysis. That is, not only is the female 'other' than male, but the male is the yardstick by which all is measured. As Dale Spender has described "within the dogma of science it would seem that reason, objectivity, reality - and male - occupy high status positions" (Spender, 1978:4). Part of a feminist research methodology is to "question all established ways of thinking regarding the notion of objectivity and the wider use of dichotomous categories" (Stanley, 1983:30).

An implication of this type of critique, as Liz Stanley points out, is that research on women should be carried out by women. "We see an emphasis on research by women as absolutely fundamental to feminist research" (Stanley, 1983:18). She argues further that this is because

only women possess a “feminist consciousness”. This approach to research is the one I have followed here.

For the feminist interviewer carrying out social science research, she is ‘in’ the interview and is as present as the interviewee. She resists the temptation to turn her interviewee into an object but retains her as a subject (Smith, 1987:151). This chapter explores the way feminist practice, in particular my feminist practice, translates feminist epistemology into feminist methodology, with particular reference to the method used in this piece of research - use of oral history via interview.

### **THE MYTH OF ‘TRUTH’**

Is there a ‘truth’? Are there many ‘truths’? Or are there only lies?

“In speaking of lies  
we come inevitably  
to the subject of truth.  
There is nothing simple  
or easy about this idea.  
There is no ‘the truth’  
‘A truth’ -  
truth is not one thing

or even a system  
It is an increasing  
complexity.  
The pattern of the carpet  
is the surface  
When we look closely  
or when we become weavers,  
we learn of the tiny multiple threads  
unseen in the overall  
pattern, the knots on the  
underside of the carpet”

(Rich, 1979:187)

Liz Stanley describes herself as being interested in lies. “My concern is with the threads and knots beneath that is the equally patterned lie” (Stanley, 1992:32). In a feminist analysis what are believed to be ‘truths’ and ‘lies’ are equally relevant, for there is neither one nor the other, but only something that lies somewhere between the two. It is, as Stanley describes, a “greater complexity of multiple truths”. For a feminist researcher, what we have learned to call ‘truth’ is often no more than a reflection of the dominant cultural paradigm. For example, the way we see ourselves as women is, in my view, significantly culturally created. To say, therefore, that I am gentle and kind and a good mother may in fact be to say that I accept the cultural ideal of womanhood and motherhood. It is no more the truth than that I am angry and radical, and no

less.

The question of truth is a vexing one. I do not embark upon my interviews hoping to find 'the truth' about Christian beliefs and practices. I believe no such thing as absolute truth exists. What I am doing, however, is recording some women's version of their truths at this particular point in time. As well, I am seeing their 'truths' through the eyes of my 'truths', lenses which filter what I see and hear and place it in the context of my experience and understanding at this point in time in my life. Why bother at all? Because the 'truth' or not does not matter. What I am recording and studying are some women's realities as they exist for them. That is their 'truth.' As a feminist researcher, that is enough. I accept the artificiality and androcentrism of the science of truth as being irrelevant to me as a feminist researcher.

There are aspects/contexts/truths of/about the women I interview that are not immediately apparent in a preliminary review of the interview itself. That is, the unconscious. Interviewing these women is an exploration of their unconscious minds as well as mine. To fail to acknowledge these processes would be to de-contextualise the interviews, and to fail to fully understand the process of interviewing itself.

As part of acknowledging my presence in the interview, I need to critically examine my interpretation of what is going on. This influences what further questions I ask, and how I ask them. It is also important to recognise that a process of filtering and labeling is going on in my mind as I interview and as I analyse the interview transcripts. As Susan Grogan has expressed

it in her work in the area of biography, “the overall patterns that I am imposing in (a person’s) life here is, of course, as subjective as any other. It would be utterly misleading to suggest that what I am doing is allowing (a person) to speak for themselves. This is my selection of themes and labels; my organisation of them; my attribution of significance to them” (Grogan, 1994:109). It is important that my analysis of the interviews involve some element of reflexivity with regard to my choices of themes to be explored and my approach to the organisation and analysis of the interview material - the texts. Grogan’s pointing out of the role of my subjectivity demands this.

### **THE INTERVIEW - ISSUES**

The interviewing has been described as “a very complex social encounter (that) lies at the heart of much research work in the social sciences” (Ribbens, 1989:579). What actually happens in interviews has been the subject of much discussion, particularly within feminism. Ann Oakley, for example, has described interviewing women as “a contradiction in terms” (Oakley, 1981). Linda Measor (1985) has described them as “unnatural”. Ribbens herself conceded “there are no easy answers to the position we take within the complex social encounters we call research”. She goes on, however, to argue that the issues that arise within the interview situation are important, and we must be both aware of and trying to come to grips with them. “All we can attempt,” she states, “is to face up to some of the paradoxes as honestly and explicitly as we can” (Ribbens, 1989:591).

One of the foremost issues, in my view, is the issue of **power** in the interview. It is unacceptable to the feminist researcher to deny that the interview situation creates an event in which there exists unequal distribution of power. Whilst I might try to minimise this power differential, I cannot erase it. I must carry out my interview knowing that it exists and taking responsibility for it. Sue Wise expresses this view succinctly when she states “we must acknowledge power where it exists and learn to deal with it wisely as feminists” (Wise, 1987:84). Further, the feminist researcher works within a framework of rejection of both traditional definitions of “objectivity” in which issues of ownership of information are dealt with. Sharing of information leads to sharing of power. It also recognises that “the researched have the power and knowledge which researchers need” (Stanley, 1983:19). This is a turning of the tables, for in a feminist approach to social science research the power has moved from the researcher who designs and drives the research project to the researched, those whose information, knowledge and experience are sought by the researcher. I have attempted in this research to take cognisance of this fact, as, indeed, every feminist involved in research must. In this paradigm, I seek their knowledge. It is they who have the power to define meanings and explain their lives in every real sense.

The issues that present themselves whilst becoming involved in feminist research as an interviewer relate not only to issues of power and control, but to listening and talking, involvement and motivation. I acknowledge, however, that the power differential is the most insistent issue to be addressed, and the most difficult to deal with creatively, caringly and responsibly. The power imbalance manifests itself in both the questions asked and the way they

are answered, in both the level of involvement of the interviewer and that of the interviewee, in the form of the interview and its character. In short, I wholeheartedly agree with Jane Ribbens when she states that, whatever we do in our interviews, the research will inevitably have “our thumbprint” all over it (Ribbens, 1989:591).

One way to attempt to decrease the power differential is for the interviewer to expose themselves in a genuinely reciprocal way as the interviewee, as suggested by Ann Oakley. “Personal involvement,” she states, “is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives” (Oakley, 1981:58). In order to be personally involved as a feminist interviewer, I am of the view that it is necessary for me, the interviewer, to be willing to “take the same risks of self-exposure as we are asking the interviewee to do” (Ribbens, 1989:584). I need to do this, however, without turning the interview into an examination of myself. I am firmly of the view that the interviewee should leave as much psychic ‘space’ as possible in order to let the interviewee fill it. This balance between being willing to self-expose and leaving yourself on the periphery of the interview is a difficult one to negotiate.

In past interviews, I have dealt with this issue by turning off the tape recorded at the end of the interviewee’s part of the interview and then inviting the interviewee to ask any questions of me that they might wish to. This is one approach, and one that has worked successfully for me. It does, however, leave the problem remaining of how much, and how, the interviewer should inject herself into the main interview experience while it is being recorded. Should the

interviewer state her views, show her reactions, agree or disagree: in other words, be fully present and interactive? Or should the interviewer be present only in that she facilitates the flow of information from the interviewee? There are advantages and disadvantages in both approaches. In my research, I have tended to be present in the interview but keep in mind at all times that the interview is not about me. That is, I have attempted to maintain the primary focus of the interview on the interviewee, leaving them as much of the interview space as possible. In doing this, I am not declining to be present, nor am I unwilling to self-expose. I am facilitating the interviewees discourse and response by moderating my own. I recognise that any input I might have at this stage may influence what the interviewee has to say. For example, if I were to express strong disapproval of Catholic nuns, the interviewee might then decide not to disclose that she spent a period of time herself in an order of Catholic nuns. Or, by encouraging an interviewee with outright approval of a certain group or person, I might influence the interviewee to emphasis the positive aspects of that same group or person. I do not think this is my role. By making myself available at the end of the recorded session to answer questions outside of the interview space, I believe I am removing the power differential in some way. I recognise that risking self-exposure after the interviewee has done so is not ideal, but it seems to me to be the best practice in view of the limitations of time within the interview space such as I am working with here in trying to keep the interview within 60 minutes.

## THE ISSUE OF FRIENDSHIP

Feminist praxis is concerned with women and their lives - social, political, sexual, spiritual and emotional. As a feminist, I am active in feminist groups and circles in Wellington. I am about to interview feminists in Wellington, and it is unlikely that, through some source of another, our lives are not connected in some way. It is possible that we might discover mutual friends, or have even been friends in the past. I am aware as a feminist researcher that issues of friendship in interviewing must be addressed. For this reason, I have chosen not to interview any women who I know personally very well, or could call my friend. Whilst realising the issues of friendship in interviewing are not insurmountable, I have chosen to avoid them in this research project.

That said, within the small circle of feminist women in Wellington, it is unlikely that any of the interviewees and myself are not connected in some way. That is, a friend of a friend, attended the same courses at university or conferences (unknown to each other at the time) etc. When I began this work I had a particular interview subject in mind. She was a friend of my partner's, but almost unknown to me. In the last six months, however, this woman has spent time in my home, baby-sat my son and stayed for a few days between flats. When the time came to commence interviewing, I felt that there was too much closeness between her and myself in that she knew my home, my son, my partner, although she and I had not become friends. I was uncomfortable at the prospect of interviewing her and told her I no longer felt she should be part of the study. The interview situation was not one in which I felt I could take myself

without feeling uneasy about the boundaries between her and myself. For me, as a feminist researcher, interviewing this woman felt unethical. I am not saying that the issues of interviewing this subject could not be overcome. It was simply that I did not want the possible complications. Would she, I had to ask myself, say things in the interview to try to please or impress me because she is friends with my partner? Would she be thinking about what I would tell my partner about the interview, and would that make her feel she wanted to try to look good? I also had to grapple with my own ethical issues. I felt she knew too much about me to be an interview subject. She had always been friendly to me, and I felt that if I interviewed her she might want to try to appear as a certain type of person in order to create an impression with me.

For all of these reasons, I switched interview candidates at the last minute - a week before I began interviewing. I now have to cope with her disappointment. This has highlighted to me the interconnections between our lives as feminists living in a community in which most women are known (by one or two degrees of separation) to each other. I have drawn the line at my personal comfort and ethical zones, deciding how close is too close.

### **THE FEMINIST EAR - LISTENING**

A feminist researcher listens in a particular way in the interview situation. Because I am a feminist interviewing another feminist, we have a closeness of a type - almost a kinship. Therefore, I believe I listen more empathetically to my interviewee subject than would a non-

feminist interviewer to their subject. It is important here to discuss the type of listening in this situation, and the effects of this type of empathy.

What is empathetic listening? Ribbens has asked the following pertinent questions. "What is empathy? Does it mean we suspend judgement and endeavour to see things from the other person's point of view, or does it mean more than this, with an active emotional engagement with the interviewee? Are these two aspects inevitably intertwined anyway?" (Ribbens, 1989:586). Does empathy change what happens in the interview? Bingham and Moore (1959) ask whether empathy is a response, and if so, is it a projection. That is, what effect does an empathetic listener have on an interviewees response? And what effect does empathy have on the person being interviewed? As Ribbens (1989) has pointed out, expressions of empathy that occur in an interview situation are almost "unnatural" in that they are occurring between two people who do not know each other well (usually). Empathy in conversation may often be an expression of intimacy and concern. In the interview situation, as distinguished from "real life", the interviewer listens empathetically and then walks away with her tape in her hand. This empathy is an expression of caring that normally occurs within the context of a friendship. As she states "the subtle distinctions between listening with empathy and actually responding with care and concern, may be hard for the interviewee to appreciate, against her more general experience that listening implies caring" (Ribbens, 1989:586).

## **PARTICULARS OF THIS INTERVIEW PROCESS**

Three women were interviewed as part of this research project. These women self-identify as feminist Christians. They were asked about how/if they had resolved the conflict that their feminism presents their Christianity with. Each women was also asked to describe what the terms feminism and Christian mean to her, and how she practices her Christianity.

## **THE METHOD**

Each of the three women was provided with an information sheet about this project (attached in Appendix I) when they were contact by mail in an initial canvassing of interest. This letter of introduction (Appendix II) was followed up by a phone call from myself a week following the sending of the letter. In this phone call I requested an interview time with each respondent after initially ascertaining their interest in the project and willingness to participate. All three women I contacted indicated they were interested and willing to be interviewed.

## **THE INTERVIEWEES**

Interviewee prospects resulted from discussions had with someone who I knew to have been a feminist Christian and who was acquainted with a wide circle of feminist Christian women in Wellington. I decided to approach women who were not known to me personally as my desire was to approach each of these women without any preconceptions of what they might be

expected to say. Also, in keeping with my feminist methodological praxis, I used this approach in order to attempt to ensure there was no prior power dynamic of any kind existing between myself and the interview subjects.

As dealt with in the previous chapter, I approached the interviews with an informed feminist consciousness of the power inequality present in interview situations, and as a feminist I determined to deal with issues of power in interviewing by setting a level playing field. That is, I did not know the interviewees, and they did not know me. I accepted this as a satisfactory approach within my ethical and feminist methodological practice.

## **THE INTERVIEWS**

Each of the interviewees was asked the same five questions. These were

1. Describe what the term 'feminist' means to you
2. Describe what the term 'Christian' means to you
3. How do you practice your Christianity?
4. What conflicts exist for you, between your feminism and your Christianity?

5. How do you resolve this conflict (if you do)?

The interviews were undertaken in the homes of the interviewees or, in the case of M. at their place of work. The home interviews were conducted in the evening, and the work interview in the morning. The two interviews undertaken in the interviewees homes were both subject to interruption - such as telephone calls, and I bear this in mind when planning future interviews. Because the interview was taking place in the interviewees own home, I felt I had no right to insist on, or even ask for, an interruption free interview period. As it was both of the people involved's homes, they were clearly more in charge of the interview environment than I was, and this did have negative consequences. However, the reason I chose to interview in their own homes was to minimise the discomfort for the interviewees. The advantages, as I saw them, were that the interview would involve a minimum of disruption and inconvenience for the interviewee, and also, I expected, the interviewees would be more relaxed and open to being interviewed if they were in their own homes.

The interruptions we did experience, whilst meaning poor quality of audio recording in one case and a break in the interview of about 5 minutes in the second (I kept the tape recorder on), did not appear to alter the quality of the interviewees concentration on the interview. In the first case, where another person entered the interview room and then talked on the telephone within hearing range for 15 minutes, whilst causing anxiety on my part about audio recording quality, did not pose insurmountable difficulties in the transcription process and did not appear to

diminish the concentration and application of the interviewee. I can only speculate as to whether or not the interviewee modified what they had to say due to the presence of the other person in the interview space, but my observation is that it did not cause undue concern on the part of the interviewee, as she appeared not to lose her train of thought, nor did she change in any marked way either her tone nor the content of what she was saying. In the second case, where a telephone call meant a five minutes delay, the interviewee did not appear to experience any undue difficulty in getting back on track and continuing with the interview once I had prompted her as to what she had been saying prior to the telephone ringing. The discomfort appeared to be mine, and mine alone.

#### **THE POST INTERVIEW PERIOD**

It is of note that in all three interviews conversation on the topic of feminism and Christianity continued once the formal part of the interview had been completed and the audio recording equipment had been turned off. The conversations that followed tended to take a more personal tone, with interviewees asking me something about myself both in an academic and a personal sense. In one case, the post-interview conversation lasted almost twice as long as the interview itself, and was almost exclusively confined to the subject of feminism and Christianity.

I wished I could have reached over and turned the tape recorder back on!

This phenomenon, however, raises questions for me about the validity of the various texts involved. For example, is the recorded interview text more valid than the informal

conversation? If so, why? It is true that the recorded section of the interview was what I was able to take away and remains a permanent record of the interview. The post-interview comments I could only carry away in my head, and they are subject to the vagaries of my recollective processes. However, in one particular case I felt that what was said off the tape significantly added to what had been said on the tape, and I endeavoured to write down my recollections as soon as I could. Thus, I have added to the transcriptional texts two others - my recollections written down by me after the interview and the memories and impressions I carry in my head since the interviews took place. This also raises issues of levels of comfort that the three interviewees had at speaking while they knew they were being recorded. The post-interview period moved into a more personal mode. It was a time in which people and places were named, stronger language used to express feelings, questions asked of me with regard to my position and views.

In my view, as a feminist researcher, the post-interview period forms an integral and important part of the interview process. For this reason I have chosen to discuss them as part of the interview itself along with the taped portion. I do, however, hold in mind the fact that the interviewees have given permission only for the taped part of the interview to be used as part of this research. They have all viewed the transcript of their interview and had the opportunity to comment on it, to delete or amend, or to withdraw altogether should they wish. I therefore use with care my observations and recollections of the post-interview period. When using my recollections I do so clearly stating that they are just that.

## **WHO WERE THE INTERVIEWEES?**

S. is a woman in her forties who works in a government department. She had a Christian upbringing and, as a result of a radical conversion experience in her early twenties, has been involved in the Christian church, both Protestant and Catholic, ever since. She, at one time in her life, spent a number of years in a Catholic religious order. Currently she is involved with a Protestant church group. This group is both gay and feminist and is open to both males and females, with more males involved than women. The women are strongly feminist and the group operates along non-sexist lines in terms of both its use of inclusive language and its structure and running. The mainstream Christian denomination under whose auspices this group operate is one of the most inclusive of Protestant organisations and is currently strongly debating the ordination of gay men and women to their clergy.

N.S. is a religious person in a Catholic order. She has served within her order in a number of roles relating to justice and equity, and has been very active in terms of her advocacy of equality for women. Now in her late fifties, N.S. serves at an educational centre as a Chaplain and is well educated in terms of feminist theological issues. As part of an all-women order, N.S. has spent most of her adult life as part of a female-dominated institution within which members have experienced and exercised a degree of autonomy from the ruling 'fathers' of the Catholic church. She has taught at secondary school level for many years before retiring due to ill-health. She is a member of a Catholic women's group in which traditional practices are re-examined in a feminist light.

P. is a member of an alternative group associated with a mainstream Protestant church. The alternative group has been created by women and exists to better serve their needs in terms of spirituality. This group allows males at some of its meetings, whilst reserving a once monthly meeting for women only. Whilst males are allowed to attend some meetings, they are not encouraged in leadership roles but are encouraged to participate in the service activities.

## **SUMMARY**

Feminist research methods share certain characteristics. These differ from traditional social science and sociological research methods both in its approach and in the way it constructs the text that results from the inquiry. A feminist reconstruction of the research interview addresses issues of object and subjectivity, friendship and power, empathy and distance. As I approached these interviews I found myself thinking deeply about how to position myself with relation to the interview process. I am aware of the hugeness of 'self' in interview method, and have struggled with how to lessen the impact of me. I recognise that is simply is not possible to do so. Where does that leave me in terms of the integrity and cogence of the result? Right in the middle, like the hub of a wheel. It can be no other way. All I can do is acknowledge that it is so.

It is my hope that somehow the interview and analysis processes will transcend the hugeness of me and offer an insight into the lives of practising feminist Christians. (I am suddenly aware that even my use of the term feminist Christians reflects my importance on the word feminist

ahead of the word Christian.) A feminist researcher must believe it is possible to create a text that is not solely about our selves, or why would one bother?

This study does reflect my emphases, my strategies, my history, but I hope and believe it does more than that. Somehow, through the hugeness of me, I hope to see something of the lives of these three women. To do so creates new knowledge and this is the aim of research.

## **CHAPTER FIVE ANALYSES OF THE INTERVIEWS**

### **WHAT THE INTERVIEWEES SAID**

The comments made by each interviewee are discussed in this chapter. I then go on to analyse what the interviewee said in the context of the feminist theory, sociological theory and socio-feminist theory as outlined in the first three chapters of this thesis. I examine the comments made by the interviewees and compare and contrast this with theories about feminism and religion. I intend to see if what these interviewees say can be contextualised in previously discussed theoretical approaches or if they are saying anything new or different in terms of their feminist approaches to Christian belief and practice.

### **ABOUT FEMINISM**

The women's accounts of their views of feminism centred in appreciating and taking into account women's perspectives and views, a view that is different from the dominant male-centred paradigm. For each respondent feminism was about allowing the voices of the 'other' to be heard. They all identified the domination of the male and recognised that women are marginalised into the position of the 'other' in society.

S. describes her feminism as existing within a male-centred view of the world, one which fails to hear women's voices. Her feminism was about "looking at things from a women-

centred perspective”. S. described society as being one in which “so much of our written tradition is actually written from a male perspective, and so much of our legal system is written and interpreted from a male perspective, and so many of our social constructs have been dominated by a male perspective, and so on”. Feminism, for S., is about “see(ing) things consciously from a woman’s perspective,” an approach she acknowledges as being “quite hard at times”. In summarising her view of what feminism is to her S. states “for me it’s a way of trying to say this is a value that means a hell of a lot to me. It’s something to steer by”. Feminism is a guiding principle through which S. views and interprets the world she inhabits.

N.S. stated it thus: “Oh, my God, they’re calling me a feminist. And then, well, I thought, I don’t give a bugger, I am a feminist. If you mean I’m seeking equality for women, that’s right”. For N.S. feminism is about acknowledging and seeking to end the oppression of women that is a consequence of patriarchy. She described this need for freedom in the context of the ways men dominate women. For example, when the Order she is part of was formed in Ireland the setting of rules that determined how the sisterhood was to operate was done entirely by males. In describing the founder of the Order N.S. states “her freedoms were tempered. And she had to accept that or she could not do the works of mercy. They established restraints early in the piece”. This made women unequal because they could only act within guidelines set by the male church leaders. These were such rules as “no woman is to go out unaccompanied” and “you are to wear a distinctive uniform”. The sisterhood could only function while they “observed the dominion” of the men.

For N.S. feminism is about opposing this dominance. It is about ending what the male leaders believe to be their “God-given right to rule” but what she describes as being, in fact, the way men “protect their own positions” of power and leadership. She expresses her desire as a feminist to see women no longer treated as second class citizens but having a voice, what she calls “an influence”, in the life of the church and their own lives. When N.S. identifies the fact that male church leaders have taken their position of power in the church as god-given, she is touching on a point brought up by feminists such as Mary Daly and Carol Christ with regard to the power of a religion to establish hierarchies in society. For example, Daly states (1973:13) “the symbol of the Father God has made mechanisms for the oppression of women appear right and fitting”. Fiorenza (1984:xi,xii) says “the Bible still functions today as a religious justification and ideological legitimization of patriarchy”. N.S. identifies the power and effects of such a model with particular reference to her own religious Order. She is also, however, quick to point out that she sees this as a way for men to establish their own power and not God’s when she talks of men “protecting their own position.” Her views reflect a commonality with some feminist critiques of religion outlined in Chapter One, where Daly (1973:47) for example, states “the myth (of male superiority) takes on cosmic proportions since the male’s viewpoint is metamorphosed into God’s viewpoint”.

P. expressed a similar sentiment when she said “I see myself as a feminist. (That means) I want to make sure there is some equality, that women are truly free. That they have the chances, options and choices. That their stories are heard”. She identifies the importance of both language and images in a way the resonates with Carol Christ when she speaks of the role and

importance of the consciousness-raising groups of the 60s and 70s. Christ states “in consciousness-raising groups every women’s experience is heard” (1979:6).

Part of this process is, for P, to move away from images of God as male. “When it comes to things like the church, well, of course that means that we don’t talk about a God that is only male”. She echoes Ruether’s view of the importance of abandoning the male language of Christianity when Ruether (1985:4) states “(women) are starved for the words of life, for symbolic forms that fully and wholeheartedly affirm their personhood and speak truth about the evils of sexism and the possibilities of a future beyond patriarchy. She also echoes Christ’s (1979) view of the importance of abandoning the male imagery although she does not go on to endorse a replacement with goddess/female imagery as Christ does. Her emphasis on the need for women to be free and to have choices is one that reflects her view of her own life as being one in which she was unable to make the choices she wanted. She states later in the interview that she does not believe she will see the availability of choices for women that she would wish for come about in her lifetime. She thinks it is the next generation who will reap the benefit of the feminist reformist work taking place now.

P. is clear that feminist activity means ending the sexist language of the church. “So the way of actually changing society is, it seems, in the end, the only thing that really changes things is language. And if you change language, you make it non-sexist, that opens things out”. She describes her feminism as working to create alternative ways of being for women. P. describes the alternative group that she belongs to as one in which “we all share responsibility for

services, we each contribute in ways that suit us. We share and work together". In P.'s expression of feminism I see an emphasis on creating alternatives, both in language and the practice of Christianity in society. These actions are based in her view of the equality of women in both the church and society at large.

All three women were articulate and clear in their descriptions of what feminism meant to them. The ways they described feminism reflected feminist theoretical views in identifying patriarchy as existing in both society and Christian church practices. Of particular note is their emphasis on the active nature of feminism. Feminism propels them into action. This action is directed against patriarchal forces in place within traditional Church practice.

## **ABOUT CHRISTIANITY**

The women's descriptions of Christianity were fairly uniform. Their basic statements indicated that they separated out Christianity in general from the particular churches they were involved in. **Christianity** is seen as one thing (a set of beliefs) and the **Christian church** (the practice and organisation of believers) another.

S. stated that, for her, "Christianity is something that is centred in a belief that.. there is a divine presence in and of the universe". Christianity is something that she believes in. That is, she has faith in a God. She describes an experiential element to her faith when she talks of a "pretty radical conversion experience" that she had as a young adult. Mary Daly's comments

on Christianity are of interest here when she states “the Christian tradition is by no means bereft of elements which foster genuine experiences and intimations of transcendence. The problem is that their liberating potential is choked off in the surrounding atmosphere of the images, ideas, values and structures of patriarchy” (Daly, 1973:57). I contrast this with S.’s approach in which the transcendent experience she described has led her to continued involvement in Christian beliefs and practices rather than an abandonment of them. Daly’s recognition of this religious experience and her feminist reaction to it is an important and contrasting one. As long as Christianity is situated in patriarchy, Daly argues, these experiences and heritages cannot bring true liberation for women. S. sees this differently.

The description of S.’s personal experience of God is important. It is this personal, revelatory experience that Mary Daly identifies as holding women in bondage to patriarchy when she states “the divine patriarch castrates women as long as he is allowed to live on in the human imagination” (1973:19). It is the exorcism of this psychological imprisonment that Daly calls for, and yet it<sup>is</sup> this personal experience of God that Ruether (1985) identifies in her critique as being the essential truth that lies at the heart of Christian beliefs.

S. differentiates these aspects of her Christian practice from the Christian church as it appears in the world. She describes institutionalised Christianity as “a set of silly church rules”. This is in keeping with analyses such as that of Rosemary Radford Ruether who has described these two groups (the institutional church and the community of believers) and the tension that exists between them. “The church as spirit-filled community thus believes itself called into an exodus

from the established social order” (1985: 22). S. in her use of “silly rules” is indicating this same tension. Just as Ruether separates out the believers in a church community from the organizational church structure, S. talks of her own belief and the validity of her Christian experience and contrasts this with a church organisation she describes as “silly”.

N.S. continually stated in her interview that she “just knew” what was right. “I just have a sense that there is a god,” she said. And again when discussing whether Christianity can ever come out of patriarchy she states “my faith says yes”. Thus we can see she has a personal belief system that guides her in her journey. She is clear that her Christian beliefs mean personal freedom and dignity, whilst the Christian church “has been captured by maleness. It has been interpreted by maleness, written by maleness”. She differentiates between the “structural church” and what her personal Christian faith tells her. “I think,” she goes on to state, “that we need to fight our way out of the morass of patriarchy”. She describes her personal faith as being put under some considerable strain by the maleness of the traditional Christian church structure. However, she expressed the view that faith is the stronger of the two. Her faith leads her to believe she will eventually see patriarchy removed from the structure of the Christian church. Again, this reflects the tension between the true church of believers and the structure of the church organisation described by Ruether (1985).

P. describes Christianity in terms of how she feels, particularly with regard to the notion of community. That is, in terms of her feelings of “personal empowerment, of empowering each other, the feeling of having a common goal, of working together”. She did not speak of

personal faith but she does describe being “drawn back” to the church as she tried to find a community for herself. She makes few references to personal faith in God apart from stating that she felt “God is in us and between us” when praying as a group. She describes herself as being in the process of “separating off... the accumulation of two thousand years of male theology” that is church practice as it exists today. For the third time we have a description of the tension between personal belief in god and conflict with how the church organisation operates and the practices it employs.

### **ABOUT PATRIARCHY**

Each of the respondents clearly identified the Christian church as patriarchal. They were unequivocal in their analysis. Their perception of privilege based on gender was clear. They all identified patriarchy as existing within the Christian church and named it as such. Their use of the word patriarchy situated them within a feminist framework.

N.S. in her interview stated that sexism has been called “sin” by her church, an acknowledgment that patriarchal forces have created a second class of citizen within the church - women. She also states that her church is “flawed” in this regard. N.S. criticises her church’s statements that it is not responsible for patriarchy thus: “The church defends itself and says its not responsible for patriarchy, but it sure as hell embraced it”. This statement indicates that she thinks the embracing of or expression of patriarchal values is as much of a wrong as a male-centred form of organisation and governance. P. states “I don’t think anybody argues about

it - we live in a society which is patriarchal. And that our church reflects that.” S. states that the church she has been associated with is “still run by the boys”.

Each recounted tales of how the patriarchy of church practices had made itself present in their lives and experiences. N.S. tells of feeling anger that was “white hot” about the inequality of women in the church. P. tells of the anger she feels at the use of sexist language in her church. “There was a point when I actually felt that one Sunday I’m going to stand on the pews and scream”. S. recounts her railing against the patriarchy of the church thus “I get quite distressed when I come up against... the put down of women.. In the church”.

None of the interviewees attempted to do more than identify patriarchy as a powerful oppressor of women. When discussing their own church involvements (each of the three belongs to a different group) they were clear about the presence and power of patriarchy.

## **INTERVIEW RESPONSES IN THE CONTEXT OF FEMINIST SOCIAL THEORY**

In Chapter Three I outlined feminist social theories, pointing out both the diversity and commonality of opinion. The key aspect, as I discussed it, in all feminist theory, is the identification of a social structure in which a patriarchal set of relations exist to systematically disadvantage women. Whether a feminist theory explains this in terms of an economic model or a psychoanalytic model by explaining how oppressive relations arise in a combination of factors like race, gender or class, there is basic agreement about the existence of patriarchal

relations in which women are disadvantaged in terms of their imaginable and achievable position in society when compared with men.

Each of the interviewees analysed their church and their particular church sub-group in terms of gender and power relations. For example, S. spoke of the importance in her group of establishing the use of non-sexist (or inclusive) language. N.S. spoke of belonging to a church in which men have power and work to protect it. P. spoke of the need to continue to develop a theology which is free from the traditional androcentric bias of the church fathers.

Each of the interviewees clearly identified themselves as feminist. Their analyses placed them within a feminist framework. They all also demonstrated another important aspect of feminism, their attempts to change their respective situations. This is what previously discussed definitions of feminism also point to. For example, Tong (1989:1) writes of feminism as “not one, but many, theories or perspectives and that each feminist theory or perspective attempts to describe women’s oppression, to explain its causes and consequences, and to prescribe strategies for women’s liberation”.

## **HOW THE INTERVIEWEES RESOLVED THEIR CONFLICT**

The interviewees were asked directly how they resolved any of the conflicts that were present for them in terms of their feminist perspectives and their Christian belief and practice. All interviewees identified areas where such conflicts were present. I have summarised below how

they described ways in which they dealt with such conflict. I have also outlined and summarised what each interviewee said about not being able to (or not feeling they had to) resolve conflict.

P. describes a process of being “quite selective” in what she participates in at her church and what she stays away from. She also describes the journey she is on as trying to find a replacement for those aspects of her Christian beliefs that make her unhappy or she disagrees with. This is, as she describes it, a momentous task. Her journey is one of trying to re-create and rebuild Christianity by re-examining the androcentric theology she has received as the Christian tradition and re-writing it into “theology” (Goldenberg, 1995). It is a process that she describes herself as still working through. There are some aspects of the Christian church that she has rejected outright, such as continuing to use the sexist language of hymns and prayers, by refusing communion at times when she doesn’t feel comfortable about it and by putting her time and energy into a women-centred group that still adheres to many Christian principles and ethics. What she is doing is what Ruether (1985) has described as “a process of renewal within the context of Christianity”.

N.S. describes her journey as one of activity against sexism in the church. That is, her feminism has propelled her into action for the benefit of women in the church, that they might see themselves and be seen as equal to men. Her reforming activities have occupied much of her life as a religious person. N.S. has a sense of values which tell her that women are equal and deserve dignity of being treated equally. She transforms these values into action towards

ending the sexism of her Christian church. For N.S. there is no conflict between her Christian beliefs and her feminism. In fact, for N.S. “to be Christian is to be a feminist”. She bases this view on her personal knowledge of who and what God is and her interpretation of the Bible. There is no conflict between Christianity and feminism, rather both of these have propelled her in her life to work towards the justice of a fair and equal society. She was clear in her expression of the differentiation between Christianity (belief in and knowledge of God) and the Christian Church which is “flawed” and corrupted by men. This is articulated in her statements firstly that “I hope Christianity can bring us greater understanding of Jesus and his statement that we are all free. We are to lead a full life, and free” and secondly in her comments that the church has been “captured by a lot of male... it has been interpreted by maleness, written by maleness. All our commentaries are male, and I think we need to fight our way out of a morass of patriarchy”.

It is this clear separation of the two things - the truth and freedom to live lives of dignity in Christian belief and the view that the church has been corrupted by maleness - that allows N.S. to live her Christianity without conflict. It does however, in her own words, demand a huge amount of faith. “The church incorporated patriarchy into its own bedrock, and I think we have to fight our way out of that. It puts you in a tenuous situation. You’re on the fringes looking in at a church which is tainted by a huge sin. And you look at the structural church which is prepared to hold onto the support props. That actually demands huge faith. Will we eventually turn it around? My faith says yes”. The implications of it not being so are immense as she has spent her adult life as part of a religious Order of the Catholic church. I see that she

needs to go on believing that change can happen. It is the strength of her faith and that of other women that she believes will bring about the change she sees as needing to happen. She believes that “we will produce a church that says both men and women were made in the likeness of God”. There is no inner conflict in N.S. Her God is not sexist. It is her church that is. And her church can be changed.

N.S. describes how she has held hopes for a church free of male dominance and has had these hopes dashed in the past. She does, however, present as a woman full of hope, vitality and optimism.

S. also expressed views of this type. “Actually,” she stated, “I don’t see a conflict between my feminism and my Christianity. I just see that as a set of silly church rules”. Here again we see the separation of Christian beliefs (which are not sexist) and the church, which is. S. goes on to describe the conflict, for her, as being between “Christian church doing and thinking” and what she understands the core truths of Christianity to be. “I don’t know that my argument is with Christianity,” she states. “I think my argument is with the way tradition is expressing Christianity”. Again a reference to the interpretation of the pure and non-sexist truths of Christianity by the tainted view of men. S. illustrates her view by talking about Christianity as being like a river, with parts running above ground and parts flowing underground. As she describes it, much of traditional Christian practice is like a dry river bed - “dry and life-killing, destructive” - when “at the same time there’s this absolutely marvellous underground stream flowing, with everything from people living radical adventures of crossed boundaries to people

going for the radical inner adventures of exploring”. This echoes the words of Ruether, who states “women in contemporary churches are suffering from linguistic deprivation and eucharistic famine. They are starved for the words of life, for symbolic forms that fully and wholeheartedly affirm their personhood and speak truth about the evils of sexism and the possibilities of a future beyond patriarchy” (Ruether, 1985:4).

Because she separates Christianity from the church, S. is able to “walk around” issues that bother her as a feminist and as a Christian. She admits at being at war with the Christian church but does not always fight on every issue. She does, however, “pick (her) battles”. S. is active in trying to right at least some of the wrongs she sees as present in the Christian church and her motivation for doing this is that she believes the Christian church to have wrongly interpreted what Christianity is. This is very similar to N.S.’s views. S., through her involvement in an alternative Christian group, is “doing a minimum reform job”. That is, she is trying to change the structure of her Christian church and the way it interprets Christianity. It is important to her to continue to do this type of reform, although she admits that she is tired of working so hard and seeing little change. She expressed the view that she is no longer prepared to “put her head on a concrete slab” and get battered. She understands that she needs to take care that she survives. In summary, S. resolves the conflicts by attempting to reform Christianity in areas where she sees it as failing to express the true nature of Christianity, a knowledge that she has gained from her personal faith in God and Jesus. She, like Eleanor McLaughlin (1979:93) believes that “Christian beliefs can bring emancipation and equality”.

## ON NOT RESOLVING THE CONFLICT

P. accepted the existence of a conflict at the core of Christianity and accepted that she was going to continue to feel that conflict. Her reasons for staying in the church and trying to work for reform were quite simple - she does not see any viable alternative.

P. talked about being unable to leave behind her Christian beliefs and the church because it had been so much a part of her life in formative years. "Like they say," she said, "get a child 'til he's seven and you've got him for life. Well, I started Sunday School when I was four, so I'm hooked for life". For P. the influence and affect of Christianity as part of her cultural experience during her formative years was something that would continue its hold on her throughout her life. Now in her fifties, P. is still involved with the Presbyterian Church and is a participant/organiser of an alternative feminist group with a Christian theme. She accepts herself as being part of the Christian church and calls herself a Christian. When describing what Christianity means to her P. makes reference to her childhood experiences of church. "What seems to be special that I remember from my childhood," she states in her interview, "is the notion of community". In spite of the patriarchal nature of the Christian church P. still finds it still meets her needs in terms of having a community. She describes the practice of her Christianity as belonging to a group where "we work and share together. Part of the process is actually being part of a community of women".

The main reason P. is still involved with the Presbyterian church is her view that there is no

viable alternative for her. Open to the problems inherent in the structure and practice of traditional Christianity in her church, she argues “there is real difficulty in getting rid of a whole lot of stuff in terms of what to replace it with. You can walk away from the church, but what replaces it?” She is in conflict about her Christian beliefs and her feminism and is trying to find a way through it for herself. She has not abandoned the Presbyterian church nor her Christian beliefs and practices because she feels there is no adequate replacement for them. She does see change happening within Christian theology but not in time to benefit her in her lifetime. “It would be nice to actually be there in another 50 or a hundred years,” she said. She sees herself as being at the beginning of a period of change but so embedded in Christian culture as to be unable, herself, to live outside of that framework. I understood her talk of “the next 50 to a hundred years” as referring to those generations who were brought up outside of traditional patriarchal Christian organisational church practices and beliefs, and therefore being able to find and create alternatives that found acceptance within themselves. She acknowledges that this is not possible for her, or she does not believe it to be.

S. acknowledged that she is unable to resolve much of the conflict between her personal view of what Christianity is and what she sees expressed in her church. Although she has put an enormous amount of effort over many years into changing what she perceives to be wrong and harmful in the structure and practice of churches (Catholic and Protestant) she acknowledges that there are times when the conflict is too big and too strong to be changed by her efforts. In these cases she just lives with it although it continues to irk her. “I get quite distressed when I am up against some of the.. Put down of women, in quite subtle ways, in the church. I’ve

done a lot of work... with the issue of women and the church”.

S. was also quite clear that some parts of traditional Christian practice were perfectly acceptable to her, while some parts of the tradition are abhorrent. As she stated “the language of the Nicene Creed I find quite problematic, but on the other hand I can read scripture pretty happily. I still read a lot that resonates for me”. There is clear conflict for S. between what she finds nourishing and life-giving (which she finds in her alternative Christian group and through her own reading and reflection and contacts with others) and what she describes as being “destructive” in her traditional Christian church. She is able to differentiate between the two and accepts that much of the “destructive” side of the church practice is what many people find when they go through a church door anywhere in New Zealand.

S. describes her personal Christian experience, from the very first, as being one in which she has continued to challenge what has been presented to her as being of God. “I’ve been a challenger from way back” she says. “I’ve never taken anything at face value”. In particular, she describes her conflict over the question of the ordination of women. “I had a real conflict sown in me quickly,” she states, “about whether as a woman I should be ordained”. She also identifies issues relating to sexuality as being particularly problematic for her. Conflict of this type seems to have propelled S. into changing churches she has been involved in. Perhaps this has been an attempt to find a church she could attend - a church that presented less conflict for her than the ones she had been involved with, a church in which she was able to feel more congruent.

One way of coping when issues cause conflict is for S. to “kind of walk around the issue”. That is, she doesn’t always confront head on. As she describes it, she “lives with the tension.” For S., this is an alternative. She finds herself “able to live with ambiguity”. So, even though some issues continue to cause her distress, she copes by “not putting myself through too much”. That is, she backs away from conflict, choosing not to fight battles that she does not think are winnable at this time, or battles that she does not have the energy to fight. She states that it is not essential for her to live a conflict-free existence. “I don’t have to have everything neatly packaged up,” she says.

### **...ON WHY THEY ARE STILL INVOLVED IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH**

As outlined earlier, these three women demonstrated a clear feminist critique of the patriarchal nature of the traditional Christian church practice and beliefs. All three women are involved with alternative-type groups within an established denominational Christian church framework. One, at least, still attends the main denominational services of her church at least once a month. Why do they continue to be involved?

For P. the answer to this question was clearly articulated in her discussion of the power of formative influences in childhood. “Like they say,” she said in her interview, “get a child til he’s seven and you’ve got him for life. Well, I started Sunday School when I was four, so I’m hooked for life”. For P. the need to be involved with the Presbyterian church is a deeply felt and long-standing one. Although she did leave this church for some years earlier in her life,

she recounts the story of her coming back as she searched for a sense of community that would meet these deep needs. It is the alternative group, however, that P. spoke of with most enthusiasm and interest. She spoke of being able to contribute in this group in ways that felt right for her, of being able to be part of the organisation and ritual practice of the group when and how she wished to. P. also spoke with warmth of the sharing of responsibility that occurs within this group, and she was most enthusiastic about the monthly meetings of this group over dinner. These meetings are restricted to women, whilst the regular monthly ritual meeting is open to all.

With reference to her continued attendance at least monthly at the main service of the Presbyterian church from which the alternative group springs, she expressed unhappiness at the way services were conducted and at the language used in the liturgy and hymn singing. In fact, it was at this point in the interview that P. expressed the feeling of wanted to jump up on the pews and scream in anger. She also said she really doesn't want to go to these services any longer. She does continue to attend, in spite of the anger she feels, because of her allegiance to another woman with whom she has been working in partnership for the last ten years. "I really feel I'd like to leave," she states, "but I don't really feel I want to break the partnership". She "sits and suffers" these services because of her commitment to this partnership of church service.

With regard to her desire to stand on the pews and scream, P says she does not do so because she doesn't "want to upset other people". As she states, "if they're happy here, and I'm not,

why should I make them unhappy?”

P. summarised her reasons for staying within or near to her Christian church (Presbyterian) as being related to the lack of alternatives. “There is a real difficulty,” she states, “in getting rid of a whole lot of stuff in terms of what to replace it with”. She made this point several times. Alternatives too far away from a known Christian church context are unacceptable to her because of her cultural and historic grounding in the church. Somehow she feels she must continue to labour to recover her church from patriarchy. P. is not hopeful of seeing this occur in her lifetime, although she sees herself as being in at the beginning of a significant and important change for the Christian church in general and the Presbyterian Church in particular. She believes it is her children and grandchildren (particularly female) who will benefit from what she and others are doing now.

S. stays involved in her Christian church because of a deeply held personal conviction. She twice mentioned during the interview of her radical conversion experience and her first turning to Christian beliefs and practices. For S. the force of this and on-going experiences has been strong enough to compel her to remain involved in the traditional Christian church (both Catholic and Protestant) ever since. S. makes this more comfortable for herself by working to reform where she can, by creating alternatives such as the group she belongs to, and by living her spirituality in a manner that is sustaining for her. Her spiritual practice, as she describes it, involves gardening, hospitality and working with integrity in her paid employment as well as her work in the alternative group. S. states that she is sometimes too tired to even pray after

a full day at the office. "It's just not there for me," she says. She is also involved in work for social justice issues, something she sees as part of her Christian beliefs. She has also "focused on creating alternatives". The alternative church community she belongs to is one she describes as being a place where "everyone can be included on their own terms" - a direct contrast with what her experience of traditional church practice has been. In this group "there is quite a lot of sharing around of ministry, leadership, all those kinds of things, so that nobody parks in anyone's slot or shoves them up on a pedestal". It is an egalitarian community that respects difference. S. believes that is "is hard to cook up good spirituality for yourself". That is, a community is important in her spiritual practice and life. That is why she has worked in creating alternatives to mainstream Christian church practice.

S. stays within her Christian church because she feels loyal to it. She stated that she thought women were "very conditioned to loyalty. Very. Very". She went on to say that breaking social ties is a difficult thing for women. S. sees women as highly conditioned to loyalty and "sentimental attachments" that may well be put in place in their childhood. This is similar to what P. spoke about in her interview. S. also spoke about the lack of alternatives for women who do leave the communities that they know and the difficulties they face. "It's moving away from a parish, it's breaking social ties, it's often seen as disloyalty to the male hierarchy. The other thing is... what the hell is out there for me? How am I going to stay spiritually alive? Who am I going to talk to? Work things out with? Socialise with? Pray with?" This echoes P.'s statements of lack of viable replacement to what is in existence for many women involved in traditional Christian church communities. "I wish there was some nice, neat, alternative place

to go, but I fear we are all too close to what we've come from yet". Again, an echo of P.'s comments on the relative ease with which the next generation of women will be able to live in what are now alternative Christian practice sites. S. sees the practice of Christianity as being in a process of change, a change that, in her view, is seeing Christian belief (the spiritual aspect) moving literally out of the church (the structure). "I think the fire inside the church is almost out," she states. "I think Christianity is moving out of the church".

S. spoke of women in the traditional church as follows. "What I do see has happened to a lot of women is that they've only ever been given the message of putting others first. Laying down their life before they've actually picked it up. How can you put down something you haven't even picked up?" Her words echo those of feminist theorists such as Judith Plaskow and Daphne Hampson when they speak about one of the "sins of the church as being not pride, but abdication of self. Women have been expected to live for others, or compelled to, rather than getting a clear sense of their own needs and working to fill them" (Madsen, 1994:487). Sandra Harding (1987) has stated "it is premature for women to be willing to give up what they never had". This is an almost verbatim echo of S.'s words.

## **THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING WHY FEMINISTS REMAIN IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH**

Critics of Christian feminism such as Daphne Hampson in her 1990 text argue that Christian feminism is untenable on the grounds that there are no scriptural grounds for it. When going

on to discuss why women stay in the traditional Christian church, she expresses the view that those women who do so are doing so because they had already made a decision to remain true to their Christian church practice and beliefs. They then face the task of reclaiming a feminist past in order to allow a feminist present. I feel this to be a critical view. When thinking about each of the women I interviewed, it is clear to me that they had each decided to stay within their Christian churches for reasons other than the fact that it made any sense to do so in terms of their feminism. P. herself expressed this when she stated that she felt, due to her upbringing in the church, that she had no choice but to stay with what she knew. She has, since making this decision, embarked on a journey of reclaiming Christian beliefs and practice from their patriarchal past by reinterpreting, reinventing or retrieving it. In spite of its current patriarchal form. In spite of her understanding of the effect of patriarchy on women. In spite of her anger and desire to jump up on the pews and scream. Here, I think, we approach the beginning to the answer of the question posed by this thesis. How do feminists resolve the conflict their Christianity presents them with in light of their feminism? Is it possible that they do not resolve the conflict at all?

At this point I come face to face with my assumptions - assumptions I was not aware that I brought with me into this study until now. I assumed that Christian feminists had somehow resolved the conflict between feminism and Christian belief and practice. I erred. The interviewees clearly were telling me that they had not resolved the conflict. They lived with unresolved conflict. And the reasons they did so are worth looking at in more depth.

S. and P. both identified their need for community as a reason why they stayed within their Christian churches. “What seems to be special that I remember from my childhood is the notion of community. So, for me, Christianity is about community” says P. S. is more explicit when she explores her reasons for staying in the church. She describes it as being due to loyalty. “I think women are very conditioned to loyalty,” she states. “Very. Very. I think there are often sentimental attachments like... childhood attachments. Its moving away from a parish, its breaking social ties for women who are very highly conditioned”. This sentiment is echoed by feminist psychoanalytical theorist Nancy Chodorow (1995:139) when she states “their (women’s) lives always involve deep and primary relationships, especially with their children and, more importantly, with other women”. In describing her view of the process of gender-definition and development, she goes on to describe young girls as identifying with and forming relationship with their mother, and this involves a process of “gradual learning of a way of being familiar in everyday life, exemplified by the person with whom she has been most involved. It is continuous with her early childhood identification and attachments. Women’s experience tends to be in communion” (1995:138). Chodorow explains the formation of a female-gendered personality in terms of attachment to other humans, particularly other women. She attributes this to the “universal mothering role” which is what children experience and males go on to reject.

There is a similarity between what Chodorow is saying and what the interviewees said. What Chodorow (1995:139) calls a “quality of embeddedness in social interaction and personal relationships” that characterises women’s lives. S. identified this as loyalty to a group and P.

described it as a “community of the like-minded”. For both S. and P. the desire to remain embedded in a community was used to explain their continued presence in their groups and within Christian practice, traditional or otherwise.

In particular, I point to P.’s disclosure of her loyalty to her church. She is angered by her church in many ways but because of her partnership (in the church services) with an older woman, a partnership of ten years standing, she continues to attend. “I really feel I’d like to leave (the mainstream church)”, she states, “but I don’t really feel that I want to break the partnership”. Chodorow also identifies this type of cross-generational interactions with other women as being particular to the female-gendered. “From childhood,” she states, “daughters are likely to participate in an intergenerational world with their mothers. In adult life, women’s interaction with other women in most societies cuts across generational lines” (Chodorow 1995:142). Whilst I am not wholeheartedly endorsing psychoanalytic feminism and general and Nancy Chodorow in particular here, I cannot help but be struck by the resonance between her theorising and the interviewees’ expression of views.

What psychoanalytic feminists are pointing to is the link between the psychological development of a gender identity in childhood and behavioural and psychological traits exhibited in adulthood. Thus, if we are brought up to value connectedness as girls, we will take this value with us into adulthood. As I have already stated in Chapter Three when discussing types of feminism, psychoanalytical feminism is based in an understanding of psychological behaviour that lies beneath the surface of our socialised selves. Chodorow, in particular, “focuses on the

pre-Oedipal stage of psychosexual development” (Tong, 1989:149). That is, she is most interested in developments in personality that occur early in life. The type of gender arrangement currently present in society are due to women’s control of child-rearing, according to Dorothy Dinnerstein (Tong, 1989:152).

## **SUMMARY**

In this chapter I have discussed the responses of each of the interviewees who took part in this research. I have analysed what they said about feminism, Christianity, the conflict they experience between the two and the ways they resolve or do not resolve this conflict.

All interviewees experienced dissonance and conflict. All three described how this conflict has affected them personally. They described what they have done in order to deal with this conflict. They have also described strategies for living with the conflict.

I have discussed the interviewee responses in the light of salient feminist thought. I have pointed out what has been, at times, remarkable similarities between the interviewee’s described experience and the words of feminist theorists such as Nancy Chodorow, Mary Daly, Carol Christ, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.

In the final chapter of this thesis I continue to explore the interviewee responses in the light of feminist thought. In particular I draw out commonalities in the women’s experience by

describing strategies they employ in their lives as feminist Christians to negotiate the dissonance of their position. I also explore more fully why they continue to situate themselves within Christian belief and practices. The concluding chapter will draw together the various feminist and sociological theoretical texts with the texts of these women's lives.

## **CHAPTER 6 - CONCLUSIONS**

### **AN INTRODUCTION**

The process of exploring a range of feminist theoretical approaches to religion has been an informative one. It has been, however, the process of interviewing and evaluating these interviews that has taken me into new areas of understanding of the question of why feminists continue Christian beliefs and practices. Exploring the interviews has surprised me because the women I spoke to did not say what I expected them to say - not that I was clear prior to interviewing and, in fact, prior to commencing this research, about exactly what all of my assumptions were.

It has been the process of oral history that has primarily and significantly informed this research and shaped, within my local context, a literature survey of the topic.

### **MY ASSUMPTIONS AND WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM**

I did not realise nor appreciate the fullest extent of the assumptions with which I had entered this study. An example is within the framework of the hypothesis itself - "Feminist Christians - A Conflict Resolved?" whereby I set the stage for an exploration of ways in which Christian feminists resolved the conflicts presented to their Christian beliefs and practices by their feminist perspectives. During the course of the study I realised that the central issue unfolding before

me was not how or whether they **resolved** the conflict but how they **negotiated** it.

The other key feature that emerged was the need to explore the reasons why these women chose to live with the conflicts they could not resolve. They each clearly identified personal conflicts. S. for example stated that she had “learned to live with ambiguity” as she didn’t want to continue hitting her head against a brick wall forever. P. wanted to stand up on the pews and scream, but she still chose to remain within her church. N.S. stated that she’d “settle for (women having) influence” in the church, when what she really wanted was for them to have their full dignity. I had to ask - why?

In some ways this thesis asks more questions than it answers. This is because I brought into the work a set of assumptions that I was not fully aware of. It was only as the work unfolded that I became aware of them. I did then attempt to address what I began to see were the real issues in question - the why rather than the how.

## **A GENERAL COMMENT ABOUT THE RELEVANCE OF PSYCHOANALYTICAL APPROACHES**

I realised when I first began to analyse the interviews that I was beginning to take a psychoanalytical approach. Initially I had thought to confine my analysis to a radical feminist approach. That is, I brought my own view (of society as divided into two, unequal gender groups kept in place by patriarchal power) into the analysis. I saw the structure of the church,

as do Walby (1990) and many other feminists, as part of a male system of maintenance of this power differential. I thought this system continues to operate and exert power over the lives of women in the church, feminist or otherwise, because the institution of the church, along with other institutions in our society, works to maintain patriarchy.

Instead I uncovered and discovered during the course of this work that the structure of the church does act to maintain patriarchy, but the reasons for it doing so need to be explored within a context of the deep, psychological effects on our identity as women and our lives as social beings. There were cues within interviews that have directed me towards an exploration of the underlying factors that sustain patriarchy in order to understand the continued involvement of feminists in Christianity. I found a resonance between what the respondents were saying and the responses of theorists such as Dorothy Dinnerstein (1977) and Nancy Chodorow (1978) who have sought psychological explanations to the expressions of distinctive female experience within a masculinist culture. Dorothy Dinnerstein (1977) points to a “pathological need” to continue dysfunctional gender arrangements in patriarchal society. She theorises that men need to control women’s lives and women need for their lives to be controlled by men. This is based in an understanding of the psychological forces that organise and maintain our socialised, gendered selves. Nancy Chodorow (1978) explains women’s gendered identity as being created by social forces operating on a psychological level within our developing selves as we progress through childhood psychosexual stages. She particularly applies this analysis to her critique of “the phenomenon of mothering”.

Naomi Goldenberg (1995:145f) has written from a psychoanalytic perspective on “the shift from Theology to Thealogy” in her exploration of the return to the Goddess-based spirituality that some women are experiencing. In this work she draws parallels between the feminist theological movement and psychoanalytical theories, and it is this use of psychoanalytical theory that I have picked up on in my exploration. This approach involves a “stress on the social context of experience” within a paradigm that encompasses the view that “the life experience of human beings as determined in a large part by other human beings”. As Goldenberg states. “Although this interdependence is most apparent in early life, this theory maintains that it is also true of adulthood” (Goldenberg, 1995:152).

The interviewees who participated in this study spoke of community as being important, of connectedness and social loyalty, of kinship bonds and of the support and love of other women. P. and her ‘partner’ in church activity, for example. S. who asks how she can “stay spiritually alive? Socialise with? Pray with?” should she leave the church. N.S. who has spent her adult life in a community of religious women and who speaks of her “wonderful experience” when attending a feminist school of spirituality run by Dominican women. This is what Nancy Chodorow (1995:139) is describing when she states “(women’s) lives always involve other sorts of equally deep and primary relationships, especially with their children and, more importantly, with other women”. She describes (1995:138) young women’s experiences as tending to be “in communion” explaining the formation of a female-gendered personality in terms of attachment to other humans, particularly other women. This need to be “connected” or to be in and remain in community (particularly with other women) is a theme that came out clearly

in all of the interviews. The reason this type of development occurs, according to Dorothy Dinnerstein, is due to women's control of child-rearing (Tong, 1989:152).

## **MY ANALYSIS OF HOW THESE WOMEN RESOLVED THEIR CONFLICTS - OR DIDN'T**

One of their tools for negotiating conflict was **confrontation**. N.S. "gave them 21 guns" and spoke of "telling the Pope to mind his own business" in a direct challenge to church authority. N.S. also confronted her church leaders through the sexism survey that she was involved in carrying out throughout New Zealand.

Whilst P. preferred to be subtle, she was nonetheless confrontational when she describes challenging the male leader of a group she has been involved with for his use of the word Chairman. She stated that she thought "you can achieve much more with a sense of humour" but was not afraid to speak out when she was offended at the use of sexist language. As she stated "where I come from is looking at things and trying to make changes and make other people aware by using humour". She also expressed her protest by being silent throughout the saying of the Nicene Creed - a sort of passive-aggressive approach.

Part of this involves the use of a language that rejects the generic use of male words. P. is rejecting the use of sexist language by pointing out to male speakers (such as the Chairman of her group) that it is unacceptable. Nellie Morton (1985:20) speaks of the importance of this

type of activity as part of the reformation of Christian practice. By “refusing to allow men to do their theological thinking” and defining their own lives in terms of their own experience through non-sexist language, women such as P. are reforming the traditional practices of her Christian church. This also applies to feminist biblical interpretations and refusals to accept Christian church texts such as the Nicene Creed, which P. does by refusing to participate as it is recited in her church.

**Reformation** is also a tool. S. spoke of “doing a mini reform job” in her group when the males involved were confronted with their exclusive language and a workshop held to enlighten them. She also took part in a panel discussion on sexuality recently in an attempt to confront heterosexist ideas during which she “had to raise some issues”. That is, endeavours to alter traditional religious practice can be one way of making the traditional church more acceptable to a Christian feminist. N.S also spoke of her work to reform the church and clearly has made some progress in this regard. For example, her work in the survey of sexism in her church was an early attempt to not only identify sexism, but plan educational processes to eliminate it. One outcome was the “demand for non-sexist language<sup>to</sup> be introduced in every parish”. She has also worked on the Justice and Peace Commission and in the area of prevention of domestic violence, as well as in the education of young women and girls.

This type of reformist activity is typical of a liberal feminist approach. In liberal feminism reform of social institutions is a priority. The educative activities that the women in this study are involved in are aimed at reforming the institution of the church in terms of its exclusive

practices. The tools of liberal reformism typically are educational and political. Liberal feminism “demands democracy and political liberties” (Jaggar,1983:27) and equality of opportunity for women. Whether through the political forums such as S. has been involved in with her seminars on inclusive language, or the National Sexism in the Church survey N.S. worked with, these Christian feminists act in ways that mark their underlying philosophy as being in the area of liberal feminist approaches.

Another strategy was **negotiation**. This strategy involves an acceptance of some types of sexism at some times, and combines it with an agenda for change that may or may not be realised. As S. describes it, it is “a way of trying to address issues in a way that doesn’t actually mean putting your head on a concrete slab”. This is a sort of position that recognises anti-feminism and wants to change it, but realises confrontation is unlikely to achieve the goal of ending sexism. “Sooner or later,” P. says, “the point is gently or ungently made”. Negotiation, in part, involves an acceptance of the status quo - with the proviso that things will not be that way forever. This may even extend to an acceptance that things may not change until the next generation. Both P. and N.S. expressed this view. P. stated “it would be nice to be here in another 50 or a hundred years, when things are more consolidated”. “Will we eventually turn it around?” N.S. asks. “My faith says yes”.

This negotiation approach recognises that education and politics may not produce the reform these women are looking for. It acknowledges that the forces that maintain sexism run deep. This criticism of a liberal feminist approach has been described by Wearing (1996:10) as “failing

to recognise that men and women do not begin equally in families". In expressing their acceptance of the limits of their reformist activities the women in this study recognised that the need for change goes deeper than just the reform of their church institution. It involves the reform of institutions involved in our socialisation as gendered persons - the family. That is, it involves reform at the most basic level of what makes us human.

A part of this negotiation process seems to be accepting some aspects of religious belief and practice that are offensive, but letting them go because changing them is either too hard or too energy-sapping. They may be accepted as being unable to be changed - for now. There is, however, expressed in the interviews an attitude that wishes, wants and believes that things will one day change. This is a strategy for accepting the unacceptable status quo. It is a way of negotiating the offensive and being able to live with it. "I pick my battles," says S. "I no longer try to fight them all". If, in fact, patriarchy is a "dynamic system in which men give up an activity only when they no longer wish to undertake it" (Walby, 1990:173) then S. is going to win some battles and lose others, but the overall progress towards dismantling patriarchy will not occur. Walby (1990:173) is of the view that "if women do win a victory, then patriarchal forces will re-group and regain control over them in a different way" thus making any efforts towards ending sexism ultimately doomed. Living with some things may be exactly the type of feminist non-action that allows the forces of patriarchy to continue, if one accepts Walby's argument.

For P. attending regular mainstream church services is part of her monthly ritual. She finds

many parts of these services offensive, but negotiates through the services by various methods. "I sit there and suffer all the male language," she says. "Sometimes if I'm feeling real stropky I change all the words and sing them very loudly, and other times, I'm a woman who is silent in the church. But not for the reasons Paul said". She describes her reaction to sexism in the church services as varying from service to service, depending on her mood. Sometimes she acts "stropky" and other times she sits in mute protest. She is, as she herself describes it, "quite selective". She is able to negotiate this part of her religious ritual because of her involvement in an alternative community, a feminist one, as it is this group that meets her needs for being part of a "community of like minds". She is also able to accept those things that make her uncomfortable because she has accepted that, at this time, there is no valid alternative. "You can get rid of all the Augustine theology," she says, "but what to replace it with? What theology do you replace it with?" For P. part of the process of negotiation involves continuing to be involved in the Christian church in its traditional form. She accepts that this is a difficult thing to do. "I think in some ways it's easier to walk right away from something," she says, "if you can find a substitute". This reminds me of what Mary Daly (1973:24) speaks of when she talks of confronting "the shock of non-being" and the difficulty of stepping outside of all we know and all that has given our lives meaning and sense. For Daly, "a realisation that there is an existential conflict between the self and the structures that have given such crippling security" requires an abandonment of the beliefs and practices of Christianity. P. identifies this crisis but reacts by choosing not to face the shock of non-being. She indicates the strength of the structures and symbols of Christian belief and practice in her life. For her there is no alternative but to stay within the structures she knows.

Whilst N.S expressed a strong dislike for traditional church practice and its sexism, she expressed an understanding of the need for negotiation and compromise when she described the setting up of the religious Order to which she belongs. In speaking of her Foundress she stated “she found a lot of her freedoms tempered, and she had to accept that or she could not do the works of mercy”. She also points out that her Order has operated in a subversive manner for many years through their role in education. Whilst I do not wish to comment directly on that, I do point out that N.S. expresses the view that an outward form of submission to male authority and the seeming curbing of freedoms may not always have been effective in preventing the religious sisters from working to improve the dignity of women within their traditional church. I chose instead to define this type of attitude and approach as one of negotiation. That is, it is almost as if N.S. and her fore-sisters have said, “alright, I will do such and such to keep you happy, you bishops and priests, but I will also go about doing the work that I really believe in, and I will bring change for those who come after me, and you won’t even realise what I am doing. For those women who come after there will be an improved place in both the church and the world. And you cannot stop me”. This is another example of the tension that Rosemary Radford Ruether (1985:22-3,25) has described as existing between the church and the community of true believers (whom she has described as “women-church”). What N.S is also doing here in recounting the history of her Order is what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1983:xix) talks about when she speaks of the power of our history as a source of energy and vitalisation. This is what appears to be happening in this story telling. It is for this reason that Fiorenza (1983:xix) argues that feminists must reclaim history and not leave it behind as Daly (1973) would have them do.

This process of negotiation involves the acceptance<sup>of</sup> some things that offend in order to do the work that they are happy to do, the work that they believe to be right and just. N.S. for example, is clear about the male dominance in her church and yet she still operates within in. “The church defends itself and says it is not responsible for patriarchy,” she states. “But it sure as hell embraced it”. N.S. has chosen to continue to act within the life of a religious, but with a zeal to see things change. “We need to fight our way out of this morass of patriarchy,” she says.

N.S. speaks of the need for women to change the church institutions when she talks about the issue of ordination for women. “They never changed seminary when they went through it,” she says. “Seminary changed them. And I thought, ordination’s not going to do it”. Here she is expressing her expectation that women change things. She accepts that much of the institutional church is male controlled and some of it inadmissible to women. However, when pressure from women forces the rules to change and allow women admission, such as they have in some denominations, it is her expectation that the women admitted change those institutions. Here N.S. is reflecting the reformist feminist view of the need for institutions that reflect male values to be changed. She is echoing Elshtain’s (1981) critique of liberal feminism and pointing to the need for reform of the institutions in terms of their philosophical approach and value systems.

Another strategy was an **acceptance of lack of resolution**. S. does not believe that she can change everything in the church in order that it is congruent with her personal, feminist views.

“I don’t have to have everything neatly packaged up together at the same time,” she says. She looks to the future in a rather glum fashion when she states “I don’t know what happens for us, as feminists. It’s all too hard”. S. also describes “walking around” some issues that are too difficult to deal with. I understand that to mean she employs selective avoidance. For P. this acceptance was expressed as “just hanging in there”. Although she still attends services she does not do so happily. She feels it is wrong in many ways. S. recognises that there are forces that keep her living in dissonance, although she does not articulate what they are. Mary Daly (1973) would be most critical of this stance as, for her, the end result of feminist thinking is not dissonance but congruence, a journey that she recognises as being difficult to take. Ruether, on the other hand, would recognise dissonance as part of being involved in Christian feminism. She is clear that this tension is important in bringing about reform of Christian beliefs and practices when she states that the true church - the community of spirit-filled believers - “demands an alternative social order in obedience to God. The basic Christian communities are thus the ecclesial expression of liberation theology” (Ruether, 1985:22-3,25). True Christian belief will thus work for change in order to end the dissonance of un-Christian practice.

**Creating alternatives** seemed to be a major part of the lives of all three women interviewed in this study. Each of the three belongs to an alternative group located within or associated with a mainstream Christian church, and it is their involvement in these groups in which we see the creation of alternatives acceptable (or partly acceptable) to these Christian feminists. The creation of alternatives goes some way to addressing problems faced by Christian feminists in the mainstream church. For example, S. describes her group as addressing the problem of

male-dominance and lack of a feminist voice through their inclusive approach to the life of the group. “Everyone can be included on their own terms,” she says. “There’s quite a lot of sharing around of ministry, leadership, so that nobody parks in anyone’s slot, or shoves them up on a pedestal”.

This is quite reactionary. S. had earlier in the interview described the problems of not being able to hear confession although in pastoral ministry because she was not ordained. For her, this has been addressed in the creative management of her alternative group in which the structure does not allow the holding of power by the few. P. talks about “the exciting thing about (my alternative group) is that we each contribute in ways that suit us. We share and work together”. N.S speaks of her religious community as being loyal only to itself, and of having created and changed the way it works in order to get away from male influences. She gives the example of the group deciding to change the title of their leader in order to “de-genderise and de-militarise it” and she goes on to describe the power of this group over itself and outside of the traditional church when she states that “it would be a brave bishop or priest who would intervene.” This is important. N.S’s group of religious women have taken the right to name themselves away from the men who rule in the traditional church structure. As feminists (Daly, 1971) would agree, the power of naming is the power to define identity. To position yourself outside of a male-defined world-view, a view in which female is defined as being other than male, is an important part of freeing women from patriarchy.

For P. and N.S. an important element in their creation of alternatives is that their alternative

communities consist only of women. P. has described her group as meeting once monthly in a service that permits the attendance of men, but for her, true community is found in the monthly meal that she shares with a woman-only group that forms the core of the larger alternative group. P. identifies that this is so because of “issues of safety”. She does not say what these are, but the point is made that an alternative group that is run by women but permits the attendance of men is, somehow, less ‘safe’ than a group meeting at which only women are admitted.

What all three women are doing in creating and working with alternative groups is exactly what reformist Christians such as Fiorenza and Ruether call for. It is, for these women and these theorists, part of their Christian practice that they do so. Ruether (1985) calls for “renewal within Christianity”. Fiorenza (1984:xiii) calls for a reclaiming of the power of the bible and Christian history, as it is these things that will give power to feminist Christians. Eleanor McLaughlin (1979:95) calls for a revisionist approach of Christian textual interpretation and praxis that “redresses omissions and recasts interpretations”, with Phyllis Trible (1979:81) calling for “text that is interpreted as a liberatory model” when it includes the lives and experiences of women.

Nelle Morton (1985:xxxiii) states that “it is not enough to walk away”. Not only is it possible to move Christian practice into a post-patriarchy, they all argue, but it is imperative that it be done.

The three women and their creation of alternatives that remain essentially sited within traditional Christian practice would be criticised, in contrast, by Mary Daly for not going far enough. Not for Mary Daly the changing of 'God' to 'Goddess', or 'Father' to 'Mother', or ordination of women. This, she argues, only serves ultimately to reinforce patriarchy. What she calls for is the exorcism of Christian symbols from our minds. To leave it all behind, to "confront the shock of non-being" is the only way to put ourselves in a position, as feminists, to create a truly liberating alternative to Christian practice and belief. For Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, 'God' must be replaced with 'Goddess' as the imagery of divinity is demasculinised, not only in terms of the gender image of the supernatural forces but in terms of the way god and religion are thought of.

The issue of alternatives to Christian practice are important to consider here, as is the reaction of these Christian feminists to that possibility. S. spoke with some nervousness of "neo-pagan and neo-Wiccan" groups of women which have developed out of Christian practice. She was uncomfortable about these groups and was clear to point out to me that these groups had moved too far away from Christian belief and practice for her. There are feminist ritual makers in New Zealand in which the goddess is important and many of the women involved have come out of Christian churches (Rountree, 1993). Part of the feminist Christian approach among the women I interviewed clearly rejected this as a possible alternative for themselves. P. felt unable to move too far away from traditional Christian belief and practice, as did N.S., who did not see any need to do so.

## THE PRACTICE OF FEMINISM BY FEMINIST CHRISTIANS

For some feminist thinkers these women would not be seen as escaping patriarchy. In fact, they would be criticised as not being feminist at all because of their continued participation in Christian beliefs and practices (Daly, 1973; Walby, 1990). As a non-Christian feminist I tend to be sympathetic to this view, although I have recognised through my interviewing experiences that feminist views are real and important to each of these three feminist Christians. It was of interest to me to note that each of the women described themselves to me as feminist (firstly) and then Christian. Although they may not have attributed significance to this, I interpret the listing order as indicating significant importance of each of the terms. It seems to me that their feminist views influence and drive their Christian practice and not the other way around. Although S. expressed her discomfort amongst feminists as a Christian along with the fact of her discomfort as a Christian amongst feminists, I saw the latter as being of more concern to her. She recounts the tale of being outed as a Christian at a feminist gathering with some embarrassment, but tells no stories of this happening the other way around. It was as though her feminism was part of her Christian praxis, but her Christianity was less so a part of her feminist praxis. In fact, it was the feminist attitudes that caused problems for her Christian beliefs and views, and caused her to work in the area of reforming her Christian practice. N.S. expressed no dissonance about being feminist, but talked of the discomfort of having Christian beliefs and practices that were incompatible. P. wanted to leave her church because of her feminism, but felt unable to do so for reasons related to her childhood experiences.

The issue of naming is an important one and I am aware that most literature on the subject of feminism and Christianity terms those feminists who remain within Christian beliefs and practices as **Christian feminists**. For example, this is the way Ruether (1985) and Fiorenza (1983,1984 and 1989) use the description. It can be argued that in this case the noun is the term feminist, with the adjective Christian being appended to describe the type of feminism being talked about. This would seem to be at odds with my view. I regard the naming first given as signifying the relative superior importance. It is the way we describe couples, for example, as Bobbi and Sue, or Mary and Jane. I, for one, will name the person in the partnership who I am closest to first. In these examples it might be deduced that my friends are Bobbi and Mary, and their partners are less well known to me, or perhaps less well liked. When I review the transcripts I find that only one of the interviewees chose to name herself in a way that expressed both her feminism and her Christian beliefs, and that was S. She describes herself as “Christian and feminist” in one place, and in another as “feminist and still calling (herself) Christian”. I have named the subjects of this study as feminist Christians, and I recognise that this reflects my view of what that term means. I recognise there are other interpretations and ways of naming.

Exploring this further I can see how, for these women, their Christian practice and beliefs might be viewed as enabling the expression of their feminism. Using Felicity Edwards’s (1995) descriptions, each of the interviewees in this study, according to this criteria, found expressions of their feminism in their Christian activity (Edwards, 1995:187-90). P., for example, finding herself unable to leave her Christian practice, turned her energies towards enabling her Christian

practice to reflect her feminist views. S.'s feminism propelled her into the creation of an alternative church community, the re-reading and re-interpreting of biblical texts through feminist eyes, and her involvement in and commitment to the ending of sexist language use in her Christian church. For N.S. her feminism fired her to work for the elimination of sexism in her church through the gathering of information and providing of education to all parishes, and her involvement in her religious life expressed her commitment to feminist ideals of peace and justice.

### **THE FEMINIST-CHRISTIAN CONFLICT FOR NON-CHRISTIANS AND NON-FEMINISTS**

The women who consented to be part of this work are all Christian feminists. They are also thinkers and theorists, each in their own way. One notable point about all the interviews was the depth at which each of these women has grappled with the issues around feminist-Christianity. For every one there was a personal history of struggle and there clearly continue to be areas which are problematic for them all. In spite of this, each of the women interviewed has invested a tremendous amount of energy into the problem, both in terms of their thinking and their actions. Whether this is because they believe true Christianity is non-sexist and they are working to bring the church into that realisation, or whether they labour to give their time and energy towards creating alternative groups that women can attend safely and with dignity, or whether they work in a textual sense to re-interpret and re-create biblical texts, each of these women have invested, and continue to invest, a huge amount of time, energy, love and

commitment into their Christian practice. This is in spite of knowing their churches to be “flawed” or even “sinful”. I have explored some of the reasons why they do so and looked at possible underlying psychological forces that may be compelling them to act in the way they do when I refer to the work of Chodorow and Dinnerstein in particular and examine their comments on the creation of gendered identity through childhood. Unconscious or subconscious motivations may have some role in the choices these women have made in terms of feminism and Christian practice. As S. states “women are conditioned to loyalty” when explaining her reasons for continuing to be involved in her local Christian church. P. also explained her continued Christian practice in terms of childhood experiences of Sunday School.

Early in S.’s interview she expressed the view that “I don’t think the most politically correct feminists would regard me as a terribly good feminist”. And then she goes on to state “but I don’t think the most religiously correct Christians would regard me as a terribly good Christian”. Thus the dilemma is expressed. S. has devoted most of her life trying to follow her Christian convictions while trying to remain congruent with her feminist ones. Whilst she may have negotiated the contradictions (or learned to live with them) she feels both the Christian communities and the feminist communities have failed to resolve their conflicts. She speaks of the set of expectations that accompany her accepting the label either Christian or feminist. “I’ve had uncomfortable experiences,” she states, “of people assuming that I was on their side in the good fight” when she stated she was a Christian. She also implies the same thing has happened with reference to her feminist labelling. For feminist non-Christians, it would appear, at least for those in S.’s experience, a bringing together of the Christian beliefs and practices

and feminism is not accepted nor understood. For Christian non-feminists the same could be said. For those who do not hold convictions of both Christian and feminist beliefs (and I use the word belief in reference to feminism to mean a political view of a differently-gendered and unequal society, not a religious view) the problem does not exist. Therefore, it does not have to be negotiated. For those who do hold both sets of views it is imperative that some sort of negotiation be undertaken. And because it is imperative, these Christian feminists have worked to do so. Through the strategies of confrontation, reformation, negotiation, acceptance and creation, these women have worked to bring about change within the context of their Christian practice and beliefs.

### **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHRISTIAN THEORISTS IN THIS RESEARCH**

The writings of feminists like Fiorenza and Ruether who are also Christians have been critical to this study. This is because, firstly, these theorists have enabled me to set a context within which I investigate the lives and political stances of several feminist Christians. The women I interviewed are not intended to be representative of the whole range of feminist Christians in the world but they are part of a huge community of like-minded women, of whom have devoted years of their lives to the study of the very issue examined as the central thesis of this research - how some feminists negotiate their Christian beliefs and practices.

By examining the works of feminist theorists with regard to Christianity I have been able to understand feminist reactions to Christianity, and I see and have argued in this thesis that these

responses fall into two general areas. Mary Daly, Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow argue that we must get Christianity out of our heads and our hearts in order to be free from it. The argument that we have internalised the symbols of androcentrism within Christianity and that they have a powerful effect on the way we live and enjoy our lives is one I find powerful and persuasive. Daly's call for exodus from the Christian church and her rejection of what it stands for and the patriarchy it condones is one that finds resonance with me. The radical rejection of the Christian tradition and its replacement with female-centred imagery and symbolism is one I find particularly attractive because in it I see myself and other women as being able to celebrate and express our femaleness without being forced into strict gender-defined behaviours as required in traditional Christian culture. I welcome no longer being 'other' and outside of the image of the male divine.

I approached this research wondering how it was that the women I was going to interview did not find these arguments as persuasive as I did. I knew that it was likely that Daly, Christ, Plaskow and others would be familiar to these feminist Christians and yet their arguments failed to be persuasive for them.

My study of the works of feminist Christian reformists such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has given me insights into the theoretical underpinnings of what I have called the reformist stance. The argument for retaining our heritage and putting back into the historical record the voices of women long silenced makes sense to me. The approach returns to women what the church and its male hierarchies have denied them for two thousand

years. The dismantling of male centredness within Christian practice is an aim I share, in common with the feminist Christians whose views I have explored. It has been important for me to grasp these arguments as they are the arguments that underpin the philosophy and practice of the women I was to interview. It is these arguments that the women in this study turn to for support and encouragement. It is these women who strengthen the resolve of Christian feminists such as the ones in my study to stay within Christian practice and belief. This substantial body of writing is well known and understood by the interviewees.

The debate is one in which the feminist response is either to depart Christianity (physically and psychologically), a response I term 'revolutionary', or to stay within Christian belief and practice and 'reform' it out of its patriarchy. In my analysis the arguments of either approach could be appreciated as being persuasive and yet why is it that I am persuaded by one argument and the women in this study persuaded by the other? It seemed to be that there were deeper issues at work. This has led me to wonder why we chose to be persuaded either way and to consider that the forces that underlie this apparent 'choice' might not be as simple as I had first suspected. Indeed, is it possible to say that we have enough freedom to make any 'choice' actually that? For example, I can see how some feminists such as those in my study feel they cannot abandon a tradition that has been a formative and on-going cultural influence in their lives, one that has met their needs in terms of community and belonging and one that has provided an important influence in their personal identity.

I have been fortunate to be investigating in an area which is so well theorised and I have drawn

upon just a few of the many who have written, thought, spoken and theorised about the issues raised by feminist responses to Christianity. It is an issue that has been particularly in the forefront of feminist debate since the 1960s and it is one that has affected my life in a considerable way since then. I have been involved in Christian belief and practice as a younger woman but have moved away in subsequent years as my feminist views became more well-defined.

This study has required that I come to grips with what I have called reformist theory - feminists whose views oppose mine. This has forced me to re-evaluate the validity of my own 'revolutionary' position. I can see that I have chosen to ignore the arguments of the reformists and that I need to take seriously the effects of the Christian tradition in order to see clearly the possibilities for a genuine liberation for women claimed by Christian feminists, despite my feeling that they have no validity for me. In the same way that I have avoided giving full consideration to the theorists who do not say the things I agree with, the women in this study have chosen not to look at nor hear the words of those theorists who call them out of their Christian beliefs and practice. I have been forced to confront my view of feminist Christians as collaborators with the patriarchy. As Ruether would point out to me, it just isn't that simple. And as Fiorenza would remind me, you cannot ignore something just because we do not want it to exist or that it has existed. Just as Mary Daly calls us to confront the shock of non-being, Fiorenza and Ruether call us to confront to shock of our being, and to face the reality of the religiously inflected culture in which we find ourselves. As N.S has called for feminist Christians to work their way out of the morass of patriarchy, Fiorenza has called for us to

embrace our history and re-discover the voices of women throughout the history of the Christian church.

On a personal note, I have moved from a position which dismisses feminist Christianity to one which respects the validity of their choice without changing my non-Christian stance. There are parallels here with the way feminism has confronted the challenge of difference among women and addressed the issue of not speaking for others.

### **A FINAL WORD: SOME CONCLUSIONS**

This thesis has identified some of the conflicts between the Christian beliefs and practices in the lives of three feminist women.

I have taken a journey, along with the women interviewed, into why and how women who want to be Christian and feminist deal with the conflict presented to them. Starting from a point of not understanding either why or how the conflicts should or could be resolved, I have examined both textual, theoretical views as well as conducting oral history research.

I have learned several things.

Firstly, it is possible for a researcher to be not fully aware of their own preconceptions and assumptions when commencing a research project. This may be true even if they think they

have a sound theoretical grasp of the issues involved. For this researcher, my assumptions were laid bare when I began the oral history component to this work. This research has been, in part, a journey of discovery into myself. I recognise that I began this study with a preconception that feminist Christians had somehow resolved the conflict between their feminism and their Christian beliefs and practices. I have realised these women have not. The question I have ended up answering has not be the one I set out to ask - that is, how is the conflict resolved? What I have explored instead are some of the ways feminist Christians negotiate and live with the conflict and why they have chosen to do so.

Secondly, it is possible for women to hold what appear to be contradictory views ostensibly without much discomfort. Even though all three women expressed a level of discomfort at times, they all find the alternative of leaving either their Christian beliefs and practices or their feminism unacceptable. This requires them to live with a certain amount of dissonance. They all did this without appearing to be uncomfortable in a way that made their position unsustainable. They all worked to reduce this dissonance when and where they could, but I noted their ability to “live with contradiction”, as S. expressed it.

Thirdly, the reasons for feminists remaining involved with the Christian church may be related to their early childhood experiences. These experiences during formative periods appears to have some influence on their choices in later life. Psychological explanations may help in understanding some of the reasons why these feminists stayed within their Christian churches despite being aware of the oppressive nature of Christian practices and beliefs. Knowing their

churches to be patriarchal has not resulted in any of these three women abandoning their Christian practice. An explanation may, in part, be found in looking at the way our identity as women is created through our childhood experiences.

Fourthly, and finally, it would appear possible that these women use Christianity to enable expressions of their feminism. That is, in the same way as feminist political activists work for social justice in our culture, Christian feminists work for the rights and dignity of women within their churches. In a society that has a history of missionary colonial and evangelical activities, religious plurality, Calvinism and the Puritan work ethic, feminists have exerted strong political influence in shaping the cultural and legal systems that have created our national identity. From the time of the Women's Suffrage Movement which saw New Zealand women the first in the Western world in modern times to receive the franchise, feminist activists have lobbied, laboured and protested for a just and equal society. This has been reflected through feminist influences in pay parity, abortion, equal employment opportunity, peace and green issues in my lifetime. Feminist activity in these spheres of life has been paralleled by feminist activities within the structures and practices of the Christian churches in New Zealand. Christian feminists continue to work for equality for women through the dismantling of sexist language and practices, the admission of women to the clergy and open discussion about issues of human sexuality.

If feminism is about taking action for social change, as I have argued it is, then these Christian feminists are feminists in every sense of the word. They are no less and no more feminist than

their non-Christian counterparts, although they may feel at times outside the sphere of traditional feminist thought. Just as the non-Christian or post-Christian feminist works for equity and justice in secular patriarchal society, so the Christian feminist works for justice, equity and an end to patriarchy within the Christian beliefs and practices.

### **SIGNPOSTS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This research raises issues that are beyond the scope of this work. For example, how powerful are subconscious forces that motivate women to stay within the patriarchal structure of the traditional church, and can they ever be free of them? N.S. for example, spoke of the compliance of women in their own oppression because they have something invested in the status quo. "Women have a stake" she states, "in never admitting that there is oppression". Complicity is a complex question and one that goes well beyond this piece of work. However, it might be explored by a fuller study.

N.S. also signposted issues related to subversion. "Our (members of religious order) running the schools had no insight into the fact that we are subversive. We actually are subversive. But I don't think it was intentional". The issues of subversion is one that has been explored by religious studies scholars and might usefully be looked at in a feminist context in church life in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

These Christian feminists also raise a challenge to New Zealand feminism. It is evident that the

issues of church involvement for feminists is one that leads to some friction. S. spoke of feeling unacceptable to Christians due to her feminism and of feeling that she is a poor or second class feminist to other feminists because of her Christian beliefs and practice. A further study of the issues raised here would inform the debate on both feminism and Christianity as they are practised in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

I would also like to point to issues in the area of feminist oral history that has been raised a part of this thesis. I found myself in areas in which there were no feminist ethical directions for me to follow. To tackle these in full would require a further thesis devoted entirely to the matter.

#### **WHAT IT MEANS TO DO THIS THESIS**

I think a thesis is a gathering together and collating of knowledge and a presentation of it in a coherent and interesting fashion. A thesis always goes beyond this and it has done for me. It contributes knowledge making.

The proof of the thesis is in...the change in the researcher from the beginning of the work to the end. For me, this thesis has provided a learning opportunity.

It is my sincere hope that, as well as adding to my personal knowledge, this thesis contributes to the informed debate on issues relating to feminism and Christianity in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

APPENDIX I

**Feminist Christians - A Conflict Resolved?**

INFORMATION SHEET

1. Statement About the Identity of the Researcher and the Supervisor

Anne Duncan is a Masterate student who has carried out post-graduate research in the areas of Religious Studies, Sociology and Women's Studies. This research has been both text-based and/or has involved the taking of oral histories.

This study is primarily a text-based scholarly review and analysis. It does, however, involve the taking of interview material from a small number of women (three) and incorporating these views/experiences into the research.

2. Statement About How to Contact the Researcher and Supervisor

Anne lives in Wellington and is able to be contacted by **telephone** on (04) 476-7536, by **fax** at the same number, by **writing** to 63 Kano Street, Karori, Wellington, or by **email** at [anne.duncan@xtra.co.nz](mailto:anne.duncan@xtra.co.nz)

Dr Lynne Alice, the project supervisor, is able to be contacted at Massey University (Women's Studies Department) by **phoning** (06) 350-4417, by **fax** at (06) 350-5627, or by **email** at [L.C.Alice@massey.ac.nz](mailto:L.C.Alice@massey.ac.nz).

3. Statement About the Nature and Purpose of the Study

The study is primarily a review and analysis of scholarly writings in the area of Christianity and feminism. The research focuses primarily around feminist critiques of Christianity. By analysing and critiquing current thought in this area, and by taking to feminist Christians in a contemporary environment, this research probes the conflict between the two and examines how theorists and pragmatists resolve or fail to resolve the issues of conflict that arise.

This is a study of the point of collision between feminism and Christianity.

4. Statement of What Will Be Asked of the Participants, Including Time Involved

The interviews form the smaller half of the study. Three interviews will be carried out, with each of the three women being asked to talk about issues relating to both their feminism and their Christianity for about an hour. It is not envisaged that the interviews will involve any time additional to the single, hour long interview.

The interviews will be tape recorded and a transcript produced.

5. Statement About Anonymity and Confidentiality

In addressing the issue of anonymity and confidentiality, I appreciate that in 'small' communities such as the Christian and feminist ones, it is likely to be difficult to be able to guarantee anonymity to the interview participants. By small, I mean that in a country such as Aotearoa/New Zealand, it may well be a relatively simple task for someone who has a mind to do so to be able, with a small amount of investigation, to be able to identify the participants in this research. Thus, I am unable to guarantee anonymity to the participants. This must be made clear prior to any interview taking place, and must again be pointed out to participants and their consent obtained before the interview material is incorporated into the study.

In pointing out that it may be possible for participants to be identified, I clearly understand and appreciate the importance of gaining initial informed consent and of continuing to gain consent right up to the stage of using transcript material as part of the study.

6. Statement About the Rights of the Participants, including their Right to Decline to Take Part

I fully understand and appreciate that consent is an on-going process, right up to the point where the interview material is incorporated into the analysis of the study. That is, right up until I use the material gathered from the participants via the interviews, they must be made fully aware of their right to withdraw from the project.

It is vital that I only carry out interviews with fully informed participants. As I am only interviewing three (3), I cannot allow myself to be put in a position where a late withdrawal may occur. This could jeopardise the project in its entirety.

Informed consent must be obtained both prior to and throughout the process of recording, and transcribing the interviews.

Participants must be made aware that participation (initial and on-going) is by their express permission. This must be obtained in written form. This issue of what should be done with the interview tapes must also be decided by the participant. It needs to be pointed out to them that they may wish to and have the right to change their minds about their preference right up until the time the material is incorporated into the study.

**APPENDIX II**

[REDACTED]

6<sup>th</sup> August, 1997

Dear ,

I am writing to you to invite your participation in my research on feminism and religion.

I am a Masterate student at Massey University and am working on a thesis that deals with the relationship between feminism and Christianity. In particular, I am wanting to talk to feminist Christians in order to explore with them how these facets of their lives are expressed. Christian feminist groups such as the group you belong to (Sophia) are thus important places in terms of this study where expressions of feminist Christianity occur.

I would be pleased if you felt you were able to and would like to talk to me about aspects of this subject. I am planning one single hour interview which I would like to tape, should this be acceptable to you.

By way of introduction, I am a lesbian-feminist post-graduate student who is the mother of a six year old boy. I live in Karori with my partner, Marilyn, and undertook my undergraduate work at Victoria University in Women's Studies, completing my BA in 1995. I have since undertaken postgraduate work in sociology and religion at Victoria and am now completing my Masters thesis through Massey University under the supervision of Dr Lynne Alice of the Women's Studies Programme. Dr Alice has published a number of articles about feminism, religion and the women's spirituality movement.

I hope you will agree to participate in this project. I enclose an information sheet and a consent form. I will telephone you in a week from the date of this letter, so that you have had time to consider my request to interview you. You are welcome to contact me before then at the above address. I would like to carry out the interview in August, at your convenience. In the meantime, if you have any questions or concerns please feel free to call either (or both) Dr Alice or myself.

My sincere thanks for your consideration and time.

Regards,

Anne Duncan

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