

**WHAT IS REALLY REAL?**

**A Feminist Critique of the Christian Symbolic Universe**

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis critiques from a woman's experience and perspective the Christian Symbolic Universe's assertion of the transcendent truth, or the "really real" behind every day experience.

My contention in this thesis is that the "really real" – the guiding and shaping force behind all experience – is knowledge created in the image of the elite males who crafted the Christian Symbolic Universe, and that not only does it not fit female experience, it also prioritises male experience in such a way that it damages women.

Starting with my own experience I look at how the Christian Symbolic Universe functions as a tyranny for many women. I then examine how the process of meaning making happens, how vital it is to humans to have control and make sense of their experiences, and how those excluded from this process are also those who suffer most under the oppressive structures of society. I focus on symbols which are central to the teachings of the Christian Symbolic Universe which are particularly damaging for women. I look at the chaos and sense of meaninglessness that accompanies the process of critiquing the authority of the Christian Symbolic Universe. I conclude by looking at an identity for women like myself which allows us space to move and resources to make a difference for ourselves and for other women.

I assert that everyone has the right to be spiritual, to have a symbolic universe which orients life in a purposeful, healthy, affirming way, and that everyone has the right to participate in the creation of meaning. I argue for the relativising of the category of truth so that truth takes its place alongside two other important categories: what is meaningful and what is powerful. I argue for abandoning the canon, the universal truth, and eternal symbols and rituals. The creation of meaning must be open to everyone in every generation.

The "really real" is not a male God who controls and directs everything. The "really real" is the struggle to make sense of life and to have the power to do that in one's own hands.

## DECLARATION

This thesis is original work by Anthea Corinne Garman and has not been submitted in any form to any other University. Where use was made of the work of others it has been acknowledged in the text.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“To make a new world you start with an old one, certainly. To find a world, maybe you have to have lost one. Maybe you have to be lost. The dance of renewal, the dance that made the world, was always danced here at the edge of things, on the brink, on the foggy coast.”*

*Ursula le Guin*

Those words move me. Probably because they are so powerfully true of my experience of living within the Christian Symbolic Universe, trying to escape that universe, finding that I cannot get away from its influence and then having to come to terms with it.

Le Guin, who has woven many fantasy worlds herself in her books, captures so neatly the experience that many religious people have had – that there is no way to start from scratch, from nought. All you have is what already exists and that is the only raw material there is to create something better, more humane and something that begins to approach real justice.

I have used this quote to introduce this thesis because it encapsulates two powerful feelings that I have carried with me for about 10 years now: firstly, the feeling of being lost myself, of being out of touch with the Christian framework that is supposed to define who I am and make meaning of all life holds for me, and the feelings of void, absence and chaos that induces. Secondly, the feeling of being on the edge, on the margins, on the boundaries, of how frightening a place that can be and how exhilarating it can be to step out, to explore new space, to blaze a trail, maybe even to become part of an act of new creation.

This thesis came about because, after completing an honours degree in gender studies, I felt that many of the questions I still had about the way women were treated in the Christian church, were still unanswered. Feminism and my readings had begun to unlock for me the analysis and the tools to understand the position of women in society, and to begin to challenge that. But because I had been a church-goer, and an active participant in the church’s rituals, I was looking for more to explain my own frustration and pain caused by my experience in the church.

I should backtrack and explain who I am and where I come from because it will outline why

the Christian world is so deeply engraved in my identity and why the experience of being lost is so integral to who I am and what has motivated this work.

I started out life in a family that was steeped in the Plymouth Brethren, which had come to be known in South Africa as the Christian Brethren. Starkly puritanical with rigid rules governing every section of life, nothing was undertaken for which there was not Biblical instruction. So, my grandmother would not allow swimming on a Sunday, going to the cinema, wearing trousers or makeup, and associating with anybody who was without the faith. This was a narrow view of life, those without included anyone whose doctrine did not match the Brethren. The enemy was not only the world but other Christians, particularly the Roman Catholic Church.

The narrowness of the Brethren drove me out. By the time I was 16, I was an atheist. I could not believe in their fearsome God. But the experience had created in me a deep longing which I knew to be a spiritual place in myself. When I was at university I encountered Pentecostals. The contrast was amazing. They were cheerful, they were convinced God was loving, and they did not instantly judge those who didn't fit into their framework. The particular church I began to attend was filled with artists, people who had been homosexuals and those who had come out of the drug culture. The enlarging of the boundaries to make space for these people (even in their converted state they were anything but the usual churchgoers) was very appealing to me. It was seductive and I found myself being "born again".<sup>1</sup> There was great warmth, enjoyment and pleasure in their company and a strong feeling of being loved and belonging. It took about four years before I started to understand the theology behind the facade. What I discovered was the same God. Judging, angry, power-hungry. What eventually drove me out of this church was a power struggle between two men who both wanted to be pastor. I could not make the choice I was being forced to make, because the choice was being cast in terms of good vs evil, God vs the devil.

At the same time I was working as a journalist for the Rand Daily Mail in Johannesburg in

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<sup>1</sup>See "In Search of the Spirit" by Don Lattin in Utne Reader Nov/Dec 1995 for an interesting analysis of why Pentecostalism is not the same thing as right-wing Christian fundamentalism and the classist nature of its appeal.

the early 1980s. I was encountering South Africa and its underside daily. Black colleagues were forcing me to see how brutal and dehumanised their lives were. I started to feel schizophrenic. The people I went to church with were white and middle-class. They were sublimely unaware of the reality of the country apartheid kept hidden from them.

During this time – I was in my early 20s – I went to live with an uncle in the Cape Province who was a self-appointed evangelist. He lived without any income in a small house and worked only with “coloured” people. He lived like them in poverty and some squalor. With him and those people I had some very intense spiritual experiences. Their brand of religion was the same Pentecostal faith which saw all this world’s problems being resolved in the next. But, the intensity of the spiritual experiences was real. I cannot claim to have seen visions, or dreamt dreams, but I had intense encounters with God, strong feelings of his presence and premonitions about people and events.

I have no neat explanations for what that means, and in the light of my present situation, those experiences often seem unreal. But to be true to myself I cannot discount them and must find out how to integrate them into my life and who I am. What they have done is convince me that the spiritual is utterly real.

The power of those experiences drove me to want to devote all my time to work that would further the “Kingdom of God”. I was offered a job with an evangelistic organisation as a journalist and I took it. Despite the deep warmth and kindness of many of the people I worked with, the most pervasive characteristic of the five years I worked there was a deadening feeling of my personal relationship with God. And a distinct and growing sense of the “absence of the presence of God”.<sup>2</sup> It was strong and frightening. I did all the things prescribed by the church to overcome the experience: I confessed, I was vigilant about every wrongdoing, I tried to “pray unceasingly” so as never to lose contact with God. And when I could feel nothing I held on to the belief of others that God must simply be there whether I knew it or not.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Prozesky A New Guide to the Debate about God, p82. Prozesky was referring to the experience which William Hamilton discussed in his article “The death of God theologies today” in The Christian Scholar, vol 48, 1965, p31.



The other powerful factor of my time with this organisation was that I was almost always the only woman member of the team. My experiences of being overlooked (or, at the other extreme, of being treated like a mascot); having my views ignored; knowing promotion or leadership was an illusion; and hearing daily censure of the behaviour of women without the accompanying censure of the behaviour of men, began to rankle terribly. Eventually in deep frustration and anguish I cried out for release from these two situations in my life that had me in a pincer grip. Driving home alone in my car one night I had an experience I can only consider an epiphany. I have kept a diary since I was 21. That night, my own words written over the five years of this very frustrating time, came rushing into my head. I heard loudly things I had written speak to me. Irrevocably I knew the only way was out. I left the organisation and I left my church.<sup>3</sup>

For the next three years I was an embarrassed outcast of my own making.<sup>4</sup> I kept on telling myself those words had come to me because God had given them to me and I kept desperately asking him to speak to me, in vain. I found it impossible, at the time, to explain to anybody within the church what I was doing on the outside. I couldn't talk about the dead feeling of God's absence, which I was now slowly admitting to myself. Eventually when I began the honours degree gender studies course I encountered people who didn't find this experience strange (many of them never having had an experience of God's presence) and I began to unravel these things by looking at them and analysing them with the new tools the study of feminism was giving me. Beyond everything else I learnt, I discovered that I remain a person with deep spiritual need, and someone who is always deeply attracted to anything spiritual or anyone who demonstrates a deeper level and understanding of existence.

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<sup>3</sup>At the time I thought it was God speaking to me, God breaking his five-year silence to reach out to me in a time of extreme pain. Now I think entirely differently about this experience. The words that filled my mind were my own. Some very vigilant, life-preserving, sanity-maintaining aspect of my own self was looking after me.

<sup>4</sup>It is important to point out at this juncture that I acknowledge here that this choice was entirely my own. In interaction with other women in my postgraduate seminar group I have become keenly aware that they too suffer this kind of pain but choose to remain within the church because of their commitment to other marginalised communities. At the time I made this decision commitment to a specific marginalised community was not a significant factor in how I saw my predicament. However, my enormous frustration with the organisation's paranoia (as I saw it) about being drawn into the sinful world of political activism, was a very important factor in this decision. I am aware that in communities of poor, black women, very often the church and the Bible provide empowering and strengthening ways to survive very depressed circumstances. I am aware that my stance is completely at odds with other women who choose to remain within the church and those women who form the majority of the population of the church. Although our positions may look contrary I still find much in common with them and endeavour to continue relating to them regardless of our very different positions.

Then about two years ago I found myself sliding into the kind of depression I felt I would never recover from. After a course of medication I started seeing a psychotherapist. I set the agenda for the therapy and one of the dominating themes was my feeling of being owned and tyrannised by God the father.

The psychotherapy revealed some fascinating things. Firstly, my relationship with my own father is a very complex, problematic one. I am the only child of his marriage with my mother. All my life he has treated me as an extension of himself. He says things to me like: “I know you, everything you do is because of me” thereby implying there is no independent life from him. It began to make sense in psychotherapy that my own experience of literal patriarchal domination is deeply imbedded in my spiritual experience. My feelings of God’s presence in my life becoming deadened coincide exactly with my permanent move away from the city my father lives in. On the other hand my experience of my mother has huge gaps and absences. It is clear she never interfered with my father’s overbearing presence in my life. And it makes sense that my strong feelings of absence of any kind of “mothering” and nurturing spiritually are related to that relationship.

I have started to understand why I feel certain very powerful things now and where they come from. I realise I moved out of the church because of a whole conglomeration of factors: I no longer wanted to be treated as a child, but as an adult. The God the father image makes church goers into permanent children to be “daddied” and chastised. Where is the mutuality in a relationship with this all-powerful male God? The scriptures urge growing up into maturity, but there is no equality with God, no mutuality, no give and take ever made possible. And being female subjugates one even further. There must always be some male mediating who one is and what one does, at home, in society and in the church.

And where is the mother? Where is the female? Where is the divine feminine? If it is there in the Bible it is sublimated under male-constructed teaching which has the effect of denying its presence at all. Not only is God thoroughly male in all his facets; there are no roles for

women (other than dutiful and silent wife and mother); no female figures to emulate; no female issues in the public life of the church. Although the majority of dedicated worshippers are women and the grind work to keep the church ticking over is done by them, they are rendered invisible and of no importance in church life.

These spiritual experiences align exactly with my entire life. No wonder I cannot live any longer in that world. Spiritually, it is an exact extension of my childhood which now sits like a too-tight suit.

So why write this thesis? Surely to sort out my own problems in the confines of my psychotherapist's office would be infinitely more bearable for the rest of the world. I believe that this experience is much wider than in my own head. There are thousands if not millions of women Christians expressing their frustration with the church world-wide. Not only that: the Christian religion is rapidly losing ground in this century as a framework that makes sense of life. It is out of step, not just with modernity but with issues thrown up by our increasingly rapid movement into a 21st century of great challenges. The pronouncements from on high on how to behave are greeted with hoots of derisiveness – witness the Pope's statements on contraception in an age of the plague of Aids. If God is a father, many of us are rebellious teenagers desperately eager to grow up and run our own lives.

As I have read and researched for this thesis I increasingly see the problem I face in the following way:

- That the reality I know and experience is totally unlike the reality the church prescribes as the real one. This is true not just of my experience as a woman with independent life and thought and action, but as a working person in a world the church has little influence in, and as a citizen where many of the perceptions and actions of the church have failed to make an impact on political reality.
- That the power to make meaning, to dictate reality, to define purpose and action is truly in the hands of a “kyriarchy”, a power structure of a few elite males.<sup>5</sup> That this kyriarchy specialises in keeping that power within a tightly bounded area of control so that those who find themselves at odds with their definition of spiritual life are banished to the outskirts or the wastes beyond, where they have no power to affect the making of meaning.

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<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's terminology to distinguish elite men with power from all men as a more accurate term to describe the structure of oppression. See But, She Said, p117.

- That the spiritual is important because it is at this level that meaning and purpose and reality are constructed not just for individuals, but for whole communities. For example all the public debates on issues like abortion always have a moral dimension in which the theologians and the religious hold powerful sway, even though in a secular state it can be argued that these issues should be considered purely political and social matters to be decided on those levels.

It would be easy to abandon any kind of interaction with the Christian Symbolic Universe altogether. But, I know myself to be a spiritual being, I know myself to be capable of a dimension of existence that the church is now denying me a right or a passage to. And I feel strongly that many of the secular people I know have abandoned the spiritual because the symbol system it requires them to live within does not fit the reality of the lives they lead. This exclusive control (despite platitudes like: the church is the only institution that exists for its non-members) over what should be part and parcel of human experience for all of us, is unforgivable. My assertion is everyone has the right to a spiritual dimension to life and everyone has the right to participate in deciding what that will consist of. To abandon the Christian Symbolic Universe is to leave a vital area of influence and control for the western world in the hands of a few men who do not represent the wide and divergent population of that world. That means that one has to do battle with the “inherited Christian Symbolic Universe”. Or maybe not so much battle, as something like “Godwrestling”, in the words of Judith Plaskow,<sup>6</sup> the Jewish feminist theologian.

My experience of the last four years of this kind of wrestling with reality, has been that as I journey out of the boundaries of the Christian Symbolic Universe, I have to struggle with my sense of identity and purpose. Who am I if I do not have an established community confirming my existence? What am I doing with my life? Who is significant around me to help me establish priority and meaning and purpose? Am I in danger of cutting myself off from a community which would prevent me from straying into unbridled individualism and privatisation of important issues to women and to the marginalised? And how do I cope when the feelings of meaninglessness and purposelessness start to become overwhelming and the boundaries of what is real and possible and allowable seem unclear?

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<sup>6</sup> Weaving the Visions, p42.

I do not have neat answers for any of this. But I do think that this is territory that has to be traversed and which I have tried to face honestly. The purpose of this thesis is not so much to draw a fool-proof map for this journey for others but to assert the right of myself, other women, and the marginalised of the church to theologise, to name, to define and to own the spiritual process and the symbolic universes where meaning is created at the deepest levels of existence. This is merely an exploration in how I have gone about it. And the methods and constructions I use are not the only ones. They are a means to enable me to understand the inner workings of theology, ideology and rituals. There are other ways, and I encountered a plethora of definitions and ways of seeing, many of which I considered and put aside because I thought to streamline images, metaphors and terminology would help to keep the task of this thesis focused.

Because of that I have mostly used the image of the Christian Symbolic Universe which comes from Linell Cady and the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, and related images of rituals, borders, boundaries and symbols which he expounds on. The title of this thesis “What is really real?” relates to Geertz’ contention that the purpose of a symbolic universe is to help human beings sift and establish what is “really real” from the multiplicity of experiences and events that happen to them. I have found this to be very illuminating in distinguishing the authenticity of female experience especially when it is in dissonance with the prescribed reality of the church.<sup>7 8</sup>

I also use Linell E. Cady, who leans on the work of Geertz, for an analysis of the relationship of feminist theologians and the work they do to the past tradition of the church. She introduces the categories of “meaningful, powerful and true” as a critique of the inherited Christian Symbolic Universe, and I have found those categories to be exceedingly helpful in

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<sup>7</sup>For example the prescription by evangelical Christians that women who are raped and give birth as a result will find the baby a source of healing and forgiveness as the maternal instinct takes over. See “Opposing Abortion” by Jo-ann Downs in *Agenda*, No 27, 1995.

<sup>8</sup>I am using the word “church” throughout this thesis in the most general way. I am aware that the world-wide church is multi-faceted and contains a myriad theological positions, a few of which are highly enlightened and some even emancipatory for women. It is lack of exact terminology and an unwillingness to get bogged down in the intricacies of exactly which branches and strands of theological thinking espouse what, that lead me to use the general term. The way I use the word throughout this thesis connotes the mainstream, male-dominated, conservative theologies and practices that have characterised those churches in South Africa I have been a member of or exposed to. My exposure to liberation theology has shown me that national liberation is a higher priority than the emancipation of women.

my own analysis of what to retrieve, what to recast, and what to abandon as unuseful. She also looks at who is responsible for continuing to make symbolic universes “more adequate visions” – a theme I pick up on and develop into a question: “Why are those charged with the task not doing the job for all of us properly?”

The work of Robert Schreiter, a Catholic who has worked in the third world and who deals with situations of syncretism, is helpful in understanding margins, boundaries and the movements on the edges of symbolic universes which explain why at times there are huge social upheavals and changes in power structures. For Schreiter syncretism is very problematic for the church, for me it is an example of enormous creative energy in making a foreign dominant version of reality pliable so that it is moulded into a more adequate shape which empowers rather than disempowers.

Sharon Welch’s insights into domination, control and the links with the symbol of the omnipotent God are helpful in getting to grips with the roots of the Christian Symbolic Universe and the drives that power it. Welch also has a healthy attitude to chaos which enlightens my search on how to unwind a symbolic universe that has become tyrannous and how to cope in the absence of another coherent, all-inclusive system.

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza gave me the category of “resident alien” which enables me to find an identity for myself, a purpose and a strategy as I am both marginal and privileged and not entirely happy to be stationary on the boundaries of the Christian Symbolic Universe.

And finally the visit of Chung Hyun Kyung to South African while I was putting the finishing touches to my thesis injected thoughts about truly contextual meaning-making which involves those who need liberation most, and about syncretism as something positive and possible.

Along the way there were other writers with other ways of seeing, but I have tried not to let the plethora of images start to overwhelm these central categories, helpful and insightful as they are.

I am greatly indebted to the understanding, patience and insight of my postgraduate seminar group at the School of Theology, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, who have journeyed with me for four years. They have been absolutely integral to the new process I have been exploring as an alternative to the Christian Symbolic Universe. In a myriad of ways they have been my significant community who have reflected, confirmed and helped me make new meaning for myself. The women in particular have been both very supportive and very critical and have not allowed me to lapse into any sisterhood sentimentality. The lecturers have strongly supported this venture into a mixture of academics and experience and pushed me into areas I would not have had the courage otherwise to go into. They have even tolerated it when I read them poetry and berated theologians for shirking their task of extending the Christian Symbolic Universe adequately for women!

## CHAPTER ONE

### There is no easy rejection

*“But it ain’t easy, trying to do without God. Even if you know he ain’t there, trying to do without him is a strain.”*

*Celie to Nettie in The Color Purple by Alice Walker.*

There has been no easy rejection of the Christian Symbolic Universe for me. Or as Celie puts it with such insight “Doing without God is a strain”. Why? Many people live entirely fruitful lives in which they give the church and the world it creates around itself scant attention. They do not find their lives impoverished and they hardly feel the need to go to church. Why can I not do the same? I have tried. By putting distance between myself and the church (not attending services, removing myself from the lists of available people to help with talks, seminars, etc) I had hoped that the pain I felt within the church would lessen, that the distance would bring objectivity and something new to fill the gap. Instead I have felt a void, terrible chaos at times and at other times a distinct feeling of being pursued and driven back.

After years of disquiet one particular experience crystallised the continuing sense for me of being still under the power of the all-controlling male God<sup>9</sup>. Although the power of this experience continues to live with me I am aware that it can be reduced to merely a psychological expression of my emotional turmoil at the time. I had left the church and cut my ties with it, I was actively re-assessing my faith and all the things I had believed from childhood, and because I had become a mother I was keenly aware that I no longer had a spiritual inheritance to pass on to the child I was raising. However, I assert that this is a “primal religious experience”<sup>10</sup> and the reason why I do this is because I have had enough experience in the presence of God the Father to know him when I encounter him.

My daughter was about a year old and she got diarrhoea and became very dehydrated. I had spent an entire day with her spoon-feeding water into her mouth so that she would not have

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<sup>9</sup>Throughout this thesis when I use the word “God” this is the character I am referring to. Although I am aware of the recovery work being done by many feminist theologians to “re-gender” God, I am taking issue in this work with the traditional male God of the Christian Symbolic Universe and his power. That is why throughout I refer to the gender of God as male and use the pronoun he.

<sup>10</sup>See the experience recounted by Ruether of a woman who envisioned Christ as a raped woman rather than a crucified man in response to a sexual attack. “Renewal or New Creation” in Gunew, p286.



to be hospitalised. That evening my mother phoned to find out how it was going. My mother is a very religious and dutiful Christian who believes in revelation. She told me she had been praying for us all day and had a message for me from God. The message was: that God was not pleased that I was not raising my daughter to know and love him, that if I did not do so he would take her away from me, because she belonged to him. Again this can be dismissed – as the emotional manipulation of an overly-worried grandparent. For me it was like a lightning bolt. I knew that this God whom I was defying was making a last ditch attempt to force me back under his control. He was using the one thing I had steadfastly refused him control over. One image stood out in my mind, that he was hounding me, that he had come after me. In a split second I made a choice. I felt as though I was standing on the edge of a chasm and that my choice could cost me and my daughter our lives – both literally and spiritually, in that we might be outcast and cut off from salvation for ever. But I felt the most enormous anger that he had dared to say that she belonged to him. I shouted out inside my head: She is mine, my body gave her life, I have kept her alive since she was born by feeding and nurturing her. If she belongs to anyone, she is mine, and you cannot have her.

That was my last contact with the God I had decided I would no longer give my allegiance to. Either I now am so far beyond his grasp he cannot reach me, or he has given me over to the wilderness. In these days of growing awareness of democracy and the power of the individual many Christians I know compare the power of God to the rule of a benign dictator. That night I felt the anger of a tyrant and it has spurred on my quest to understand why I struggle so to be free of the world I chose to walk away from.

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza says: “Western women are not able to discard completely and forget our personal, cultural, or religious Christian history. We will either transform it into a new liberating future or continue to be subject to its tyranny whether we recognise its power or not.”<sup>11</sup>

On an intellectual level, Schüssler Fiorenza is tapping into a very serious issue – that of a history which cannot be denied or abandoned easily, because of the power it continues to

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<sup>11</sup>In Plaskow and Christ, Weaving the Visions, p40.

wield over the secularistic western world at the end of the 20th century, and because the culture in which we live and move and have our being is permeated by it.<sup>12</sup> But on a deeply spiritual level she is touching the experiences of pain, of tyranny, of the shared memory Christian women have which extends through thousands of years of abuse of the female.

For me to defy the dominion of the Christian tradition over my life is to have seen its ugly tyrannising, dominating face very clearly. The dictator is benign only when he is pleased. The point I am trying to make here is that the Christian Symbolic Universe might be terrible to live in for women like me, but it can be as difficult to leave as it is to stay. That is the first reason why I have to grapple with the God of the Christian Symbolic Universe. The extent of his power and the influence he wields over people around me and through my society must be dealt with.

The second reason is because I find myself in the gap between an unsatisfactory past and an uncertain future. This often feels like a vacuum, a frameless place without reference points. This is fine as a temporary refuge and place to reconsider, re-evaluate and make decisions about direction but it does not make for an inheritance to pass on to others, especially other women of future generations and in particular my own daughter, and that fact impresses itself on me keenly and urgently. It is not possible to create from nothing, even if the Biblical tradition insists that God himself was able to do so – all of human endeavour shows that to be nonsense. Some kind of engagement with the past is going to have to be undertaken so that the present is transformed into a liberating future. Women like me cannot start from scratch to create a heritage for the women of the future. We need some building material.

At this point it is important to diverge and consider an alternative some women who have left the church find to be a real option – a move behind the Christian tradition and into the pre-Christian past of goddess worship.

Goddess worship is an alternative espoused particularly by Carol Christ. She says to reach back 5000 years to find the female creator god allows modern women to find the divine

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<sup>12</sup> She says in But, She Said “I believe that feminists must develop a critical interpretation for liberation not in order to keep women in biblical religions, but because biblical texts affect all women in Western society.” p7.

within themselves and affirm female power. It allows them to relate to a personal female god if they need to. The goddess is symbol of the life, death and rebirth cycles of nature and culture, which has a constraining effect on the desire towards omnipotence of human beings and injects a healthy dose of respect for the earth into religion. Although I think the reclaiming work being done here is enormously important for the whole field of feminist theology I find that I personally have three problems with the alternative of goddess worship.

Firstly it reaches too far back for me to feel that there is continuity and congruence with my life and experience. Secondly, it is very hard to shake off the deep-seated fear of the pagan which evangelical Christianity bred into me. And thirdly, instead of feeling that goddess worship is a new and fresh religious experience, it often feels like a female god is a mere transposition of sex for the same god I have always known. This last feeling is particularly keen when I encounter the work of those who see in the spirit of God a female deity who is God and complements God. Susan Cady, Marian Ronan and Hal Taussig make use of the Wisdom tradition to show that a female aspect of God – Sophia – is recoverable. They are deeply conscious, as I am, that the pagan goddess image may not be a useful one for people within the Christian tradition. “If the goddess becomes a strange, exotic figure, substantially lacking in historical context, if she is perceived as a mythic, romantic figure appealing primarily to alienated white middle-class women, she will be of little use in the struggle to develop a new consciousness of connectedness.”<sup>13</sup>

Although this is a laudable attempt to grapple with the distortion of the maleness of God (when there is ample evidence within the Biblical tradition that “he” is not only male) I have not seen this piece of recovery work being embraced by women I know in the church. This is possibly because they have no access to this kind of work as it tends to remain within academic circles. But women of influence, such as the newly ordained priests of the Anglican Church in South Africa, are also not using it to inspire the women in their congregations.

My own response is that unwinding the tyranny of the Christian Symbolic Universe is more than just finding a female power to celebrate. It is about opening up the process of meaning-

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<sup>13</sup>Sophia: the future of feminist spirituality, pp9-10.

making. I agree with Daphne Hampson who says: "... whereas Christian feminists want to change the actors in the play, what I want is a different kind of play".<sup>14</sup>

The third reason that I find it difficult to walk away from the Christian church and cut myself off from it, is that I find myself nameless out here, and continuing to be defined by it. How do I name and define myself in the place outside the reach of the Christian church? Because of the moulding that religion did to me in the earliest part of my life, I do not find myself comfortable giving myself in the same kind of devoted way to other forms of religion, and I am hypersensitive to any activity or mode of belief that begins to display the same fundamentalism and controlling interests that Christianity had over me. At a recent gathering of women from about five different religions who were all thinking through their problematic relationships to their faiths<sup>15</sup> I was asked to say who I was. I resorted to calling myself an ex-Christian or a post-Christian – a thoroughly unsatisfactory way of having to define myself as a negative category in reference to the faith I now find inadequate.

In the gap, identity has become a big problem for me, and so has community. If I am not part of a specific community of faith that defines purpose and meaning for me, then what do I call myself and how do I define what I am doing with my life? Who should I relate to? Who can be trusted to be an adequate mirror of reality so that I do not land up in a self-pleasing individualism?

The fourth reason I find I cannot just let the Christian Symbolic Universe be, is that even though I do not feel myself to have a "calling", I do feel responsible for challenging the power of the church so that other women do not have to suffer the debilitating effects of Christian teaching which upholds misogyny. The realisation for me that the Christian tradition has a history of denying women the status of human being and personhood and has condoned and participated in the torture of women, was earth-shattering. And the evidence stretches from the Biblical accounts which espouse horrific misogyny through to the present

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<sup>14</sup>Theology and Feminism, p162.

<sup>15</sup>This gathering was convened by Agenda magazine and the resultant writings appear in volume 25, 1995.

day church which does not see, or does not care, about the endemic violence against women all over the world. Within the Bible there are a myriad women, who although active in the narrative and whose behaviour is central to the outcome of the plot, have no names. They are just never recorded. This same indignity is never accorded the men who are central or incidental to the plot. Again and again women are raped, dominated and discarded. They are property to be used for the purposes of individual men, societies, armies and kingdoms. The history of the church is a shameful one with the most notable series of events being the 500-year persecution of “witches” in Europe which some scholars estimate to be on a scale comparable with the Holocaust.<sup>16</sup>

The modern day church treats the world-wide, horrifically endemic, violence against women as though it is not one of the major problems facing humanity in its scope and intractability. The recent Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing showed that millions of women are bought and sold, trafficked, treated as spoils of war, and still considered so worthless as not even to be given a chance at life itself – witness the widespread female infanticide through ultrasound scanning and abortion which is rife in Asia.<sup>17</sup> Within the safe and civilised, middle-class, developed world reports of wife battering, abusive treatment of girls, and the general paranoia that women internalise so that they are always subconsciously aware of the need for protection from the men of their society, gets scarcely a mention in the church’s policies and documents, never mind in its sermons.

This condoning of torture and of denigration of the female cannot be walked away from. It is like the Holocaust. It demands a reaction. Any woman aware of this legacy cannot allow it ever to happen again. It is like apartheid. Huge amounts of work must be expended, not just into unwinding the ideologies and spiritual underpinnings of these systems, but into setting up safeguards so that these kinds of atrocities may be brought to a halt and can never happen again.

It is these four powerful conditions: the feeling of being tyrannised; the distinct feeling that

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<sup>16</sup>See Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father, p63.

<sup>17</sup>Unpublished report compiled by Sizani Ngubane, Gender Specialist at the Association for Rural Advancement, Pietermaritzburg, from the Beijing NGO Conference, August to September, 1995.

the vacuum is an unsatisfactory place to be, and doesn't provide a good legacy to pass on; the discomfort of being defined negatively by my opposition to the church; as well as the complex decision of choosing how and where to be an agent of change; that have given great impetus to this inquiry. On one level activism is an effective method to deal with these concerns, but it is important to have the intellectual and spiritual tools to underpin activism.

It has therefore become important to me to find a way of understanding the power of the Christian Symbolic Universe, and particularly its destructive power for women. I need the tools to understand why it functions on such a deep level to sustain the patriarchy of not only the western world, but all those places where Christianity forced other religions to bow to it when it arrived hard on the heels of the colonisers. Are there any cracks in this structure, that appears to be so monolithic, that can be widened so that other ways of seeing the world might begin to impact on the centres where meaning-making happens?

Linell E. Cady's paper "Hermeneutics and tradition: the role of the past in jurisprudence and theology"<sup>18</sup> was my first insight into the inner workings of the "Christian Symbolic Universe". Cady outlines a very useful set of options in understanding how people relate to the past. This opens up the possibility for me to deal with the tyrannising aspects of the Christian Symbolic Universe. She also shows that symbolic universes are supposed to be visions of reality that keep changing to keep pace with altering events and experiences. They are both static and moving – holding onto certain powerful insights for a community, and going out to embrace the future and learn about it so that it too can be incorporated into a meaningful vision. Cady charges theologians specifically with this task.

To turn to the first issue – coming to terms with the past: Cady highlights the complexity of coming to grips with the "inherited" Christian tradition and with the legacy it gives women by using tools from another field of study – jurisprudence. Like theology, jurisprudence is constrained by its past. How to interpret that past successfully in the light of modern day concerns and challenges so that material may be found to orient life meaningfully for women,

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<sup>18</sup>Harvard Theological Review 79:4, 1986.

is Cady's special concern.<sup>19</sup>

Cady outlines three categories of response to the Christian tradition: conventionalism, naturalism and instrumentalism. She says that those who consider the past totally authoritative for an interpretation of present day actions and beliefs are acting in a "conventionalist" manner. Decisions are made solely on the basis of precedents. The tradition is closely scrutinised for as careful a fit to the present-day situation as possible and action is taken on that basis. Those espousing this view do not consider themselves to be engaging in interpretation of the tradition but in simple application. So, for example, the Christian Pro-life lobby in the abortion debate cannot find within Biblical tradition a direct statement on the permissibility or otherwise of abortion. But within the Bible they find the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" and within the western tradition they find the philosophy that all human life is sacred, and from that they assert that abortion is a terrible evil (killing innocent unborn life is murder of the worst sort) and they lobby lawmakers not to allow it on the statute books. They consider themselves to have apprehended the intent of the Christian tradition (and the mind of God) without any human intervention. Phrases such as "God says", "the Bible says" and the use of the category of "revelation" are central to this position. Those who adopt this position consider themselves duty bound to fit present events and action to the dictates of the past.

This position is most problematic for feminists. It is the prevalent mindset in the church (not just the fundamentalist sections of the church) and it is the attitude which has continued for centuries to endorse anti-female behaviour. The Biblical tradition overtly contains stories of dangerous women who do not know their place, who presume too much, and who are violently put back into their prescribed place. These stories are considered authoritative and modern behaviour (women working, earning money, raising children alone), is considered an aberration from what is normal and spiritually healthy and therefore women must be forced to return to the Biblical norm. Cady points out that even evangelical feminists find it difficult

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<sup>19</sup>It is important to point out here that although my particular interest is grappling with the Christian tradition from without the church, coming to terms with the tradition is a huge part of the endeavour of women who remain within the church, because the authority of the church and its power over people is tightly connected to its past. How authoritative is that past is, is a question one encounters again and again in the work of feminist theologians who work from within the church.

to come to terms with this position. They might belong to communities of Christians who espouse this position, but they themselves have to grapple with the fact that it inherently demeans women. Cady says: “It is noteworthy that feminist theology does not reflect the conventionalist approach to the past. Even conservative evangelical feminists have concluded that a positivistic conception of revelation inevitably sanctifies the patriarchal distortions of the ancient Near East.”<sup>20</sup>

A move away from conventionalism brings us to a “naturalist” position in which decisions are made based not just on a precedent but also on the context of the precedent. Here interpretations must be based on past decisions, but they must also be informed by the entire framework and intent of the context of the precedent. So in the above abortion example, other factors such as the quality of human life, the suffering of women, and the questionable justice of an absolute position of “thou shalt not kill” as well as the lack of specific knowledge about practices in this regard in the Biblical community, would be brought into the evaluation of the situation. The decision becomes increasingly complex the more context is brought to bear on it.

In grappling with the Bible “naturalists” look for context rather than content. They look behind the text to find the intent. The kind of work which takes cognisance of context is work, for example, like Rosemary Radford Ruether’s who looks for the liberating strands and the prophetic pronouncements within the Biblical tradition as more indicative of the “mind of God” than the actual happenings recorded. This position is self-consciously interpretive.

The third position is an “instrumentalist” one. In this the past is considered useful only if it has something helpful to offer the present situation. The usefulness of the past is evaluated in the light of a specific present political agenda. “This approach concedes that there may be

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<sup>20</sup>An interesting example of a Christian woman espousing the “abortion is morally wrong” point of view is given in Agenda, no 27 of 1995, which highlights the difficulties conventionalists find themselves in. Jo-ann Downs, a central committee member of the African Christian Democratic Party, is forced to use evidence of legal abortion in South Africa being both physically and psychologically dangerous to argue for the “Unborn Children’s Protection Act” which her party has submitted as a draft bill before the South African Parliament. She is obviously aware that just to rely on a single religious tradition for her argument will not sway legislators in a pluralist society. And she relies heavily on arguments that veer into context (eg: abortion damages women) to get across her viewpoint.



strategic reasons for taking the past into account ... this pragmatic use of the past, however, is still consistent with the fundamental criterion of creating a more just community.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, if the past fits with a present day agenda of justice for women, then it can be considered useful. So to continue with the abortion example: here the guiding agenda would be justice, human dignity and empowerment and personal choice for women as understood today. If the Biblical tradition could be found to contain useful examples of these kinds of impetuses they would be incorporated into the argument. If not, and here the degree of interpretation of what constitutes helpful becomes increasingly guided by the political agenda, then the Biblical legacy would be discarded as not having any power to inform the debate.

I have deliberately used the abortion debate as an example because the lack of a clear fit with the past highlights the futile use of the conventionalist approach for feminist theologians, and the complexity often of the naturalist approach. While Cady strongly believes in the past as a “source of genuine insight”<sup>22</sup> and is concerned with the relationship between past and present, she concedes that a strategic use of the past is often more suited to the purposes of feminists. “What possible sense is there in a right to maintain a theological vision which, on moral or cosmological grounds, appears inadequate? ... perhaps in theology at least the instrumentalist approach is correct in arguing that it is irrational, as well as immoral, for the past to have more than a strategic role in shaping theological positions.”<sup>23</sup>

Cady is not willing to give up on the naturalist approach completely, and neither are other feminist theologians. Ruether says: “The effort to express contemporary experience in a cultural and historical vacuum is both self-deluding and unsatisfying” ... as humans we have a very deep need to “situate (ourselves) meaningfully in history”.<sup>24</sup>

In defence of the naturalist approach the reclamation work of theologians such as Ruether,

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<sup>21</sup>“Hermeneutics and Tradition”, p447.

<sup>22</sup> p460.

<sup>23</sup> p455.

<sup>24</sup>Sexism and God-Talk, p18.

Schüssler Fiorenza, Sandra Schneiders and the reinterpreted work of Phyllis Trible and Mieke Bal, is fundamental to the power and huge, sustained challenge that feminist theology now poses to the establishment church. This is recovery of the “genuine insight” Cady makes a plea for.

But there are times and points in the grappling with the past where a strategic assessment of the tradition is the only useful way to deal with the legacy. For example, what does one do with the “Texts of Terror”<sup>25</sup> – the appalling litany of actions against women which are canonised as a means to frighten, disempower and keep women in their place? The only way to use these stories is strategically for the following purposes: as insight into the workings of patriarchy so that one can be armed; memory, so that like the Holocaust these stories function as a warning of what human actions to guard against diligently; and a source of anger and rage which provides the power and motivation to create change.

In order to help women wade through the territory of the past Cady provides what I find to be very enabling categories to make the judgement on how to tackle the problem of the burden of the past. She asks if the existing tradition has the power to orient life in a “meaningful, truthful, powerful”<sup>26</sup> way, and I add, for women. The different stances of feminist theologians are the result of their differing assessments of the capacity of the resources of the inherited tradition to be meaningful, powerful and true, says Cady.

Like Cady many feminist theologians move between the naturalist position and the instrumentalist position. To give an example: Elsa Tamez examines whether the Bible is really liberating for women in the same way that it is being used as a tool of political liberation for the poor of Latin America. She finds that although the “central message is profoundly liberating” and in true naturalist analysis finds that the context of the Gospels is a spirit of justice and freedom which “neutralizes anti-female texts”, she then enters into an instrumentalist position when she instructs women to “deny the authority of those readings which harm them”. She in no way agrees with a total rejection of the Bible, but is using the categories of meaningful, powerful and true as they apply to women in her society, as a

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<sup>25</sup> The title of Phyllis Trible’s book.

<sup>26</sup> “Hermeneutics and Tradition”, p461.

sifting mechanism.<sup>27</sup>

My own position tends towards being instrumentalist. But I do see women in South Africa interpreting the Bible from their experience in such a way that they find material which is empowering, particularly poor black women who are deeply embedded in the blend of Christian Symbolic Universe and patriarchal culture. Finding the cracks in the edifice of Biblical teaching and widening them gives these women space to breathe and reflect – an important first step on the journey to making spiritual meaning for oneself and not having it mediated to one by a male.<sup>28</sup> They do not have the option, as I do, of walking away. I still espouse an instrumentalist position, but I must stand with Cady when she argues that there are moments in the tradition when “genuine insight” emerges.

However, I find that the more positive aspects of Biblical tradition which acknowledge women (for instance the claims that both Jesus and Paul promoted and worked with women as important members of the new community of Christian faith) no longer move me as I feel the incidents are too few and far between to string together an alternative theology. But the “Texts of Terror”, which I first encountered with revulsion<sup>29</sup>, continue to motivate me to reflection, study and activism.

To return to the question: “What is meaningful, powerful and true?” For thousands of years the hierarchy<sup>30</sup> of the church has probably been using these exact categories (certainly they have laboured over “what is true” resulting in a plethora of warring denominations) in an unconscious way to decide the canon, teach the dogmas and excommunicate the heretics. They have been doing the work of constantly relooking at the symbolic universe and making changes to it. Cady says: “The theologian, as I see it, is primarily involved in investigating

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<sup>27</sup>“Women’s Rereading the Bible” in *Voices from the Margin*, p65.

<sup>28</sup>See “Reading the Bible ‘with’ women in poor and marginalised communities” by Beverley Haddad and Malika Sibeko (both theology students at UNP) which explored how women in a Zionist church felt about the church’s attitude to menstruation and their response to the story of the haemorrhaging woman who touched Jesus. An unpublished paper.

<sup>29</sup> It took the conscientisation of feminism to give me the eyes to see these stories in this way. For years I had interpreted them to myself in a way that hid their sinister meanings.

<sup>30</sup>I am using the words “hierarchy” and “theologian(s)” to mean those elite men who have had an inordinate amount of power over the shaping of the Christian Symbolic Universe. Again the words are possibly too general as there are many who do not fit the caricature. But my purpose is not to assign one specific meaning to the

the meaning, truth and power of the world view(s) which shape human experience ... a picture of the way things truly are and an emotional and moral sensitivity which responds to this picture.”<sup>31</sup>

Cady sees the task of the theologian as “extending” what is meaningful, powerful and true, reworking it so that it keeps on fitting reality and giving orientation. Seen in a vacuum and separate from the complexities of life as we know it, the “priests, shamans, seers of different varieties, healers and magicians”<sup>32</sup> are supposed to negotiate the different realities that experience throws up for us as we traverse time. They have the special power to walk between this physical world and the spiritual world, the past (by their knowledge and study they have easier access to it), the present and the future (through the space our societies give them for reflection). This paints a simple picture: the theologian is concerned to help all of us find meaning and purpose and keeping one foot on the stepping stone of the “genuine insight” of the past, and another reaching across to the next stepping stone which is firm and secure s/he helps guide us across a raging river of ways of perceiving and decisions to be made. “Through ongoing human reflection and activities these horizons continually change. Theology is the discipline which contributes to the extension of these symbolic universes.”<sup>33</sup>

So, if as the centuries have passed there have been certain people chrysalising a tradition that enables people to negotiate the world around them successfully,<sup>34</sup> how have we women landed up at this end of the 20th century with a highly inadequate Christian Symbolic Universe? It is not only inadequate as a vision for women, but dangerous in its skewed conception of maleness as superior. What have the theologians been doing? Who have they been serving? Why have they moulded the tradition in the way we have received it?

Part of the answer lies in the fact that they have seldom played this extending role adequately for an entire society, judging by what they have chosen to keep in the tradition. They might

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terms but to find a handle to facilitate an argument.

<sup>31</sup> “Hermeneutics and Tradition”, p455-6.

<sup>32</sup> Constructing Local Theologies, p66.

<sup>33</sup> “Hermeneutics and Tradition”, p456.

<sup>34</sup> This is obviously a very complex, multi-faceted process.

have negotiated the passage through time for kings and the elite male members of society, but their concern was not for those who had no identity or personhood or worth in the eyes of that elite. Not only are they not experienced in serving the unimportant of society and in coping with a pluralism of demands, but the demands of the elite for a definitive identity and a world-view that favoured their interests, dramatically weaken the theologians' commitment and ability when it comes to negotiating social change. The preoccupation with supplying a system of meaning that upholds a hierarchy means that engaging with waves of change becomes perilous for them.

It seems to me that while symbolic universes are absolutely vital for the innate human need to make meaning out of life, they are often inadequate in facing certain areas of life, or in seeing the world through certain people's eyes. The Christian Symbolic Universe is powerful, coherent and universal. But there are significant challenges to its version of total reality. Pluralism, the demands of those on the underside of society for freedom and democracy, and the cry of the poor and women for justice are the major obstacles the church faces to its continued authority in society. In the face of these challenges the church calls those opposing it to a return to its core values, repentance from the pursuits of secularism, adherence to its teachings and practices. However, restating the privileges and positions of the church with increasing dogmatism is not the inspired and useful task of "extending" Cady calls for.

It is therefore important to delve further into the inner workings of a symbolic universe to understand why change is such a complex process for women who want to ensure that the Christian Symbolic Universe is meaningful, powerful and true for them.

In this first chapter I have outlined why abandoning the Christian tradition is no longer an option for me. Cady's helpful insight into how to use the past begins to empower women like me to grapple with the Christian Symbolic Universe. In the next chapter I will look at the work of Clifford Geertz on how symbolic universes work. My interest in this is two-fold: I want to discover why the symbolic universe we have inherited is skewed to favour men, and particularly elite men; and I want to find out how the creation of meaning happens, so that the

marginalised of the church can take hold of the process and begin to do it for themselves.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>I am completely aware that this is already happening, particularly in liberation theology which switches the focus of faith from the tradition to daily experience. My particular concern is with the “how” of how this happens and how it begins to create a new symbolic order to live within.

## CHAPTER TWO

### What is really real? The Problem of Meaning

*“We live in meaning like a fish lives in water. Creating meaning is what each of us does all the time, but while we are very good at doing this, we often have difficulty in understanding just how we do it. As the ancient Chinese philosophers said, ‘The fish is the last to discover the water.’ Yet an understanding of how we create meaning is essential to an understanding of ourselves.”*

*Dorothy Rowe*

*“The drive to make sense out of experience, to give it form and order, is evidently as real and as pressing as the more familiar biological needs.”*

*Clifford Geertz*

*“The concept of meaning, in all its varieties, is the dominant philosophical concept of our time.”*

*Susanne Langer*

There is no doubt in my mind that every human being needs a symbolic universe. It is a powerful means of making sense of life and even secular people who give no quarter to religion have a symbolic universe of their own which informs, empowers, and drives them. Even those who have no religious faith act out of what they “believe”, rather than what they rationalise and hold to intellectually. My interest in the next three chapters is to find out how that very constructive process happens and to look at the positive, functioning aspects of symbolic universes. But I am also interested in where they go wrong. I want to know how the process of meaning-creation starts to get skewed, how it starts to ignore huge slices of life, why it avoids tackling certain areas, and what the consequences of this are – particularly for women. I am also hoping to find clues which lead to the building material for a better symbolic universe which has a more powerful vision to live by for me in South Africa at this stage in time.

What is a symbolic universe? Clifford Geertz, an American anthropologist who has worked with two communities, one in Bali in Indonesia and the other in Morocco, over a period of 40 years,<sup>36</sup> gives this definition: it is a synthesis of ethos and world view. Ethos being “the tone,

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<sup>36</sup> See his book After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist.

character and quality of life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood”.<sup>37</sup> World view being “the picture ... of the ways things in sheer actuality are, (the) most comprehensive ideas of order”. The term “symbolic universe” can be expanded or contracted, as when it is being used to explain an entire nation’s underlying motivations, or when it is used to describe a particular world view.

Geertz says there are four major perspectives which people use to “construe the world”: the common-sensical, the scientific, the aesthetic and the religious.<sup>38</sup> The common-sensical perspective relies on a pragmatic approach of either mastering the world or, failing that, of adjusting to it. The scientific perspective motivates people to “analyse the world in terms of formal concepts” – here reality is put under the spotlight of doubt and systematic inquiry and evaluated in the light of scientific concepts. The aesthetic perspective relies on a suspension of belief and an absorption in things in themselves, says Geertz.<sup>39</sup> In contrast to these three major ways of understanding and grasping the world, the religious perspective has several attributes that these other perspectives do not have.

The religious perspective has a transcendent quality which motivates the faithful to believe in a reality above and beyond the one they encounter in their everyday lives. From that perspective it aims to “correct and complete” daily reality. It self-consciously makes a distinction between different types of reality, earmarking its own perspective on the world and the otherworld as superior to what may be apprehended through daily experiences, and especially daily experiences that fall in the realm of the common-sense, the scientific or the aesthetic. Geertz says: “It is this sense of the ‘really real’ upon which the religious perspective rests and which the symbolic activities of religion as a cultural system are devoted to producing, intensifying, and, so far as possible, rendering inviolable by the discordant revelations of secular experience.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> The Interpretation of Cultures, p89.

<sup>38</sup> p111. He also lists others as the historical perspective and the philosophical perspective. My point here is not to give a comprehensive rundown of symbolic universes, but to contrast a religious symbolic universe to other important ways people perceive reality.

<sup>39</sup> I believe he would find that many South African artists would take issue with his superficial understanding of their world view. Many would totally disagree with his contention that the aesthetic perspective aims to escape reality.

<sup>40</sup> p112.



So what makes a perspective a symbolic universe? From what I understand of Geertz' work, a symbolic universe is a completely pervasive means of sifting reality, deciding what has worth, what fits with what, and then using that material to shape knowledge of the world so that it gives the person a unique sense of having grasped the intent and purpose of being alive. It is a way of stamping cohesion and order on what might otherwise be a plethora of unconnected experiences. The symbolic universe becomes so real to the person using it that it becomes an unconscious, invisible world within which that person lives. As in the quote at the beginning of the chapter, its pervasiveness is so all-encompassing that "the fish is the last to discover the water".

How does a symbolic universe work? How does it do a vanishing act so that those who live within it and use its processes of creating meaning every day of their lives become completely unaware of what they're doing?

Part of the answer is biological. Our brains have the facility to learn something and then to act on it without calling the consciousness to focus attention on that behaviour every time it does it. But the rest of the answer lies in the way we use symbols as a shorthand to make sense of reality. A symbolic universe is a "complex of symbols" and not just symbols, but metaphors - linked symbols which bring different meanings together and fuse them. Geertz says a symbol is anything which acts as a "meaning for conception".<sup>41</sup> A symbol can be an "object, act, event, quality or relation". So it has its concrete, material form out there. Then it conveys something of meaning to the person perceiving it. It becomes a "tangible formulation" which connects to "notions (and) abstractions from experience". It is the "concrete embodiment of ideas, attitudes, judgements, longings or beliefs".<sup>42</sup> So symbols are packages that unwrap a wealth of learnings from similiar experiences and speculations about what those experiences mean.

The result of this is that it creates "longlasting moods and motivations". A mood, says

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<sup>41</sup>p91.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

Geertz, is a state of mind about something and a motivation is the drive to act out that state of mind. Symbols induce both. So the symbol of Jesus Christ on the beach calling Peter to become his disciple, can induce a mood of deep thankfulness in an evangelical Christian that s/he was saved through the same kind of “calling”, and a motivation to go and do the same – call others to repentance and belief in Christ. Every time this symbol (and other related ones) are invoked, for example by an evangelist in a sermon, the same motivation is awakened. The motivation seems to bypass the conscious mind and be experienced as a deep-seated strong feeling that demands action.

There is nothing simple about this process. Why should a symbol induce a particular mood and a corresponding motivation? Only because it is embedded in a particular view of the world, a certain understanding of how reality is structured and ordered. Take the same story and tell it to a Jew or a Catholic, or an animist, and the mood and motivation will be entirely different. Something prior has happened to the invoking of the symbol, a process of setting down what that symbol means has already taken place. This is a bit like the chicken and egg, which came first? That question is impossible to answer, but every time a symbol is invoked two things begin to happen: the symbol calls up all sorts of associations that trigger a particular mood and a motivation, and the symbol shapes the person’s perception of what they have encountered so they know how to react to it. It activates a framework of reference which shows them where this particular experience fits and how to interpret it.

One of the absolutely intrinsic elements of symbols is this dual nature: they describe reality and they also “programme” it. They are models “of”, but also models “for”, says Geertz. They do not just “store meaning”<sup>43</sup>, but they do so in order to direct thought, action and feeling. They are the shorthand of the symbolic universe, the signals that trigger a particular way of knowing, believing and perceiving. “They both express the world’s climate and shape it”<sup>44</sup>. This dual nature of a symbol is inescapable. As long as both elements are happening (expressing and shaping reality) and the symbol has the fluidity to change, then it is working well. But when the symbol begins to be set in concrete (such as when the church hierarchy

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<sup>43</sup>p127.

<sup>44</sup>p95.

puts its stamp of authority on the use of particular symbols) it then loses its flexibility to keep on describing a changing reality. This is fundamental to how symbolic universes start to lose their grip on changing experience and how they describe a reality that is no longer true for many of the people inhabiting that universe. Because symbols are so powerful and so key to the unwinding of the power a symbolic universe can wield over people, I have devoted the next chapter to a discussion on symbols that lose their fluidity and become “hardened” in the words of Mary Daly.

Because symbols have a dual nature, therefore an entire symbolic universe also has this dual nature. It is not just a coherent formulation of the way the world really is, it is also a blueprint for how to go out and live in that world successfully. All of this is embedded in a culture. It is in community that people make meaning together to help them negotiate daily life in the world. It is axiomatic that while a symbol might attain universal meaning (eg the dove for peace), very often symbols are highly particular and mean different things to different people. And even within a culture symbols can be easily misunderstood, as for instance when two people from different age groups or social classes converse with each other. The successful apprehension of the meaning of symbols is a highly nuanced, very sophisticated business which is happening mostly unconsciously all the time.

Dissected like this it seems incredible that any of us ever have a meaningful interchange with another human being! Our processes of meaning creation are so finely tuned. The success of a symbolic universe is that human beings do make sense of life. They engage with it, are shaped by it, control it, and formulate a way of seeing that they work into a tradition that they can hand on to other generations. These traditions are highly particular depending on culture and place and time. Geertz describes a culture as: “... an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men (sic) communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.”<sup>45</sup>

There might have been a time in some people’s history when their culture and their religion

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<sup>45</sup>p89.

were one and the same thing. But today we live in a world of multiple world views intersecting each other. The western world's secularism and militarism and economic domination are almost inescapable, no matter where on the planet you live. The Christian Symbolic Universe – although itself challenged by secularism and other powerful religious symbolic universes like Islam – is also a force to be reckoned with as it is still the largest world religion. And then there is history and culture and race. You can find a Christian African living in the west who brings with him/her a unique cultural background and a slightly different understanding of the Christian Symbolic Universe from a European westerner. This western Christian African is juggling up to seven different symbolic universes. These could be the African cultural background, the western secularistic mindset, African common-sense and western common-sense, the scientific, the Christian Symbolic Universe and the remnants of African religion such as his/her reverence for ancestors. At points of crisis this person has to decide which is the overriding symbolic universe by which to orient their lives and direct choices.

There are points of congruence between symbolic universes. Examples of this are: the militaristic expansionism of Western colonialism and the evangelistic mission of the church which found perfect congruence, and the patriarchalism of the world of the Bible and its mirror image in traditional African society. When two symbolic universes coincide in purpose and intent like this the result is a mutual consolidation of each other's power. But often the Christian Symbolic Universe is at odds with other symbolic universes. Then it has to assert its own unique grasp on the "really real". Sacred symbols trigger not just an understanding which is related to everyday reality, but a "transcendant truth"<sup>46</sup>, something above, beyond daily life, more real than the real, universal and cosmic in its reach.

This is another area in which the symbolic universe starts to get skewed. Both the points of congruence between the Christian Symbolic Universe and other universes, and the places of dissonance are flip sides of the same coin. Where the congruence happens the universe becomes too powerful and controlling for the good of those who are subject to it. For example, Elsa Tamez says a sexist interpretation of the Bible by the hierarchy of the church

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<sup>46</sup>p98.

in Latin America and the practices of that sexist society are “mutually consolidating”.<sup>47</sup> The symbols become imbued with too much shaping power. When this happens Rosemary Radford Ruether says: “Religion sacralizes the existing social order as an expression of the will of God.”<sup>48</sup>

And where there is dissonance, the Christian Symbolic Universe asserts its overriding claim to knowledge of the transcendent truth, the “really real”, the interpretation of reality which cannot be questioned because it is superior to common-sense and secularism which are rooted in mundane reality. Sacred symbols’ “peculiar power comes from their presumed ability to identify fact with value at the most fundamental level”, Geertz says.<sup>49</sup> Instead of a healthy modesty about its sphere of influence, the Christian Symbolic Universe has great pretensions to being the definitive universal understanding of all time.

One of the ways a religious symbolic universe uses to assert this supremacy is through ritual. Again the double action is important here. Rituals are “not only models of what they believe, but also models for the believing of it. In these plastic dramas men (sic) attain their faith as they portray it.” In going through a ritual a person is not just acting out a belief, but living it in the ritual.<sup>50</sup> So, for example, the liturgy of the church is crafted in male language. Not only is God he, but the entire congregation of the church is assumed to be men. Through repetition of prayers and hymns and other sentences spoken out loud, women are obliterated over and over again in the rituals of the church. It is very damaging and a source of enormous pain, driving women like me right out of any form of ritualised service because of the deep feelings of distress it evokes. What it does for men is to give them a distinct and deep sense of the rightness of their superiority and the exclusiveness of the gender of God.

In this chapter I have begun to unpack how a symbolic universe functions. I have looked at how fundamental a symbolic universe is to make sense of life and how there is no grasp of

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<sup>47</sup>“Women’s Rereading of the Bible”, in Voices from the Margin, p63.

<sup>48</sup>“Renewal or New Creation” in Gunew p277.

<sup>49</sup>The Interpretation of Cultures, p127.

<sup>50</sup>p114.

purpose or meaning without such a system to orient oneself. I have looked at several kinds of symbolic universes, how they intersect the Christian Symbolic Universe and how it asserts itself over them as the transcendent version of the “really real”. I have begun to examine the dual nature of symbols and symbol systems. In the next chapter I will look more closely at how symbols get skewed, how their shaping function starts to overtake their describing function and how they begin to craft reality to fit a certain conception.

### CHAPTER THREE Symbols that enslave

*“Symbol systems cannot simply be rejected, they must be replaced. Where there is not any replacement, the mind will revert to familiar structures at times of crisis, bafflement or defeat.”*

*Carol Christ*

*“Metaphor is perhaps our most powerful use of language, our most effective access to the meaning of reality at its deepest levels.”*

*Sandra Schneiders*

Symbols are the currency of a symbolic universe. They are integral to its functioning. In the previous chapter I explored the dual nature of symbols, their function of expressing, or describing, reality, and their function of shaping reality. What I want to concentrate on in this chapter are three symbols for God with inordinate shaping power for the Christian Symbolic Universe. My aim here is to show that they manipulate reality to suit a particular purpose, that they are used to cultivate particular moods and motivations. The reality they describe and the responses they demand are not those which I as a woman can endorse as transcendent truth or really real for me.

It is important to engage in this dissecting task because as Carol Christ says: “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. Even people who no longer ‘believe in God’ or participate in the institutional structure of patriarchal religion may still not be free of the power of the symbolism of God the Father. A symbol’s effect does not depend on rational assent, for a symbol also functions on levels of the psyche other than the rational.”<sup>51</sup>

In actuality there are some symbols that do not just act as vehicles for meaning, they begin to set themselves up as important things in and of themselves. According to Sara Maitland: “Since we need (and yearn and long) to speak of the unspeakable, we use metaphors, images, symbolic terms. So far so good, but language is sneaky; if the image is a strong one it always demonstrates a tendency to ‘drift’ into ‘reality’ (my italics). And this is marked in

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<sup>51</sup>“Why women need the Goddess” in Gunew, p291.

Christianity because we do have a faith grounded in the materiality of time and space.”<sup>52</sup>

Maitland in my estimation is being generous here, although critical. I think that more is happening than just the tendency of symbols to “drift” into reality. There are definite gains to be had for certain people by having certain symbols transcend their metaphoric capacity into actuality.

Mary Daly says: “The images and values of a given society have been projected into the realm of dogmas and ‘Articles of Faith’, and these in turn justify the social structures which have given rise to them and which sustain their plausibility. The belief system becomes *hardened and objectified, seeming to have an unchangeable independent existence and validity of its own.* (my italics) It resists social change that would rob it of its plausibility.”<sup>53</sup>

A.N. Wilson puts it like this in his book Jesus: “Men (sic) worship gods in their own image, which in turn, once made, have a potency of their own to shape and enslave.”<sup>54</sup>

I consider the following three symbols, God the Father, God as omnipotent and God as person, as having become “hardened and objectified”. Instead of being a means of reaching for a way to describe the divine and being conscious of the inadequacy of such words, these words have become the truth, the really real. They are what God is. They have been prioritised out of all context. There are numerous symbols for God within the Biblical tradition which are not male, not human, and not singular, but these three under discussion are elevated above all else in Christian use today. This is an instance of powerful elite men making the divine in their own image and forcing everyone else to bow down and worship him. These symbols enslave.

### **God the Father**

Although I intellectually reasoned away my allegiance to the male God a long time ago, I have found myself in times of stress and crisis reverting to the God the Father symbol. To relate a silly story about one of these crises: On a recent journey from Pietermaritzburg to

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<sup>52</sup>“Ways of Relating” in Loades, p151.

<sup>53</sup>Beyond God the Father, p13.

<sup>54</sup>p8.



Cape Town we stopped to spend the night about half way through the journey. The next morning our car wouldn't start. It took hours to figure out that the immobiliser was faulty and was overriding the ignition. Nothing we could do would make the car start. As the day dragged on we became increasingly anxious that we were losing precious time and would have to drive through the night to reach our destination. I was angry and frustrated and began to pray to the Father God to help us. I then caught myself and reminded myself that this was a stupid bit of behaviour. I then asked myself who could I pray to instead, and for a brief moment tried to imagine a female divine being who would be available to be called on. But a flashing thought brought all this theological introspection to a grinding halt. The thought was: "If there is a female god out there she probably doesn't understand car engines at all." This might be a frivolous example, but on a more serious level, my years of the use of the God the Father image means that I equate maleness with knowledge and ability, with intervention in crises.

The effect of the God the Father symbol can be devastating for women. In God as father, they find no space for any conception of the divine that can also be female. Not only is this God thoroughly male, he also subsumes female qualities and is able to create, nurture and sustain all by himself. To continue to espouse God as a "loving father" is highly incongruous in a world in which fathers are absent, mothers are single parents, or in which many children's experience of a male parent is of a violent, abusive man. Although priests draw a distinction between human father behaviour and heavenly father behaviour there is great tension inherent in the use of this symbol.

Not only has the symbol cut itself off from its Biblical roots,<sup>55</sup> but it resists the passing of time and our growing scientific knowledge. Maitland says:

"Changes in social reality change the meaning of images. The current scientific model, for example, affects the content of Christian imagery. When Aquinas spoke of God as Father/Creator, he was basing his metaphor not just in the social dominance of maleness, but also on a specific biology *in which we no longer believe*: that male sperm contained the complete and perfect living child and the woman's body

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<sup>55</sup>In popular Christian teaching Jesus called God "Abba", a familiar and approachable term for a God previously thought to be distant and aloof.

provided nothing but a growing place for it. God as male, impregnating nature as female made good – no, beautiful – image sense, but it does not any more. If we look at the God/nature, male/female imagery in any depth at all, it is patently rubbish and moreover creates all sorts of heretical complications in the light of our scientific model. Changed gender roles, the discovery of the non-geocentric universe, the ‘invention’ of the psyche by the post-Enlightenment nineteenth century, evolutionary theory – all change the implicit meaning of symbols.”<sup>56</sup>

All talk of the divine is approximate language which tries to pin down things we human beings are grasping at. But we forget this so easily. Sandra Schneiders puts it so well when she says that metaphors<sup>57</sup> always contain an “is” and an “is not”.<sup>58</sup> When the “is not” gets forgotten the metaphor becomes skewed and dangerous. She says:

“‘God is our Father’ is a powerful metaphor. To be a father, literally, is to co-operate in the generation of human offspring by sexual intercourse with a woman. Obviously, God is not a male being, does not engage in sexual intercourse, and does not produce human offspring. We recognise this by saying that God is our adoptive father rather than our biological father. (This, however, is just as metaphorical as calling God our ‘father’.) But even though we know that God is not literally our male parent, either biologically or by legal process, the metaphor of divine fatherhood has been so literalised by many people that they are profoundly shocked by the use of feminine parental metaphors for God.”<sup>59</sup>

Schneiders goes on to say that to literalise an image is to have lost the “is not”. She calls literalisation of metaphors “the cancer of the religious imagination, powerfully and pathologically at work”.<sup>60</sup> The danger is not that the metaphor will die. A dead metaphor has no more power, constructive or destructive. However, says Schneiders, a skewed metaphor

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<sup>56</sup>Loades, p151.

<sup>57</sup>I’m staying with Schneiders’ terminology here. She uses metaphor rather than symbol.

<sup>58</sup>The Revelatory Text, p30.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

functions still in “powerfully distorting ways”.<sup>61</sup>

My own experience is that the God the Father symbol acts to prop up patriarchy<sup>62</sup> and the rule of fathers more than it releases people into a relationship of warmth and trust with the divine. It creates a parental dependency in the believer which requires that one is a permanent child, without decision-making capacity and responsibility or space to grow up into an independent adult phase of faith.

### **God as omnipotent**

Firstly, this symbol requires a monumental suspension of one’s intellectual powers. Despite repeated human experiences where God does not intervene, where his power seems to have no ability to penetrate desperate situations, where human beings set themselves up as tyrannical dictators and perpetrate atrocities in flagrant attempt to be godlike, the church continues to insist he holds all control of the universe! The rationalisation for why he does not (cannot?) act is that he chooses not to. This characteristic of arbitrarily deciding whether to act or not is part and parcel of the symbol of omnipotence.

Omnipotence is a particular kind of power which has many unsavoury characteristics. If this God holds all power, then the logical conclusion is that there is no real freedom to be had anywhere, all exercise of power by humans is borrowed. If people feel themselves to be powerless they can pass the buck to God who is very powerful and chooses not to act in this particular instance. This was a favourite piece of theology used by white middle-class South Africans<sup>63</sup> during the apartheid regime, when they felt themselves to be incapable of action because they didn’t see God acting directly against the regime. To take action was to usurp a power not given.

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<sup>61</sup>p31.

<sup>62</sup>Schüssler Fiorenza defines patriarchy as “racist, sexist, colonial, economic, militarist and ecological exploitation”. But, She said, p177.

<sup>63</sup>This is a generalisation, I am keenly aware (being middle-class South African myself) that there were many people who were deeply anguished by the political events of the time and willing to go immense lengths to help overthrow the apartheid regime. But they were a minority.

The power he wields, according to Biblical tradition, is very often coercive, and of the “I’m God and I know what’s good for you” variety. In true patriarchal style, human beings learn to emulate the symbol, when they exercise power they act like God – unilaterally and parentally on behalf of small, rather stupid children. Again this was evident in the apartheid regime where one of the strongest ideologies underpinning the tyranny was that the Christian Afrikaner nation serving God was doing what was best for the savage African children who couldn’t figure out how to civilise and Christianise themselves.

Sharon Welch points out that “a theology that valorizes absolute power through its concept of an omnipotent God is dangerous for middle-class people”.<sup>64</sup> It camouflages the power they do have and makes them irresponsible about how they use it.

And the Biblical tradition is full of militaristic use of power by God and by his appointees. This glorifies conquest and domination. “The idea of an omnipotent and sovereign God ... assumes that absolute power can be a good ... it assumes that the ability to act regardless of the response of others is a good rather than a sign of alienation from others,” says Welch.<sup>65</sup> By claiming submission to a God of this kind of behaviour, human beings in positions of power can behave like this too. To quote Ruether their appalling behaviour is “sacralised”.

One of the other characteristics of this kind of power is its sado-masochistic nature evidenced in the sacrifice and death of Jesus Christ. The ideology that is given power by this story is more than just an example of loving to the death, it is also a subtle, but forceful, message that this God requires submission to the ultimate degree if he is to share his power – Welch says of Christ: “the return for total sacrifice is absolute cosmic and historical power”. The result of this belief is that this type of power is predicated on self-abasement and self-denial. This gets horribly skewed, with those elite human beings who wield power demanding that those below them abase themselves before their power, which is actually God’s power.

An example of this horribly twisted theology is quoted by Korean feminist theologian Chung

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<sup>64</sup>A Feminist Ethic of Risk, p111.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

Hyun Kyung:

“This is the common teaching Asian women receive from the institutional male-dominated churches in Asia. When I was a Sunday School teacher at a Korean church in Orange County, California, in 1983, I witnessed a Korean woman, who was a Bible teacher for a college student group, share her experience of death and resurrection of self in front of the entire congregation. She confessed how sinful she was in relation to her husband. She said that she was not able to obey her husband because she thought he was not reasonable and fair. So she argued with him a lot. One day her husband, who was a medical doctor, threw a kitchen knife at her out of anger during an argument. Fortunately the knife missed her and stuck into the wall behind her. At that point, she said, she experienced the love of God through the judgment of her husband. She believed then that as a wife she had to obey her husband as God’s will. She witnessed to the congregation that her old self was *dead* and her new self was born through her husband’s *love*. This woman concluded her statement with: ‘There have been no arguments and only peace in my family after I nailed myself on the cross and followed God’s will.’ After her talk, the entire congregation responded with a very loud ‘Hallelujah!’<sup>66</sup>

This is the very sado-masochistic consequence of absolute power vested in one God.<sup>67</sup>

### God as person

Gail Ramshaw says: “Recent use of the word person in association with God has unfortunately tightened the tie between God and male sexuality ... At the start this reflected relationships between God and humankind. But increasingly talk of God as person is influenced by modern definitions of person as a self-conscious being ... language of God as person can lead to images of God as a superperson, and then all too easily to God as a supermale. Finally, the word person is linked in modern American English to human personality, and we find ourselves open to anthropomorphism of the cheapest sort.”<sup>68</sup>

To hold to an extreme monotheism is to make it impossible for believers to conceive of God as containing both sexes. For God to be one, he can only be one sex. As both Gail Ramshaw and Mary Daly point out, if he is superperson, then he is supermale. The effects of entrenching a symbol that elevates maleness to godhood are extremely dangerous indeed. It

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<sup>66</sup>Struggle to be the Sun Again, p122.

<sup>67</sup>See Welch’s section on “The valorisation of absolute power”, p116-7.

<sup>68</sup>“The Gender of God” in Loades, p175.

also sets up all sorts of sexual tensions in relating to a male God. Is this a romance for women who are in a personal relationship with him? That is an aspect of evangelicalism which is encouraged by certain sections of the church.<sup>69</sup> How do men relate their sexuality to a male God? Are they having a particularly close friendship which borders on the homosexual?<sup>70</sup> Because these questions are so difficult to answer the church response is to deny that they exist. God is not sexual at all, and relationships to him must have no aspect of sexuality. But the passion and ecstasy often induced by spiritual encounters can veer into the same sorts of feelings as evoked by sexual experiences. This is an area not open for discussion. It is also blatantly out of kilter with the whole Biblical tradition.

God as person is a symbol used particularly by the evangelistic branches of the church who consider it their duty to give every human being on the planet the choice of accepting or rejecting Jesus Christ as saviour. In evangelicalism being “saved” depends on a personal relationship with Christ. Unlike other sections of the church who believe that baptism, or the sacraments of the church keep one within the faith, evangelists<sup>71</sup> believe that only a continued personal relationship with Christ is proof of salvation. In its extreme form this is a one-to-one relationship with a mono God that is considered to have more importance than any other relationship in a human being’s life. It takes priority over marriages, over partnerships, over parent-child relationships, over communities and social networks. It supersedes the intimacy of close friends. In its worst forms it has encouraged the abandonment of families, of children and social networks for an alternative family which consists of God as father and all those who have personal relationships with Jesus Christ as his children, as brothers and sisters to each other.

It is no coincidence that this brand of relationship to the divine goes hand in hand with a Western individualistic, privatised faith that has little relationship to a community and even

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<sup>69</sup>For example, the Song of Solomon is often interpreted to be a metaphor for God and his church. If faith is privatised it becomes God and his disciple.

<sup>70</sup>The friendship of David and Jonathan is often evoked here as an example of a perfect friendship between two men. My point is that the sexual tension of the friendship is constantly present through the Biblical accounts.

<sup>71</sup>I have used this word here because not all people within the “evangelical” churches would actively promote this piece of theology. Those who do I have called “evangelists”, and there are many of them who see their life’s task as bringing people into this kind of relationship to God.

less responsibility to a whole society for one's behaviour. If the one-to-one relationship to God is of the highest priority then only things of a personal nature become important – so personal habits, personality traits, personal behaviour gets elevated to the only sphere in which responsible action is required. Political, social and economic actions are beyond the scope of this, and because they are embedded in society they are actions of lesser consequence, and there is declining responsibility for behaviour in those areas. Again the South African white Christian middle-class was an appalling example of privatised religion in the face of terrible political atrocities. The refusal to take action was based on a morality bound up with personal, privatised faith.

Privatised faith for women very often results in a paralysis to do anything about wider social circumstances that demean women. I know women who use their personal relationship with God as comfort to protect them against the treatment they receive from their husbands, male family members, priests and other men. But they do not consider themselves to have any power or right to take action against this dehumanising treatment of themselves or of women generally.

God the Father, God as omnipotent and God as person are symbols for which there is a strong foundation within the Bible. But there are other symbols for the divine. Christian tradition has taken these three and worked them into an inflexible system of theology so that other symbols have been sidelined and in many cases completely forgotten. Many symbols exist for God in which "he" is not male and not person. These are elided from common knowledge and teaching. The very beginnings of our knowledge about God proclaim a nature of plurality for the divine. Asphodel Long's translation of Genesis 1:1 says "a number of gods". Christian tradition is monotheistic and trinitarian (a contradiction in itself). When the trinity is evoked it is in three male persons, and the image is of a triangle with God the Father at the apex, Son answerable to God, and Spirit acting out God's commands. The image of these three male deities loving each other, knowing each other perfectly, and eternally moving in and out of each other simply boggles the feminist mind.

On the other hand, female images for God (a mother who cannot abandon her child, a hen guarding her chicks) are subsumed under the male parental role of God. God is superparent – he can do both nurturing and disciplining all alone. Impersonal images for God – a rock, a

wind, a fire, a vine, the way, the truth, the life – are used occasionally for the sake of the poetry and then abandoned. Other powerfully active symbols, such as the “pure verb of being-ness”<sup>72</sup> I Am, are used in such a cursory way in the teachings of the church that their inherent liberatory power is never set free. These other images are not taken up and worked into a comprehensive theology like the three above. They are not allowed to direct and guide the inhabitants of the Christian Symbolic Universe, mainly because they would not direct them in the way the meaning makers want them to go.

This is why I am sceptical about the joy that women express when they learn of the alternative symbols for God within the biblical tradition. The symbols are there and they seem to promise space and room to manoeuvre for women. But, at the same time, they have been sidelined out of the mainstream of theology. So, a woman knowing of their existence, will still find herself forced to pray and say aloud “God the Father” in the liturgy of her church before she can take communion. If she says anything else, she will be ostracised by the members of her church. On the one hand there is no room to adapt. On the other hand adaption goes only in the direction that the male meaning makers control.

Not only have we created (or allowed others to create for us) a God in our own image but we keep updating him so that he becomes increasingly like the men who rule our world – Western, individualistic, power-mad. The result of these kinds of symbols becoming fixed and hardened is that the symbol system becomes a place not of open habitation but a dictatorship which enslaves people who are not like that portrayal of God. Because societies are dominated by men with power and because priesthoods are dominated by men with power what is perceived to be “really real” bears the hallmark of the reality of male experience in positions of privilege. The symbols that describe and programme that reality clearly show this effect. God as Father, God as person and God as omnipotent says more about those who believe in this God and what characteristics they prioritise as important in their societies, than it does about the divine, the transcendent and the broad diversity of human experience with that.

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<sup>72</sup>Sara Maitland in Loades, p156.



Instead of Cady's task of "extension" through time, of making religious visions more adequate to the experience of reality, of sifting choices so that the really real becomes apparent, something else is happening. The dualistic and dialectic nature of a symbol system is no longer fluid but has become one-sided and weighted. As change occurs through time the symbol system seems to be more concerned with preventing movement (or ensuring movement only in specific, controlled directions) than with embracing it.

Throughout this chapter I have used symbols as a grammatical subject (they do this, they do that) as though symbols had agency all on their own. This is just a manner of speaking. In fact, symbols are manipulated by those who have spiritual power to decide what they will prioritise and what they will make invisible. Because those with spiritual power are usually elite, white men and those with political and economic power are elite, white men, this easy congruence of identity means that the Christian Symbolic Universe is being used to prop up an entire social set-up which thrives on dependancy, childlike acceptance of what is good for it, and worship of power.

What women need is neatly summed up by Chung Hyun Kyung when she speaks about the emerging feminist theology of Asia.

"After many heartaches, Asian women are coming of age. They are becoming stronger and wiser. They no longer believe in an omnipotent sovereign God who takes care of every agony in their lives, like a father or a big brother caring for a helpless little girl. Like the God of their colonisers and the God of the dominant institutional church `he' did not give them life-giving power ... Asian women who have come of age ... are determined to recover their full humanity and ripened `womanity'. They are also renaming their own God who gives birth to their dignity and nourishes and empowers them in their life struggle."<sup>73</sup>

The work done by feminist theologians shows that within the inherited symbolic order are many clues to an entirely different way of viewing the transcendent and the world. But, what happens when these treasures are held up to the light like archaeological finds? On the surface they provide impetus for women looking for the really real. But then these symbols begin to challenge the dominant understanding of God. If God is not male and not father and not omnipotent, then the entire edifice built on those symbols begins to crack. The cracks

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<sup>73</sup>Struggle to be the Sun Again, p22-23.

provide space for more theologising, but they also unleash a reaction from the keepers of the Christian Symbolic Universe, and they open up a space that begins to look more like a void than a pleasant vista. This is the territory I will cover in the next chapter: The threat of chaos when one begins to unwind the cohesion of the Christian Symbolic Universe.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Facing the chaos

*“In the beginning, a number of gods began to give birth to the heavens and the earth. The earth still belonged to Tohu and Bohu (goddesses of formlessness and ultimate space), and darkness was on the face of the mother creator goddess Tiamat, and a huge wind flapped its wings over the face of the water.”*

*Asphodel Long*

I have called this chapter “Facing the Chaos” for three reasons: the first is that symbolic universes exist precisely because human beings cannot live lives without order and meaning. To travel through a world that has no coherent sense is intolerable and because of this a framework must be found to explain why seemingly inexplicable experiences happen. The second reason is that when one begins to critique and re-examine the capabilities of one’s symbolic universe, as I have been doing, the coherence of that system begins to unwind. One is left staring into the face of a creeping chaos which threatens to make a mockery of any human endeavour to make sense of life and to find purpose and direction. It is not responsible to do a feminist hatchet job on the existing Christian Symbolic Universe and leave women (and anybody else persuaded by the feminist analysis) with no other method of meaning creation by which they can orient their lives. The third reason is that the drive to control reality and to be able to grasp the “really real” is, as Geertz says, as basic as the more familiar biological needs. This drive is an important factor then in any attempt to construct an alternative system of meaning, and it is a powerful foe in attempting to deconstruct the existing Christian Symbolic Universe.

Let me deal with the second reason first: Because my experience of the Christian Symbolic Universe has been of its controlling, conforming, dogmatic face, I have spent a lot of time searching for cracks and gaps which allow me to widen out a space for myself to theologise and make sense of my experience.<sup>74</sup> At first I naively thought this would allow me to relate to a more adequate God who would be female as well as male, and to find female-orientated messages within the biblical tradition which would give me direction and strength. But, the unexpected consequence of questioning the dominant symbols and theologies has been that

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<sup>74</sup>What was advanced as the “really real” by the Christian Symbolic Universe, and the transcendent truth behind some of the experiences of denigration and worthlessness that I felt didn’t convince me of their usefulness.

the coherence of the Christian symbol system has begun to unravel. It has become impossible to pick and choose and to hold on just to those symbols which continue to make meaning for me – the whole edifice has come crashing down. Instead of finding a simple space to reflect I found myself with a yawning chasm that threatened to propel me into a universe without any meaning at all.

This invoked deep feelings of fear and a strong temptation to return into the Christian Symbolic Universe no matter how inadequate it might be. The Christian Symbolic Universe I inherited was powerful, pervasive. Its tentacles of meaning reached into every area of my life. The deconstruction of that universe leaves with me fragments, bits and pieces that might be useful, but without another coherent, structured system to put in its place. That is why it has become important to face the chaos. It is a significant factor in why religious symbol systems are so tightly wound and so full of denial,<sup>75</sup> and it is a significant factor in any task of creating alternative and better systems of meaning.

So to turn to the first reason – humans cannot live without order and meaning and symbol systems must provide that for them. The Christian Symbolic Universe was crafted over thousands of years. It appears to be monolithic, organised, powerful and when one lives within a certain section of it, it appears to be finely tuned and as though it fits perfectly with no gaps. The reality is that it is shot through with contradictions, with confusion, with different interpretations of what is true, real, just and good. But the illusion that a total system operates perfectly and has an answer for every occasion is carefully cultivated and sustained through liturgy and ritual.<sup>76</sup>

However, if one looks into the biblical tradition one sees that right at the beginning of Christian mythology there is an immediate concern with chaos and a powerful attempt to control it. The Genesis story about creation lays down a neat chronology of meaning to

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<sup>75</sup>Geertz points out that denial is a integral method of dealing with the inexplicable, but it is a subtle denial. It is not a statement which claims there are no experiences of death, pain and injustice, but a denial that these experiences cannot be interpreted and explained by this symbolic universe. These experiences are affirmed as real, but the symbolic framework asserts that there is also a “really real” behind them. The Interpretation of Cultures, p109.

<sup>76</sup>For example, the entire Christian Symbolic Universe rests on a celebration of what is probably the most extreme experience of meaninglessness — death. The whole universe hinges on the torture, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is not just an annual ritual, but a weekly, and sometimes daily celebration, that affirms over and over that death has meaning and purpose, that it is not an end in itself, that it can be overcome. The forces of the entire symbolic universe are focused again and again on this one paradox and contradiction.

reassure those within the Christian Symbolic Universe. First was God,<sup>77</sup> God wrestled with chaos, produced order and from that came the physical world and then its inhabitants – male first, female second. This leaves Christians with a deep, secure sense that God and his order is the primal reality – the “really real”. I beg to differ: the structure of meaning did not come first, but the chaos did, and the presence of chaos gave rise to desperate and sustained attempts to coerce it into a framework of meaning. If I may be allowed the licence to rework Genesis 1:1 in the spirit of Asphodel Long:<sup>78</sup> In the beginning was chaos (Tohu and Bohu, goddesses of formlessness and ultimate space). Along came a male deity made in the image of the men on earth who could not bear the chaos and so he began to order it for them, so they did not feel so blown about by the arbitrariness of the goddesses above them, or the mother creator goddess Tiamat (spirit of the sea and also of chaos) below them.

Geertz says: “The existence of bafflement, pain and moral paradox – of the Problem of Meaning – is one of the things that drives men (sic!) toward belief in gods ... but it is not the basis upon which those beliefs rest, but rather their most important field of application.”<sup>79</sup>

Chaos is the primal reality and the constant background to life on Earth.<sup>80</sup> It is the impetus for the crafting of a symbolic universe and the place where its efficacy is tested again and again. It is because chaos exists and defies meaning that structures of meaning are created to marshal everything that can be defined into a framework of sense, in the hope that the coherence of that cosmic order will then have the power to overarch the chaos and bring it within its bounds of control. Geertz says: “Man (sic) depends upon symbols and symbol systems with a dependance so great as to be decisive for his cultural viability and, as a result, his sensitivity to even the remotest indication that they may prove unable to cope with one or

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<sup>77</sup>It is very interesting that a new translation of Genesis by Everett Fox The Five Books of Moses doesn't say “In the beginning was God” but “At the beginning of God's creating” — a nuance that unseats this powerful ideology that has held sway for thousands of years. See Newsweek January 15, 1996, p38.

<sup>78</sup>“The Goddess in Judaism — an historical perspective” in The Absent Mother, p27.

<sup>79</sup> The Interpretion of Cultures, p109.

<sup>80</sup> Geertz says that the problems of meaning, suffering and evil are not “sudden eruptions” (p102) which surface now and again to challenge the coherence of the symbolic universe, rather they are a “persistent background”. This has the effect of giving the inhabitants of the symbolic universe a “chronic uneasiness”. It “sets ordinary human experience in a permanent context of metaphysical concern and raises the dim, back-of-the-mind suspicions that one may be adrift in an absurd world”. Because of the deep-seated need to make meaningful order of experience, people just do not seem to be able to leave this be. They are “unable to leave unclarified problems of analysis merely unclarified” (p100). To acknowledge that the structure of meaning has limits and cannot explain everything is very often unbearable.

another aspect of experience raises within him the gravest sort of anxiety.”<sup>81</sup>

This anxiety has got to be taken seriously. A feminist critique of the Christian symbols will trigger a deep nervousness in those who have a stake in holding tight to this universe’s understanding of life. For example to question the maleness of God, is not just to query an incidental detail about the sex of a symbol, it is to touch a fault line, which if widened sends shock waves throughout the entire Christian Symbolic Universe. And the anxiety this triggers will result in a backlash. Furious attempts will be made to consolidate and verify the truth of this version of reality and to discredit the alternative and those who espouse it. Sharon Welch points out that those in control of the Christian Symbolic Universe equate chaos with evil.<sup>82</sup> If order is God then chaos is anti-God. The reaction to chaos will be to marshal every power available to control it and bring it under submission to the god of this universe.

This leads us to my third reason. The challenge facing feminist theologians is this: having deconstructed and exposed the fault lines of an old, inadequate symbol system, can a new way of making meaning be found which takes seriously the inexplicable, the absurd, the chaotic? Can a new way of living be found which sees chaos not as evil and anti-order but as fertile material for new creation? When one has lived for a long time in the gap between systems of meaning it is tempting to want another coherent water-tight system to fit exactly the void left by the old, inadequate system. What is needed is not just a simple accommodation which recognises that any process of change is attended by feelings of confusion, lack of direction and wavering of purpose. What is needed is a recognition that chaos and the limits of control will always be a passenger with us on this journey toward a new kind of theologising and making sense of all of life.

At first when I researched this territory it was with academic interest that symbol systems have their origins in chaos, and are driven by the fear of chaos. Objectively this seemed to be a good place to explore the tensions and ambiguities of the Christian Symbolic Universe in the hope that it would create huge spaces for religious feminists to manoeuvre. I was taken by

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<sup>81</sup>p99.

<sup>82</sup>A Feminist Ethic of Risk, p37.

surprise at how overwhelming an experience it is to be in the vortex while one's symbolic universe unwinds around one. The resultant lack of identity, purpose and clarity is not easy to come to terms with. This is an area which troubles me. Intellectual deconstruction is all very well, but women like myself want to continue to have a vibrant spiritual life, which gives us a distinct sense of the really real and empowers us to be activists for justice. We want to have meaningful spiritual experiences.

Gradually I've had to realise that there will be no neat system to replace the old one. That no matter how meticulous feminist theologians are in answering point for point the ideologies of the male-created symbol system, another closed system would be as oppressive, and ultimately as destructive, as this one has been. I have been immensely critical of the male theologians whose extension of the Christian Symbolic Universe has been one-sided and skewed. It would therefore be ludicrous to expect female theologians to step into the breach and to do all the work for all of us. Whoever has the power to create meaning will craft it to look like herself.<sup>83</sup> Only when all of us take responsibility for making meaning and we do it in dialogue together, will we have a multi-faceted, diverse system in which a vast majority of us no longer feel like strangers but like citizens with ownership and rights.

If women like me take seriously that they have a responsibility to start doing theology where do we situate ourselves for maximum impact on both women and on the Christian Symbolic Universe? The choice is often presented as an either/or option: either move into the centre of the system and try not to get co-opted or deceived into being loyal in return for some measure of power, or move to the margins where there is community, identity, clarity of purpose, and few resources to bring about substantial change. This then is the territory I want to cover in the next chapter and to explore what power is available outside the centre.

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<sup>83</sup>Feminism as a movement is already suffering from the assumptions certain women with power make about all women. The tendency to universalise must be guarded against closely.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The moving margins

*“Well, we’re already foreigners. Women as women are largely excluded from, alien to, the self-declared male norms of this society, where human beings are called Man, the only respectable god is male, and the only direction is up.”*

*Ursula le Guin*

At points throughout this thesis I have alluded to those people who throughout the centuries have been responsible for crafting the Christian Symbolic Universe. The people with spiritual power who have theologised and made meaning of life for all of us, past, present and future. I have been very critical of the way the symbols and the whole system have landed up skewed and oppressive for those of us who are not elite men. Their conception of the “really real”, that has been put forward as the transcendent truth behind daily experience, does not convince many of us that it has any congruence with the lives we lead. It looks too much like those in power, and suits their purposes for ruling the world, more than it empowers and enables those without economic or political power.

The problem is not that there has been a conspiracy to craft the symbolic universe to look a particular way. Rather it has been because the power to make meaning has rested in only a few hands that the symbol system has been crafted to look like its makers. Those with this power have insisted that their version of universal transcendent truth stands for all time and for all people. But their preoccupation with objective, disengaged universal truth has meant that the application in particular contexts has lacked meaningfulness and power for those on the receiving end.

I see as absolutely vital the broadening of the task of meaning-making to everyone within the Christian Symbolic Universe – a literal “priesthood of all believers”. This terminology has been used in the past in denominational wars to describe different types of leadership. I would like to see it applied to the fundamental power every single person has within the Christian Symbolic Universe to ask two questions: “What is really real?” and “What is meaningful, powerful and true?” And to have the space to explore the answers and then to have those answers incorporated into a practical, contextual theology that is filled with purpose and direction.



But how is this going to happen? At present the makers of meaning are elite and educated and meet in exclusive forums. They are at the centre of the Christian Symbolic Universe. They are the custodians, the crafters, the boundary keepers. They decide who the faithful are and who should be cast out and lose the benefits of belonging to this universe. Although not exclusively, they are usually, white men.

On the margins of the Christian Symbolic Universe are those who have no power to influence the centres of decision-making – the poor, the uneducated, the women, the deviants who refuse to live by the rules. Very often these people feel so far away from the centres of power that they have no hope of changing anything. But, Robert Schreiter says, those who live on the margins help define the boundaries of the Christian Symbolic Universe. They are at the limits of its control and therefore their presence at the boundaries defines the extent of the power of the universe.

The nature of the boundaries is fundamental to what is contained and what is excluded. Boundaries are “areas of ambiguity between two states”. They are “perilous areas in human existence”, says Schreiter.<sup>84</sup> Because those with power within the symbolic universe recognise that the boundaries are at the limits of their power, and that they are states where a simple crossing over will put people into an entirely new frame of reference, they are often supervised by specialists. Very often these specialists are those who are integral to the making of meaning – the priests, the theologians, those with spiritual power. This fits with Linell Cady’s insight that theologians are those people who, situated in these liminal areas, can walk beyond the boundaries and return, to help reset the parameters, to “extend the symbolic universe”. The tragedy is that many of the boundary keepers do not see their job as adjusting the boundaries to make the symbolic universe more habitable for all its population. They seem to see their task as setting the boundaries in concrete to uphold the power of the universe and to reinforce the positions of those who are in power.

Boundaries are populated not just by those who have been pushed out of the centre of the

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<sup>84</sup>Constructing Local Theologies, p65.

symbolic universe and by those keeping and protecting the symbol system. There are people who gravitate to them because they are places of ambiguity and provide space to explore that the centre does not allow. There are people located there who have abilities and insights that many within the symbolic universe find frightening, disorientating and disturbing. Schreier says artists of all sorts often position themselves on the boundary where, free of the strictures of the symbolic order, they can explore the tensions and ambiguities of society. It is not surprising that many cultures find their artists strange, incomprehensible, and alien to who they know themselves to be. "... In many cultures people connected with theatre, with the circus and carnivals are considered marginal people in the society. They play with the structures of reality too easily for most people's taste."<sup>85</sup>

Seen this way, the margins are not just a dumping ground for the symbolic universe's worthless people. They are places where a great deal of fruitful activity can take place. Part of the containing strength of a symbolic universe lies in its ability to peg people to a place within the universe. The control of movement and access to knowledge upholds the power of the elite. It is when those with privilege move to locate themselves on the boundaries, and the marginalised come inwards to bang at the doors of the citadels of power, that the structures of place begin to be shaken. "Consciousness of boundaries is tied up with consciousness of identity. They interact, causing the one to bring about change in the other," says Schreier.<sup>86</sup>

The margins often look so desolate, so removed from the place where the making of meaning happens but, as Schreier insists, they are integral to the structure and control the symbolic universe exerts. When the people on the march (out to the boundaries or inward from the margins) start to actively question the process of meaning creation; when they ask who is doing it, for whom and who has been denied access to this process, they are opening up huge gaps in the tightly-woven structure of the symbol system.

An intolerable challenge to the symbolic order comes when those on the move reject the meanings constructed by the power bloc and begin to do their own work of symbol creation

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<sup>85</sup>p67.

<sup>86</sup>p72.

and meaning creation. For instance, when terminology that denigrates people is turned into a symbol of defiance and pride, then the symbol system starts losing its power to ostracise (the power traditionally to cast people out into the place without identity, meaning or purpose). This happens when women begin to take control of words like harpy, hag, witch and turn them into positive names for those who are initiated into a different way of seeing, or when homosexuals take words like fag, queen, queer and use them blatantly to identify themselves in transgression of the value system of the symbolic order. What is happening here is that a huge question mark is cast over what is really real and who decides what is really real. The dissonance between ritual as prescribed and reality as lived or between symbol system and experience is being loudly proclaimed.

Using this theory of the margins marking the boundaries of symbolic universe and therefore having power to influence the shape of the universe by any movement or change on the boundary can result in too much optimism. Taking on a structure of the kind of power of the Christian Symbolic Universe is more than just a simple positioning oneself with marginalised people and hoping that this kind of movement outward will have a ripple effect on the centre of power.

The power of the centre must all be taken seriously because it is still the main conduit for knowledge for the majority of women even if they are marginalised from its power, and marginalised politically and economically. It is reality that all the activity by feminist theologians of creating new symbols with power and meaning that has been happening with such profusion in the last decade, has not penetrated mainstream Christianity with the kind of impact needed to have an effect on the lives of the majority of women who live under church-sacralized domination. The conduit for this new information is still via the structures of the old order and can still be filtered out by those in positions of power so that it never reaches those it should benefit.

To position oneself on the boundaries might be a fruitful and a realistic alternative to living within the Christian Symbolic Universe, but it may also never have a significant impact on the centres of meaning creation, and teachings which demean and devalue women will continue to have power and hold the majority of Christians – both male and female – under

their power.

Another factor I have to take seriously is that any woman, who like myself, is white, educated and has access to a job, money, mobility and the resources that the elite uses to keep itself in power, cannot be considered marginal. To be marginal is then a choice. But to be truly marginal is to let go of resources one has which can be used to open up space for the marginalised to move. For example, to move from an urban area to a rural area in order to be marginal is to remove oneself from access to information and the networks of people who know what is being decided and planned at the centres of power.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza finds a very creative way of resolving this difficult decision of how to situate oneself for maximum impact on the centres of meaning making. She has adopted the identity of the “resident alien”. Instead of choosing between places – centre versus margin – she chooses an ambiguous identity, which allows her to move into the centre, but with the constant awareness that she is a foreigner in a culture she had no part in creating. “I propose that the metaphor of resident alien is an apt figure also for a feminist movement and politics of liberation within the academy and church. Like the Syro-Phoenician, feminists enter the house of biblical scholarship or ministry as theological, cultural and religious aliens. Those of us who have made biblical scholarship and ministry our place of residence must not forget we are strangers in a land whose language, constitution, history, religion and culture we did not create.”<sup>87</sup>

She chooses not to situate herself away from the centre of power but to access that world as an “immigrant” so that she may glean all the resources she needs for her struggle. “I do not intend to relinquish the centre in favour of the margins. Rather I seek simultaneously to destabilize the centre and the margins of ‘malestream’ biblical studies ...”<sup>88</sup>

What is the purpose? To acquire the language, the knowledge and the intellectual tools to wage the struggle against “marginalising theologies”, the theologies that prop up the marginalising economic policies and political structures. “The resident alien tries to

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<sup>87</sup>But, She Said, p185.

<sup>88</sup>p7.

overcome the either/or position, the stay in the church or get out (option). For change to happen one must be inside and know the language. But one must always be conscious that this structure and system was not created for us – we are outsiders.”<sup>89</sup> The danger of this position is the alienation one constantly feels. The temptation to be lured inside is ever present because of the innate human need to belong. The resident alien must be on her guard against being drawn into the purposes of the symbol system. “We must refuse to produce or teach biblical-theological knowledge that legitimates intellectual and religious discourses that vilify women.”<sup>90</sup>

Is the key to walking this tightrope successfully being aware of one’s alienation and outsider-ness, but always foregrounding one’s insider status and privileges? It is a more realistic technique for people like myself, who, however hard they try cannot, because of their skin colour and their educational privileges and their jobs, pretend to be marginal. Even when people like me locate ourselves physically with the marginal we are just not in the same situation at all.<sup>91</sup>

If one is a resident alien moving through the world of the kyriarchy, one is not fixed at a specific location on the margins. So where is one directing one’s energies? Fiorenza says the struggle must be directed at a particular boundary and she says that boundary is at the “junction of racism and sexism”. The focus of the work of the resident alien must be “human liberation” and not “God talk” in the words of Filipino theologian Elizabeth Tapia.<sup>92</sup>

Chung Huyn Kyung ask the central question of this privileged but precarious position:  
“These middle-class, educated, and English-speaking women talk about Asian women’s pain – poverty, physical and psychological battering, prostitution and so on ... But what right to they have to talk about poor Asian women’s struggles? How can

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<sup>89</sup>This was said at a meeting with women theology students of the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg campus during her visit on August 24, 1994.

<sup>90</sup>But, She Said, p185.

<sup>91</sup>A reporter I know has done several stints of living in squatter camps. Her writing approach has been to live with people for months on end to find out the deeper workings of their communities. She reported after a stint in a squatter settlement on the edge of Durban that even though the shack dwellers were upwardly mobile and that most people stayed only for two years before finding jobs and better housing, that the difference that marked her from them was her internalised knowledge of how the system of getting access to resources works just because she has had access to it all her life, regardless of her present location and its limitations.

<sup>92</sup>Quoted by Chung in Struggle to be the Sun Again, p100.

they speak of the poor Asian women's faith with authenticity using the language of the colonisers which the poor women in their respective countries cannot even understand?

And answers it with insight and inspiration:

“Many educated women theologians in Asia know that they are not doing theology *for* the poor women. They articulate theology in order to enhance the liberation process in their broken communities ... these women do theology as a form of repentance and self-criticism ... these middle-class, educated Asian women theologians are learning how to work with poor women and how to be transformed by the wisdom of the poor through the process of doing theology.”<sup>93</sup>

Is there power available to those who choose this precarious assignation to journey between the centre and the margins so they may impact both? And can they affect the power structures so that the marginalised can be empowered by their use of theological knowledge and tools gleaned at the centre?

Power is not just a word, not just a thing. It too is a symbol and has been defined, named and contained in certain ways by the Christian Symbolic Universe. Its most potent symbol is the God of the Christian Symbolic Universe who embodies the following attributes that then become the guiding knowledge about power for all those who live within this realm.

- Firstly, he has all power. There is no power outside of him. He alone has access to it and shares it only with those he chooses. Those who have power claim submission to him and therefore wield power only at his command.
- The power operates at his will, he directs and controls it.
- There is no other kind of power (even his opponent the devil, has a kind of “borrowed” power allowed to him at God’s discretion).
- This power is coercive – despite portrayals of God as loving, he is often characterised as using power over and against the will over human beings, for their own good, which they are characterised as being too foolish to truly know.
- Those who want access to this power must be willing to give themselves in total self-sacrifice. This message is clear through the symbol of the willing death of Jesus Christ – “the return for total sacrifice is absolute cosmic and historical power”.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup>p102.

<sup>94</sup>A Feminist Ethic of Risk, p116.

This symbol and its clusters of meanings have dramatically channelled the way we approach our knowledge about power. Unless it is resident in authorised structures and controlled, preferably by one man at the top, it is not power at all. Welch says “A theology that emphasises the absolute power of God holds as an ideal a type of power not possible for those working for justice.”<sup>95</sup> In keeping with this definition of power, the ruptures of order which take place in opposition to this power are called “mob violence”. They are defined as illegitimate, uncontrolled and goal-less and to be avoided because the chaos involved in them is likely to turn on itself and extinguish those nearest.

But, having lived through the dramatic turn around in South Africa which saw the end of one of the most structured, controlled, powerful oppressive systems on earth that endured for nearly half a century, it is obvious to me, that that is not all there is to say about power. Schüssler Fiorenza says: “We cannot let the system define the issues.” There is power beyond the kyriarchy. “The struggle is to build our power which is *the energy which is among us*.”<sup>96</sup> (my italics). “Power is an elusive force which takes many forms,” says Adeline Masquelier,<sup>97</sup> and quoting Comaroff and Comaroff: “Power also presents, or rather hides, itself in the forms of everyday life.”

Instead of seeing power only in structures legitimised by the symbolic universe, power can be found in energy, in force, in the efforts at sheer survival that women put into mundane, daily events. The first step is to acknowledge “there is power outside the dominant structures” – to deny the kyriarchy from convincing us with its belief that it has a monopoly on power. If we have life and energy and feelings, we have power. Sheer numbers is an incredible form of power! (often one of the only factors the oppressed have on their side).

To structure and organise this power is the challenge. The only model we have of power is the kyriarchy’s, and it is not an enabling, sharing form of power. The temptation with power is to emulate the oppressors and historical struggles against domination are full of their own histories of awful atrocities committed in the name of freedom. Sharon Welch points out that

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<sup>95</sup>p113.

<sup>96</sup>Schüssler Fiorenza’s meeting with women theology students at UNP, August 24, 1994.

<sup>97</sup>Modernity and its Malcontents, p4.

often the mindset becomes: that to overcome a dominating system we need to build a competing system of even greater power, so that the system we oppose will cower in defeat, having recognised that our system is more powerful. To counter this temptation she proposes an “ethic of risk” as a counter to the “ethic of control”.

Under this definition power is:

- Risky: the actors are not situated in fortified bastions with a military machine to protect them. Their actions are often imaginative instead of military, using their own bodies, words and works as weapons.
- Limited: An ethic of risk is “a definition of responsible action within the limits of bounded power”.<sup>98</sup> “Maturity means recognising that ideals are far from realisation and not easily won, that partial change occurs only through the hard work and persistent struggles of generations”.<sup>99</sup>
- Imbedded in relationships with other people: it is “power with” and not “power over”.

Welch points out that the belief in absolute power has another side effect – utopianism. When success doesn’t come easily it leads people into paralysing despair, and this is not a place activists should dwell in.

“The aims of an ethic of risk may appear modest, yet it offers the potential of sustained resistance against overwhelming odds. The aim is simple – given that we cannot guarantee an end to racism nor the prevention of nuclear war, we can prevent our own capitulation to structural evil. We can participate in a long heritage of resistance, standing with those who have worked for change in the past. We can also take risks, trying to create the conditions necessary for peace and justice, realising that the choices of others can only be influenced and responded to, never controlled.”<sup>100</sup>

In this chapter I have looked at how spiritual activists can position themselves for maximum impact on the centres of power of the Christian Symbolic Universe. I have suggested that neither a static location within the symbol system or a position on the boundaries is sufficient to destabilise a system which has perfected the art of co-option and marginalisation. There is power available to those who are not elite males and there is space to move, but those

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<sup>98</sup> A Feminist Ethic of Risk, p19.

<sup>99</sup> p70.

<sup>100</sup> p22.



undertaking the task of resident aliens must be very clear that their purpose is to undermine theologies that marginalise and that their communities of accountability are located on the margins.

Fundamental to unwinding the tyrannical power the Christian Symbolic Universe wields over women is for women to take over the process of meaning-making. A symbol system that does not oppress anybody and prop up any systems of exploitation, but which empowers spiritually and gives guidance should be our goal. This will entail freeing the process of meaning-making forever – the subject I explore in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Freeing the process forever

*I do not want to take over all the old models and simply brand them  
with female transpositions. I want the process freed forever.*

*Sara Maitland*

It has become increasingly clear to me that finding a female face for God, finding female role models to emulate in the biblical tradition, and discovering a “true” and “central” message of liberation in the biblical texts, is just not enough to challenge the power of the androcentric Christian Symbolic Universe. These are noble and important tasks and they empower and give space to many women, but they do not go far enough to destabilise the gender system on which the Christian Symbolic Universe is built and which it continues to sustain.

There are deeper issues at stake than simply having a female divinity who understands and empowers women. In the words of Chung Hyun Kyung “theology must be democratised”.<sup>101</sup> Elite women cannot take the place of elite men doing theology *for*<sup>102</sup> other women. It is important that women enter the places solely occupied by men, and if they can do theology for both women and men (instead of being ghettoised into women’s issues), that is another important milestone. But neither are satisfactory end points. To democratise theology would be for everyone to have access to meaning creation. A true “priesthood of all believers”. And because so many others live in the shadow of the Christian Symbolic Universe, I would like to add the unbelievers to this list of those who have the right to participate in the creation of meaning.<sup>103</sup>

Already in predominantly secular Western countries where people have found the Christian Symbolic Universe to be out of touch with their lives there is a kind of religious free-for-all in which a smorgasbord of spiritual symbols is available to pick and choose from to create a personal symbolic world to live in that suits the individual self. I am not advocating this kind of individualistic “this is my truth” spirituality. I would like to advocate a community-

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<sup>101</sup>Struggle to be the Sun Again, p100.

<sup>102</sup>Giyatri’s Chakravorti Spivak’s category *for* involves an obliteration of the poor, black woman’s voice when an elite woman speaks about her as though she knows all about her, but has not actually talked to her, or let her talk for herself.

<sup>103</sup>My purpose is purely selfish, I would not like to exclude myself from this happy occasion!

grounded experience in the creation of meaning. Those who take this spiritual job seriously will have to locate themselves in communities where through dialogue and exploration the categories “meaningful, powerful and true” become the norm for testing the worth of spiritual symbols. And the goal must be “human liberation” and not simply “God talk” in the words of Elizabeth Tapia of the Philippines.<sup>104</sup>

The most effective place to position oneself is at the nexus of racism and sexism (according to Schüssler Fiorenza). This will involve coming to terms with an identity that is “partially constituted”, a category Sharon Welch introduces.<sup>105</sup> The way I understand being partially constituted is to situate oneself not just with the nationality, class, race or sex of one’s birth or upbringing, but to allow others from other classes, races and sexes to have an impact on one’s identity, work and direction.

Freeing the process means that everyone will have to be involved in meaning creation – especially the poor and illiterate. And this is the challenge to feminist theologians, not to repeat the mistakes of the male elite who made the symbolic universe look like themselves and reflect their concerns.

An example of listening to poor, black women in recent South African history shows that it is possible to cross the very difficult divide between elite and Other. In drafting the Women’s Charter (which was actually done mostly by women politicians and lawyers) the Women’s National Coalition sent out hundreds of workers over a period of about a year into the rural areas of South Africa to speak the local languages and listen to the hopes and dreams of women who were beyond the boundaries of the political processes leading up to South African’s first democratic election. The result is a document which has already had a significant impact on the interim Constitution and the Bill of Rights, but which also, for the first time in this country speaks out for the majority of women, and not what an elite group thinks are the issues affecting all women. Frene Ginwala, convenor of the coalition, and now

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<sup>104</sup>Quoted by Chung, p100.

<sup>105</sup>A Feminist Ethic of Risk, p151. Welch says she considers work with other groups to be a “mutually challenging and mutually transforming pluralism”.

the Speaker of Parliament, called the process “a great bending of ears”.<sup>106</sup>

I would like to add that it was the largest, most comprehensive listening exercise that had ever taken place in South Africa and probably the first time anyone at national level had listened to those on the very bottom rungs of South African society.

This attitude of listening and bending ears must be an integral part of any task of making new meaning for women. It is a serious concern that much of the liberatory, ground-breaking work done by feminist theologians never reaches the ordinary women occupying the benches and pews in the church – those who arrange the flowers and pour the tea and who have internalised all the demeaning theologies that teach them to be silent and consider themselves less worthy than men. Not only are they the reason why such theologising must happen, they are integral to the process, otherwise the end product will not reflect what is “really real” for them. And in the words of Cady, it will not be “meaningful, powerful and true” in their situations and contexts. They will have no choice but to remain within the androcentric Christian Symbolic Universe because there is no comprehensive alternative that they can grasp and make sense of.

What does it mean to free the process forever? Here are some of the ideas which I have about what an alternative process of meaning-creation might look like:

Firstly, it means that there can be no fixed canon ever again. No fixed body of truth, no closed system which coerces reality into a predetermined framework. The word “truth” must be liberated from a monolithic understanding in which the male-dominated western church prescribes and decides what is true. It must be relativised and placed alongside the two other categories: “what is meaningful?” and “what is powerful?” If the “truth” makes no sense to triply oppressed women and does not empower them and lead to their ultimate liberation, then it is worthless.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza contrasts two understandings of truth – the type embodied by

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<sup>106</sup>The Natal Witness, May 2, 1992.

the Christian Symbolic Universe, and the kind women discover among themselves when they start asking what is “really real” for them. She says of the former: “Truth is something hidden or buried. It is often located in the Other and must be extracted through violence.”<sup>107</sup> So truth in this version of reality is a Holy Grail (one solid distinct entity) that one acquires by going and getting it (and the getting requires male energy and strength). Or truth can be “an absent presence”. “Not something to be found but something to be constituted through the interactive deliberation of the assembly of voices in dialogue.”

I suggest a new form of meaning-making will have to take seriously that what is true will have to be constituted in each context and it will look different every time because it will look like those who have created it together. And that is the way it should be. “Universal truth” has been a terrible burden for those Christians to carry who cannot recognise themselves in it at all.

Chung Hyun Kyung says of Korean women whose cultural history is Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist and Christian:

“What matters for them is not doctrinal orthodoxy ... what matters to Asian women is survival and the liberation of themselves and their communities. What matters for them is not Jesus, Sakyamuni, Mohammed, Confucius, Kwan In, or Ina, but rather the life force which empowers them to claim their humanity. Asian women selectively have chosen life-giving elements of their culture and religions and have woven new patterns of religious meaning.”<sup>108</sup>

This will lead us into a glorious syncretism – that state that the Christian Symbolic Universe has appointed specialists to avoid. To quote Chung again:

“Syncretism has been such a ‘dangerous’ word for Western theologians. They believe syncretism destroys Christian identity and will eventually lead people to confusion. Syncretism, for them, is the lazy and irresponsible way of combining different religious heritages without any principles. They talk as if Christian identity is an unchangeable property which they own ... Traditional Western theologians seem to say to us that they have the *copyright* on Christianity.”<sup>109</sup>

It is this sense of owning exclusively, of holding the copyright, of possessing the

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<sup>107</sup>Lecture to the School of Theology, UNP, August 24, 1994.

<sup>108</sup>Struggle to be the Sun Again, p113.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid.

unadulterated truth, that syncretism challenges. I submit that it is a valid option for women, and especially for women who come from cultures other than the Christian West. It is crucial to their sense of identity and community that they do not sacrifice who they are at the deepest levels to be obedient and silent inhabitants of the Christian Symbolic Universe. This attitude to truth means acknowledging the permanent partiality of all points of view including feminism, even though at this point in human history, feminism is the most radical critique of racism, sexism and economic and political exploitation we have.

Secondly, freeing the process forever, means that symbols and meaning will have to be created again and again. Rituals will have to be adapted and changed. Sifting the past to find meaningful, powerful and true ingredients to build the future will happen over and over again. No ritual, liturgy or symbol can be set in concrete again as being universal.

Thirdly, freeing the process forever means that the community of those producing meaning will fluctuate and will not be determined by membership card or by orthodoxy of belief and profession. Community can never again be defined by a simple dualism of Us versus Them.<sup>110</sup> Just as one Christian African woman is already partially constituted by several layers of cultural and social interaction, so will a whole community be made up of overlapping layers of culture brought into it by the partially-constituted people who make meaning together. It will of necessity be diverse, multicultural, multiracial and must consist of those who are triply oppressed. Because of this, community cannot be those who are able to gather in one place at one time. It will have to consist of a network of layers of overlapping commitments and contacts.

Fourthly, freeing the process means embracing an ethic of risk. We will have to accept that to tie everything up into a system that encapsulates everything conclusively for all time is to rob future generations of their right to make meaning, to define, name and own the process too. It means that chaos will be ever present and that we will have to learn to live with that.

To summarise: The feminisation of the entire Christian Symbolic Universe will still not be

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<sup>110</sup>See Schreier Constructing Local Theologies, p44.

satisfactory conclusion to the project of crafting a spirituality that empowers and benefits women. The process must be open enough to be owned by everyone who wants to do theology and be spiritual. This means there can be no fixed canon, no fixed truth. Truth will have to be constituted in a community of diversity through dialogue. And truth will have to take its place alongside what is meaningful and what is empowering in each particular context. Symbols and rituals will have to be made again and again, and the question of whether they truly reflect the “really real” asked over and over again. The psychological need for certainties will have to be faced and an ethic of risk embraced. Our inability to have all the answers, all the strategies and more than the measure of control we really need, must be tackled head-on and the limits of our knowledge, our power and our ability to make meaning, accepted.

## CONCLUSION

*In the middle of the night  
I go walking in my sleep  
From the mountains of faith  
To a river so deep  
I must be looking for something  
Something sacred I lost  
But the river is wide  
And it's too hard to cross ...*

*In the middle of the night  
I go walking in my sleep  
Through the valley of fear  
To a river so deep  
And I've been searching for something  
Taken out of my soul  
Something I would never lose  
Something somebody stole ...*

*Billy Joel*

I was not sure that to give a white, American male singer pride of place at the conclusion of my thesis was a terribly good idea. But, I looked again at his words which I found so moving the first time I heard them, and decided yes, he does speak what I truly know and feel.

The four years it has taken me to research and write this thesis have been a long night. People who came into my postgraduate group fleetingly and heard of my journey labelled it “the dark night of the soul”, counselled me that it was exactly what the Christian mystics had experienced and told me I would find comfort and direction in the heart of the tradition of the Christian Symbolic Universe. I didn't, and they didn't truly understand quite what I was experiencing. There were others who listened and walked the road with me, never telling me what I felt was wrong or unacceptable or had been perceived incorrectly.

It has been a night in which I have felt as though I had lost my bearings, as though the markers and boundaries had disappeared. It has been a dark time of searching, of re-evaluating things at many levels of my life.

But it has also been a night of sleep, in which I have descended into realms of myself beyond the conscious, and allowed my psyche and spirit space to breathe without the constrictions of a stifling theology that told them how to behave.

I had thought I was lost. There was no salvation for me, no place in this Christian Symbolic Universe for me. I thought I had lost this world, that I had wilfully let go of it. But then I realised: I would never lose something precious. The inner core of me knows how to affirm



life and guard it. Something sacred was stolen from me, denied me.

So I had to go journeying. Through rivers, up mountains and down valleys of fear.

The journey has been an intensely intellectual one. I had to understand why I could not be free. And the journey has been a psychological one – in therapy I have looked at myself, my family, my marriage, my relationship to my child. It has also been a political journey – maternity benefits and the existence of a creche for babies exist at my place of work because of a process I started with several other women. And it has been a communal journey: over the last four years I have been part of three different women's groups which consisted of people of faith struggling to integrate their experience, their spirituality and their hopes for liberation.

I have tried to be ruthlessly honest with myself and other people. I have tried to integrate all I know and do and believe into one whole. I have also tried to let other people speak to me and to listen to them with the kind of openness that acknowledges that this interaction will change me. I have vowed to be true to this journey wherever it might lead.

The journey is not a linear one. It backtracks, it spirals, it moves backwards through the past and projects me into the future. It delves deep into the subconscious and it elevates my mind.

This thesis is this moment's result. Already in the time it has taken to write I look back at the statement in the introduction that I was not ready to undertake any spiritual experience outside of the faith I know and grew up in, and I can see that I am more ready to consider this possibility.

I have struggled with talking about myself all the way through. It is terribly easy with the heritage of Western individualism to prioritise the self. But I have resorted to talking only about what I know and experience because I do not want to make assumptions that other women are not comfortable with. Women in my postgraduate seminar group were quite honest with me when they disagreed with me or perceived things differently. I do not presume to talk for them. And I most certainly cannot talk for women in South Africa who are black.

All the things I conclude in the final chapter of this thesis are challenges for me. I am one of the privileged who hold in their hands precious new knowledge which is liberating, what will I do with it? How will I ensure that it reaches those who need it? How do I root myself in a community of diversity and make myself accountable? How do I stop myself from being over-enthusiastic and making meaning for other people, instead of opening up the space so that they can do it for themselves?

This is the challenge. This is the struggle. This is the journey. This is the really real.

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