Discerning Redeeming Communities: Rita Nakashima Brock and Elizabeth A. Johnson in Dialogue

Alison Downie

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DISCERNING REDEEMING COMMUNITIES:
RITA NAKASHIMA BROCK AND ELIZABETH A. JOHNSON
IN DIALOGUE

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of Theology
McAnulty Graduate School of Liberal Arts
Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Systematic Theology
By
Alison Downie

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DISCERNING REDEEMING COMMUNITIES:
RITA NAKASHIMA BROCK AND ELIZABETH A. JOHNSON
IN DIALOGUE

By
Alison Downie
Approved December 9, 2008

Dr. Anne M. Clifford, CSJ
Dissertation Director

Dr. Jean Donovan
First Reader

Dr. Maureen O’Brien
Second Reader

Dr. George Worgul
Chair, Department of Theology

Dr. Albert Labriola, Acting Dean
McAnulty College of Liberal Arts
ABSTRACT

DISCERNING REDEEMING COMMUNITIES:
RITA NAKASHIMA BROCK AND ELIZABETH A. JOHNSON
IN DIALOGUE

By
Alison Downie
May 2009

Dissertation Supervised by Dr. Anne M. Clifford, CSJ

Rita Nakashima Brock’s Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power and
Elizabeth A. Johnson’s Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of
the Communion of Saints offer resources for reflecting upon what redemptive community
is, how it functions, and how women, in particular, experience redemption.

With deep roots in Trinitarian creation theology and a strong trunk of feminist
theological anthropology, the branches of Christian feminist reconstructionist theology
produce rich soteriological fruits. Without rootedness in creation theology, theological
anthropology is anthropocentric, not sufficiently holistic or ecologically aware.

Similarly, without development of a feminist theological anthropology, soteriology
inevitably reflects the distortions of patriarchal perspectives embedded in anthropological
themes intertwined with soteriology, such as the imago dei, sin, and grace.
Rita Nakashima Brock’s *Journeys by Heart* understands both woundedness and healing as relational phenomena. Her interpersonal and process orientation can benefit from dialogue with systematic categories. Her analysis of heart and the relational power of Eros to heal have deep resonance with the systematic theological categories of *imago dei* and pneumatology.

Elizabeth A. Johnson’s *Friends of God and Prophets* reconstructs the symbol of the communion of saints for a contemporary North American faith. In her hands, this symbol functions as an inclusive, relational, dynamic image of redeeming community, offering a Christian symbol and language for a reality not limited to one faith.

Despite the differences between Brock and Johnson, in these particular texts, each of them offer evocative insight and language which can dialogue together in the ongoing task of articulating what the word “redemption” means in the particularities of women’s lives and in theological discourse.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my advisor and mentor

Dr. Anne M. Clifford

for hearing me into speech
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to briefly sketch the contours of the wide ranging support and many gifts of grace which have carried this work toward completion. I am very grateful to the Theology Department at Duquesne University for the support of graduate student assistantships over the course of several years. I am also deeply indebted to The Unitarian Universalist Panel on Theological Education for receipt of its 2007-08 Scholar’s Grant. I would not have been able to complete the dissertation had it not been for the financial support and emotional renewal this generous grant provided. I am thankful to the panel members who believed my project showed promise and trusted me to complete what I had begun.

Many professors over the years have encouraged and inspired me. At Duquesne University, I am grateful to my readers, Dr. Jean Donovan and Dr. Maureen O’Brien, for their time, focused attention, and encouragement. As Theology Department Chair, Dr. James Hanigan supported me in a difficult time. Drs. William Thompson-Uberuaga and Maureen O’Brien also offered employment, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to work for both of them. I thank Dr. Moni McIntyre for her personal availability to students. I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to study with Dr. Marilyn Schaub, who has taught me much about Wisdom.

I also wish to thank the faculty of the Religious Studies Department at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), not only for providing me the opportunity to teach a variety of courses, but also for welcoming me into their collegial community and
encouraging me to finish my doctoral work. At IUP, I am especially grateful to Drs. Terri Smith and Stuart Chandler.

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Taza d’Oro houses another sort of community which has enriched and encouraged me, a special place of belonging and welcome. Among the many whose friendly support has made such a difference to me, I especially thank Amy, Rachel, Jim, Mike, Dave, Matt, Ben, Ross and Lawrence.

I borrow Elizabeth Johnson’s phrase “a great sea of support” to describe the many dear friends who have been and continue to be my redemptive community. The following women, in particular, have given me more strength than they know: Rosa Snyder-Boyd, Esther Tse, Patty Sharbaugh, Rachel Wildman, Paola Scommenga, Shelley Thacher, Ellen McGrath-Smith, Paula Flaherty, and Jane McCafferty. Dr. Anne M. Clifford, my spiritual mother, to whom this work is dedicated, empowered me to believe I could make this academic and personal journey. I continue to learn much from each of these wise women. My prayer for each is that they may receive the kind of care and support they have given to me.

I thank my three sons, Ethan, Kevin, and Cullen, for their presence in my life. They are blessings beyond words to tell, the treasures of my heart. May they each know their own worth.
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Though Christian language is part of the North American cultural context, popular religious talk and substantial theology are often at odds. What does it mean to say that one experiences redemption, or, even more audaciously, to say one experiences God’s presence? This is a radical claim which must be made with great care. Too often in this North American context, salvation-talk is flippant, cheap or trivial, serving only to alienate those who are honest enough to say they cannot resonate with such language. Some hear claims to experience God as absurd because for them the word “God” denotes a remote, omniscient, omnipotent, self-contained entity that arbitrarily blesses some and condemns others. Unfortunately, God-talk is complicated by the fact that many who talk about salvation do speak out of this very conception of God and the God-world relationship.

Claims to experience God are often (perhaps unintentionally) offensive when expressed in moralistic or exclusionary ways. Too frequently, smug religious language implies ethical or spiritual superiority for insiders and deficiency for the “unsaved.” In such talk, the unsaved are a homogenous lot, already categorized, analyzed and dismissed. Though what follows is an academic theological study, I believe it is important that it be done with awareness of the broader cultural context of religious claims, for theological discourse risks causing harm when it ignores or discounts the experience of those who are not part of the specialized conversation.

In dialogue with an atheist, Martin Buber once agreed that “‘it’ [the word “God”]
is the most heavy laden of all human words. None has become so soiled, so mutilated.”¹
But while the atheist could no longer find use for the word God, Buber said, “Just for this reason I may not abandon it. . . . We cannot cleanse the word ‘God’ and we cannot make it whole; but defiled and mutilated as it is, we can raise it from the ground and set it over an hour of great care.”²

Many feminist theologians seek to raise from the ground Christian “salvation” in a similar way. The dominant understanding of salvation in the North American cultural context continues to be some variation of atonement theory: the belief that Jesus was born primarily to die and that the suffering he endured in a gruesome death paid a debt owed to God, thereby providing the salvific bridge across the chasm separating all humanity from the Creator. For many, this word “salvation” has been so thoroughly soiled and mutilated that it may seem unrecoverable. Wanting to speak of grace and redemption, of new life and liberating wholeness, feminist theologians seek to redeem the notion of redemption itself.

Feminist theology systematically reflects upon what women experience as empowering and what deepens well-being in order to contribute to the human quest for meaning and wholeness and to deepen understanding of God’s presence in human lives. A feminist soteriology is deeply informed by the actual experience of transformation as women find themselves, despite suffering, despite obstacles, despite the soiled nature of much “salvation” talk, participating in redemption and needing to name and probe this

²Ibid.
experience.

Perhaps paradoxically, this is an assertion I make out of my own history as a woman who was taught, for theological reasons, not to listen to my own experience of what led to health and wholeness, but, on the contrary, to accept a definition of salvation that actually diminished life and constricted spirit. For me, deepening experience of redemption has had much to do with learning to recognize what empowers rather than what quenches spirit.

There has never been a time when I would not have described myself as a Christian. Raised in an evangelical home, attending Christian schools from the elementary to the college level, I spoke the language of being born again, of having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and I considered myself “saved.” In my late thirties, I returned to graduate school, and, in a time of profound personal crisis, I sought out a spiritual director, who asked me, “How do you experience God?” An overwhelming emptiness suddenly opened before me as I realized I did not even understand her question. I was a graduate student in theology. I enjoyed nothing more than spending hours each day studying scholarly conversation about God. But “experience” God? What did she mean?

I do not know why this simple question cracked open my professed identity on that day. I had wondered what it meant, really, to claim to “have a personal relationship” with someone said to be the Son of God who had died 2,000 years ago, but I had not spent much energy on that blasphemous question. My theology had not allowed me to dwell in such places. I “had” the relationship because I “had” the belief. It was an automatic, necessary corollary. My self-understanding and self-awareness depended
upon the security of that possession. The certainty of belief resolved the issue by precluding experiential questions.

The theological world I lived in asserted that God’s self-communication had happened in the past, in the ancient history of the life of Jesus and the closed canon of Scripture. My task was to understand and apply what had been revealed to others, long ago. I was not aware of any way to “experience” God that was not an exercise in understanding a lesson and applying it in a situation, much like knowing which theorem to use to solve a geometry problem. In practice, this meant following the rules. There were clear rules for how to be a good daughter, sister, wife, mother, and student, and my task as a Christian was to understand and apply these rules. Jesus’ death was the hermeneutical key that opened the manual for correct procedure in this life and the guarantee of life after death. That was salvation.

In my effort to be a good Christian, then, there was no place for knowing my own heart, for attending to my own experience, or for listening to troubling questions, especially those which challenged some of the rules I worked so hard to keep. The theological world in which I lived taught me that my totally depraved heart was a constant source of temptation and a fountain of sin. My job was to control and confine it, not listen to it! In this theological milieu, the self not only had nothing valuable to offer, but needed to be routed out, hunted down and killed as a dangerous enemy. I knew this in my bones even as a child.

I vividly remember a time of intense private devotion when I was ten. During this time of prayer (which I then conceived of as a mental letter to God), I did my absolute best to cry because I knew with all my heart I was a miserable sinner deserving of eternal
damnation. I could not think of anything particularly bad that I had done recently, nor
was I feeling guilty about anything in particular. Nevertheless, I knew with absolute
conviction, by fifth grade, that I was sinful in my deepest core, and I wanted to show God
how sorry I was for simply being me. I wanted to prove my sincere regret through tears,
and was frustrated at having a hard time calling them up.

Suddenly, a paralyzing stab of guilt did pierce me. If I were truly repentant,
wouldn’t tears flow naturally from genuine remorse? My effort to generate tears
demonstrated in itself how far I was from having a good heart. As if the all-knowing God
would not see through such a performance! I was immediately ashamed for having tried
such a manipulative tactic. Since tears did not flow spontaneously, I must not be truly
repentant, so how could I be forgiven?

I was so worthless, I could not even confess and repent of my worthlessness properly.

No wonder, then, that when I was older, believing I had “a personal relationship
with Jesus” was not to be questioned. If I had the relationship with Jesus locked up, I
could, theoretically, manage all that churning internal shame and worthlessness. The
promise of the belief was that it enabled me to be good precisely by knowing just how
worthless I was and believing that somehow a transaction between Jesus and God took
care of the whole mess. Salvation occurred metaphysically and I was to believe it, not
experience it.

When the spiritual director’s question caught me off-guard and slipped through a
crack in the dogma I clenched so tightly, I realized that, despite years of assent to creed
as well as deep desire and strenuous effort to live a godly life, I had to admit I did not
know if I had ever experienced God’s presence at all. She assumed I had, since she asked
“how” not “whether” I did. But I was not so sure. I also realized this woman would not ask the question unless she believed she had “experienced God” herself in some way and believed it was possible for me to do so as well. I will always be grateful for having been asked this question in a way that was neither moralistic nor exclusionary, but quite clearly flowed from compassion and a surety in experience of grace.

Fortunately, through this and many other occasions of grace, questions rose up in me strong enough to pull me out of a place that entrenched shame rather than nurtured growth. I truly grieve to say that in order to explore what it means to experience redemption, I had to leave my church tradition. In my experience, a particular Christian congregation and a redemptive community may be congruent, but there may also be a life-denying chasm between the two.

The dissertation which follows seeks to explore an understanding of redemption as a graced, healing, transformative process that occurs within a relational context. The impulse for my intellectual investigation of this theme arises out of my experiences of both painful losses and unpredictable, astonishing gifts. Though a scholarly theological project, its spiritual roots stretch down into many years and are deeply personal.

More than a decade has passed since that spiritual director asked how I experience God. Now I know that I have received gifts of grace in myriad forms, in ways which continue to amaze me with their unpredictability and their power to heal, including all that has made it possible for me to complete this academic work. Most precious to me, I continue to experience God in the kindness, love, and wisdom of an incredible variety of dear saints, including my mentor, professors, and graduate student friends, but also including loved ones both inside and outside the Christian tradition who, not likely ever
to study the theological significance of the term, would laugh heartily at being named saints.
Chapter One

Rumors of Glory

“Rumours of Glory,” is the title of a song written and performed by Bruce Cockburn, a Canadian musician and songwriter, which suggests glimpses in the natural world and in the human person of “something shining like gold but better.” This chapter adopts Cockburn’s evocative phrase for a theological exploration of the presence of God. This introductory chapter will establish a context for reflecting upon the experience of transformation that Christians name redemption. Such a context will help to lay the foundation for pursuing a feminist soteriology.

While a work of systematic theology, this dissertation seeks to locate the task of critical, analytical scholarship within the larger context of a spirituality which attends to ways of knowing that exceed intellection. In her work Women and Spirituality, Carol Ochs writes that the meaning the human searches for is not in life per se, but in one’s relationship to life. She explains that thinking about experience is, indeed, essential, but people also need a relationship with their experience that involves more than intellectual reflection. Such a relationship involves “accepting or rejecting, consenting or denying,

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3This phrase is the title of a song by Bruce Cockburn, Live, True North Records, 2002. I will use his phrase to capture the sense in which the divine is not perceived directly, but experienced in a mediated fashion. (The British spelling of “rumours” will be dropped in subsequent references).
loving or enduring one’s life.” In her view, “religion and spirituality do not spring up as answers to abstract questions—they are our responses to what we experience.”

Spirituality, then, is not a matter of seeking out particular kinds of experiences but learning from and being transformed by the experiences a particular life brings. Thus, spiritual questioning is “a consciousness that will reflect on an experience and not let go until its value has been understood.” Such transformation leads to “an extraordinary perception of the ordinary.” To use Cockburn’s metaphor, one may learn to glimpse rumors of glory all around, breaking out in surprising, unanticipated places and ways. The facts of a particular situation may not change, the ordinary remains ordinary, yet one’s relationship to those facts may be revolutionized, leading a person to experience him or her-self, and the ordinary, in an entirely new way.

A thesis of this work is that transformation does happen within people’s lives, and it can be profitably studied and reflected upon systematically, as long as the lure of theological critical thinking does not usurp the larger context of spirituality within which such study ought to take place. In the introduction to Power and the Spirit of God: Toward an Experience-Based Pneumatology, Bernard Cooke says that “people’s experience of ‘the divine’ has become more intertwined with the experience of their own

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5 Ibid., 13.
6 Ibid., 27.
7 Ibid., 36.
personhood. Whether they reflect on it or not, they have a new view of how divine and human power interact in the process of ‘salvation.’”

Themes of divine and human power and agency in redemptive transformation, particularly in women’s experience of community, are the heart of this theological study. In order to establish the context within which redemption will be studied, this chapter will have three major sections. The first section presents the major feminist critiques of classical theism as an inadequate framework for women’s experience of redemptive transformation. This section will summarize the fruits of scholarship undertaken with a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion, which has surfaced ways in which classical theism is not only limited, but actively harmful, especially to women. The second section will articulate a Trinitarian creation theology, in order to provide an alternative foundation to the weaknesses noted within the classical tradition. Moving beyond critique of traditional thought, this section seeks to summarize what Christian feminist scholarship has built as a positive framework for theological reflection regarding God’s relationship to the world. Finally, the third section of this chapter will sketch key elements of a feminist theological anthropology, in preparation for the more focused study of the soteriological contributions of Rita Nakashima Brock and Elizabeth A. Johnson in chapters two and three, respectively.

Critiques of Classical Theism

The most pertinent critiques of classical theism apply equally to the intellectual and the popular traditions of Western Christianity. Therefore, the following general overview will not trace distinctions between clerical/lay or scholarly/popular descriptions.

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of God. In Western thought, all the dominant images of God until the twentieth century are at issue and are conflated in the following references because the short-comings and harmful effects of these images are the focus of study, not their differences. Briefly put, the God of classical theism is the supernatural king of the Cosmos, the Ancient of Days in William Blake’s painting of that name. God is an aged but strong, white-haired, white male, who rules the world from somewhere up above. He is Father, Lord, King of Kings. However, this mighty God eventually devolves in popular parlance into a trivialized “old man upstairs.” This image is a weakened, domesticated Ancient of Days, a caricature, but not an essentially new image. In the “old man upstairs,” utter transcendence, having become entirely remote, eventually dissipates into utter irrelevance.

Elizabeth Johnson provides a succinct summary and analysis of the God of classical theism in *She Who Is.* As she explains, this was the dominant image of the divine in Western Christianity until the early twentieth century. The intellectual heritage for this conception is Greco-Roman philosophy and Enlightenment rationalism, yet this image of God has functioned in all three monotheistic faiths. It is an understanding of God that is thoroughly hierarchical and absolutely transcendent.

Edward Farley, in his *Divine Empathy,* notes that a careful study of classical theology reveals “a deep and pervasive ambiguity in the discourse about God in Western

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11While this image has been critiqued for a long time in scholarly contexts, I believe it is still the dominant image in much of popular Christianity, both in North America but also in a global sense. See Philip Jenkins’ *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002) for a description of the form of Christianity exploding in Africa, Latin America, and Asian countries.
Christianity” concerning whether or not God is being itself or a being.\textsuperscript{12} On this point, Farley makes an important distinction between theism at the popular level and scholarly theology. For the purposes of this study, the focus will not be on a precise understanding of particular theologians within this heritage, but on the broad effect this theology and its symbols have had, particularly on women. Though many theologians have spoken of God in more nuanced and complex language, at the popular level, conceptions of God have remained straightforwardly hierarchical and male. There is, therefore, great discord between the theory and the practice of the classical theology of God. Johnson summarizes:

Theoretically, theism adheres to the assertion that the mystery of God is beyond all images and conceptualizations. Yet the history of theology shows how in practice theism has reified God, reducing infinite mystery to an independently existing Supreme Being alongside other beings, a solitary, transcendent power.\textsuperscript{13}

Classical theism’s image of God has been critiqued as theologically inadequate for roughly one hundred years, yet this conception of God is still very much an issue in Western culture. Some popular forms of Christianity continue to speak of God in terms that perpetuate and cling to this image as though it were the inviolable, orthodox faith. At a popular level, this God is still the “God of the gaps” of many creationists and fundamentalist groups. While historically and theologically limited, these voices are, nevertheless, a strong public representation of the Christian God in the North American context.

At the same time, many who cannot believe God exists are not aware of or do not seriously engage any possibilities for the meaning of “God” other than this “God of the


\textsuperscript{13}Johnson, \textit{She Who Is}, 20.
Much of the current popular conversation, as a result, is characterized by polarization between those who cling to a notion of God that mainstream Christian theology would hold to be inadequate, and those who would throw out “God” without remainder as an impossibility for any educated person. Little genuine dialogue takes place on this issue anywhere other than specialized academic settings. Although a theology of God that might engage these opposing polarities is not possible here, key theological critiques of classical theism will now be briefly reviewed.

Critiques of the Classical Christian Heritage

The critiques come from two directions, firstly, from within classical theology itself and, secondly, from contemporary feminist perspectives. Within classical theology itself, Johnson notes three basic ways in which this image of God falls far short of the Christian God. The tradition maintains, firstly, that God is ultimately incomprehensible to the finite human mind, secondly, that speech about God is understood to be analogous, and thirdly, that many names for God are theologically necessary.

The classical tradition itself asserts that although God does reveal Godself, no human understanding can ever come to an end of the mystery that is the reality of God. Unfortunately, the history of theology demonstrates a tendency to forget that systematic

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14 Examples of recent popular writing which assume the absurdity of God’s existence but fail to seriously engage any understandings of the reality of God other than that found in classical theism are plentiful. See Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* (New York, NY: Mariner Books, 2008). Other currently popular works are Sam Harris’s *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York, NY: Norton, 2005) and Daniel C. Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2006). These works regard religious faith as inherently anti-intellectual. Faith is possible only by making grave errors in rational thought or by being deceived (by others or oneself).


thought is always undertaken within the context of faith that God is ultimately beyond all human understanding. Too often, as Johnson points out, creedal statements came to be “construed as a wire fence that not only protected but also captured and tamed the unknown God.” 17 A danger lurks within the legitimate pursuit of systematic thought, for what may begin as exploration and celebration of holy mystery may end in absolutizing an image or a theory. Idols can be shaped unintentionally. Statements made by one generation in the surety of faith can be taken up by others in a brittle dogmatism that no longer knows how to search or explore. To the extent that classical theism defined God so precisely, it strayed from its own best insight.

A second weakness Johnson notes is that the classical tradition came to define faith as belief in abstract, propositional statements about God, missing the “dynamic of relational knowing” that the analogical method affirms. 18 Johnson explains that the Thomistic principle of analogy has three movements. A statement about God is made affirmatively, but then it must be “negated to remove any association with creaturely modes of being.” 19 Finally, the descriptor is understood to refer to God in a new, unique, and “supereminent way that transcends all cognitive capabilities.” 20 Since God is Creator, any aspect of creation may provide some window of association to the divine, yet the similarity is at best suggestive and partial. What is said must also always be unsaid in order to make this distinction, not because nothing can be said of God, but because God is always other and unique, always more than human language can contain.

17Ibid., 107.
18Ibid., 114.
19Ibid., 113.
20Ibid.
This sort of knowing and the metaphorical language that facilitates it is never at an end, for both the saying and the unsaying are transcended, pushed deeper into mystery. This process is best understood and retrieved as a dynamic and relational one, involving an element of human discernment as language is continually stretched and exploded. Therefore, in Johnson’s assessment, propositional statements about God that are univocal and authoritarian are not true to the insight of the heritage upon which they profess to draw. For example, to say that God is Father is also to say that God is not Father. A literal connection between God and the male image freezes what was never meant to be static.

The final critique Johnson makes of the God of classical theism draws again from Thomas Aquinas and is a natural conclusion from the heritage of divine incomprehensibility and the principle of analogy. It is the necessity for a plethora of names for God. This is not because all the names and images can tally up to one accurate picture in a cumulative fashion, but because to become comfortable with a limited and familiar scope is to miss the reality that is beyond a simple accumulation of descriptors. This is the heart of the ancient insight Johnson repeats, “If you have understood, then what you have understood is not God.”21

All of these critiques can be leveled at the God of classical theism simply by retrieval of the authentic insights of the classical theological heritage itself. Feminist theology, however, goes beyond demonstrating these internal inconsistencies. In the work of attending to and reflecting upon the experience of women, feminist theology speaks of the ways in which classical thought has harmed women. Firstly, since the God

21Ibid., 120.
of classical theism is exclusively male, symbolic exclusion of the female devalues and harms women. Secondly, this image of God holds within itself hierarchical assumptions regarding power, which are also harmful to women. When God’s power is understood as dominative, then in some theologies Jesus the son becomes the victim of a tyrannical Father God. While additional feminist critiques are made, these are the two themes of critique with the greatest impact for the soteriological focus of this study. In order to flesh out these feminist criticisms, it is first necessary to describe the perspective of reconstructionist feminist theology and to probe the methodological distinction between theologies “from above” and “from below.” This review of methodology will explain how feminists arrive at the above criticisms.

Feminist Methodology

As the term “reconstructionist” implies, this feminist theological perspective involves both taking apart and then rebuilding. It claims that “reinterpreting the traditional symbols and ideas of Christianity without abandoning the God revealed in Jesus Christ is possible and desirable.” While some feminist theorists would argue that the entire Judeo-Christian tradition must be left behind as inherently harmful to women, a reconstructionist perspective holds that the gospel of Jesus Christ is still good news; furthermore, it is a guide to the critical process. Perhaps a helpful analogy could be imagining Christianity as an old home. Some feminists would say the house is so

22 These limitations in understanding also have harmful effects upon men, but that exploration is beyond the scope of this limited study.

23 The “above” and “below” distinction is helpful but limited for it may create the impression of a dichotomy between revelation and experience. As this chapter will argue in the next section, however, when revelation is not conceived as timeless, propositional truths, then the inseparability of revelation and human experience is clear.

dilapidated that it must be demolished; others would say it just needs to be spruced up with a little paint and redecoration. The reconstructionist position stands between these two, aiming for a complete overhaul, but seeing the remodeling project as faithful to the core of the tradition itself, a restoration as well as new development. Reconstructionist feminist theology sees Christianity as its home and wants the home to reflect its own deepest values.

Keen awareness of the harm done to women by aspects of the tradition is the impetus for feminist critique. At the same time, a reconstructionist perspective is convinced that the harm lies in misinterpretation and loss of the genuine gospel, not in the heart of Christian faith. Over the last fifty years especially, as women have become aware of, reflected upon, and articulated their experience, destructive elements within the Christian heritage have been rigorously examined. This methodology, referred to broadly as theology “from below” argues that human experience is an essential starting point for theological reflection. Often the experience of suffering at the hands of one’s own faith tradition is the catalyst for prophetic critique of deformations within the heritage. This approach moves in sharp contrast to traditional methodology, often referred to as theology “from above.”

Again, broadly speaking, the phrase “from above” indicates a deductive movement. In this methodology, Scripture, the church’s interpretation of it, and doctrines, often rooted in classical metaphysics are the starting points for further reflection. General principles, definitions, and creedal dogmas precede and are applied to particular human circumstances. Universal truths are regarded as unvarying through

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25 This methodology is found in Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant traditions; therefore, reference to “the church” remains intentionally broad.
time or culture; therefore, the Christian task is to bring human understanding and experience into conformity with the unchanging absolutes.

Theology that is exclusively “from above” may cut people off from their own experience and, therefore, their own spirituality. In the worst scenario, faith becomes no longer a living dimension of one’s experience, but simply a list of rules to memorize or a set of propositions to which one gives mental assent. Theological climates that are entirely from above may become what sociologists describe as closed rather than open systems. Authoritative answers may not permit the searching questions that arise in experience. Paradoxically, well-intentioned efforts to revere the tradition and the Holy often construct a cage, using a methodology which makes the Holy remote, perhaps even removing it from experience altogether.

In contrast, theology “from below”\textsuperscript{26} begins with the historical particularity of human understanding and works in an inductive, rather than deductive, direction. From this perspective, human insight is always conditioned by the particularity of the context. Therefore, genuinely new insight may emerge in human history because a new context may yield a valid new perspective. In contrast to the conviction that an absolute truth can be known as an abstract proposition and upheld, unmodified, across time and culture, theologies from below acknowledge the possibility that as yet unheard voices may necessitate reconsiderations of present understandings.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{26}Theologies “from below” is a broad reference to reflection which begins with human experience, reflecting the turn to the subject in theology in the twentieth century. This includes, for example, Paul Tillich, liberation theologies, political and feminist theologies.

\textsuperscript{27}When revelation is understood as a set of propositional truths then its relational quality is lost. Truth then becomes defined in terms that are ahistorical, abstract, and impersonal.
The specifically feminist versions of theology from below say that theological reflection, which has historically and consciously been done “from above” has, in fact, been, consciously or not, thoroughly male. What has been presented as being universal and absolute has actually been the expression of a specific, historically conditioned perspective, that of clerical, heterosexual, European males. Of course all of Western theology does not speak in a univocal voice or a completely unified perspective. Feminists do not claim there are no theological differences between, for example, the thought of Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther (or among feminists themselves); nevertheless, feminist theology does argue that there has been a defined, dominant (European male) center in Western Christian thought. Historically, any perspective not proceeding from this center has been regarded as peripheral. Feminist theology, therefore, aims for a de-centering.

This goal is not simply to add new voices as garnish on the edges of a platter while keeping the main course essentially intact. What feminist theology calls for is a rethinking from differing vantage points at all levels, in all aspects of reflection and practice, which is necessary because patriarchy “functions as an ideology that affects every aspect of societal life.” Feminist theology is a radical call because the domination of one perspective and (Euro) male power, patriarchy, “is a root cause not only of sexism, but also of racism, ethnic prejudice, colonialism, economic classism, and naturism (the destructive exploitation of nature for human ends).” The feminist perspective articulated here challenges the ideology of patriarchy because of the harm it

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29Ibid., 19.
does in so many directions. Importantly, the critique of this ideology and its myriad manifestations is not an implicit claim for any form of superiority of women over men.\(^{30}\) White women have perpetuated and often continue to benefit from patriarchal notions and structures as well as white men. And white men themselves are also damaged by patriarchy to the extent that it forces a truncated understanding and expression of their own humanity upon them.

In response, a concern of traditional theological approaches is that the decentering described above will inevitably lead to the chaotic free for all of complete relativism. Relativism asserts that no judgment among variety can be made.\(^{31}\) Since all understanding is always provisional, subject to new information and developing perceptions, there is no solid ground from which to make a judgment. Relativism claims “there is no justifiable recommendation or criticism to be made of different stances so each has to be left as it is where it is.”\(^{32}\)

Recognizing the limitations of situated perspectives and historical human understanding does not, however, make relativism inevitable. Denying the possibility of attaining neutral, objective or absolute knowledge does not mean that contingent judgments are not important or should not be made carefully. At the same time, such

\(^{30}\)I am aware that some feminist theorists do in fact claim female spiritual or ethical superiority over men. There is a large body of literature of such essentialist perspectives. The point I wish to stress, however, is the validity of insight that arises in experience. To the extent that women have experience which differs from men, then their insight is a unique and valuable contribution. This argument does not, however, lead to the conclusion that women are better in any way. The argument for the validity of experience is my focus, which applies equally to all types of peoples excluded from patriarchy, such as gay and lesbian perspectives, all non-Western peoples, the disabled, and so on. The male/female duality is only the presenting issue that leads into the larger critique.


\(^{32}\)Ibid., 69.
judgments are not absolute because they are recognized to be modifiable. As more voices and varieties of experience enter the conversation about how God’s grace is experienced, plurality emerges as a rich gift, not a threat.

Negative theological assessments of this pluralism in Christianity, coming from traditional perspectives, see emerging fragmentation with no center or guide for navigating through choices. Such critiques also tend to assume a casual, careless, or self-indulgent attitude on the part of those who speak, as though the new voices are merely “doing whatever they want” and expressing personal whims rather than deep convictions grounded in faith.

The admission that absolute surety is not possible does not make discrimination and judgment pointless or impossible; neither does it reduce moral choices to preferences or whims. It does, however, introduce an important ethic of humility into the process. Honestly acknowledging that one must act according to one’s conscience and best understanding, in full awareness of the risk of being wrong or having only partial comprehension is difficult, at times, even anguishing. Risk, responsibility, and openness to voices and perspectives that differ from one’s own are required and these are not comfortable or easy demands. Admittedly, the stakes are high. The trust required by this path is not in the correctness of certain positions but in the guidance of the Spirit. Plurality introduces the need to focus on methods of spiritual discernment rather than on systematically formulated answers.

Feminist theologies assert that discrimination can and must be made according to what harms, inhibits or promotes the full well-being of women and all those who have traditionally existed on the margins, outside of the historically central Euro-male
perspective, including the earth itself. From this perspective, truth is primarily relational, not propositional.

Taking all this into account, then, when approaching the God of classical theism, a reconstructionist feminist theological perspective will ask, “How has this symbol impacted the well-being of women, the disadvantaged, the powerless, the earth?” The gospel of Jesus claims that what is truly of God brings hope, justice, healing, new life, love, peace, and liberation into being by grace. What is true will function to set people free. Idols, however, cage people in prisons that inhibit and damage, suffocate and destroy, because they hide truth, wrench it out of shape, or oppose it in some way. The function of a theological symbol, then, indicates whether it leads to life or whether it is harmful and dangerous. Discernment is needed for the continual task of examining to what extent theological symbols are leading to God’s truth and to what extent they are missing the mark. At its best, theology, as faith seeking understanding, reflects upon the symbols of faith, analyzing and theorizing with the mind but also at the same time seeking prayerfully to be led and transformed by the Spirit. In his description of such reflective thinking, Edward Farley imagines theology as active in the dusk, rather than either pale moonlight or afternoon sun, for it “merges mystery and clarity.”

In She Who Is, Johnson examines traditional God language and concepts in order to discern what is true to the gospel and what is reflective of other influences. “Words about God are cultural creatures, entwined with the mores and adventures of the faith.

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community that uses them.” The same must be said for concepts, such as power and perfection, for such ideas are historical and must always be re-examined in light of new situations, new learning, and specific contexts. The question of sexism in language about God, then, goes much deeper than gendered pronouns. It has to do not only with exclusively male images for God, but also with interpretation and theorizing that is shaped by patriarchal perspectives.

**Male Language for God**

As Elizabeth A. Johnson demonstrates in *She Who Is*, “the symbol of God functions.” Johnson’s work carefully studies the language the Christian tradition has used as it speaks of God, and how these symbols affect women. As she summarizes, “the difficulty does not lie in the fact that male metaphors are used . . . rather, the problem consists in the fact that these male terms are used exclusively, literally, and patriarchally.” Although there are theoretically safeguards within the tradition to prevent this, as reviewed above in the critiques of the God of classical theism from within classical theology, in Christianity, God has, in practice, been conceived as thoroughly male. How does this affect women?

When God is spoken of only as male and never in female images, then such language “is a tool of subtle conditioning that operates to debilitate women’s sense of dignity, power, and self-esteem.” Women are implicitly told they cannot be as closely related to God as men can, a continuation of the ancient explicit teaching that women do

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35 Ibid., 5.
36 Ibid., 33.
37 Ibid., 38.
not image God as men do. The foundation of human dignity and worth in the Christian tradition is the *imago dei*. It is what sustains the value of each person, regardless of intelligence, skills, appearance, social status, age or any other trait by which society accords a human person value. Exclusively male God-language robs women of their *imago dei* and thereby leaves them vulnerable to cultural messages which claim their worth is dependent upon others’ assessment of their value. Since cultural power has been held primarily by men, this has generally meant that a woman’s value has been based upon whether or not she is found to be in some way useful or appealing to men. Instead of being a source of dignity, the tradition has actually been an obstacle for women in achieving a sense of dignity. Thus the half of humanity which has historically held less power and had fewer opportunities for autonomy and independence has also been deprived of the dignity the Christian faith claims to give to human life.

A further consequence that flows from the above is an enormous obstruction to women’s sense of power. When God is spoken of only as male, then God is for the fathers, not the mothers, and with the sons in a special way, not the daughters. Women are cut off from their own experience of the divine as for-them. If experiencing God’s presence is always somehow related to the male experience, then a woman is shut out from the possibility of experiencing God within her experience of herself as female. Male God-language is a barrier to the power of God both with and within her. Johnson argues that

> Personal development of the self also constitutes development of the experience of God; loss of self-identity is also a loss of the experience of God. They are two aspects of one and the same history of experience.\(^{38}\)

\(^{38}\)Ibid., 65.
Thus a woman who is prevented from development of self, because of the devaluing of the female and the impossibility of a female *imago dei*, is thereby also prevented from the mediated experience of God which emerges in an authentic experience of self.

Self-esteem, to be genuine, must be grounded in experiencing one’s own value by living it out. Self-esteem emerges in acts of accomplishment and integrity, living out of one’s deepest values, increasing discipline toward gaining skills one values, living so as to respect one’s decisions. If a person lives a shadow existence, in which value is determined by another’s recognition or approval, then self-esteem will remain forever elusive. Again, therefore, from a feminist theological perspective, male God language inhibits women from developing appropriate self-esteem to the extent that they are prevented from encountering themselves as a locus of divine presence and power to be effective in the world. Instead, a dependency which diminishes self-esteem is fostered. Rather than accept the risk and adventure of living into what God is calling them to do in the world and becoming who God is calling them to become, women are, in effect, taught to wait to be told by men what God wishes for them. The male stands between the female and God and thus diminishes a women’s sense of agency and responsibility. The male mediator is the interpreter, and the female position is one of passive receptivity, not engaged interpretation.

The above explorations of ways in which exclusively male God language work against women’s development of their dignity, power, and self-esteem extrapolate from Johnson’s study in order to select aspects of the problem which have functioned to obstruct women’s experience of salvation. These are themes which will surface again in a relational soteriology which will analyze how traditional views of salvation have been
formulated within a patriarchal context and therefore must be re-examined in light of women’s experience. Of course, throughout Christian history women have found ways to circumvent these diminishing forces. Emphasizing the harm this language does is not intended to depict women as helpless victims trapped in an impossible situation.

In her feminist theological retrieval of the scriptural Wisdom tradition, in *She Who Is*, Johnson points the way for a constructive recovery and expansion of language for God which includes female metaphors as well as images from the natural world. When Scripture and the tradition are interpreted with a hermeneutic of what is salvific, what is life-giving and what is liberating, then a new range of images and language about God becomes possible. Her work in this regard will be summarized later in the context of creation theology.

*Images of Power*

The second primary feminist critique of the God of classical theism is that his power is understood in a harmful way. Classically, God’s power has been understood in an entirely hierarchical manner. It is a power that imposes its will, from an external and superior position, upon a situation or form of life. It is a force to control, to intervene, to make happen what he wants to happen. Feminist thought finds this understanding of power inherently inappropriate and even harmful because it holds a dominative ethos within it. It is the power of the European male within history, the power of colonialism, the power of conquest, the power that defines others and imposes its own agenda upon them. This notion of power is essentially raw might.

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39Male pronouns are used when referring to the God of classical theism because this is a male image. Other references to God will be gender neutral.
Critiques of this image of power come both from within the Christian heritage and from women’s interpreted experience. While the Hebrew and Christian scriptures emerged within patriarchal cultures, and such images of God’s power are found within them, these texts must be interpreted through the lens of what is salvific, what is true to the gospel of Jesus Christ and the experience of life-giving liberation.\textsuperscript{40} The traditional notion of divine power is one of force run amuck, cut loose and cut off from the context of relationship and love. A reconceptualization of power in general, and divine power in particular, is called for. As Johnson argues, what is needed is a “resymbolization of divine power not as dominative or controlling power, nor a dialectical power in weakness, nor simply as persuasive power, but as the liberating power of connectedness that is effective in compassionate love.”\textsuperscript{41}

This is a practical and urgent issue for women because images of God function powerfully in peoples’ lives. A dominative understanding of divine power works to legitimate such structures within human relations. In a top-down structure, dutiful, unreflective submission becomes a virtue, in particular, the virtue demanded by the more powerful of the less powerful. The more powerful are the ones who maintain the hierarchical structures, the status quo. In practice, this theology of God manifests in human lives as men being in relationship to women as God is to men. So women, to be virtuous, must submit to men. In this paradigm, the structures and the positions, the roles and the appropriate chains of command take precedence over unique persons and insights, which may emerge in relational contexts. It is a given, for example, in some

\textsuperscript{40}Scripture itself outlines this criterion in 2 Timothy 3:14-16, which emphasizes that sacred writings equip one for discernment and good works that contribute to salvation.

\textsuperscript{41}Johnson, \textit{She Who Is}, 270.
Christian churches which hold to this theology, that women must not ever lead a public prayer because only men are the spiritual leaders of the church. What a particular woman’s gifts, insights, and passions are is not relevant to the question because the design is divine and has priority over any person’s experience.

Another harmful fallout of this conception of God’s power is evident in atonement theories that portray Jesus as a willing victim and thereby legitimate or even glorify suffering. In some scenarios, the all-powerful Father God of classical theism requires and mandates the Son’s death. Thus the injustice and the violence of Jesus’ last hours were God’s will and an implicit theodicy is established in which God’s (theoretical) love is manifest in brutal murder. Feminist thinkers point out that the logic undergirding such thought is the logic of abuse, in which the integrity and value of another’s well-being, life, and authenticity is systematically undone in order to serve the purposes of the more powerful. In such interpretations, Jesus’ great task was to become passive, to let himself be unjustly killed in order to obey his Father. When this interpretation is made within an authoritarian theology of God, love and care drop out of sight. Jesus is not savior because of his life, his love and ministry, which brought the kingdom of God to people, especially the most vulnerable in his society, but because he did not resist a state execution. Understandings of God’s power are inseparable from soteriological interpretations of the Christ event.

In the paradigm of classical theism, one discovers God’s will not by attending to what gives life within one’s experience, not by making authentic choices of responsibility, but by obeying rules that tell one how to feel, what to do, how to live. Experience is not a legitimate source of reflection because the rules are already known.
Similarly, some atonement theories bypass reflection on Jesus’ very human experience of making tremendously courageous, authentic choices to live with integrity, to follow his own experience of his *Abba*, from which he then taught others. Theories which isolate Jesus’ death as the salvific event do not fully consider how his life of ministry led to his death. Consequently, the meaning of both is distorted and human responsibility for violence is diminished.

Feminist perspectives that critique traditional understandings of power are rooted in attending to the relational nature of power within human experience. The traditional approach, by contrast, is to assert the theory of God’s all-powerfulness in order to protect God’s supremacy. In traditional thought, God must be the biggest of the big, so to speak, the most powerful of all. The analogous nature of understanding God’s power diminishes and a literal, absolute quality takes over the thought. Power becomes a possession, not a dimension of relationship, and since God is conceived of as the supreme king, God owns it all without qualification. Experience, by contrast, demonstrates that power is a dimension of relationship. As the second chapter will demonstrate, Rita Nakashima Brock’s work focuses on this understanding of power.

Critiques of the hierarchical understanding of God’s power that results when power-as-force is divorced from a relational context of love will resurface in later soteriological analysis. A key theme at this point, for establishing the theological foundation for further reflection, is that the violence of force inherent in the traditional image of divine power leads to harmful uses of power within human experience. But the harm has another dimension as well. Traditional images of God’s power also work to prevent those who have been harmed from becoming aware of their own experience of
harm and being able to be healed and liberated from it into new ways of being. The gospel message that the truth shall set one free must often begin with recognition of the painful truth that wrong has been done. Healing does not occur without first becoming aware of the wound. When people are cut off from their own experience, they are also cut off from the salvific possibilities of God’s liberating power. A foundational point in this critique, therefore, is the need to attend to, reflect upon and interpret experience.

*The Role of Experience: Beyond “Above” and “Below”*

As Elizabeth Johnson has pointed out, if people did not somehow experience salvation, there would be no talk about God at all, for people must experience some degree of love, healing, liberation or freedom, some dimension of Spirit, in order to be awakened to the possibility of more sustained reflection and learning on this experience. For this reason, a theology which begins in historical human experience is an appropriate starting point. At the same time, a Christian theology which is grounded in human experience is also starting in the faith that it is attending to the perceived effect of the transcendent Spirit in human life. The theological focus, therefore, is not simply on human experience as such, but on the divine communicating in and through the human. Thus the standard dichotomizing of theologies into above and below categories is an over simplification, schematizing these movements as opposed polarities.

In *Divine Empathy: A Theology of God*, Edward Farley writes, “I begin with a general thesis. God redemptively comes forth as God insofar as redemption does in fact occur.” People experience transformative change which is understood theologically to

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be redemptive. Thus, the change and the naming or interpretation of the change are inseparable. Without the experience of redemption in human lives, revelation conceived as propositional truths would be meaningless. An ahistorical and abstract definition of truth is part of the inadequacy of classical theism, for it leads to a deistic God, not the intimate union of the Divine and the human to which the gospels testify. While the lived experience of redemptive transformation is not “proof” of God’s existence, it is a reason for a believer’s faith that God is present in time. When redemptive truth is understood to be relational rather than propositional, originating in God’s gracious love and union with the human, there is ultimately no rigid distinction between the categories of “above” and “below.” The hierarchical language in the division of these approaches, while it is still commonly used, is ultimately inadequate to express the holistic approach this study seeks to develop. While God is the source of revelation and redemption, divine love and grace remain ineffective unless appropriated by the human acceptance of the gift, which includes continuing interpretation and reflection upon it.

While systematic feminist theology is a relatively recent development in Christian thought, the significance of attending to experience is not new in either Jewish or Christian faith. As seen above, the very concept of revelation itself is one which boldly claims that God moves within human experience and then that experience is reflected upon, interpreted and shared among a community of faith. According to Edward Farley, “revelation depends on redemption; redemption does not depend on revelation. The discernments (revelation) that ground the bespeaking of God arise with the redemptive

\[44\] The language of proof and debate regarding God’s existence or non-existence is an example of categories of thought that stem from a propositional definition of truth, not a relational one. The language of relationship is that of commitment and trust and a knowing of the heart, not one of proof. This does not mean, however, that there are no reasons for such commitment and trust.
transformation of idolatrous passions into freedom.” People experience redemption and then consider how it happens and continues to direct their lives. Farley writes, “The human being . . . does not experience redemption in some general sense but rather as specific transformations and empowerments of its passionate life, in this case the release from the hold of cognitive idolatry into the freedom of wonder.”

Thus the importance of attending to experience is not the controversial issue because it is embedded in the claim that God’s grace changes human lives. What is relatively new and still developing is the question of whose experience will be listened to, how such listening will occur, how people with quite different experiences will dialogue together and how discernment of God’s voice will proceed in this theological process. The distinctive claim of a feminist position is that women’s experience has not been part of reflection upon the redemptive process. Therefore, it is important for women to voice their distinctive perspectives because without them, the community of faith is denied aspects of God’s revelatory presence.

In Truly Our Sister, Elizabeth A. Johnson’s study of Mary, she points out that despite the undeniable and problematic language of slavery (“handmaid”), Mary acts in personal autonomy in consenting to have her child. This woman’s story, so close to the heart of the gospel, demonstrates the relational (rather than propositional) quality of truth. Mary hears and follows the word of God to her in her unique situation, trusting God. Her virtue lies not in following an externally imposed command or a rule deduced from an

45 Edward Farley, Divine Empathy, 97.
46 Ibid., 96.
abstract principle; rather, her obedience is portrayed as her trusting faith in God with her. Obedience, in the model of Mary, is not submission to a dominative power which intrudes an impersonal command. That would be, and has been, a hierarchical, polarizing, dichotomizing interpretation of how God’s power manifests in human experience.

Johnson says, “The courage of her [Mary’s] decision vis-à-vis the Holy One is at the same time an assent to the totality of herself.” 48 Mary courageously chooses to become who she most deeply believes God is calling her to be by consenting to her pregnancy and committing herself to mother her child. There is no conflict of interest between what God wants her to do and who she wants to be, no mighty war of wills ending in a heroic self-sacrifice on her part. She does not cut out whole parts of her genuine identity to acquiesce to a supernatural mandate, as obedience to God’s will has so often been framed.

Instead, she is called to risk embracing and committing herself to a life that was not anticipated, one which exposes her to the harsh judgment and misunderstanding of others. While we cannot go back in history to know what “really” happened in the manner of a documentary, the texts bear witness to a young woman who listened to her experience and her faith in order to make an ordinary yet courageous, historically definitive decision.

We do not have access to Mary’s religious experience, but can simply say that by the power of the Spirit she encountered the mystery of the living God, the gracious God of her life, the saving Wisdom of her people. In that encounter, the die was cast for the coming of the Messiah. 49

48 Ibid., 257.
49 Ibid., 254.
So much attention has been given in the Christian tradition to Mary as virgin, to the utter uniqueness of this event and of Jesus himself, that a simple but significant point has often been overlooked. As the brief gospel accounts narrate it, the human decision that brought Jesus into the world was one which exemplifies God moving in and through ordinary female experience.

The heritage of Judaism and Christianity demonstrate within Scriptural accounts themselves the central role of experience for faithful understanding and growth, from theological developments of Israel to the New Testament churches. But new questions emerge when contemporary experience is the issue. How is the revelatory process best understood, how are we to approach interpreting Scripture, and what is the role of experience in these discussions?

A history of Biblical hermeneutics is beyond the scope of this study, but much consensus exists among mainline Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church with respect to biblical interpretation. In general, Phyllis A Bird notes that the difference tends to be not in views of Scripture itself, but in appropriate “authority for interpretation, with Protestants unwilling to hand this over to the church, and Catholics unwilling to entrust it to unqualified or unscrupulous exegetes.”50 The most important document of Vatican II to deal with this issue is Dei Verbum, The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. In Dei Verbum, the Council affirms the continuing work of the gift of the Holy Spirit within the faithful, “so that Revelation may be more and more profoundly

understood.” In Chapter II, paragraphs eight and nine, the document explains the role of both sacred tradition and sacred scripture, intimately interwoven, through which the Holy Spirit works to deepen understanding and increase faith. Growth comes about, in part, by “the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they [believers] experience.” The Bible’s divine inspiration, reliability and authority are not documentable by external evidence or historical or scientific accuracy because this is not why it has been given. It has been given for the sake of salvation and this must be the guiding interpretive principle. The document stresses that Scripture is inspired yet also fully a product of the human writers as well, teaching all that is needful for the sake of salvation.

Mary Catherine Hilkert points out that Dei Verbum reflects a shift in the Roman Catholic understanding of revelation. Faith is no longer spoken of as only or primarily acts of mind and will but as a relationship to God that involves the entire human person. God’s initiative in the relationship is made in revelation, which “transcends human experience, but that offer can be perceived and responded to only in and through human categories.” Hilkert argues that God’s self revelation cannot be separated “from the faith that perceives, receives, and responds to that offer.”


52 Dei Verbum, 754.

53 Johnson, She Who Is, 78; as noted previously, 2 Timothy 3:14-16 stresses the use of sacred writings for salvific living.


55 Ibid.
Because revelation is relational, it is also on-going. Tradition is alive and dynamic, not an inert relic. Hilkert writes that “Tradition is first and foremost a process—the transmission or handing on of the mystery of God’s self-communication in creation and history that culminates in salvation history and reaches its fullness in Christ.”\textsuperscript{56} She also quotes Joseph Ratzinger’s (now Pope Benedict XVI’s) comment that “‘tradition is ultimately based on the fact that the Christ event cannot be limited to the age of the historical Jesus, but continues in the presence of the Spirit.’”\textsuperscript{57} There is, in \textit{Dei Verbum}, a place for the Spirit’s work in human experience for continuing insight, growth, and faith development. Continuing challenges, however, are issues of whose experience counts and how developing understandings dialogue with and express themselves in the tradition of the faith.

Sandra M. Schneiders points out in her work \textit{The Revelatory Text}, “as possibility, divine revelation must be seen as coextensive with human experience. Insofar as the divine desire to give Godself is concerned, all of human experience is meant to be revelatory.”\textsuperscript{58} This is not to say, as Schneiders makes clear, that the possibility is always realized, but it is to affirm that God works in history, in human experience. In Christian faith, the concept of revelation is a relational one, for it affirms that God does not simply impart knowledge, but seeks to make Godself known in a relational manner. The Christian affirmation that Jesus is the Word of God is also a relational claim that the

\textsuperscript{56}Ibid., 68.


pinnacle of God’s self-revelation is not found in abstractions such as creeds or texts, but in a person.

Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza writes that “experience is a hermeneutical starting point, not a norm.”59 Only certain kinds of experiences, such as those that are liberative, can be normative. Given the importance of experience for increasing insight and faith in the Judeo-Christian heritage, feminist theologians insist upon the conscientizing process, in which experience becomes a teacher as it is reflected upon in faith.

The Christian tradition has a long history of asserting that “to find our authentic selves is to find the indwelling presence of God.”60 Stating this conviction negatively, Ann O’Hara Graff asserts that “to avoid who we are is to avoid access to the Divine.”61 This is a foundational truth in feminist theology. Attention to one’s own experience is not, as it is sometimes misperceived to be, narcissistic navel-gazing. On the contrary, unless a person is aware of his or her own reality, including one’s strengths and weaknesses, struggles and hopes, then one is avoiding the very pathway by which the Divine would come to be present and transformative within one’s life.

People are constituted by their relationships, including relationships with themselves. Yet the healthy relationship to self which can produce self-awareness is not automatic. It requires discernment, which Ann O’Hara Graff defines as “an effort to recognize revelation in the present. It is the effort to seek the presence and guidance of


61Ibid.
God in the ambiguity of human life."\textsuperscript{62} It is an on-going process which can be avoided, inhibited or suppressed in many ways. Ironically, one method of suppression may be religious beliefs. The arguments of the so-called “cultured despisers” of religion, for example, focus upon belief in God’s reality as wish fulfillment, projection, or other forms of self-deception. A theme of these arguments is that faith is possible only by a corresponding lack of psychological or intellectual maturity, so that increased awareness (including self-awareness) will lead to the realization that “God” is simply a creation of human imagination.

It is true that people often create God in their own images, out of their own needs, fears, desires, and even self-deceptions. Christian tradition names this the sin of idolatry, an example of which has been discussed in the critique of the male God of classical theism. How can one realize he or she has slipped into idolatry? How does one discern the pull of an idol? Attention to one’s experience (as well as to the differing voices of others) is necessary in order to discern this ever present possibility.

Although the claim that genuine self-knowledge can lead to God and, therefore, lack of self-awareness diminishes one’s capacity to experience God is central to feminist theology, there is no automatic or easy correlation between religious belief and self-knowledge. In fact, inattention to one’s own experience is actively required, even demanded, by certain theological positions, as previously explained, such that self awareness and discovering one’s own experience is a project made very difficult for anyone in these theological climates, but especially for women. Some religious beliefs most certainly do work by attempting to prevent or suppress self-awareness.

\textsuperscript{62}Ibid., 203.
As noted earlier, a critique feminist theology makes of traditional Christian theology is that the exclusive use of male language for God and inadequate understanding of power has cut women off from their own experience by telling them, for example, what sin is, what grace is, what salvation is. A reconstructionist perspective argues that the tradition itself, within Scripture and within hermeneutical principles for interpreting Scripture, urges the necessity of listening to women’s experiences of these spiritual realities. Thus the argument that theology must begin in experience is not peripheral or trivial and does not privilege human subjectivity over divine transcendence, but is at the heart of what it means to experience salvation within a particular context.

Trinitarian Creation Theology

A holistic Christian feminist theology must be developed in the context of a creation theology that lays the groundwork for reflecting upon the Divine/world relationship. Christian tradition has named God a Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. While a Trinitarian perspective is foundational to a Christian theology, two problems in traditional Trinitarian heritage must be addressed. Firstly, the traditional names reflect the dominance of male conceptualizations. Many feminist theologians argue that the names Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer are faithful to the heart of Trinitarian faith without limiting God in male language and these names will be used here.

Secondly, a difficulty in Trinitarian doctrine has been affirming Divine community without literalizing divine personhood. The analogical nature of language about God means that abstract doctrine, often written in a propositional way, is nevertheless symbolic language when it attempts to say something about God. This is especially difficult to remember with respect to the doctrine of the Trinity. The
analogous sense often slips away, and God is then conceived as “three persons in the modern psychological sense of the term.” This literalizes what the tradition has intended to be a symbolic statement about the heart of reality, for the Trinitarian claim is fundamentally a claim about the nature of existence.

In *God For Us*, Catherine Mowry LaCugna writes, “The Trinitarian *oikonomia* is the personal self-expression and concrete *existence* of God. The ontology proper to this understands being as being-in-relation, not being-by-itself . . . God is not being-by-itself but being-with-us.” In this symbol of God, “the mysteries of human personhood and communion have their origin and destiny in God’s personal existence.” This means that reality is relational at its very heart. “Being, existence, is thus the event of persons in communion.” Theologically, then, a person is never an isolated, individual subject, because persons are always already in-relation. The relational heart of reality depends upon its givenness by God, not upon a person’s subjective feelings, choice or circumstance.

Elizabeth Johnson emphasizes the importance of remembering that the theological symbol of Trinity is one which has emerged from faith experience. Although theology has sometimes had moments of “wild and empty conceptual acrobatics” on the Trinity,

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65 Ibid.

66 Ibid., 249.


this occurs when it loses its grounding in the experience of salvation history, in which Christians have held first to the Hebrew experience of the God of Israel, then Jesus the Christ, and the Holy Spirit. It is important to remember that the doctrine of the Trinity developed as a faith claim that emerged from human testimony regarding experience of God’s saving presence in history, not one which was deduced from a prior metaphysical theory.

Feminist theology stresses the importance of the Trinitarian Christian God for three reasons. Firstly, it is a tremendous corrective to the distortions of classical theism because “at the heart of holy mystery is not monarchy but community; not an absolute ruler, but a threefold koinonia.”

The community expressed in the symbol is one of mutuality, one in which distinctiveness and unity are in creative harmony. Johnson suggests the image of adult friendship as appropriate to evoke this relationship of love in which bonding does not diminish distinctiveness. She extends the metaphor of friendship from relationship within the one God to a model for relationship between God and all creation, such that God is the One Who Befriends.

Secondly, an ontology of relationship in the symbol of the Trinity speaks of “radical equality” which seeks to preserve both distinctive, unique personhood and at the same time affirm perfect equality. She summarizes: “In this vision personal uniqueness flourishes not at the expense of relationship but through the power of

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69 Ibid., 216.
70 Ibid., 218.
profound companionship that respects differences and values them equally: an aim
mirrored in the symbol of the Trinity.”  

Finally, the community of relation expressed in the Trinity is not a self contained or static entity, as in the God of classical theism. Johnson suggests the image of a triple helix “moving in a dance of separation and recombination, which creates new persons.” But she cautions that the goal is not to grasp an image of the inner life of the Trinity, which is beyond human experience. Instead, the goal is to reach toward images that suggest the God-creation relationship. “The circular dynamism within God spirals inward, outward, forward toward the coming of the world into existence, not out of necessity but out of the free exuberance of overflowing friendship.”

Within this Trinitarian context, then, God is experienced as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. This claim is not an argument for proof of God’s existence, but names the Christian rumor of glory at the heart of the world. It is an explanation of how, to use Edward Farley’s language, “God comes forth as God such as to be ‘known,’ ‘experienced,’ bespoken and worshiped.” Farley’s use of quotation marks around the words “known” and “experienced” are, as he explains, intended to indicate that speaking in this way is not a natural theology, in the sense of a “cognitive and universally convincing demonstration of the reality of God.” Instead, reflection upon experience

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71 Ibid., 219.
72 Ibid., 221.
73 Ibid., 222.
74 Edward Farley, Divine Empathy, 4.
75 Ibid.
answers the question, “What evokes belief-ful convictions of God’s reality?” The following sections will summarize reconstructionist feminist theological claims concerning what it means to experience and name God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer in order to establish a framework for a soteriological investigation.

**Creator**

Naming God as Creator marks a theological claim both about God and the nature of all reality, principally that God is the reason anything, rather than nothing, exists. Traditionally, this claim is made through the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, which emphasizes that creation is entirely dependent upon God for its being. The historical development of this doctrine demonstrates that its primary intent is “to make a metaphysical claim about the triune God and not a specific historical one that established that the cosmos originated as the result of a singular event in the distant past.”

In classical theism, a chasm yawns between Creator and world because of a problematic understanding of perfection, a philosophical position which maintains that God, “who is being itself” is “totally in act while unmoved by any other.” In this view, “as pure act or the fullness of being, God has no potentiality for either gaining or losing. Therefore change is impossible (the attribute of immutability.)” Commitment to this definition of divine perfection keeps God safe and pure, untainted by genuine relationship with the messiness of daily life, but also profoundly uninvolved.

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76 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
A relational ontology leads to a very different understanding of the Creator/creation relationship, typically expressed in the model of panentheism. In this view, created reality does not exhaust God’s reality, but rests within God. God is both within and beyond all that is, both immanent and transcendent. In this model, “transcendence and immanence are correlative rather than opposed.”

This model does not collapse distinction but upholds an intimate relationship between God and world which is deeply sacramental.

The insight of classical thought which regards God as being/act can be reinterpreted in relational terms. In Elizabeth Johnson’s words, “God’s being is identical with an act of communion, not with monolithic substance, and so is inherently relational.” The type of “Be-ing” described here is not a reified object but the power of love active in the world, an inherently relational power which creates, redeems, and sustains. God is “the power of being over against the ravages of nonbeing. . . the unoriginate welling up of fullness of life in which the whole universe participates.” Johnson uses the name She Who Is as a symbol for this “absolute, relational liveliness that energizes the world.”

Within this theology of God, creation becomes the primordial sacrament; any aspect of creation is potentially able to mediate the divine. Johnson has written that “the whole universe is a sacrament, vivified by the energy of the Creator spirit present in all

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80Ibid., 231.
81Ibid., 238.
82Ibid., 239.
83Ibid., 240.
84Ibid., 243.
creation as its very animation." Redemption is thus part of the larger loving relationship which brings forth the entire Cosmos, not only human life. Human consciousness is gifted with the possibility for awareness of this web and presence, the one open to sparkling rumors of glory.

Since creation theology systematically reflects upon this Creator/creation relationship as the larger context within which the divine/human relationship is to be explored, it effectively counters traditional anthropocentrism. Elizabeth Johnson’s important contribution to feminist creation theology has two parts. Firstly, she writes as a major feminist systematic theologian who joins Biblical scholars in the relatively recent recovery of the long-neglected Biblical wisdom tradition. Secondly, Johnson focuses on the female image of Wisdom in Hebrew Scriptures and examines the connections between this figure and Jesus Christ. Both of these contributions are important for laying a soteriological groundwork

*The Hebrew Wisdom tradition*

For many years, the Hebrew Wisdom texts were judged of secondary importance for Judaeo-Christian faith. Many Biblical scholars argued that the lack of Israelite detail and covenant language marked them as a secular tradition, more part of the larger Wisdom tradition of the ancient near east than an integral part of Yahwistic faith. This is no longer the case. The recovery of the theological importance of the Wisdom texts is extremely important for contemporary creation and feminist theology because the ethos,
themes, and imagery of this literature have very strong resonances with feminist concerns.

Most importantly, the Wisdom texts stress the revelatory authority of human experience. An overarching perspective in this literature is that God speaks within ordinary human experience. Rather than locating the will of God as something outside of human life, the wisdom writings are quite humanistic in the sense that they stress human responsibility for human well-being in the here and now. These texts are remarkable in their insistence upon the “reciprocity of faith and experience.” Furthermore, the interpretive discounting of these writings parallels the subjugation of the cosmos to a mere backdrop for covenant history. Recovering the wisdom literature is intimately linked to recovering the goodness of the cosmos as primordial sacrament in that this presence within the canon obviates the sharp distinctions which have historically been drawn between general and the often more highly valued “special” revelation. The ethos of the Wisdom texts is that God’s Wisdom is available to all, not only to one privileged group.

Themes of Wisdom literature that communicate this ethos are that the world is ordered by God and people can learn how to live well within this order. The sacred and secular, as well as the natural and the human realms are not antithetical. It is significant that the Book of Proverbs shows Wisdom calling to people in the marketplace, a social

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hub of public accessibility. Even though the search for wisdom is a human activity, it is also a gift, a “human response to a transcendental overture.” In Wisdom, the divine and the human meet. But wisdom is not a possession; instead, it is a way of life, a path upon which people walk or from which people stray by their behavior. “Wisdom personified was a poetic vehicle by which the sages conveyed their idea of Wisdom as the mediatrix of the divine presence, as a means of rapprochement between God and man.”\(^92\)

Choosing the wrong path is refusing relationship with God and also one’s own deepest possibilities for becoming fully human. The two are not ultimately separable.

**Woman Wisdom**

The imagery of the Wisdom texts is integral to their ethos and themes; Woman Wisdom, especially as presented in the first nine chapters of Proverbs, is the most dominant and striking image of these texts. She is “the most developed personification of God’s presence and activity in the Hebrew Scriptures,” pervading “the world, both nature and human beings, interacting with them all to lure them along the right path to life.”\(^93\)

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza writes that she is “Israel’s God in the language and Gestalt of the goddess.”\(^94\) Elizabeth Johnson has developed the perspective that “Sophia is a

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\(^91\)Wilson, “Sacred or Profane?” 317.


\(^93\)Wilson, “Sacred or Profane?” 317.


female personification of God’s own being in creative and saving involvement with the world.”

Strange Woman, by contrast, seeks to lure men away from Wisdom. The two female figures share several similarities, but the essential distinction between the two is that Wisdom is trustworthy, whereas Strange Woman is best understood as a composite figure representing all false ways. Wisdom’s language of love is a call into genuine relationship leading to life and well-being. Strange Woman’s speech imitates Wisdom’s, but is the language of seduction, manipulation and betrayal couched in relational terms. Wisdom’s speech emphasizes over and over the integral connection between behavior and consequence, while the Strange Woman’s seduction lies in separating the two from each other. Her lure is toward a false experience of choice as entirely unfettered, in the sense of no ethical responsibility or ramifications.

The lure of the Strange Woman, however, is not best understood simply in terms of a theology of retributive justice. The seductress’s power is in her deception. Human response to her wiles is the decisive factor. On the surface, Strange Woman and Woman

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95 Johnson, She Who Is, 91.

96 Because of the gendered nature of the imagery, “men” is specifically male yet theologically representative, it may be argued, of the human. While some feminist scholars find little recoverable in the androcentric framework of this imagery (Athalya Brenner, Christl Maier, Gale Yee, and Carol Newsom), I follow interpretations which believe the text can be interpreted in life-giving ways for women. In addition to misogynist problems, as Diane Bergant has said, in Israel’s Wisdom Literature: A Liberation-Critical Reading (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 97, “The dangers of ethnocentricity are apparent” in the image of the Strange Woman. Scholars are agreed that ancient Near Eastern goddess imagery, whether that of Astarte, Ishtar, Maat or Isis, lies behind both female figures. The theological issue is how such imagery is used and whether the patriarchal and xenophobic limitations in the imagery can be recontextualized in liberating ways. My interpretive summary follows this method of biblical interpretation.

Wisdom seem very similar. Significantly, the only way to avoid being deceived is to be in genuine relationship with Wisdom. The human drama Proverbs presents does not offer rules to memorize but calls for people to enter into a relationship with Wisdom, which is the source of necessary discernment. The key to wise living is not correct information or even a systematic moral code. Instead, what is necessary is ability to distinguish between the authentic and the deceptive, which depends upon being able to recognize Wisdom.

A Christian creation theology may take up this Wisdom theme and ask what enables such discernment? It is the *imago dei* understood as the original grace of the creaturely relationship to the Creator. The human is able to recognize the good, the true, and the holy; otherwise, Wisdom wastes her time calling out in the bustling marketplace of everyday life. In Proverbs, those who reject Wisdom are not called fools because they lack sufficient information or intellectual capacity. Their foolishness, their willingness to be deceived, and their harmful choices derive from an inclination to turn away from what they are able to recognize as right. The clear implication of Wisdom’s call is that all could choose life, but some choose a way leading to death. This need not be so.

In this ancient Hebrew tradition a theme noted earlier is manifest, that becoming one’s best self is inseparable from attending to Wisdom’s presence and guidance. As Rosemary Radford Reuther has written,

The liberating encounter with God/ess is always an encounter with our authentic selves resurrected from underneath the alienated self. It is not experienced against, but in and through relationships, healing our broken relations with our bodies, with other people, with nature.\(^98\)

The fools who follow the Strange Woman deceive themselves, while those who recognize and follow Wisdom’s voice live out of their authentic selves. Reuther’s thought is more oriented toward the prophetic than the Wisdom tradition, but she emphasizes a key point that parallels what this reflection upon Wisdom has demonstrated: the need for discernment in praxis. Speaking of the Biblical prophetic tradition, Reuther says that it cannot be codified into a finished doctrine, but must always be a praxis of responding to changing circumstances and contexts. The same must be said of following Wisdom.

Redeemer

The preceding section focused upon the theological implications of the continuing presence of God the Creator in all creation, especially as symbolized by Wisdom. The Christ event must be interpreted in light of the foregoing foundational creation theology. Some scholars argue this was the pattern that occurred in the New Testament communities themselves. Writings of Paul, Matthew and John all identify Jesus with the wisdom of God and Wisdom christologies are among the first theological reflections of early Christians seeking to understand the significance of Jesus as the Christ. Denis Edwards argues that “Wisdom Christology was the bridge to the theology of the Incarnation.”

Several points of comparison between Jesus and Woman Wisdom are important for their theological and soteriological implications. Marcus Borg has pointed out that

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99Ibid., 27.

100Denis Edwards, Jesus, the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), 33.

101Ibid.
the emphasis of the Pharisees on laws of purity and tithing as keys to holiness made it physically impossible for many to be holy. By Jesus’ time, holiness had come to be defined in ways that fragmented the Jewish people along economic and social lines. In his teaching and his behavior, Jesus completely rejects this conventional wisdom which divided the righteous and the unrighteous into two distinct groups of people. In aphorisms, lessons, parables, and most of all, in his lifestyle, Jesus focuses upon “a way or path, specifically a way of transformation.” Very often, Jesus’ parables are invitations to see reality in a new way. They do not focus upon teaching content so much as challenging an accepted paradigm that is turned inside out by the end of the parable. In this sense, the parable requires those listening either to accept or to reject his view of reality. Accepting Jesus’ vision involves a new relationship to reality. Seeking to live in harmony with this vision is the way of redemption, entering into the practice of the kingdom of God. “Salvation is not a reward ‘added on’ to repentance and faith. It is their other side, as their intrinsic effect.”

Just as Woman Wisdom made herself available in culturally shocking ways, Jesus spends time with and eats with those boxed out of conventionally religious definitions of holiness. Just as Wisdom in Proverbs 9 sends her servant girls to invite people to her banquet, Jesus tells stories of God’s lavish banquet invitation and dines with those

103 Ibid., 97 [emphasis in the original].
excluded from “good” society. The message is that God’s table is large and inclusive, that God provides life and nourishment to all who will receive it.

In Proverbs, those who attend the banquet of the Strange Woman are those who refuse the way of life and choose instead to structure reality in their own ways, which lead inevitably to death. Their ways are illusions. In Proverbs, this is symbolized by images of seduction and getting away with deception, the advantages of selfish action divorced from its harmful consequences. The Strange Woman says, “Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant” (9:17, NRSV). Those who refused Jesus’ vision are also characterized in the New Testament texts as those who wanted to live their own way, according to their own paradigms, their own view of reality, their own definitions of holiness of which they were in control. For a time, this included even Peter who tried to convince Jesus to stay safe and who denied knowing Jesus in order to keep himself safe. The ethos of rejecting Jesus-Sophia is the demand to create and live in one’s own world rather than the world as God, both Creator and Redeemer, is offering it.

Seen in a Wisdom context, redemption is not about atonement or sacrifice, nor about bridging a cosmic chasm between God and the human. As Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza says,

Jesus’ execution . . . results from his mission and commitment as a prophet and emissary of the Sophia-God who holds open a future for the poor and outcast and offers God’s gracious goodness to all children of Israel without exception. The Sophia-God of Jesus does not need atonement or sacrifices. Jesus’ death is not willed by God but is the result of his all-inclusive praxis as Sophia’s prophet.  

A Wisdom Christology points to a very different way of understanding what redemption is, including what redemption is from, and what it is toward. In Elizabeth Johnson’s

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106 Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 135 [emphasis in the original].
words, a Wisdom Christology leads beyond a “Jesus-ology.” Wisdom Christology restores the cosmic significance of redemption. Denis Edwards writes that the resurrection of Jesus points to God’s commitment to transform and bring new life, not to destroy. Redemption is not only a human theme, but also a whole creation theme. God the Creator’s love and desire for liberation and redemption include the whole cosmos, not only human life.

At the human level, a Jesus-Sophia Christology frees theology “from a naïve physicalism that would collapse the totality of Christ into the human man Jesus” and once again points to the limitation and distortions inevitable in using only male imagery for God. Understanding Jesus as the prophet of Wisdom herself helps to focus upon the message of Wisdom. Johnson concludes

The fluidity of gender symbolism evidenced in biblical christology breaks the stranglehold of androcentric thinking that circles around the maleness of Jesus. Wisdom Christology reflects the depths of the mystery of God and points the way to an inclusive Christology in female symbols.

Theologically, keeping Christ stuck only in the image of the male, first century Jesus limits the truly astounding claim of resurrection. Johnson summarizes this point:

The truth is rather that Jesus has truly died, with all that this implies of change: he is gone from the midst of history according to the flesh. Faith in the resurrection affirms that God has the last word for this executed victim of state injustice and that word, blessedly, is life. Jesus in all his physical and spiritual historicity is raised into glory by the power of the Spirit.

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107 Johnson, She Who Is, 162.
109 Johnson, She Who Is, 161.
110 Ibid., 99.
111 Ibid., 163.
Because of the resurrection, “Christ is a pneumatological reality, a creation of the Spirit who is not limited by whether one is Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female.”

Johnson argues that wisdom Christologies are theologically important in three primary ways. Firstly, they are rooted in the wisdom tradition’s orientation to the goodness and value of all creation, including but not limited to the human sphere. Secondly, the language of wisdom is a universal one and it therefore “directs belief toward a global, ecumenical perspective.”

Thirdly, Johnson emphasizes the presence of God for the oppressed and the suffering since Wisdom cries out for justice and peace. The theological thrust of wisdom christologies leads to a broader theology of loving connection in which “long-standing dichotomies are herein brought into mutual coinherence: creator and creature, transcendence and immanence, spirit and body, all splits which have fed into patriarchal obsession with power-over.”

*Sustainer*

Feminist theologians have argued it is no coincidence that the sexist interpretive lens of classical theology has neglected the Holy Spirit. Because of its dualistic orientation, traditional theology, even while upholding the doctrine of the Trinity has focused on the Father/Son dyad, relegating the Spirit to third place. Once again, as with other weaknesses noted in classical theism, there is a gulf between the theory and the lived reality of the theological tradition. From a reconstructionist perspective, the heritage

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112 Ibid., 162.
113 Ibid., 166.
114 Ibid., 169.
holds riches which have been ignored to the harm of the faith and many it has touched, for neglect and devaluing of the Spirit has been intimately linked to devaluing both women and the earth. Elizabeth Johnson says

Our eyes have been blinded to the sacredness of the earth, which is linked to the exclusion of women from the sphere of the sacred, which is tied to focus on a monarchical, patriarchal idea of God and a consequent forgetting of the Creator Spirit, the Lifegiver who is intimately related to the earth.⁹¹⁶

For Johnson, the over-arching meaning of God the Holy Spirit is God as Lifegiver, not just once at the beginning of the universe, but as the “unceasing, dynamic flow of divine power that sustains the universe, bringing forth life.”¹¹⁷ Out of this primary identification, three key theological points emerge. Naming God as Sustainer points to the reality of divine presence in the here and now, the immanent attribute of God seen previously in the summary of the panentheistic understanding of God’s relationship to creation. God the Artist-Creator is not done, not lounging aloof in the wings while the play goes on, as in James Joyce’s famous image.¹¹⁸ That distant, laissez-faire God is the God of classical theism, not the God of a panentheistic perspective. A very important implication of this insight is that there can ultimately be no sacred/secular divide within creation or within human experience. To set up such mental structures is to establish a theological barricade against the Spirit, to rip apart what is already interconnected. As Bernard Cooke argues, “a pneumatology that attempts to limit the functioning of ‘the Holy Spirit’ to any specific religious faith or more generally to

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¹¹⁶ Ibid., 21.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 42.

¹¹⁸ “The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails,” James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, (1916), ch. 5.
‘religious’ activity as a particular activity in humans’ lives is truncating the influence of God in human existence.” Definitions determine what can be seen. When entire areas of human life are regarded as “secular,” in practice this has often meant a presumption that God is not involved, does not care, is not touching any aspect of that sphere. In effect, such categorization reduces God to the Joycean image rejected above. When God is, a priori, defined as out of contact with an aspect of the world or human endeavor, then theology hinders rather than enlarges the mediated experience of God in the world.

The second theological point Johnson makes regarding Creator Spirit is that this lifegiving, sustaining divine presence is what can renew, restore, and bring new life to what is suffering, broken, or even dead. This is the resurrection power to which Jesus’ followers testified. Faith in God the Sustainer is faith that life has the last word over death; death is not an illusion, but it is also not the end of meaning. In this context, understanding the power of the Spirit in the resurrection is to claim that Jesus’ followers found the force of his life and vision were still powerfully present to them, even after his death on the cross. This presence was not nostalgia; it was a presence that transformed them from a cowering, fearful group to a dynamic, thriving community. The life-giving power testified to is beyond what any of Jesus’ followers could have expected for themselves. There is a transcendent dimension to this immanence; there is an unanticipated, in-breaking quality to this graced gift because it is beyond human planning, control, or prediction. It cannot be reduced to a result produced by structured activity in a mechanical or directly causal way. It cannot be codified or tamed. It can be welcomed or refused, but never controlled.

Johnson’s third point is closely tied to the relational life-giving power sketched above, which is that the Spirit is in constant motion: “In every instance the living Spirit empowers, lures, prods, dances on ahead.”¹²⁰ In his pneumatological study, Bernard Cooke seeks to convey the active nature of the spirit by using the metaphor of embrace and the language of “divine ‘outreaching.’”¹²¹ The Spirit of God can be recognized but not predicted, accepted but not tamed. As with Wisdom, the quality of relational knowing involves a discerning receptivity, for which there are guidelines and markers, but no finished roadmap. Cooke writes, “Because humans are personal creatures, the invitation of the spirit is none other than the transcendental relationship of creature to creator.”¹²²

Western systematic theology, which searches for structures, which divides, defines, and categorizes, has tended to split apart from spirituality, the realm of the transformational activity of the Spirit. The shift from the monastic to the scholastic theologians in the Middle Ages marked this divide, which has continued ever since. In his study of spirituality and theology, Philip Sheldrake traces this history and describes it as a divorce resulting from an increasingly more scientific approach to religious reflection. “Reason began to triumph over imagination and the ability to define truth over experiences of the sacred.”¹²³ This general trend established a rift “between the affective side of faith (or participation) and conceptual knowledge. Further, within what

¹²⁰Johnson, Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit, 44.

¹²¹Cooke, Power and the Spirit of God, 183.

¹²²Ibid., 82.

we think of as spirituality there was a concentration on interiority that separated it from public liturgy and from ethics.”124 Spirituality or mystical theology became the province of specialty groups with a particular charism, or the province of an elite, rather than an integral aspect of popular and public faith life.

The division was solidified by the Enlightenment emphasis upon scientific pursuits as the only reliable means of inquiry. To the extent that theology has regarded faith as a matter of intellectual assent to propositional statements, it has followed the Enlightenment pattern. The ethos of this sort of theology places primary value upon abstract intelligence . . . Consequently the experiential dimension of human life was to be questioned continuously throughout an analytical journey towards what could be proved. The notion that theology was a science became linked to the belief that science could generate value-free knowledge. This pointed theology towards a position of isolation from context or personal feeling.125

While oversimplifying Sheldrake’s historical review, this brief account nevertheless demonstrates a widely accepted acknowledgement that theology and spirituality have both suffered from being torn apart, since they belong together. The harmful rift between the two has been a primary cause of the neglect of pneumatological reflection in Western theology, which is now a concern to many. As Sheldrake notes, the second half of the twentieth century has seen a turn “from a more deductive, transcultural theology towards serious reflection on experience of God in its particular and plural cultures.”126 This turn toward experience is also a turn toward the Spirit of God active in the specific circumstances of life. As Sheldrake argues, “the move to experience as the

124Ibid., 43.
125Ibid., 45.
126Ibid., 55.
primary starting point is *not* an invitation to pure introspection. Rather it is an invitation into the experience of *faith*, the human self in relationship to the Absolute.”

Just as the symbols and images for God the Creator and Redeemer need to be freed from an exclusivist, patriarchal palette, so also does the language of the Spirit. In this case, however, the task seems much easier since the vocabulary of the Spirit of God is often tied to the natural world and female images. Prevalent biblical symbols from the natural world include “wind, fire, and water.” As noted, the most developed biblical female image is that of Wisdom, but there are also maternal images in the Psalms, Isaiah, and in the recorded words of Jesus. The holistic vision that emerges from this wide array of imagery is a deeply incarnational, sacramental one in that “the Spirit creates matter. Matter bears the mark of the sacred and has itself a spiritual radiance. Hence the world is holy, nature is holy, bodies are holy, women’s bodies are holy.”

Toward a Relational Theological Anthropology

Having explored the limitations of classical theism, and having introduced a reconstructionist creation theology rooted in the Triune God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, attention can now turn more particularly to the human person as a distinctive creature within the larger creation, the human person as one of the rumors of glory in the world. Emphasizing the whole earth context of the human is essential; otherwise, anthropocentrism results and the *imago dei* symbol is distorted.

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127Ibid., 61 [emphasis in the original].  
129Ibid., 51-57.  
130Ibid., 60.
The Imago Dei

Traditional formulations of the *imago dei* doctrine have been harmful to the extent that they have been dualistic and hierarchical, both establishing and legitimating domination of the human over all other forms of life and the earth, and also of men over women, and technologically complex cultures over all others. When the human (more precisely the Euro-male), is the only or assumed subject, all others and the cosmos itself are reduced to objects which the privileged subject is free to use for his own purposes.

In contrast to the traditional Western worldview, “Ecofeminism recognizes that the domination of women and non-human nature are intimately connected and mutually reinforcing.”131 Ecofeminism identifies an interlocking logic among various forms of dominating, controlling, and, therefore, harmful uses of power. In particular, it is concerned to show how the Western cultural definition of “nature” has been inherently dualistic and has privileged Western culture as more valuable than all else in ways that have served to legitimate many types of exploitation.132

Historically, the *imago dei* doctrine has been rooted in the thought of both St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Augustine’s understanding of the human imaging God elevates the male over the female and the intellect over the body. Men image God on their own, independently of women, but women image God in a secondary fashion. The image of God in man, for Augustine, is the created capacity to know God, which occurs most fully in the mind, a faculty more substantial in men than in women, in his view. While Aquinas differs significantly from Augustine in having a stronger sense of the


132 Ibid., 176.
human body/soul unity, his notion of the *imago dei* continues in the vein of privileging male over female and mind over body in the human capacity for knowing God.

Feminist perspectives argue that not only is this perspective not integral to the heart of the Christian gospel, but that the Christian faith itself can be a resource to critique and transform the harmful aspects of this theological legacy. Many contemporary thinkers argue that the Trinitarian theology surveyed earlier in this chapter implies that “the very nature of existence is relational; being is always being-in-relation.”

Thus the image of God is not found in a particular capacity or quality of an individual person. Rather, “the image of God is reflected most clearly in communities characterized by equality, respect for difference and uniqueness, and mutual love.”

Understood in this way, the doctrine is not about a substance or an abstract aspect of human nature, such as the intellect or the will, but about an interactive process of relationship, a way of being human together, which can be fulfilled to varying degrees. It is a constitutive, relational and therefore ethical dimension of human life. Marjorie Suchocki writes “when relations between persons consciously reflect a unity based upon mutuality of respect and sensitivity, then this union might indeed be the achievement of the image of God in human relationship.”

From a theological standpoint, the norm for this human relationality is the life of Jesus Christ, the human person who fully embodied the divine presence in his human life.

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134 Ibid.

Given the context of a relational ontology, attention must now turn to the nature of the human person. As Edward Farley has argued, if one considers redemptive transformation in only a social manner, without considering change within the individual human person, then one of two distortions occur. Either God’s activity in redemption is reduced to societal and external causation, or redemption is reduced to a metaphysical assertion. 136 It is important, therefore, to develop a theological anthropology within which to consider the transformative experience of redemption.

Embodied Spirit: Five Themes

Rather than privileging the mind or the soul in the heritage of a Western mind/body hierarchy, understanding the human person as embodied spirit affirms that “the body’s physicality is an important source of knowledge.” 137 “How does the body know?” is a more appropriate question than “What kind of knowledge does the body give?” The issue is not to distinguish “kinds” of knowledge which are separate from each other; instead, beginning with embodied experience is important because it embraces a sacramental hermeneutical perspective. This stance is described well by June O’Connor, quoted here by Susan Ross.

The invisible spiritual dimension of life is expressed and discovered in the sensuous dimension of life... to go toward spirit is to move through matter... To be attracted to the sensible is to discover its spirited, spiritual dimension. 138

136 Edward Farley, Divine Empathy, 63.


138 Ibid., 26.
Relationality is necessarily part and parcel of embodied existence, for moving through matter always involves encounter, with oneself, with others, and with the world.

In her essay “Beyond Mere Gender: Transforming Theological Anthropology,” Jane Kopas reviews the dangers of universalizing thought and, therefore, the hesitations of feminist theologians to construct a systematic anthropology. Nevertheless, she finds five themes that pervade feminist perspectives on the human person. The first is an orientation to the significance of embodiment, including the concerns developed above. The second theme she identifies is the awareness of one’s cultural location upon one’s understanding and, in particular, upon one’s experience of gender. Women’s experience of themselves as women will vary because of cultural diversity. She notes, for example, that “mujerista theological anthropology differs from that of North American feminists because it emerges from a different relationship to culture.”139 Womanist and Asian American feminists also point to unique aspects of their experience. Thirdly, a recurring issue is a relational ontology which seeks to ground individual autonomy within a relational context. This theme also includes the search for a holistic spirituality which attends to the development of one’s sense of self and how this process differs between men and women. Fourthly, Kopas notes an emphasis upon the connection between theology and ethics, particularly in focusing upon the effects a theology has upon people’s lives.140 Finally, she notes an emphasis upon transformation within and among people and in the theologizing work itself. She says feminist theologians tend to


140 Ibid., 228.
emphasize a “theological anthropology itself as conversation in which dialogue partners are changed in the process of hearing/relating to others.” All of these themes are significant and have been touched upon to some degree in this chapter. In addition to these, it is also important for a relational anthropology to consider the symbol of transformation in its relationship to epistemology and ambiguity.

Ways of Knowing and Ambiguity

One’s epistemology is predicated upon one’s anthropology; that is, models of how people know will be shaped by particular understandings of what it means to be human. An approach to knowing which is rooted in embodied, relational life establishes a hermeneutical trajectory that accepts ambiguity. An embodied and relational orientation to knowing seeks to navigate ways that are fluid and contextual, understanding that “development and change are . . . part of the structure of reality itself.” As Ruth Page argues, framing a dualism which opposes order and chaos is too simplistic. In her view, it is better to speak of the world as “orderable.” In a similar vein, Winnie Tomm argues that “it is more accurate to speak of ways of knowing than of having knowledge.” In many feminist perspectives, then, knowing is an inter-subjective, relational process with ambiguous and ethical dimensions.

This is a significant foundation for attending to women’s experience because

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141 Ibid.


Appeal to women’s experiences as a source of theological and moral knowledge is not dependent on assuming a common ‘female essence.’ Rejecting the idea of gender essentialism only entails acknowledgement that there is no simple, unambiguous correlation between women’s experiences, truth, and normativity. It also signals the absolute need to examine critically issues of power when analyzing groups of women’s experiences.\textsuperscript{145}

A relational orientation to knowing is fluid and therefore able to avoid the extremes of relativism on one hand or a totalizing universalism on the other hand. It provides a model which allows both for genuine knowing as well as recognition of the limits of one’s knowledge. In addition, such a relational understanding of truth entails elements of risk and vulnerability in one’s anthropology, themes which will surface in the soteriological study of the following chapters.

In their study \textit{Women’s Ways of Knowing}, the psychologist authors identify a difference between connected and separate knowing, corresponding to the distinctions just drawn above.\textsuperscript{146} The authors describe connected knowing as a way the most developed women they interviewed tended to approach understanding, a way grounded in empathy, in which the knower approaches the endeavor with a certain patience and willingness to wait, to listen with suspended judgment, in order to see through a new lens. This orientation values receptivity which does not rush to closure. In the women they judge to have a well developed sense of self, voice, and mind, the authors note that a marker of this development is “a high tolerance for internal contradiction and

\textsuperscript{145}Jennifer Beste, “Limits of the Appeal to Women’s Experiences Reconsidered,” \textit{Horizons} 33 (Spring 2006): 60 [emphasis in the original].

ambiguity.” These women sought to combine their intuitive and reasoning capacities and their epistemological framework is summarized by the authors in this statement: “All knowledge is constructed, and the knower is an intimate part of the known.”

Precisely because reality is characterized by ambiguity, metaphorical ways of knowing are important avenues to truth, because, like symbol, the metaphor both reveals and conceals. It suggests new relationships, heretofore unavailable for reflection. It moves in a zig-zag rather than linear fashion, suggesting and retreating, illuminating and concealing. “The role of the living metaphor is to juxtapose two dissimilar forms of articulation in order to bring to language dimensions and values of reality that have been previously hidden by straightforward, descriptive discourse.”

The space of the like and yet unlike within metaphorical thought is a space of risk and ambiguity. It is the space in which both questions and insight arise, a space that has room for doubt, searching, and faith, all at the same time.

Embodied and symbolic ways of knowing are linked in that they share a participatory immediacy. They are not necessarily identical, but they are each experiential. Susan Ross, linking the aesthetic and the sacramental, argues that these ways each approach truth as “an event of disclosure.”

147 Ibid., 137.

148 Ibid. [emphasis in the original].


in the event, then knowing does not happen. As Ross argues, art and sacraments “do not only mirror experience but also transform it.”

Symbolic expression is particularly important for women. Ross echoes observations of the Belenkey, et al. study when she says, “If we cannot express ourselves symbolically, we are mute.” This is a vitally important point to make in an anthropology that seeks to understand the fullness of human well-being; it is not merely decorative icing on the cake. Ross captures the significance well:

Symbols transform the way we see reality. The emergence of new symbols provides expression for experiences previously not recognized and makes it impossible to return to old symbols without transformation. When the symbol is genuinely expressive of the experiences of those for whom it speaks, when it is representative of the reality in which they live, it is recognized as true.

To summarize the key points thus far, a relational anthropology will situate the human within the context of relationship with the divine, the non-human world, and the inter-human. The imago dei will be interpreted not as a characteristic or attribute that divides the human from the rest of creation, but as the capacity for healthy relationship in all dimensions, pre-eminently the divine/human. A relational anthropology will seek to identify the paths that lead to a fulfillment of this gift and task by working with models of spirituality which are holistic, rooted in bodily experience and connected ways of knowing. It will begin with the human-in-relationship as it works toward a focus upon transformation and development of persons, recognizing the ambiguity inherent in this process. This will necessitate attention to symbol and metaphor as meaning-making.

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151Ibid., 14.
152Ibid., 16.
153Ibid.
methods. While not comprehensive, this section has outlined aspects of a relational anthropology which will be especially important for later soteriological focus. One last element remains to be discussed, and that is the inescapability of risk.

A relational theological anthropology necessarily entails recognition of the vulnerability and risk inherent in being fully human. Risk as the term is used here is not recklessness or haphazard impulsivity, but an integral part of making authentic moral choices. In *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, Sharon Welch argues that “the fundamental risk constitutive of this ethic is the decision to care and to act although there are not guarantees of success.”\(^{154}\)

Two apparently appealing counters to risk are safety and control. Safety, however, is not an actual, attainable possibility but always an illusion.\(^{155}\) While people may strive to construct nets of safeguards, none are absolutely secure in a finite existence. Lying underneath the comforting appeal of safety is what Welch critiques as an ethic of control, which defines responsible, mature decisions in terms of being able to guarantee the outcome of a particular strategy or plan.\(^{156}\) But this is only possible through the exercise of dominative power. As Welch says, one can guarantee another’s death, but not that person’s cooperation.\(^{157}\) Moral choices must be made in a climate of risk, in which outcomes are not certain.


\(^{156}\)Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 41.

\(^{157}\)Ibid., 121.
Risk also involves being accountable for the negative impacts of one’s choices. As Welch points out, limits to well-being due to human finitude are quite different from those due to injustice.\textsuperscript{158} Yet disappointing and harming others in their vulnerability is a risk inherent in a relational experience of being human. Rita Nakashima Brock’s work has focused upon the ambiguity involved in the experience of both being harmed by and also harming others. She asks,

> The structure of Christian theological thinking, and even of English itself, reinforces dichotomous dualisms of oppressor and oppressed. We are asked to identify as one or the other, but what if we are both?\textsuperscript{159}

Important feminist work has been done in following and developing the implications for women in understanding sin as lack of self, first established by Valerie Saiving Goldstein’s seminal article on this issue, in which she argued that, for a variety of cultural reasons, “the temptations of woman \textit{as woman} are not the same as the temptations of man \textit{as man},” and, for women, sin is likely to manifest not as pride or dominating power but as “underdevelopment or negation of the self.”\textsuperscript{160} Brock’s work moves beyond a dualistic framing of sin as either too much or too little self by asserting that people cannot be simply identified as members of distinct groups, either oppressors or oppressed. A theology of sin that rests upon this polarization will be limited in its treatment of the reality of human experience, which is more ambiguous.

\textsuperscript{158}Ibid., 159.


But ambiguity goes much deeper than the possibility of switching roles. Locating a person entirely in “oppressed” or “victim” categories of thought is not ultimately redemptive because it excludes in its very categorization any sense of personal agency, power or responsibility. The aim of breaking down this dichotomy in no way overlooks the reality of victimization or abuse and in no way minimizes the responsibility of those who perpetuate such harm. It is, instead, a critique of a conceptual dualism that itself does more harm than good. Brock argues that this dualism harms by perpetuating another dualistic distinction between the innocent and the sinner. The dualisms need to be transcended because “in some ways . . . we are all both victims and sinners” because of the vulnerability inherent in our relational existence.\(^\text{161}\) The following chapter will examine Brock’s arguments in detail.

In conclusion, this introduction has identified shortcomings of classical theological thought and has sketched a reconstructionist perspective in creation theology and relational anthropology. With the context of this theoretical groundwork, attention can now turn in the next two chapters to more focused study of two important voices conversing at Wisdom’s table, those of Rita Nakashima Brock and Elizabeth A. Johnson.

Chapter Two

Rita Nakashima Brock’s Vision:
The Whitecap on the Wave

Introduction to Brock

Much of Rita Nakashima Brock’s writing has been explicit about how her identity as a female Asian Pacific American informs her theology. The most striking example is her collaboration with Rebecca Ann Parker in *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*.\(^{162}\) This text is narrative theology and spiritual memoir, in which the authors tell the stories of their lives, sharing ways in which their suffering and healing are bound up not only with the life stories of other women, especially women whose lives have been shaped by abuse, but also with their theological work.

Until she was six, Brock lived on the island of Kyushu, with her Japanese mother and her maternal grandparents, speaking Japanese and being shaped in the Pure Land Buddhist family culture.\(^{163}\) Not until her early thirties did Brock learn that her biological father, a Puerto Rican American soldier, had abandoned his lover and child, leaving her

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only with the name Rita. While in Japan, Brock’s mother married a white Christian American man and the young family moved first to Okinawa and then to the United States when Rita was six. In elementary school in Kansas, Brock experienced the cruelty of racism but had no language for identifying or discussing it.164

In her college years, Brock joined the Church of Christ (Disciples of Christ) and eventually became ordained in that denomination. Her experience volunteering during the 1970’s and 1980’s at summer youth camps sponsored by the National Conference of Christians and Jews showed her “the power of evil in human life, the regularity of its occurrences, its banality, its deep embeddedness in the most intimate corners of life, the scarcity of means for social accountability in minimizing evil, and the length of its legacies.”165 As she recounts in Proverbs of Ashes, her experiences in these programs “forced me to live the theology I believed long before I could put it into words.”166

Awarded her PhD in 1988, Brock “was the first Asian American woman in the country [USA] to earn a doctorate in theology.”167 Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power, her dissertation, won the Crossroad Women’s Studies Award in 1988. Throughout her professional career, Brock has continued to be a leading Protestant feminist scholar and activist. Most recently, she has led the Fellowship Program at the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard and has been a Fellow at the Harvard Divinity School Center for Values in Public Life. She was one of six theologians who led "Re-Imaging

164 Brock and Parker, Proverbs of Ashes, 54.


166 Brock and Parker, Proverbs of Ashes, 136.

167 Ibid.,135.
Redemption: A Symposium on Feminist and Womanist Theologies," sponsored by the Anna Howard Shaw Center at Boston University School of Theology. Currently, she is the founding Co-Director of Faith Voices for the Common Good, a project she describes in her recent article “Fantastic Coherence.” Although she continues to publish important articles and books, this chapter will concentrate on themes raised in her award-winning text, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power.*

Brock’s central thesis in this work is that a feminist vision can redeem Christ in the sense of freeing the liberating truth of the gospel from harmful patriarchal interpretations. Key traditional themes that must be redeemed are understandings of sin, love, power, and the source of healing and reconciliation. In an essay published several years before her dissertation, Brock argues that traditional Christian understanding has been shaped by a dualistic perspective which sees God as transcendent and the Christ event as the one locus of God’s presence in the world, which has led to theological reflection on why God became incarnate in Jesus. For Brock, this perspective leads to “objectifying Jesus Christ as an idol of devotion and worship, with all of us standing, eyes focused upon and possessing his figure in our center.” Instead, she proposes another way of approaching the issue: “What is it about the Christ event that informs us about God as present with us and in us [?].” If salvation is considered from this perspective, then we have different questions to pursue, such as “how we are to stand in

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169Rita Brock, “A Feminist Consciousness Looks at Christology,” *Encounter* 41 (1980): 324 [published before she took her mother’s maiden name as her middle name].

170Ibid.
the place where Jesus stood, facing where he faced, and, with his presence as somehow resonant with our own center, how we are to walk our journeys together, with all their lost and stumbling moments[?]”  

Brock investigates these themes in greater depth in *Journeys by Heart*.

In her first chapter, “The Character of Being Human and the Making of Human Character,” Brock presents a phenomenology of woundedness, drawing upon feminist and psychological sources to demonstrate her understanding of the condition that the promise of salvation addresses. The second chapter is a theology of divine power as love, the Christological implications of which are developed in the third chapter, “The Feminist Redemption of Christ.” The last two chapters use these theoretical foundations to study the Gospel of Mark. In these chapters, Brock dialogues with other feminist Christologies and feminist interpreters of Mark.

**Brock’s Relational Anthropology**

In the introduction to *Journeys by Heart*, Brock claims that “traditional Christian theology has made self-sacrifice the highest form of love.”  

Further, traditional theology has made “separation and disconnection the source of reconciliation and connection” in atonement theories that focus upon Jesus’ death as the salvific event. Brock argues it is contrary to human experience to claim separation and disconnection

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171 Ibid.


173 Ibid., xiii.
can be the source of connection. She says, “Connection cannot come from disconnection any more than love can come from hate.”

Brock uses the metaphor of heart to focus upon the human capacity for love understood not as self-sacrifice but as intimacy. Her theology begins in “love as the basis of all power in human life.” Brock argues that her image of heart is essential for a renewed understanding of the human person, of Christ as much more than the historical Jesus, and of what redemption is as well as how it occurs. Her emphasis upon this image, she notes, distinguishes her position from that of other feminist theologians who preceded her in “excellent articulation of the turning of oppressed and oppressor upside down” by challenging hierarchical power structures. Brock says that with such feminist groundwork already having been laid by others, she aims to “turn patriarchy inside out” (rather than upside down), to examine its wounded heart.

Heart is a holistic image she intends to represent not a single attribute or dimension of personhood, but the core and entirety of the human person. “The profoundest intellect lodges in our heart where thought is bound with integrity, insight, consciousness, and conscience.” This image is not easy to systematize, but that is part of Brock’s point. She emphasizes the need for this holistic approach as a way beyond traditional Western thinking, which she believes has been too linear and dualistic. She says “Christian theology has tended to focus on cognitive, analytic, and often polemical

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174 Ibid.
175 Ibid., xii.
176 Ibid., xiv-xv.
177 Ibid., xv.
178 Ibid., xiv.
methods of discourse, a noisiness that makes the quiet, inner journey to heart difficult.”\textsuperscript{179}

“A liberating faith lies on the borders of our thinking where heart links thinking with feeling, perception, and the body.”\textsuperscript{180}

The contrast in approach Brock advocates becomes clear in considering a common, often unquestioned reverence for Jesus as ethical model. The traditional “What would Jesus do?” approach is not helpful, in Brock’s estimation, because it “focuses on reality external to us as the prime source for love and action, on obedience to ideology, conformity to heroic norms, self-sacrifice, and vicarious feelings.”\textsuperscript{181} Instead, people need to ask themselves how they are feeling, how others are feeling, and how they can act to reduce the pain and suffering in a particular situation. Although Brock does not linger on this example in her brief introduction, an implicit theme in her criticism, and one which permeates much feminist theory, is the importance of becoming self-aware.

Brock’s metaphor of heart involves a relationship with oneself, something impossible without self-awareness. A danger in the “WWJD?” model is the active suppression of self-awareness, which often emerges in the disjuncture between what one wishes one felt or wanted to do and the often painful limitations of one’s present reality. Brock argues the WWJD question unhelpfully leads focus away from one’s experience. I would go farther and say that frequently, it act as a flaming sword which prevents self-awareness because the question is, in many contexts, deceptively rhetorical. In practice, it is too often an answer, a criticism or a judgment disguised as a question.

\textsuperscript{179}Ibid., xvi.

\textsuperscript{180}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{181}Ibid., xiv.
A further complication in the ethical model approach is that in addition to discouraging or preventing self-knowledge, it encourages, even demands, inauthenticity in the name of faith. When this occurs, a vicious cycle is created in which the appearance of virtue, i.e. living according to rules, is more important than one’s genuine heart search and struggle to discern what is best, such that deep convictions about how to live a virtuous life work against the “inner journey to heart” that is necessary for the formation of genuine virtue.

The journey of coming to know one’s heart involves looking at aspects of self which one may wish not to see. It seems easier and safer to fall back on a rule or an answer, to think of oneself as “good,” one who does what Jesus would do, rather than examine limitations, struggles and weaknesses. Brock addresses this issue elsewhere, but not in the present context of her development of the image of heart, since she is primarily considering the perspective of those wounded by familial abuse.

One of Brock’s most perceptive critiques of Western thought is its tendency to link a call for justice with innocence, goodness, and victimization. The focus, she argues, ought not to be on the relative moral purity of those injured but on the unjust acts and structures which injure. “Abuse is wrong not because victims are innocent, but because abuse, even by good people for a good cause, dehumanizes the abuser and abused.

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Hence, we need to focus not on innocence, but on what is wrong with abusive behavior.”\textsuperscript{183}

Focus on innocence and moral purity reduces moral outrage in the presence of ambiguity. While not minimizing the reality of victimization, Brock addresses the need for personal responsibility within spaces which are shades of grey. “The sacred is embedded in life’s ambiguities, and the human task is to discern its power, for good and ill. Human goodness is found in the capacity to be wise and to negotiate relationships that maintain life and harmony.”\textsuperscript{184} A dichotomizing tendency to split people and situations into good or evil categories ignores the truth that people can be “both powerful and powerless at the same time.”\textsuperscript{185}

In similar fashion, the self awareness needed to begin the inner journey to heart which Brock calls for in \textit{Journeys by Heart}, is possible only when one is willing to embrace oneself as both valuable yet limited, as one who has been harmed yet is also responsible for having harmed others. Wounded people need to know they deserve love, even though they have been taught they do not, and even though they are not perfect or completely innocent or purely good. It seems to me that Brock’s metaphor of heart could


offer a great deal to a reconstruction of the *imago dei*, just as this symbol offers resources for understanding the importance of love within ambiguity.

*Brock’s Image of Heart and the Imago Dei*

As outlined in chapter one, some feminist anthropologies see the *imago dei* not as one particular human attribute, such as the will, but as the relational nature of being a human. As embodied spirit, human persons are shaped by and also shape their relational contexts.\(^1\)\(^{86}\) It is this process, capacity and quality to human experience which many call the image of God in the human. As Brock wishes heart to be a holistic and dynamic metaphor for the deepest level of the human, so the image of God is a systematic theological category that may be interpreted in this fashion, a symbol that connotes a sacred quality to human identity, capacity and potential. It also suggests dynamic process, human responsibility for that process, and resources for discerning and knowing truth. A value in the heritage of the *imago dei* is the conviction that each human is precious in his or her particularity and, further, is in relationship to God through the concrete particularities of his or her own experienced life. It is a symbol that can be both pluralistic and also affirm, universally, the value of all.

At the same time, this relationship is not inviolate, tucked away and preserved like a buried treasure, immune to circumstance. It is a dynamic and vulnerable quality of human experience which can be both damaged and healed, just as Brock outlines for heart. When one is cut off from one’s heart, when the heart is damaged, the spirit is

\(^{186}\)Although the focus here is anthropological, I intend the term relationality to refer to human connection to bodily existence and the relation to the natural world, as well as human to human, and the human-Divine relationship.
diminished, the image of God is stifled and pained. Dehumanizing treatment and conditions rob people of their own truest identities.

**Woundedness and Sin**

Brock begins *Journeys by Heart* by asking what the root of human pain is. Where does the pain come from and how can we act to reduce it? The traditional Christian answer to this question is that pain comes from the state of being in original sin. In traditional thought, “sinfulness is understood to be a state that is prior to the particular relationships that shape human beings.”\(^{187}\) Since the problem is the state of humanity’s metaphysical condition, the answer must also be extrinsic. This orientation to the problem is, in Brock’s view, conditioned by patriarchy, which has been unable to acknowledge, let alone be informed by, the suffering of women and children in patriarchal family structures, in which, Brock argues, “violence is more common than love and respect.”\(^{188}\) Brock argues that theological reflection on suffering must begin by looking at the patriarchal family, in particular the way children are treated, because “the quality of care given to children is crucial to whether they grow into loving persons or destructive adults capable of monstrous acts.”\(^{189}\)

Brock argues that sin is better understood as a symptom of a wound than as a state of being.\(^{190}\) As relationally-constituted beings, all persons are born vulnerable to harm,


\(^{188}\) Ibid., 3.

\(^{189}\) Ibid., 4.

\(^{190}\) In *Casting Stones: Prostitution and Liberation in Asia and the United States* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), Brock and co-author Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite write that human sin is “forms of behavior that perpetuate the evil” existing in the world (243). Brock’s understanding of evil is not a force of the cosmos but “whatever increases human helplessness, reinforces or inflicts pain without a healing purpose, and/or creates separation from relationships of love and nurture” (241).
are harmed by others, and, out of that damage, harm others in a cycle of brokenness.

“Hence sin is a sign of our brokenheartedness, of how damaged we are, not of how evil, willfully disobedient, and culpable we are. Sin is not something to be punished, but something to be healed.”\textsuperscript{191} In her view, a correct diagnosis of the problem also leads to the source of healing. Just as our relationality is the source of harm, since we are wounded by others, it is also the source for healing because we can work to bring healing to each other in loving relationship. Brock’s conclusion is that the doctrine of original sin, as traditionally understood, is entirely patriarchal, not informed by or helpful to female experience, and must be set aside for the phenomenology of woundedness, which she then develops by considering early parent/child relationships.

Brock does not provide an extended analysis of the problems with traditional understandings of original sin, which are many, or take up any of the contemporary reformulations of it. Unfortunately, an opportunity is missed. Although she does not explicitly say original sin is a bankrupt concept, she leaves that impression. At the same time, her phenomenology of woundedness has clear points of contact with interpretations of original sin in such writers as Paul Ricoeur and Stephen Duffy.\textsuperscript{192}

Her understanding of the inevitability of woundedness and each person’s responsibility in perpetuating cycles of harm has much in common with these contemporary understandings of original sin as “the sin of the world” which affects each

\textsuperscript{191}Brock, \textit{Journeys by Heart}, 7.

person before the person is in the world in a morally responsible way. Such reconstructions of original sin do attend to relationality as constitutive of the human. They also locate “sin” as a historical, concrete wounding that produces further wounding acts. Dialogue with such interpretations could expand the phenomenology of woundedness that Brock develops by attending to the larger circumstances of the patriarchal family structure.

For example, while Brock’s excellent work with psychological theory is important to understanding the dynamics of the wounded heart, “sin of the world” theories are also valuable for contextualizing family dynamics. As will be seen, Brock’s concern is to focus on the damage done by abusive relationships in the home. This was groundbreaking work in the late 1980’s and is still, unfortunately, timely and relevant. Yet while the dynamics of abuse have similar psychological patterns across family situations, very different forces are also at work depending upon the particulars of the abusive environment, such as economic, social, racial, and ethnic location. The forces that facilitate or legitimate abusive relational patterns and the resources for healing in such environments vary a great deal.

A theory of original sin which includes a phenomenology of the brokenness of the larger, structural environment, could be a valuable macro-framework within which to hold micro-examination of interpersonal family relationships. It would also serve to keep in the forefront of analysis the complexity and the ambiguity inherent in human relationality, which is exactly what Brock emphasizes. While I do not disagree at all with her analysis of abuse at the heart of patriarchal family structures, it is unfortunately the case that abusive family dynamics are not limited to the patriarchal family. So, for
example, a “sin of the world” perspective offers an important context within which to hold a study of an abusive single parent in poverty and the dynamics at work in such a home in contrast to a more privileged environment. This point will resurface when Brock’s treatment of innocence and power are summarized.

Brock turns to psychological theories to consider the self and how it emerges, particularly those of psychoanalyst Dr. Alice Miller and Nancy Chodorow, both object-relations theorists. Broadly speaking, object-relations theorists believe that the earliest years of human life are key to human development, most particularly, they stress that a child’s relationship to the primary care-giver affects development in significant ways. As Brock summarizes, “relationships become the basic ingredients from which a sense of self is shaped. Hence the self is relationship-seeking activity.” Miller’s work focuses upon the impact parenting practices have upon a developing sense of self in a child, and Chodorow centers upon how children are socialized into gender identities and roles.

While Brock also draws upon other well known feminist theorists, such as Nelle Morton and Adrienne Rich, Miller’s thought is most influential for Brock’s appeal to psychological theory. Brock finds Miller’s basic understanding of how people develop a sense of self to be consistent with the dynamics of grace, sin, and salvation. For this reason, a thorough explanation of Miller’s perspective will now be reviewed.

At the outset, it is important to emphasize two cautionary points. Theories of mind, consciousness, and self are by no means uncontested among many disciplines and Miller’s work is no exception. A summary of Miller’s thought is not a claim for scholarly consensus upon her perspective. Secondly, though Miller’s analysis of the

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193Brock, Journeys by Heart, 9.
development of self is deeply resonant with Brock’s theology, the key theological arguments Brock makes do not depend for their validity upon the ultimate verification of a particular psychological school or theorist. So, while attention to Miller is significant, there is no argument here that her psychoanalytical perspective has been universally accepted. Nor is it assumed that, should her theories be seriously challenged by further work, this challenge would invalidate the foundational theological claim that a relational ontology is essential to an adequate understanding of the human person. 194

Brock identifies Miller’s use of the concept of the “true self” as very close to her own metaphor of heart. Miller argues that unhealthy parenting practices in Western culture inhibit, harm or even squash development of the true self of a child and, in fact, necessitate development of what she calls a false self. 195 These terms remain somewhat loosely defined, rooted in Miller’s conviction that

Children who are respected learn respect. Children who are cared for learn to care for those weaker than themselves. Children who are loved for what they are cannot learn intolerance. In an environment such as this they will develop their

194 For example, in Paul R. Lawrence and Nitin Nohria, Driven: How Human Nature Shapes Our Choices (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), the authors develop a theory of human nature from an evolutionary psychological perspective, arguing that the evolutionary process has selected four drives which are now part of human genetic make-up, beginning in the subconscious, deeply influencing though not automatically determining human behavior. They further argue that the first two drives, to acquire and to defend, were the primary motivators of human behavior until approximately 100,000 years ago. At that time, in the development of language and culture, the human brain changed such that the drives to bond and learn also became part of the limbic center. Since that development, “cultural change rather than genetic change” is now structured to be “at the forefront of further human development” (50). The authors see the drive to bond as the origin of conscience and morality as well as the potential for genocidal behavior because of the possibility for separating people into “us/them” and “good/evil” camps. Since the four drives are not reducible, they conflict and require conscious choices because people will not feel fulfilled unless all drives are being satisfied. It seems to me that such a psychological perspective could also dialogue with a relational ontology.

own ideals, which can be nothing other than humane, since they grow out of the experience of love.\textsuperscript{196}

Miller’s belief is that the true self goes underground, into hiding, when not adequately acknowledged or nurtured. Her concept includes a reality that does exist, yet it is also a potential that will come into being only if helped to emerge by proper nurture. If it is not given what is necessary at the appropriate developmental time, then it suffers an arrested development, while the false self is manufactured to hide the truncated, endangered true self. Taking responsibility for one’s healing begins with clear-eyed examination of the wound which instigated construction of the false self, an edifice built to cover lack of love and nurture.

In Miller’s view, parents who are living out of their false selves have not faced their own woundedness or done the work of healing; consequently, they relate to their children in ways designed, unconsciously, to get their own needs met, not out of understanding what is best for their children. Parents are unable to be aware that they are relating in this way if they have not dealt with their own hurt because that is the healing that enables one to be genuinely nurturing, in the sense of acting for the child’s best care, regardless of the parent’s desires or needs. Wounded parents behave in order to get what they need, which may or may not result in the child receiving what he or she needs. This self-oriented behavior is not conscious on the part of the parent, but is the inevitable result of a lack of self-awareness. Since children do not merely prefer attention, but need it to survive, they respond to their care-giver in such a way as to keep the adult in relationship, even in harmful connection.

Miller’s observation as an analyst is that those who do not become self-aware are doomed to repeat patterns of woundedness and harm as they parent their own children. This is all the more tragic because it is largely unconscious rather than intentionally cruel. In short, those who have not been able to discover or develop their true selves continue to live out of a false self incapable of genuine nurture. Always hungry for what it never received, the false self continues to replay patterns, searching for satisfaction, stuck in harm it has never transcended. If, for example, a mother needs to be affirmed and recognized as strong and competent (because she does not actually believe she is), then her behavior will be directed toward filling that hole in her sense of self. This wound in her, not being able to experience herself as strong and competent, will function as a parenting blind spot. Her response to situations which challenge her sense of competency will be reactionary, determined by her unconscious need to have others tell her she is strong, or to have a situation confirm her competency. When her child’s behavior may seem to call these qualities into question, rather than being able to see what is prompting the behavior from within the child, and respond to that, the wounded parent will act out of her own defensive need.

The false self, in Miller’s thought, is both reality and illusion. It is a reality in the sense that it is the guiding force in a wounded person’s behavior. It is what a person believes he or she has to be in order to be loved, to be approved, to function in the world, to achieve meaning or accomplish goals. But it is always also an illusion because it is an idealized image, unique to each person, yet always predictably unattainable and therefore continually preventing genuine self-acceptance. For example, one person’s false self may include never being able to admit to feeling hatred, because hatred is condemned as
wrong, and the person needs to be good. Paradoxically, denying the experience of feeling hatred precludes finding ways to leave the hatred behind. In this way, the false self keeps people stuck in unhealthy patterns, preventing growth and transformation.

Miller’s analysis, while focused on individual parent/child relationships, extends to a cultural critique because she also argues that the values of Western societies have established the primary norm of the parenting relationship as one of domination, in which parents are to control and shape their children. Particularly damaging is the way parents often attempt to instill moral values by demanding that children do not feel difficult emotions. For example, a child who is never allowed to be angry, but must always be nice (i.e., compliant), may learn that she has no right to personal boundaries but must comfort or please others even at the expense of her own well-being. Rather than learn self-awareness by being helped to recognize her own anger and make conscious choices about how to manage this strong emotion, such a child is conditioned, instead, to become unaware of her own feelings. This is the drama of the “gifted” child, in Miller’s phrasing, the child who has been trained to be so attuned and responsive to the needs of others, by pleasing her parents, that she has lost all touch with her true self and lives only out of a shell, a false self that always gives others what they want or expect, who only feels what she is expected or allowed to feel.

Miller does not consider whether or not particular injuries are more likely to occur for boys or girls; she focuses on the psychological dynamic between the true and false self as part of the widespread modern experience of depression. When children are trained to be cut off from their own emotions, they lose their true selves, their ability to

\[\text{197} \quad \text{Brock, } \text{Journeys by Heart, 11.}\]
feel, and this creates the soil in which depression takes root. Living out of the false self is living out of a lonely, empty space that is never adequately filled, no matter how one may be temporarily distracted. As long as a person lives in this way, cut off from his or her own pain, but also cut off from genuine fulfillment, then one is also unable to be empathetic toward the pain of others. As Miller says, “The true opposite of depression is not gaiety or absence of pain, but vitality: the freedom to experience spontaneous feelings.”

Brock emphasizes that in Miller’s thought true and false selves do not form a dualism of opposing, separate entities. Instead, “the false self protects the damaged true self and masks it.” In her language, Brock argues that the broken heart, which is the false self, acts as it does in order to protect the person from awareness of pain. Thus the false self functions over the years as a means of survival, a structure of defense. It is a shield and no genuine change can occur until it cracks open. Brock concludes that the practices which maintain the false self are characteristics of patriarchy: relationships of dominance, a devaluing of the body, and a tendency to blame the victim.

The most extreme cases of these patriarchal dynamics are apparent in abusive situations, but the phenomenology of woundedness may be most helpful if understood to exist along a continuum. At the far end of harm, an abused child is fragmented, split apart by forces he or she cannot control. Surviving such harm requires a defensive response which serves a life-saving purpose. The defensive strategy of childhood,

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198 Miller, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, 57.

199 Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 12.
however, inhibits further growth. What once preserved life can become a prison causing further suffering as the harmed child grows into responsibility.

Since Miller’s work does not address differences in sense of self between boys and girls or men and women, Brock next briefly summarizes the work of Nancy Chodorow to explain her theory of how gendered views of self emerge. Boys and girls develop differing senses of self, according to Chodorow, because of differing experiences in relating to primary caregivers, who are nearly always female. In her view, the human self is not essentially either male or female in its earliest identity, but becomes so because of the gendered differences of social realities. In short, “males are forced to develop gender identity by separation and females by bonding,” a process which produces male orientation to an autonomy achieved by separateness, and female orientation to identity in networks of relationship.

What are the implications of these theories for a theological understanding of the human person, especially with respect to sin, grace, and redemption? Brock argues that a relational ontology informed by these theories opens up a new understanding of sin. “We are broken by the world of our relationships before we are able to defend ourselves. It is not a damage we willfully choose.” In her view, human woundedness is concrete, particular and a direct result of the relational nature of human existence. Although at this point in her book she does not make this point explicitly, a logical extension of this assertion is to note that some people are born into much more damaging environments than others. There is not, then, a blanket, one-size-fits-all metaphysical condition of

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201 Ibid., 16.
original sin into which all are born. Instead, each person is harmed to a lesser or greater extent by the relative health of one’s primary relationships in infancy and childhood.

Another factor that Brock does not address in this chapter is the complexity of the givenness of both the infant and the care-giver. While a consensus is not available regarding how much people are shaped by their particular genetic makeup, it is certainly clear that each person’s physical reality is an important factor in the complex dynamic of early life relationships. Parents know each child is unique from birth, not only in physical appearance but also in personality or temperament, some very sensitive and easily distressed, others more tolerant of disruption. Such predispositions an infant brings into the world impact the way the developing child will experience a relationship as less or more nurturing. In addition, the strengths and weaknesses of the temperament of the care-giver will interact with those of the infant in unique ways, with some relationships being much more naturally harmonious than others. While not traditionally part of a definition of sin, the relative ease or tensions in the givens of the relationship clearly impact its nurturing character for the infant and child. These variables are further exacerbated or minimized by the particular environment in which the primary relationship occurs, creating an endlessly complex kaleidoscope of interacting factors.

Brock’s primary understanding of sinfulness, then, is that woundedness which, to some degree, is part of every person’s life. Each person enters the age of moral responsibility already harmed in ways that will surely affect the person’s ability to relate to others in healthy ways. Though this general assertion can be made, because infants do not survive if they do not receive at least minimal care in a primary relationship, each person’s context and evolving life story are unique.
Grace and Healing

Brock’s understanding of sin as outlined in her first chapter is horizontal yet multidimensional. It is an inter-human event. If woundedness is the problem, then healing must be the solution, but how does this occur? Brock argues that traditional theology has often inhibited healing by fostering dependency on external sources rather than encouraging authentic responsibility. Healing comes not by expecting others to accomplish it on one’s behalf, but by one’s own active engagement in the process. She writes

Those who damage us do not have the power to heal us, for they themselves are not healed. To be healed, we must take the responsibility for recognizing our own damage by following our hearts to the relationships that will empower our self-healing.202

Recognizing that one had no way of avoiding harm which has already been done does not, in Brock’s view, inevitably lead to a victim mentality. Instead, the true self must be seen not only as a wounded entity but also as a process. It “only exists in relationships as it focuses and structures those relationships. The self, the heart, therefore is recreated continuously through feeling, connectedness, and memory.”203

Each person bears responsibility for his or her own healing because no medicine given from the outside can accomplish the necessary internal change. Healing is genuine transformation, which cannot occur without the active involvement of the one being transformed. Brock says, “We are called not to dependence on a power outside ourselves, but to an exploration of the depths of our most inner, personal selves as the

202 Ibid.
203 Ibid., 17.
root of our connections to all others. It seems to me that use of the *imago dei* here would contribute to Brock’s emphasis that the source of healing is not extrinsic but is in the deepest and most intimate corners of one’s being. Brock says:

[H]earth is our original grace. In exploring the depths of heart we find incarnate in ourselves the divine reality of connection, of love. The grace we find through heart reveals the incarnate graciousness, generosity, and love necessary to human life.

But we cannot do this all alone. In order to find our own deepest hearts, we must encounter loving presence. The search is not for an entity or an essence but is, instead, relational.

Brock identifies another obstacle on the road to healing, in addition to dependence on external solutions, which is avoiding awareness of the depth of one’s hurt. First, an accurate and honest assessment of the harm a person has suffered is necessary, and this may well entail feeling angry. Anger is often the first crack in the shield, which can begin the work of dismantling the false self to uncover the true, the first step in taking the risk of encountering whatever emerges. Traditional theology has inhibited the healing process in that it has labeled anger sinful, especially for women. Harriet Lerner’s *Dance of Anger*, emphasizes the particular importance for women in becoming aware of and learning how to work in productive ways with their anger.

The point of the recognition of such anger is not primarily to judge or change others, though in a relational world a change in ourselves will inevitably affect

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204 Ibid., 16.

205 Ibid., 17.

others, but to understand ourselves and to change from a reliance on a false, too-fused self to a grounding in the true self and in what hurts that self.  

Becoming aware of one’s woundedness and the anger accompanying this realization is often tied to one’s body, especially for women. Although anger has been a socially and often religiously unacceptable emotion for women, this does not mean it has not been present. Women have often buried anger or turned it against themselves, rather than acknowledge and learn from it. Turned inward, anger works to make a person harm or reject, in some way, dimensions of bodily experience. “Reclamation of the body is part of the reclamation of self as awareness of physical pain and stress can become important clues to psychic and spiritual distress.”

A theme running through Brock’s relational understanding of sin is that truly ethical living depends upon ever deepening self-awareness. This not synonymous with self-control, which is typically understood as willpower, exerting dominance over oneself. That concept perpetuates patriarchal privileging of control by domination. By contrast, Brock argues for a self-awareness that is also a deep self-acceptance. It involves effort and discipline, as will be outlined subsequently, but it is not a way of self-control which buries or denies what is deemed unacceptable within oneself. It is a starting place of love, of working to deepen one’s integrity, which cannot be achieved by dominance. Proceeding from love is a way of committed relationship to oneself, whereas proceeding from an ethos of self-control is to follow a pre-conceived theory regarding what is appropriate, which makes attending to one’s heart irrelevant except for finding occasions of guilt. Emphasis on self-control in the dominative model judges before listening. The

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208 Ibid.
structure of that model necessarily silences or makes invisible aspects of one’s self from the outset.

Although Brock does not raise this point, attending deeply to one’s own heart is inseparable from deepening one’s receptivity to the movement of the Spirit. Brock’s anthropology charts out a phenomenology of transformation which is attuned to what I would call spiritual discernment, a process in which the divine and the human are united, a way which enables one to live as Jesus lived, not as an imitation of an external pattern but out of one’s own integrity and commitment to authenticity.

Brock’s emphasis on a starting place of self-acceptance may seem to indicate an individualism at odds with the primacy of relationality, but she argues that this is not the case.

We can only become self-aware and self-accepting through relationships that cocreate us, and the maintenance of nonharmful environments requires sustained, nurturing relationships. Self acceptance, as an ongoing, lifelong process, is possible only through our openness to others and their presence.  

The premise of Brock’s theory of sin is that wounded people, unless they experience some degree of healing and wholeness, continue to wound others. As a result, the healing of one’s heart, or self, is necessary to the project of ethical living. At the same time, such healing cannot be accomplished in isolation. Rather, the healing Brock advocates occurs precisely in the realm of human relationships. She concludes her first chapter by

\[\text{Ibid., 34.}\]

\[\text{Brock’s emphasis in this work is on inter-human relationships. The larger context of her thought recognizes the importance of human relationship with the natural world. In many of her essays, she emphasizes an Asian sensibility to ethical living as part of a larger aesthetic of harmony, which includes a web of inter-relationship beyond the human-to-human. Although beyond the scope of this study, it is clear that in a personalistic sense, human/natural world connections offer healing to the wounded person, for example, in such relationships as gardening or caring for pets. The larger structures of the human/world}\]
saying that “we can only come into flower with connections to other self-accepting selves. This relationality is the terrifying and redemptive grace of the character of being human.”

My discussion of Brock’s anthropology has deliberately amplified and extended some of her arguments, in ways which are arguably consistent with her insights. In concluding this section on her relational anthropology, I wish to stress that identifying similar patterns and tracing a phenomenology of woundedness originating in the relationships of early life does not deny or minimize the important differences among people’s experience. As noted earlier, children are born into unique circumstances with variables that impact the nature and extent of their harm. Likewise, parents conceive and raise children in environments ranging from those supportive and full of resources to those which make adequate care of their young impossible. No amount of love can prevent a child from suffering the harmful effects of fetal alcohol syndrome, malnutrition, lead poisoning or bullets.

A relational ontology requires that each person’s history be part of considering what sin means in a particular life situation. The goal, therefore, is not to define a universal state of sin which can be understood as a theological abstraction. Instead, the goal of a relational perspective on sin is to see how deeply intertwined and connected people are in sin as well as in grace. Additionally, the goal is not to parse out relative degrees of blame on grandparents or parents, but to gain insight into the complexity and multidimensionality of wounds which require healing and the responsibilities of all to relationships evidenced in such issues as global warming and pollution point to ways in which harm is perpetuated in the world as people harm each other and the planet.

Brock, Journeys by Heart, 24.
participate in this work. To the extent that traditional understandings of sin have focused upon judgment, a one-size-fits-all metaphysical approach, and assigning blame, they have short circuited the transformative process, which is rooted in love.

Divine Eros

Brock’s second chapter is entitled “The Heart of Erotic Power: The Incarnation of Divine Love.” In this chapter, Brock first describes and critiques both traditional (male) definitions of power and historically typical female experiences and understandings of power within a patriarchal context. She then turns to feminist theory to outline an understanding of power rooted in feminist work on Eros and begins to draw out epistemological and theological implications of this revolutionary perception.

Traditional understandings of power are causal and dominative, such that power is the force by which one is able to exert one’s will on a particular situation to effect the desired outcome. While this definition may seem to be a simple description of everyday dynamics, Brock argues it is both inaccurate and actively harmful. It is a perception produced in and through male experience, loaded with assumptions that must be unpacked.

The typically Western view of power is produced by a hierarchal and patriarchal worldview in which power and authority are possessions, varying in degree, so that some have more than others. This is an accurate description of positional power at work in hierarchically structured human systems in which status is achieved by being above others. Brock rejects this definition as illusory, however, for it creates images of the rugged individual, the hero, the leader who finds it is lonely at the top of the power pyramid. In this model, achievement of status is a possession of power, the outcome of
one’s solitary effort and superior skill. Culturally, power has been understood to belong to the winners and men are trained to strive to win.

This great man model is inaccurate because the successes it points to for validation are not contextualized. Its construction of success and achievement ignores the presence of entire systems feeding the dynamics of dominance and control rather than mutuality. In addition to being inaccurate, this model harms even those who ascend the hierarchy because it enforces an ethic of rigid autonomy and interprets life as a zero-sum game of winners and losers. While status, prestige, and accomplishment may seem to be marks of strength, they often mask a brittle, defensive, and fearful way of life, which is cut off from genuine relationship. Authority and power remain extrinsic, no matter how much money or status is amassed. There is always another rung on the ladder or another enemy to defeat. In Brock’s analysis, dominance, though a tremendous source of real harm is, ultimately, powerless.

In a patriarchal context, women have been on the underside of this hierarchy and have typically understood power as ability to nurture others. At first glance this understanding may appear to be more positive, but it often is not, for self worth is still located in one’s effect on others. Stereotypically, in this experience of power, a woman gets what she wants not by mastery of others, but through maintaining strong relational ties which are often manipulated. While the stereotypically male way emphasizes separation and autonomy and ignores the fusion at work in the dominance dynamic, the stereotypically female way is oriented toward creating and maintaining fusion. The two patterns are flipsides of the coin of relationship grounded in control, rather than in genuine mutuality.
Each of these power dynamics is unhealthy. The two ways feed on each other in a synergy that entrenches fusion rather than authentic connection. Both ways are reactionary and have developed in a patriarchal context. Building upon her argument in chapter one, Brock asserts that children learn power is authoritarian control and respond either in efforts to achieve dominance, a more typically male response or the typically female response of submission. Patterns that appear to be polarized opposites are actually dependent upon and feed each other.

The root problem is an extrinsic understanding of authority and power. Having charted out the “powerlessness of dominance” and the “dependency of powerlessness,” Brock turns to developing a theory of power rooted in feminist work on Eros and a relational understanding of reality. Erotic power is a way to name this connectivity at the heart of all that is. This power is already present at the heart of life. Erotic power is much deeper than what is available to a cause/effect paradigm. For Brock, erotic power is the divine dimension of human existence; it is “the basis of being itself as the power of relationship” and it is “existence-as-a-relational-process.”212 True power and true authority, then, are not dominative or external but arise from connections within and among. This power is not a commodity, which some have and some do not, but is that relational energy which is holistic, life-giving, creative and integrating.

Increasing personal power is not accomplished by an exterior change in status or position. Rather, coming into a deeper personal power, living in erotic power is possible only through increasing self-awareness so that transformation can occur. The wounded heart, which has suffered relational injury, can be healed, restored, and strengthened only

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212Brock, Journeys by Heart, 41.
through relational means. Self-awareness is a path toward healing developed only in nurturing, loving connections. Thus erotic power names both the gift of human life in its relational construction and also the source of hope and healing from the damage of abusive relationality.

This revolutionary vision of power, rooted in a relational perspective, has significant epistemological and theological implications. Firstly, when reality is understood as fundamentally relational, then ways of knowing are expanded far beyond the rationalistic and scientistic approaches that dominate Western culture. Knowing involves integration and empathic connectivity, not “mastery” of inert material. Knowing is relationally adventurous, open-ended, creative and imaginative, a realm of symbol and process, not control. It is fluid and living, not dry, stale, or mechanistic, not reducible to possession of quantitative information.

Secondly, Brock explicitly states that she takes Eros as developed in feminist theory and expands it “to include its sacred dimensions.” In her view, “The presence and revelation of erotic power is the divine dimension of human existence.” She does not dialogue with the theological category of sacramentality, but she writes that “imagining the divine presence in the world as Heart leads us to a greater sense of the whole of life as sacred.”

Understanding conceptions of power-as-dominance as distorted and harmful leads to new theological reflection, for these unhealthy assumptions have shaped theologies of

213 Ibid., 45.
214 Ibid., 46.
215 Ibid.
divine power. Brock notes that process theology’s vision of God’s power as persuasive is a modification that does not probe deeply enough; it remains an extrinsic conception of power in which God calls to the human from the outside. Persuasive power is gentler than dominance, but is still exertion of one will over another, in her view. She says,

[T]he good that includes but moves beyond our own individual existence to become sacred emerges from the risks each of us takes to be vulnerable to relationships. Mutual support, intercommunication, and sensitive openness, the only avenues of divine power that create good, require enormous risks.\textsuperscript{216}

This perspective on divine relational power leads to the Christological examination of her third chapter, entitled “The Feminist Redemption of Christ.”

Christological Implications

Brock develops the Christological implications of her relational anthropology and approach toward power, working toward her image of Jesus as the whitecap of the community Christological wave. Since solid feminist groundwork has been laid by other thinkers who have analyzed issues of Jesus’ identity as male, Brock does not revisit that critique of traditional Christology but, instead, probes more deeply into the hierarchal and patriarchal thought patterns embedded in traditional understandings of salvation. A key finding here is “an androcentric preoccupation with heroes.”\textsuperscript{217} Whether it be prophet or priest, king or savior, the seeds of all of these images are embedded in patriarchal soil.

Though these images may have offered insight and help in their contexts over the ages, new images and insights continue to emerge, reshaping tradition where it has become rigid. Brock’s Christology aims to free traditional images and theological

\textsuperscript{216}Ibid., 48.

\textsuperscript{217}Ibid., 51.
reflection from the calcification of patriarchal thinking. If tradition and faith are understood as propositional (and therefore static), then Brock’s Christology will be rejected out of hand for not being “high” enough and for departing from inherited symbols. If, however, Christology and soteriology name faithful reflection upon the relational truth of redemptive experience, then Brock’s Christology demonstrates how social and psychological theory can nurture theological reflection.

In Brock’s analysis, traditional Christology and soteriology reflect a wounded consciousness. The Father God of patriarchy is described as loving and benevolent but is actually remote and emotionally unavailable. “Nostalgic longing” for what has not been experienced permeates traditional theology. The God whose love is understood as a disinterested agape reflects the paternalism and fusion of patriarchal dynamics, not genuine empathy and loving, caring connection. Human salvation is worked out between the Father and the Son, while the human passively submits. Human submission to an external, transcendent authority imitates Jesus’ submission to the Father’s will, in which he sacrifices his personal power as a requirement of obedience. Brock rejects all variations of atonement theories as inherently patriarchal. They perpetuate the dynamics of abusive relationality while claiming the language of love and redemption.

While deeply appreciative of liberation theology’s social consciousness, Brock argues that its Christology does not move past glorifying the lone hero who surrenders his will to the ultimate authority to accomplish the cosmic achievement of human salvation. Feminist Christologies also have not yet fully integrated their relational commitment in

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218Ibid., 53.
soteriological ways. Brock finds inadequate are those developed by Patricia Wilson-Kastner and Rosemary Radford Ruether.

Brock believes Wilson-Kastner’s work privileges the abstract notion of human unity over genuine, concrete particularity and connection by focusing on Jesus as the individual representation of all humanity. This position is unable to fully embrace and value diversity and connection because of a prior commitment to unity as an abstraction. Brock argues that “Particularity is not the self-emptying of divine power, but an aspect of its fullness.” The particularity of the historical Jesus must not be lost in a universalizing schema, which would also diminish the value of unique persons. Instead, Christological focus must be on Jesus’ place in a relational net.

Brock affirms Rosemary Radford Ruether’s critique that Spirit-Christologies, though allowing a way for Christ to have female expression, ultimately devalue embodiment. Yet Ruether’s prophetic emphasis, according to Brock, is not able to leave behind the heroic model. In Ruether’s Christology, Jesus is a prophet who is able to reject patriarchy. His vision and understanding exceed others’, enabling him to reject what is harmful. The deconstruction is necessary but not enough, for the prophetic tradition privileges the solitary voice. Jesus is still understood as a lone figure, not in relational terms. This is not ultimately redemptive, in Brock’s judgment, because

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219 It is important to remember that Brock’s work was published in 1988. In summarizing her critique of the state of Christology at that time, I wish to trace the importance of her work in developing a trajectory for feminist Christology and her early critique of atonement theories.


221 Brock, Journey by Heart, 63.

222 While Brock references several texts, her primary dialogue is with Rosemary Radford Ruether’s Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology (Boston: Beacon Press), 1983.
“[W]ithout alternative relationships, the iconoclastic shattering of power-over is also the fragmentation of self.”223 Brock believes Ruether’s prophetic model also remains stuck in anger and iconoclasm. What is needed, therefore, is a redemptive vision that embraces relationality at the heart of all that is.

Instead of seeing Jesus as a lone individual who reached out to the weak from an isolated, superior position of strength and wisdom, Brock views Jesus as part of a web of connection that nurtured him into his healing activity. Rather than focus on a Jesus/God relationship that set him apart from everyone else, Brock wishes to focus upon Jesus’ human connections through which, in her view of erotic power, God becomes known.

“The visions that empower the actions of a community are not possible before the actual relationships.”224 Jesus was nurtured into his vision, his love, faith, and wisdom, by his community, for “individuals only make sense in the larger context of events embedded in particular historical structures.”225 Patriarchy has been oriented to look for heroes, those who stand apart, and for brave warriors, those who conquer by individual will and dominance. Jesus’ salvific significance has been seen through this lens, despite the many images in the Gospel texts themselves which undercut and break through their patriarchal context. Brock next turns to the Gospel of Mark to demonstrate this.

The Gospel of Mark

In Brock’s view, the exorcisms and healing stories in Mark need to be seen as “normative statements about the sacred within the Christian community.”226 These

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223 Brock, Journeys by Heart, 66.
224 Ibid., 67.
225 Ibid., 68.
226 Ibid., 72.
passages do not require either a naïve supernaturalism or an interpretation which sees the outcast sick being brought into the status quo. Instead, Brock argues, these stories are about breaking through to new ways of seeing and being, not magic or superstition or proof of Jesus’s divinity. In contrast to the Western model of sickness, which tends to be mechanistic in its location of causes in genes or germs, Brock finds the Markan texts to be holistic, revealing that “sickness is oppression or possession by hostile forces that seek to destroy a person’s body, psyche, spirit, and/or community.”

Exorcism is liberation. One who is possessed does not experience self-possession because the destructive powers are not only external in physical oppression but also have taken over within. The fact that the person is sick, the fact that possession manifests as destructive is a symptom, evidence that “heart,” in Brock’s terminology, is calling out for change. There is no room for blaming the oppressed victim here. Brock interprets the story of the Gerasene Demoniac of Mark 5 in terms of oppressive Roman rule.

Possession is not the result of personal sin and cannot be healed by private penance. The possession comes from relationships lived under the deceptions of unilateral power. A return to heart must come from the revelation of erotic power that emerges in the relationships possible through the exorcism.

The wounded heart makes itself known, crying out for help in the symptoms of possession. Jesus helps, the “Legion” of devils leaves the man and enters the pigs, who drown in the sea. But how did Jesus help? Rather than see Jesus as the hero-spiritual-warrior whose dominative power is even greater than Legion’s, Brock says “the image of

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227 Ibid., 76.
228 Ibid., 79.
Jesus as exorcist is someone who has experienced his own demons.”

Jesus is the wounded healer who has come through his own forty days in the desert, confronting his own demons, and so is able to hear and respond in love to the cry for help in the demoniac’s violent, unnerving behavior. The exorcism is liberative healing, which occurs in a relational space.

Brock next draws upon Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza’s interpretation of Mark 5 to examine the healings of the woman with the hemorrhage and Jairus’ daughter. The story of the bleeding woman could be read as showing Jesus’ power to be a substance of some sort, as something that he has, something the woman takes from him in her touch. But this story can also be read quite differently. The woman is suffering precisely from being female in an oppressive, that is to say patriarchal world. Her bleeding of twelve years cannot be redressed by the existing authorities or experts, for the system itself is the cause of her continuing problem. Nevertheless, the woman acts courageously, taking the risk of breaking a strong taboo by touching Jesus. She is driven by a desire to be whole. Until the woman makes this contact with Jesus, he is not even able to see her and is unaware of her presence. The text has Jesus saying that her faith has healed her, but in Brock’s reading, the woman’s faith and action have also given to Jesus by breaking “through the barrier of male privilege and status that separated them.”

Schussler Fiorenza and Brock find significance in the way this encounter is placed within the framework of the story of Jairus’ daughter. The twelve year old girl is

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229 Ibid., 80.


231 Brock, Journeys by Heart, 84.
reported to have died just as the woman who has been bleeding for twelve years experiences healing. “The older woman’s courage has removed for Jesus the barrier of patriarchal privilege.” With a new vision, Jesus can see outside of the patriarchal box and awaken the girl he understands to be sleeping, not dead. What patriarchy had shut out and made invisible can now be healed and awakened.

Using Schussler Fiorenza’s approach, Brock argues that “without the specificity of gender and historical context, the theological implications are lost.” These stories need to be read as normative for revealing redemptive dynamics at work.

We are not called to place our faith in benignly paternalistic powers who will rescue us or protect us from suffering. We are to have faith in our own worth, which empowers us to be healed by each other. Despite fear of the consequences, we are summoned to take heart, to refuse despair, and to act for ourselves and each other. Taking heart creates more healing; it opens new ways of power.

In this reading, without the older woman’s faith and courage, the young girl could not have been healed. In the next chapter, the gospel reports that Jesus could not work miracles in his hometown because of the lack of faith there. A few verses later, Jesus sends disciples out to heal and exorcise, which they are reported to have done. Jesus, then is not the possessor of some substance or healing power which others do not possess. His life and his interactions reveal “a new understanding of power that connects members of the community.”

232 Ibid., 85.
233 Ibid., 86.
234 Ibid.
235 Ibid., 87.
After building upon Schussler Fiorenza’s interpretation of these Markan passages, Brock disagrees with Fiorenza’s argument that the second half of the gospel rejects the Christology of glory evident in the first half, with its focus on exorcism and healing. Mark’s emphasis on the suffering of the abandoned Jesus on the cross is not, in Brock’s view, a critique of what has gone before. Jesus’ death was a result of the empowering love that raised hope and stirred new life not because his death was required by divine mandate but because domnative powers in the world acted to crush the threat of this new life.

How was Jesus’ death understood? Brock argues that it was interpreted through male experience and spiritualized into an other-worldly event, such that the abandoned hero is raised by a transcendent deity. In this interpretation, there is no place for human power, which has completely failed. What remains is passivity and helplessness, “the alter ego of the egocentric, destructive masculine self.” 236 In Christian history, this interpretation has served important functions.

The most damaging thread running through Christian reflection on Jesus’ death has been the belief that it was necessary, that Jesus had to die, either because God willed this or because human sin required it, assumptions which have been the foundation of harmful soteriology. This tragic event required a change in vision for the disciples, but Brock argues that belief in the necessity of anyone’s unjust death can only perpetuate harm. It is true that those disciples who misunderstood Jesus’ power as messiah needed to see in a new way, but Brock suggests that guilt influences traditional interpretation. When Jesus is spiritualized into an unearthly King more powerful than Caesar, one

236 Ibid., 91.
hierarchical authority is substituted for another and a real paradigm shift has not occurred. Patriarchal structures and hierarchical, domineering views of power remain in place in that interpretation. The hope revealed in Jesus’ death is not one of control, not assurance in the belief that it “had” to happen and therefore all is proceeding according to plan. The hope revealed in Jesus’ death is the courage of love to risk, which “is a profound affirmation of the possibility of life beyond oppression.”

Jesus’ life of love was risky and courageous until hierarchical powers killed him; those who stayed with Jesus were also courageous and “with such courage, life in the midst of death surfaces through connection.”

In a stark challenge to theologies which understand the miracle of resurrection as a supernatural proof of divinity, Brock writes, “The resurrection of an abandoned Jesus is a meaningless event.” In her view, Jesus is the whitecap on the wave, not the wave itself. Since a resurrected Jesus apart from community would be meaningless, Brock locates the Spirit of Christ in the love of the community from which Jesus emerged and into whose arms he died.

Her recent work continues this perspective on redemption as a communal action. In an essay drawn from her recently co-authored book Saving Paradise, she writes that “[S]salvation comes from communal practices that affirm incarnation, the Spirit in

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237 Ibid., 94.
238 Ibid., 96.
239 Ibid., 100.
240 Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008).
life, and its on-going promise of resurrection and paradise.” Redemption needs to be not only about what we are freed from but also about what we are freed toward.

The divine powers that deliver salvation are love for the beautiful, care for the material life that gives pleasure, nourishment, and joy, respect for the numinous world, reverence for the Spirit in life, and embrace of the eros that empowers human beings as social creatures to seek life in just communities.

Just as Jesus cannot be severed from his community context, so salvation can never be understood or experienced apart from this bodily life and the lives of others. The power of grace is a communal one. “The most neglected dimension of grace is the social process by which we are freed from sin into new dimensions of human life in which it is possible to behave decently and responsibly.”

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Chapter Three

Friends of God and Prophets

Elizabeth A. Johnson needs little introduction to those familiar with Roman Catholic feminist theology. Distinguished Professor of Theology at Fordham University, Johnson is an award-winning teacher and sought-after scholar lecturer whose work has been translated into numerous languages. She serves on the editorial boards of several distinguished theological journals and has been president of both the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA) and the American Theological Society. To date, three of her books have won awards. She has also received awards from the Catholic Library Association, the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, and the CTSA. A bibliography of her work as of 1999 has been published in Things New and

244 “She has received numerous awards, including the Louisville Grawemeyer Award in Religion for She Who Is (1993), the American Academy of Religion Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion for Friends of God and Prophets (1999), and the Book Award of the College Theology Society for Truly Our Sister (2004). She was also the recipient of the John Courtney Murray Award of the Catholic Theological Society of America, the Jerome Award of the Catholic Library Association, and the Monika K. Hellwig Award of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities.” http://tandtclark.typepad.com/ttpc/2007/12/elizabeth-johns.html http://tandtclark.typepad.com/ttpc/2007/12/elizabeth-johns.html; Internet; accessed January 6, 2008.
Old: Essays on the Theology of Elizabeth A. Johnson. Most recently, in January of 2008, she was presented with the Yves Congar Award by Barry University.

In a 1999, review symposium on Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints, Johnson wrote, “The one fascination that runs through all my work in various ways is the mystery of God,” a statement which seems to have forecast her most recent book, Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God, published in 2007. In the 1999 symposium previously mentioned, Johnson explained a deeply personal reason for her study of “who God might be in the context of human suffering,” sharing that her father died as a result of a subway accident in New York City. As she was preparing to attend her senior prom, she did not know that her father’s bodily trauma was drawing him into the grave. In Johnson’s words, “I never got over it. It shattered every assumption in my young girl’s heart about God’s love, power, and reliability.” Her young orientation to theodicy expanded with life experiences; in particular, living in apartheid South Africa

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246 “The Yves Congar Award for Theological Excellence recognizes the contributions of contemporary theologians working, writing, and teaching, as did Cardinal Yves Congar, OP (1904-1995), in light of tradition and moving the tradition forward in meeting the challenges of the late Twentieth and early Twenty-first centuries.” http://www.barry.edu/TheologyPhilosophy/lectureseries/congar.htm; Internet; accessed March 25, 2008.


250 Ibid., 133.
and in Mexico shifted her focus from a quest for personal understanding to integrating theory and praxis. In her view, the driving issue for achieving such integration is the function of the theological symbol under investigation.251

Johnson’s Wisdom Christology

In an essay published in the late 1980’s, Johnson assesses a problem and a need in Christian theology that much of her subsequent work addresses in various ways. She writes that the notion of revelation has given rise to an occasion “in which the need to preach and interpret has resulted in words becoming too clear and ideas too distinct, almost as if they were direct transcripts of divine reality.”252 The Christian tradition’s tendency to make graven images of male metaphysics and male metaphors, its tendency to freeze the divine, has created a gulf between the reality of the human experience of God and the capacity of the tradition to be enriched in its development by on-going experience.

Drawing upon Wolfhart Pannenberg, whose works she treated in her dissertation,253 Johnson says that “religions die . . . when they lose the power to interpret the full range of present experience in the light of their idea of God.”254 Further, “If the idea of God does not keep pace with developing reality, the power of experience pulls people on

251Ibid.


253Johnson’s dissertation was “Analogy/Doxology and Their Connection with Christology in the Thought of Wolfhart Pannenberg” Catholic University of America, 1981.

and the god dies, fading from memory.” Nothing less than the on-going relevance of the Christian tradition as it enters a third millennium is at stake. Can connections be kept not barely alive but vital and dynamic? Can dialogue between the rich gifts of Judeo-Christian heritage and contemporary experience enrich both?

Johnson’s theology engages the task of these questions. She explores a variety of themes, including Christology, pneumatology, Mary, the communion of saints, ecological consciousness, and a theology of God, all with passion, eloquence, and a vision for keeping Christian language alive, while working to interpret tradition in the context of contemporary lived experience. In Johnson’s estimation, Christian doctrine need not become a moribund patient on life support, though that scenario is a real danger. In the deconstructive aspect of her archeological work, Johnson identifies distortions, obstructions, and deformations sedimented within the tradition. Critique is needed not to obliterate but to renew. Johnson’s theology identifies wrong turns and dead ends, using a compass of constructive feminist methodology, in order to recover old and discover new ways of life and Spirit.

In her 1990 *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology*, Johnson surveys key shifts in Roman Catholic Christology in the second half of the twentieth-century. She argues that the waves of renewal her book describes have been stirred up by the Kantian turn to the subject, the horrors of unprecedented human slaughter, and increasing awareness of a global context. Johnson traces those movements within Roman

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255 Ibid., 247.


257 Ibid., 12-13.
Catholic Christology that reflect upon the meaning of Jesus in a late twentieth-century context. After identifying and surveying various “waves” of Christological reflection that reflect contemporary sensibilities, her book concludes with this statement:

Out of our own experience of salvation, our own telling of the story, our own praxis and prayer, we must name Jesus Christ again and claim him again for our own people, so that a living Christology will be handed on to the next generation into the twenty-first century.²⁵⁸

In She Who Is, first published in 1992, Johnson develops a living Wisdom Christology that names and claims Jesus in ways which speak to ecofeminist awareness.²⁵⁹ Her critique of classical theism and the patriarchal narrative of Christianity have been noted in chapter one of this dissertation. From this critical platform, She Who Is argues that “Jesus the Christ is the Wisdom of God in a concrete, historical gestalt.”²⁶⁰

Recovering the Wisdom tradition’s significance in the development of the doctrine of Incarnation impacts Trinitarian and pneumatological theologies, as well as Christology.

In Johnson’s view, “Christ is a pneumatological reality.”²⁶¹ Seeing Jesus as Sophia not only brings renewal within Christian theology and tradition, but also opens up liberating relationship between Christianity and “justice for the poor, respectful encounter with world religions, and ecological care for the earth.”²⁶² The implication, then, of

²⁵⁸Ibid., 146.


²⁶⁰Ibid., 167.


Johnson’s Wisdom Christology is radical. Johnson’s vision opens new horizons while arguing that these new vistas are at the heart of who God is, so that the new is truly a liberation and redemption of what has been constrained and harmed by patriarchal vision and structure. As Harold G. Wells has observed, “Significantly, Johnson’s search for a feminist Christology utilizes a biblical concept that was itself originally an instrument of contextualization.”\(^{263}\) Wells realizes that “Johnson, as a feminist theologian, is doing what the ancient wisdom authors did.”\(^{264}\)

Wisdom Christology’s undercurrent is divine presence and action in the world, both the human and the non-human. In *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, Johnson says “The Spirit creates matter. Matter bears the mark of the sacred and has itself a spiritual radiance. Hence the world is holy, nature is holy, bodies are holy, women’s bodies are holy.”\(^{265}\) In response to Roger Haight’s concerns, in his essay in *Things New and Old*, regarding whether her Christology is from above or from below, Johnson clarifies her approach by asserting that experience of salvation occurs first and metaphysical reflection follows. In her view, a descending Christology has legitimacy within this framework. She emphasizes that her use of the term Sophia does not to “refer to an ontologically distinct object, but to the mystery of the transcendent God immanently present in the world.”\(^{266}\) This Sophia-Christology leaves no door open for return to patriarchal soul/body dualisms or spirit/matter hierarchy. Significantly, Johnson’s


\(^{264}\)Ibid., 333.


recovery of Wisdom is not without critique for that tradition as well. She has pointed out that in addition to its positive resources, the biblical wisdom tradition also includes “[S]ome of the most offensive biblical statements about women.”

Johnson’s Wisdom Christology leads to integration, not dualistic separation or hierarchy. In addition, viewing the world as sacrament of Creator Spirit entails a truly radical conversion which leaves no aspect of theological reflection or of human experience untouched. This holistic impulse and its sweeping call for renewal speak directly to contemporary experience, as Johnson understands it, particularly because Christian tradition has evidenced “little sustained appreciation of the Spirit in an existential or intellectual way.”

Johnson’s Christology and pneumatology embrace a theological anthropology in which “the Spirit’s action does not supplant that of creatures but works cooperatively in and through created action, random, ordered, or free. Nor does the Spirit’s dynamic power arrive as an intervention from ‘outside,’ but is imminent in the world that is becoming.”

In 1994, Johnson published an essay entitled, “Between the Times: Religious Life and the Postmodern Experience of God.” Though written primarily with a vowed religious audience as context, the article explores a theme pertinent beyond that demographic and vital to this study of redemptive experience: “a change in the

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269 Ibid., 58.

experience of God.”\textsuperscript{271} This change is intimately linked, in Johnson’s view, to a “constructive postmodernism,” one which does not end in a mere nihilistic razing of modernity’s false hopes and illusions.\textsuperscript{272} Instead, Johnson sees a postmodern spirituality emerging, one which “honors the plurality and ambiguity of human consciousness, sensitive to the difference that difference makes according to one’s social location in gender, race, and class.”\textsuperscript{273} In general, this spirituality “prizes not isolation but essential connectedness; not body-mind dualism but the holistic, embodied person; not patriarchy but inclusive feminism; not militarism but expenditure for the enhancement of life; not tribal nationalism but global justice.”\textsuperscript{274} These converging orientations and values, Johnson speculates, may signal a genuinely new shift in human consciousness. How will such a consciousness communicate with traditional Christian symbols of God and redemption?

One very clear point is that the theism of modernity is no longer tenable to those in this new spiritual current. If the tradition insists upon upholding the modernity model, many will simply conclude “God” is not an option, as many of the widely read so-called “new atheists” are delighted to argue.\textsuperscript{275} That “God,” the god of modern theism, is already so irrelevant as to be dead to all but perhaps some fundamentalisms. Johnson

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\item Ibid., 7.
\item Ibid., 19.
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believes that in the death of that model lies an opportunity for new words and images to emerge through hope. “We know God through hope and, in the face of starkness, even hope against hope, nourished by remembrance and the circle of community.” In a potentially nihilistic time, Johnson sees the very experience of the absence of God and the death of the theistic God, as an opening to deeper encounter with Creator Spirit.

The dialectic between divine absence and presence, in the last analysis, is an experience of the Spirit of God: radically transcendent, like the wind blowing where it will; and at the same time radically immanent, dwelling at the heart of the world to vivify and renew all things.

In the longing of darkness, in the ache of the human heart, Johnson sees a new way of hope. Her orientation resonates well with a song refrain written by Leonard Cohen, “Ring the bells that still can ring/ Forget your perfect offering /There is a crack in everything/That's how the light gets in.” In Johnson’s theological vocabulary, “Divine absence itself becomes a mode of divine presence. The unknowing beckons to a deeper knowing.” This does not assume that all who experience darkness and shattering understand their experience to be one of the divine. But for those who resonate with the vocabulary of grace and God, the contemporary redemptive experience is not alien to the dark night. More commonly,

while there is no universal enactment of salvation, the sacred comes in the form of promise mediated through everyday, small fragments of healing, beauty, liberation, justice, and love. This does not remove the darkness, but it allows us to keep on walking.

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277 Ibid., 24.


280 Ibid., 22.
In order for the very notion of “God” and “redemption” to have currency in contemporary experience, these ordinary fragments must be celebrated and claimed as shards of divine love. Johnson’s vision courageously and boldly holds to hope while refusing to deny the reality of darkness and suffering. False hope clings to certainty, clutching assurances and claims which no longer inform, insisting that experience conform to authority or theory. But the cracks of experience which have shattered much of traditional theology can be interpreted not only as loss but also as hopeful windows, opportunities for light to enter in. As Johnson says, “It all depends on the character of God.”

Clouds of Witnesses and Holy Community

Johnson’s Wisdom Christology and theological orientation toward hope provide context for her recovery of the symbol of the communion of saints and its relevance to redemptive experience in *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints.* Her first chapter’s title, “A Sleeping Symbol,” reflects Johnson’s sense of the challenge and promise in her topic. The challenge is to confront the apparent irrelevance of the Christian symbol of the communion of saints “among dominant sectors of the population in the democratic, capitalist nations of western Europe, North America, Australia, and wherever Western secular culture has gained a

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281 Ibid.

foothold.” After exploring reasons for the symbol’s dormancy, Johnson then works to resurrect it for contemporary experience.

In a postmodern culture, the tradition of the saints seems alien, a relic of a bygone era which may have historical but no existential value. Johnson believes the chasm between tales of the lives of the saints and contemporary experience, the process of canonization, and the dogmatic statements about the structure of an afterlife are elements of the tradition which have become foreign to contemporary minds. Underneath these specifics, however, Johnson believes a deeper reason for the disconnect is that the contemporary experience of faith does not seem to speak the same language as the tradition of the saints and so the two have seemed to have nothing to say to each other.

In this culture, secular and fragmented but also dreaming of new forms of relationship, where people experience God’s presence in absence as absolute mystery while knowing death to be the real end of life as they know it, little spiritual energy is generated by the traditional question of the saints. Existentially, Christians in this culture cannot seem to connect with them; intellectually, such a connection seems irrelevant to the burning religious questions of the day.

In her second chapter, Johnson engages in feminist critique to ask, “Might women’s practices of memory rediscover the communion of saints as a source of strength in the struggle toward a world where justice reigns? And in return, might this symbol itself help to interpret spiritually the depth of what is occurring in women’s experience of

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283 Ibid., 15.

284 Johnson notes the continuing vital importance of saints and ancestors in many world communities (pp. 12-16). Her book and this study, however, focus on the Western secular cultural context dominant in North America.

285 Johnson, Friends of God and Prophets, 18.

286 Ibid., 20.
remembrance?” Feminist method leads her to analyze the patriarchal patterns in the tradition, which, beyond the problems addressed above, have made the symbol especially irrelevant to women in its “silence, distortion and subordination” of their lives and experience. Since three quarters of those honored as saints are male, the tradition has ignored the lives of holy women. In addition to this silence, even when women’s lives are taken up into the tradition, “they are distorted by the patriarchal point of view that controls interpretation” such that narratives which could be empowering to women become tools of “ecclesiastical control.” Finally, the overall pattern in the tradition of the saints “is so designed that relationships pivot on inequality while solidarity is undermined,” causing the symbol to cement a hierarchy of dominance and submission rather than nurture mutuality and communion.

For all these broad cultural and sexist reasons, the heritage of the saints either has become largely meaningless or has been rejected as a harmful tool of suppression and spiritual elitism. Johnson, however, finds a connection between historical feminist work that retrieves the memory and stories of women and the symbol of the communion of the saints. Turning to feminist theology as a guide for a “fundamental, ethical, and pluralist quest for understanding,” she re-examines this ancient symbol in conjunction with

287 Ibid., 26.
288 Ibid., 27.
289 Ibid.
290 Ibid., 28.
291 Ibid.
292 Ibid., 29.
293 Ibid., 35.
“Holy Wisdom who makes the world sacred and connects people to each other as a great sea of support.”

The wisdom tradition, with its orientation to this-world experience as the place of encounter with the living God, provides the hermeneutical key Johnson uses to unlock and open a symbol that has apparently been closed to contemporary life. She uses “friends and prophets” to name the communion of the saints symbol in order to integrate it with two equally necessary poles in faith. “Friends” evokes the manifestation pole of harmony, joy, and celebration of the sacred presence in the everyday, while “prophets” are those who speak to the experience of discord, suffering, and absence of the divine. In her words,

Though at opposite ends of the spectrum and embodying truly different types of spirituality the two classic expressions are intimately related: manifestation and proclamation; disclosing sacred presence and exposing illusory pretensions to totality; connecting to the holy and shattering idols; the analogical and dialectical imagination; grace and judgment, friend of God and prophet—neither alone is adequate to the totality of life in encounter with God or with the world.

The five chapters in Part Two of *Friends of God and Prophets* trace the history of the communion of saints as both doctrine and devotional practice. While the symbol is a Christian development, Johnson argues that it emerges from the thoroughly Jewish relational understanding of holiness. She argues it is not accurate to view Israel’s God as one whose holiness is found in being set apart, as Pantocrator upon a celestial throne. The biblical sense of God’s holiness is deeply relational, always manifest in loving care. She argues that “compassionate and challenging engagement is the very form in which

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294 Ibid., 26-27.

295 Ibid., 45.
divine transcendent holiness makes itself known.” God’s holiness (*kadosh*) as “set apart” is not a philosophical term referring to a morally or spiritually pure state of independence or isolation. In the biblical context, God’s “set apartness” is to be transcendentally other, mysterious, uncontainable, not subject to manipulation or human control. At the same time, this is also the glory of God which “pervades and leaps out from things.”

Biblically, God’s glory is manifest in the beauty of the created world and in God’s acts of compassionate care for people; thus, God’s glory is a source of hope. Johnson argues that God’s holiness and glory are relational categories marking God’s liberating and redeeming presence in the world and among people. “When connected with the biblical narrative, the incomprehensible holy mystery of God indwells the natural and human world as source, sustaining power, and goal of the universe, enlivening and loving it into liberating communion.” This relational sense of holiness is necessary to understanding the biblical sense of Israel as a holy people.

Although a patriarchal milieu constructed holiness in terms of hierarchy, separation and degrees of purity, Johnson draws upon Judith Plaskow’s interpretations to conceive of God’s holiness and that of the chosen people in a “part-whole” model. The exclusivity which arose historically in connection with these themes need not be regarded as inherent in the concept of holiness itself, nor in that of a holy, chosen people.

In Johnson’s reading, “The call to be holy as God is holy implies a share in this world-

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296 Ibid., 51.
297 Ibid., 52.
298 Ibid., 55.
299 Ibid., 58.
embracing love.” Furthermore, Johnson finds convergence among the biblical themes of God’s glory, holiness, spirit, Wisdom and divine presence in the world, a convergence that leads to a consideration of Wisdom Christology and Christian community.

Having established its biblical origins and foundation, Johnson turns to the development of a Christian identity of holiness that drew upon its Hebrew heritage. New Testament texts, especially the letters of Paul, refer to members of the Christian community as saints. In this usage, the term “conveys an equality of persons in value and religious status without discrimination.” The term names the identity of members as community following in Jesus’ faith. While particular to the Christian community, it refers to all within that group. Saintliness is life in the Spirit, a divine gift given to all, not a privilege granted to a few extraordinary individuals or the achievement of ethically outstanding figures. Johnson argues that in the New Testament texts, “saints” is a truly corporate concept referring not to a collection of individuals but to a cohesive God-centered group.

The glue of the community and the source of the holiness, in the perspective of the first Christians, was the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of Jesus as the Risen Christ. The corporate nature of this identity was believed to be so enduring that it could not be shattered by death. Johnson explains, “In their experience, the power of the Spirit shaping them into a community of the friends of God in Christ was so strong that death could not break the relationship.” Thus, “the saints” in the Christian scriptures

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300 Ibid.
301 Ibid., 61.
302 Ibid.
303 Ibid., 64.
includes the faithful who have died as well as living communities. As used in the New Testament, the term spans both space and time in its sense of community held by Spirit. Once again, Johnson emphasizes its relational nature, for belief that community extends beyond death “is not held because of logical deduction but as an act of hope in the fidelity of God.” The faithful are those bound together by the Spirit, a tie not severed by geography or years.

Memory of the great cloud of witnesses, as the letter to the Hebrews exhorts readers, inspires the living to “find courage and heart for the journey.” These memories are fuel for holy living, energizing precisely as a great cloud, not for being remarkable narratives of a few exceptional people. It is interesting to note that the image of a cloud is at once expansive and diffuse, evoking enormousness not as a quantitative sum of many individuals but as a whole not reducible to the sum of its parts. The patriarchal skewing of memory which privileges great men (as in the Hebrews text) is readily identifiable. A feminist reconstruction of this metaphor is needed to include those whose narratives have been lost in records of his-story.

Johnson does not deny the many ways in which holiness and sainthood became conceptual tools of domination and exclusion, yet returning to the Hebrew covenant relationship as the ground upon which Christian understanding of the holiness of the saints is built enables the symbol to be genuinely communal rather than inherently patriarchal. Holiness is also a gift of grace, not an achievement. Finally, holiness is also a call to a way of living in harmony with God’s creating, sustaining and redeeming

\[304\] Ibid., 65.

\[305\] Ibid., 66.
relationship with the world. It is, then, in Johnson’s words, “a category of beauty, of rescue, and of hope” which calls for “compassionate, liberating engagement with the world.”

Martyrs and Saints, Friends and Patrons

After establishing her interpretation of holiness and the term “saint,” Johnson turns to a history of the tradition of the saints in Western Christianity, beginning with the early martyrs. She agrees with Maureen Tilley’s argument that asceticism preceded martyrdom and not vice versa; in fact, the rigorous disciplines already part of the ascetic experience enabled the martyrs to die brutal deaths with extraordinary grace. As communities remembered and honored them in devotional life, two responses to the martyrs emerge within the Christian tradition. Johnson names the earliest response a “companionship of friends.” This response emerged from an understanding of the communion of the saints as Johnson has interpreted the New Testament texts. She also cites Augustine’s reference to the martyrs as “lessons of encouragement” as she explains this model. This way of reverencing the saints holds the memory of their lives and deaths as inspiring, empowering models for the faith community. Despite patriarchal assumptions about male strength and female weakness that are present here, Johnson finds deep mutuality in this pattern, in which “the saints are not situated between God and living disciples, but are with their sisters and brothers through the one Spirit poured out in

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306 Ibid., 70.
307 Ibid., 79.
308 Ibid., 82.
the crucified and risen Jesus Christ.” As the living keep the memory of the dead alive, those who gave their lives give courage and hope for the task of faithful living.

This companionship model, however, soon lost ground. By the late fifth century, a patronage model dominated, in which the saints became “intercessors in a structure of power and neediness.” This response to the martyrs, patterned according to relationships within empire, depends upon the experience of a chasm between the divine and the weak, sinful, and powerless ordinary. The sacred and the holy are no longer within and among the community, no longer a unifying bond reaching across time and space. Instead, the divine rises so high above those on the ground as to be unreachable except through extraordinary channels: the heroic saints. Saints become lobbyists, powerful because of having access to the remote Imperial ear. Hierarchy becomes entrenched even in the invisible realm of the saints themselves, whose relative influences are charted. Since she was not a martyr, Mary had no prominence in the companionship model of the saints, but in the patronage pattern, Mary becomes the Queen of Heaven.

Johnson argues that, though quickly eclipsed, the earlier heritage of the friend-model did survive and she traces this actual or potential sensibility as she surveys church history, recovering aspects of the tradition useful to a feminist re-reading of the communion of the saints. Key institutionalizations of the communion of the saints include the addition of the phrase “communio sanctorum” to the Apostles’ Creed in the early fifth century, the addition of the feast of All Saints to the liturgical calendar, and the

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309 Ibid., 81 [Johnson’s emphasis].
310 Ibid., 86.
process of canonization. Johnson rereads each of these developments from a perspective of mutuality.

Although the phrase “communio sanctorum” likely emerged from an Eastern emphasis upon the sacred elements of the Eucharist rather than from a sense of personal community, Johnson argues that the murky history of the phrase provides an opportunity. A contemporary reading of this phrase in the creed, she says, “allows us to see that holy people and holy things are inextricably linked in the one Spirit of God.”

Johnson’s reading of the phrase extends far beyond the limits of those who attend liturgical services, including persons of any or no particular faith who seek to “live according to the light of their conscience.” In her view, Vatican II supports such an ecumenical sense of the global presence and work of the Holy Spirit wherever people are serving the truth and each other. Additionally, Johnson extends the phrase ecologically, arguing that “The universe itself is the primordial sacrament through which life and all potential for the holy is communicated.” Since the human and the natural world are not separable, the community of the sacred is not an inherently anthropocentric symbol, but a fluid relational web held together by the movement of the Spirit.

The origin of the Feast of All Saints is even less clear than the addition to the creed. Not until the ninth century was it clearly established on November 1 for the Western church. For hundreds of years, the Eastern and Western churches had a

\[311\] Ibid., 95.
\[312\] Ibid., 96.
\[313\] Ibid.
\[314\] Ibid., 97.
\[315\] Ibid., 99.
designated feast which honored all the martyrs, but this celebration was not clearly planted on the calendar. In the late fourth century, the Syriac church held this feast on Good Friday but in other places it was held after Pentecost.\textsuperscript{316} The November date is clearly connected to the Druid \textit{Samhain} celebration. A further complication is the addition of the All Souls feast of November 2, introduced in the late ninth century as a way of remembering those understood to be in purgatory.\textsuperscript{317} The Western church has a different legacy in this regard than the Eastern church. Despite this problematic history, Johnson believes the feast is recoverable and suggests concrete ways of keeping this day alive in the concluding chapter of her book. For now, it is enough to note the experiential struggle evident in the history of the day’s placement on the liturgical calendar.

The final institutionalizing of the symbol took place in the process of canonization itself. For the first one thousand years of Christian history, “sainthood” and reverence of exemplary lives was an unregulated emergence, dependent upon the relative energy of response to a person’s life. Not until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries did designation of sainthood become a papal decision at the end of a “bureaucratic process.”\textsuperscript{318} Johnson’s two primary critiques of this history are that it diminished the term saint and “resulted in a certain uniformity among the canonized saints reflective of the face of that bureaucracy itself.”\textsuperscript{319} Ordinary people were not part of the communion of the holy, but only those so identified by the institutional powers, which alone defined and deemed who would be designated holy. As a result, canonization became a system of spiritual

\textsuperscript{316}Ibid., 98.
\textsuperscript{317}Ibid., 99.
\textsuperscript{318}Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{319}Ibid., 102.
regulation, of control and conformity, rather than a celebration of the astonishing
diversity of lives radiating grace.

Johnson identifies the two primary movements to reform the entrenched
patronage model as critique within the Protestant Reformation and Vatican II, both of
which sought to recover “the companionship model in theology and practice.” The
Reformers, opposing any mediators other than Jesus between God and believers, rejected
prayer to the saints but understood the church to be the *communio sanctorum*.

After surveying major Protestant developments with regard to the doctrine of the
saints, Johnson focuses on the teaching and implications of Vatican II’s *Lumen Gentium*
for this symbol. Grounded in an *imago dei* anthropology, *Lumen Gentium* affirms that in
the saints, God communicates through persons who lives are “‘especially successful
images of Christ.’” The saints are thus contextualized in a universal call to holiness;
their importance is their gift of example and hope precisely because what has manifested
in their lives can become true in any life lived in the Spirit. This is not only an
ecclesiological vision for the Christian churches, but a cosmic one since no aspect of the
world is excluded from God’s love. Johnson concludes that this deeply theocentric
symbol is not limited to Christian expression, for God’s love and the sustaining,
redeeming activity of the Spirit span the universe. “The communion of saints therefore
functions as a symbol of redemptive communion in the sacred that is as broad and deep
as history itself.”

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320 Ibid., 107.
321 Ibid., 109.
322 Ibid., 119 [Johnson quotes *Lumen Gentium* no. 50 here].
323 Ibid., 122.
Before turning to a more explicitly feminist retrieval of this symbol, Johnson considers what venerating the saints means and whether or not it is incumbent upon Christian, especially Roman Catholic, piety. As her historical work has demonstrated, the symbol is not without dangers for it has functioned in a patriarchal context in many destructive ways. It has contributed to the sense of a great gulf between the human and the divine which can only be bridged by the spiritual elite, preventing people, and women especially, from discovering their own “sacred power.” It has also competed with focus upon Jesus as savior. For a contemporary context, however, perhaps the most problematic aspect of this symbol is the way it has functioned to promote dogmatic representations of life after death, which is alienating to those for whom such assumptions seem arrogant or naïve.

Not deterred by these obstacles, Johnson argues that the communion of the saints need not function in these harmful ways if it is reclaimed as a symbol of deep solidarity. When approached as a symbol of companionship not destroyed by death, it can function to deepen and strengthen community bonds. While a literal plea for prayer may conjure images of singular petitions before an all powerful monarch-God, asking for the prayers of those bonded together by the Spirit at a symbolic level reflects one’s conviction, hope, and remembering of the web of sustaining connection. The act of prayer is a concrete affirmation that one exists within a community of grace. Though Johnson does not explicitly explore a theology of prayer, her understanding of what venerating the saints

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324 Ibid., 131.

325 This is the primary Reformer and Protestant critique which begs the soteriological question this dissertation explores. It is simply noted without comment here since questions about what salvation is and how it is accomplished will be addressed in the next chapter.
means is dependent upon this understanding of prayer, and she recognizes that “apart from this the practice becomes deeply problematic.”

In her study of Roman Catholic Church teaching in its canon laws, papal teachings and theology, Johnson concludes that the church’s requirement for members is at the level of honoring saints in the public liturgy, not necessarily in private devotion. While this practice is recommended, church teaching does not require veneration of the saints for membership or salvation, but leaves the matter to individual conscience.

Concluding this review of Johnson’s historical study, the most essential finding to stress is her uncovering of the early companionship model, the context in which the symbol first emerged. Though quickly submerged in the strong current of hierarchical patronage, the symbol is not inherently patriarchal itself, for it points to “a continuous river of holy lives; a company of the friends of God and prophets today, in the past, and in the future.” Johnson’s next move is to bring the symbol up for air, breathing an ecofeminist new life into it.

Retrieving the Communion of the Saints

Johnson’s feminist reading of the communion of the saints begins with “Women’s Practices of Memory,” the title of her eighth chapter. After reflecting upon particular women’s lives, she turns in subsequent chapters to theological reflection upon the themes of memory, narrative, solidarity, death, and hope, concluding with specific examples and examples and

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326 Ibid., 135.
327 Ibid., 130.
328 Ibid., 138.
suggestions for practices of gratitude and lament for rousing the dormant symbol to
nourish faith once again.

Two women and two groups of women exemplify Johnson’s work on memory. The themes she pulls from these particulars are bringing to light forgotten women, such as Hagar, correcting distorted narratives, as in the case of Mary Magdalene, reassessing value by examining patriarchal assumptions in the memories of virgin martyrs and honoring the unknown by reflecting upon those lives whose particulars merge into a collective “anonymous.” These tasks are needed to make the communion of the saints a symbol able to fully include women, past, present, and future.

Though Hagar’s poignant story in the Hebrew scriptures has been marginalized in Christian tradition, Hagar speaks powerfully to women of many different identities. Johnson quotes Kwok Pui-Lan’s summary of Hagar’s appeal:

It seems that African-Americans focus on Hagar as a slave woman, the Latin Americans stress that she was poor, the Africans underscore the fate of Hagar in polygamy, and Asians emphasize the loss of cultural identity. Each group observes a certain analogy between the oppression of Hagar and their own situation.329

Though the particular feature of Hagar’s story that captures the heart of women varies, a theme resonating across different keys is the dehumanizing treatment of a woman who has been used and tossed aside in a patriarchal relationship. Treatment of a person as an object may take many forms. Her story speaks to any permutation of such dehumanizing interaction, both structural and interpersonal.

329Ibid., 144-45 [Johnson quoting Pui-Lan].
Hagar’s story provides “no neat religious solution.” Sarah and Abraham’s behavior appears to be justified by the text, yet God also provides Hagar and Ishmael with the water they need to survive. Perhaps the ambivalence and tension is part of the paradox in which the story of Hagar, “the consummate outsider,” is retained in the insider text. Though it has not been heard this way, historically, it speaks prophetically to the arrogance of a faith that would deface the image of God in persons (abandoning them to suffering and death) even as it claims to know precisely how to control fulfillment of divine promise (by enforced pregnancy). In this sense, Hagar and Ishmael were abandoned in a man-made desert. To those struggling to survive in their own wilderness, Hagar’s story brings hope of living water and divine presence even in the context of hostile, death-dealing treatment. The presence of Hagar’s memory as part of a communion of saints “demands that the corporate memory of the *ekklesia* make room for the female, the foreigner, the one in servitude, the religious stranger—and the person who is all four—as a vital player in the history of humanity with God.”

While Hagar has been ignored and discounted in Christian tradition, Mary Magdalene has been defamed. Hers is a stunning example of what results when theology and religious symbols are crafted almost exclusively by men in a patriarchal framework. Then the power of the male gaze, which shapes women into beings that satisfy the needs of the male psyche rather than seeing women whole in their own integrity, has full sway.

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330Ibid., 145.
331Ibid., 145.
332Ibid., 145-46.
333Ibid., 149.
Contemporary scholarship has clearly demonstrated not only the inaccuracy of the tradition of Mary as (lovely) reformed prostitute but also the complete lack of any reason other than sexism for such an outrageous fabrication. Feminist practices of memory can set such wrongs right by working to restore the stories of women patriarchal tradition has libeled.

Johnson turns next to the memory of the virgin martyrs in order to critique what has been valued about them. While male martyrs have been honored for their courage in facing death for their faith, these young women have been praised for suffering as a result of protecting their virginity: “the not so subtle message conveyed by this cache of stories is that women who exercise or enjoy their sexuality, or who do not suffer enough, belong on a plane of lesser holiness for precisely these reasons.”334 At issue with these stories is the Christian tradition’s definition and models of virtue for women. A feminist look at these stories reveals a difficult tension, for, on one hand, their fiercely independent and courageous resolve to live in their own way, even if that meant a cruel death, is a model of strength and autonomy. On the other hand, “why should death be the only option for women seeking self-definition? Holding this up as the ideal in all situations implicitly glorifies the torture and the murder while undermining women’s motivation to resist male predation.”335

Those who have died unjust and cruel deaths must be honored without in the process glorifying innocent suffering, especially for women. Since passivity has been promoted by the Christian tradition as a virtuous trait for women, the need for stories of

334Ibid., 151.
335Ibid., 155.
survivors, such as Hagar, is especially important. As Johnson says, “Living for the faith is as crucial a witness as dying for the faith. Resisting death is as much a way of holiness as is sacrificing one’s life.”\textsuperscript{336}

Johnson’s final category in women’s practices of memory is the heritage and gift of all the ordinary women through the ages who remain unnamed but whose lives nevertheless helped to shape the world. The memory of all those who have suffered unjustly and died by cruel hands can inspire the continuing work for a more just world. Those who served the good and contributed to the well-being of others can be thanked as an aggregate, even though personal stories remain unknown; what is known is that women through the ages have been strong and resourceful, loving and brave, wise and kind, even when they have taken their tales to the grave. Their goodness has gifted the lives of others whom they touched, and has not been wasted, even when not explicitly recounted.

It is right to honor all those who survived, as Hagar did, and those whose names have been sullied, as Mary Magdalene’s has been. It is also right to honor those whose courageous deaths have been covered over, all those whose lives have drifted away into anonymity or have been violently silenced. For every known story, how many others will never be told? “Remembering them gives rise to a surge of awareness, grief, gratitude, and hope.”\textsuperscript{337} This kind of remembering is not invention, nostalgia or wishful thinking. It arises out of knowledge and conviction. Though countless lives can no longer be seen,

\textsuperscript{336}Ibid., 156.

\textsuperscript{337}Ibid., 159.
they have been and continue to be an integral, precious part of the great cloud of witnesses.

Digging deeper into the function of memory as spiritual practice, Johnson’s next chapter explores the connection between memory, narrative, and solidarity. While Anselm of Canterbury’s well-known definition of theology as “faith seeking understanding” is helpful for highlighting the on-going seeking and questioning which fuels theological reflection, a merely cognitive faith is not authentic to the Judeo-Christian tradition, in which treatment of others is inseparable from relationship to God. Building upon the work of liberation and political theologies, Johnson braids memory, narrative, and solidarity together into a dynamic force, each strand distinctly necessary. This force is the heart of her belief that the communion of the saints can be retrieved as a life-giving symbol for women and all who have been marginalized.

Drawing particularly on J. B. Metz’s work, Johnson discusses the importance and function of subversive memory. Oppressive forces seek to erase a sense of heritage and identity in those they wish to control. Subversive memories are “dangerous” to those powers because they function to preserve or recover personal and communal identity.338 This type of memory “interrupts the omnipotence of the present moment with the dream, however fleeting, that something else might indeed be possible.”339 Subversive memory challenges complacency in times of ease and inspires resistance or reform in times of difficulty; remembering a different past energizes vision and inspires work for a different future. For women, the communion of female saints can become such a subversive

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338 Ibid., 165.
339 Ibid.
memory. “Existentially it subverts the incultrated tendency to self-effacement in women” as it enables them to “recognize and own the wonder of their own selves.”\textsuperscript{340}

For visions shaped by patriarchy, it is a challenge toward inclusivity.

Narrative is intricately linked to memory, for memory shapes itself in story form. People live inside the stories they tell and their stories shape the meaning of their lives at both personal and community levels. Constructing a life-narrative is especially important work for women since North American cultural story lines continue to sketch patriarchal plots. Conscious focus upon telling one’s story can help women intentionally create their own lives rather than simply drift into a subplot of another’s life story.\textsuperscript{341}

Within narrative, people tell what redemption is for them. Narrative also provides a means for people to express and structure a response to suffering. Johnson says,

Rational argument breaks down in face of the surd of excessive human suffering, whereas story enables the touch of grace present in such experience to be thematized. This is not done in such a way, however, as to bring intelligibility to the suffering or to deliver a premature sense of how it will all work out.\textsuperscript{342}

Stories are interpretations which structure and give meaning to experience. They function redemptively as they bring life and hope to deep places of pain and despair. This interpretive process is creative, redeeming work, offering a vision leading toward wholeness and new life. It does not deny or minimize the reality of suffering or answer

\textsuperscript{340} Ibid., 169.

\textsuperscript{341} Nancy Mairs, \textit{Voice Lessons: On Becoming a (Woman) Writer} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), is a particularly notable exploration of the integral connection between writing as a means of telling one’s story and writing as a means of creating or becoming one’s self, as a woman. Mairs discusses the particular struggles for women to tell their stories, not necessarily only in verbal forms, in life plots and language which continue to be dominantly male.

\textsuperscript{342} Ibid., 173.
unanswerable questions. Story enables people to be more than their suffering, to look at pain rather than be entirely contained within or defined by it.

Horrific stories which offer no silver lining bear witness to the outrage of things which should not be. These stories are testament to presence with suffering by the teller’s refusal to be silent and the listener’s refusal to turn away from what cannot be borne; stories are also prophetic calls to resistance, perhaps beginning in the very acts of telling and listening. As Johnson says, “The critical narrative of the cloud of witnesses functions . . . as a verbal sacrament of the vivifying, redeeming work of the Spirit.”

Turning to the third strand of the braid, Johnson defines solidarity as “a type of communion in which deep connection with others is forged in such a way that their sufferings and joys become part of one’s own personal concern and a spur to transformative action.” The ties may be between those who suffer and work to resist their own oppression or between the victimized and those who choose to unite with them. Solidarity is the creation of community and the enactment of redemptive care. As praxis, commitment to fullness of life for all cannot be reduced to well wishing apart from active engagement in the process of constructive change.

It is easy for those in positions of power to remain blind to ways in which they are structurally complicit in the oppression and difficulties of others. Johnson particularly notes M. Shawn Copeland’s criticism of educated, white, middle class feminists who would engage the rhetoric of solidarity without making real change on the ground.

343Ibid., 175.

344Ibid.

345Ibid., 178.
Without genuinely honoring and respecting real differences, solidarity cannot be achieved. Without the discipline of humble listening to those unlike ourselves, we will inevitably project our experience onto others and perpetuate alienation rather than help to create community. Listening, therefore, can become an avenue toward deeper awareness of self and others, making deeper solidarity possible. Johnson extends her understanding of solidarity to include those most different from all the living, perhaps, the dead. In her argument, listening to those lives, letting their stories speak, empowers the living to build a practice of solidarity in continuing redemptive connection. Redemptive community is not static but an ongoing relational process. The renewed doctrinal symbol of the communion of saints can be experienced as “a discipline or way of remembering and connecting that brings life.”

After examining the unified force of memory, narrative, and solidarity in the life of faith, Johnson turns to themes of death and hope in her next two chapters. In “The Darkness of Death” she emphasizes that just as language about God must always be understood to be analogous and evocative, not literal, so too must be any discussion of this topic. Traditional Christian visions of life after death do not make sense to a contemporary feminist theological anthropology which understands the human to be embodied spirit. As Johnson puts it, “Spirit and matter are not two essentially different substances but two forms of the same phenomenon, even though once spirit emerges it is not simply reducible to the workings of matter. Spirit evolves from matter and the two

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346Ibid., 180.
are profoundly interdependent.”\textsuperscript{347} The picture of a ghostly soul rising up out of a corpse, floating through the ceiling up to heaven is no longer imaginatively possible.

In addition to the intellectual changes which make such conceptions untenable, Johnson also surveys the profound ethical critique of ways in which escapist focus upon an afterlife has devalued work for justice, the body, women, and the earth itself.\textsuperscript{348} An ecofeminist lens sees all of these as deeply interrelated, growing from the root of patriarchal dualism which separates and elevates mind/spirit over body. How, then, can a Christian eschatology be sustained in a contemporary ecofeminist intellectual and ethical context?

Johnson surveys contemporary theological reflection upon themes of purgatory, heaven, and hell before also summarizing the “after death” scenarios of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Karl Rahner, and Bartholomew Collopy. Her consistent emphasis is on variety among theologians and the speculative nature of this undertaking. Although she explains ways in which traditional eschatological symbols have been interpreted for a contemporary context, Johnson’s concluding statement is, “In the end, everything depends upon the character of God.”\textsuperscript{349}

Powerful and mysterious experiences of connection with the dead may occur, yet they are incommensurable, inseparable from one-of-a-kind relationships developed in life and the unique quality of each loss and grief.\textsuperscript{350} Rather than systematize such phenomena

\textsuperscript{347}Ibid, 184.

\textsuperscript{348}Ibid, 186.

\textsuperscript{349}Ibid, 201.

\textsuperscript{350}Rita Nakashima Brock recounts such an experience of her mother’s presence, after her mother’s death, in \textit{Journeys by Heart}, 101.
into a theory of post-death consciousness, into which such personal narrations would then be pressed to “fit.” Johnson’s approach is deeply respectful not only of postmodern, apophatic spirituality, but also of the mystery of death. There is openness in her refusal to dogmatism, which creates a holy space for grief, loss, and whatever experience emerges in that sad, loving space.

Some have criticized Johnson for not being more forceful in presenting some sort of theory of individual consciousness after death. Responding to this criticism, Johnson says, “In truth, death really cuts us off from all recognizable interchange” with the deceased. Her argument is that, ultimately, hope for existence of any kind after death can only be grounded in God. Rather than create speculative frameworks regarding post-death experience, Johnson chooses to examine the theme of hope, reflecting deeply upon what is available within human experience.

Johnson’s faith for a personal dimension in some kind of afterlife in God is clear, but intentionally stops short of speculative theorizing. As with redemption itself, the reasoning is grounded in the experience of grace. Christians claim redemption occurs because transformation is experienced in history. All soteriology is based upon this. As Edward Farley has argued, “God redemptively comes forth as God insofar as redemption does in fact occur.” Johnson’s argument regarding personal existence for the dead has a similar structure. This hope is based upon experience of graced transformation in this

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353 Edward Farley, Divine Empathy, 63-64.
life, and the hope that this trajectory will continue. It is not first a metaphysical argument, but begins in what is available within finite experience, which indicates the hope that God will continue to value life beyond death. The metaphysical claim arises upon secondary reflection.

In its most general sense, Johnson describes hope as “a firm expectation of something good to come, closely linked with the experience of yearning and desire for it.” As a religious category of experience and reflection, “language about the future is meaningful as an extension of a community’s experience of grace in the present.” This is the hermeneutical eye, trained in a Rahnerian perspective, with which Johnson reads biblical eschatological images. Rather than seeing such images as self-deceptive projections of unfulfilled desires, Johnson argues that hope is firmly rooted in concrete experience. Christian hope is that divine love, known in the present through faith, will continue into the future, even into and after death.

Additionally, it is important to distinguish hope as a disciplined practice, a cultivated orientation of trust, from arbitrary optimism or a particular desire for a specific good. Hope is not dependent upon a personality trait, however desirable and helpful such a trait might be, which enables one to screen out the worst aspects of a circumstance or invent positive interpretations, however convoluted. When hope as an act of faith is distinguished from personal or cultural temperament, then hope can be experienced and discussed even in the darkness of bleak circumstance. Hope in God is trust that God will continue to be in relationship beyond even the worst imaginable particular. This does not

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355 Ibid., 205.
diminish the reality of bad luck, tragedy, and human atrocity, but it does affirm that even the horror of extreme suffering will not have the last word. Rooted in experience, it reaches into metaphysics.

As Johnson makes clear, religious hope in the face of death depends upon a theology of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, as “not one power among others but the all-embracing matrix that makes all else possible.” Resurrection is the essential symbol of this hope, and it, too, is rooted not in evidentiary certainty, but in relational trust and experience. It is important to stress that “resurrection and rising up are themselves metaphorical terms.” The biblical accounts of the resurrection appearances point to personal encounter between Jesus’ grieving friends and the one they knew, now transformed in a profound and mysterious way. “The crucified one does not die into nothingness; he dies into the absolute mystery of the glory of God.”

A pulsing refrain in Johnson’s thought is the principle that truly becoming one’s self is precisely, at the same time, growing more deeply into relationship with God. Johnson quotes Rahner’s succinct statement: “Nearness to God and genuine human autonomy grow in direct and not inverse proportion.” If, then, the redemptive claim that transformation into ever deepening well being is God’s desire for all, and if this process is begun and tasted within present experience, then eschatological hope is that, whatever form it may take, this process is not cancelled or abandoned in death, but somehow continued and completed because God desires it to be so.

356 Ibid., 206.
357 Ibid., 209.
358 Ibid.
359 Ibid., 213.
Such hope in no way defies scientific understanding of body-selves which disintegrate in death. Present experience indicates a spiritual dimension to embodied life which is “not reducible to the marvelous interplay of biological and chemical forces that regulate its embodiment.”\(^{360}\) Put another way, the question is, “Does God want everyone to merge back into the whole?”\(^{361}\) While some answer yes, Johnson argues that the Judeo-Christian tradition, and most particularly the Christian claim of Jesus’ resurrection, are sources of hope that God’s love entails more than recycling at the end of life. For Johnson, our lives are not sandcastles, erased as though they had never been when the tide turns. The grace which enables change, healing, and growth can be trusted to wish for more than dissolution of those it has loved into life.

At the same time, hope for personal continuity after death, rooted in the character of God, must not be twisted into a fantasy of individualistic escape from this world. This traditional scenario, so rightly recognized as a source of indifference to present human and ecological harm, is inconsistent with the character of God upon which eschatological trust is based. Personal eschatological hope, as sketched above, must not become individualistic or earth-degrading orientations. Personal hope is relational, for persons do not exist apart from the relationships that constitute them, including their physicality as earth creatures. The hope Johnson describes is for the entire universe, including but not limited to the human race.

\(^{360}\) Ibid., 212.

\(^{361}\) Ibid., 213.
Eschatological hope, brought forth by interpretation of present experience, remains “totally agnostic as to the how of personal continuity in and through death.”362 Retaining agnostic unknowing yet affirming a something, Johnson celebrates the image of the communion of saints as a symbol which accommodates both. In her assessment, this symbol provides an energizing, not enervating hope, which feeds both critique and creativity. In her view, hope for a future after death grounds a sense of dignity, enabling people to recognize and oppose oppressive or demeaning treatment that would deny their value. It also establishes the value of the present, ecologically and socially, and frees imaginative energy to work for the well being which is mostly deeply meant to be, despite the pain of the present.

Despite the validity of Marxist opiate critique and some feminist assessments that hope for a future after death is a patriarchal construct which must be demolished, eschatological hope need not be abandoned as inevitably diminishing the value of the present. The energizing, life-giving quality of hope is well expressed in a song entitled “Dream Like Mine,” which captures the intensity and passion for the present which can be conferred by hope for a future:

When you've got a dream like mine
Nobody can take you down.
When you've got a dream like mine
Nobody can push you around. . .

When you know, even for a moment
That it’s your time,
Then you can walk with the power
Of a thousand generations.363

362Ibid., 214.

For Johnson, “the communion of saints forms part of the vocabulary of this hope,” born out of trust in the character of God, to whom all life and the natural world is precious. It is a symbol that, to use Bruce Cockburn’s metaphor, can enable the living to walk with the power of a thousand generations into their dreamed future.

Critical response to Johnson’s work on hope has been appreciative while also recognizing that more needs to be done. Michael Downey praises Johnson’s insights on hope and a theology of life after death as the strongest aspects of *Friends of God.* In her assessment of Johnson’s theological contributions, Margaret Farley stresses the need for hope which provides a sense of future and possibility. In her view, Johnson’s hope seems somewhat lacking and Farley presses for more. She argues that a more developed feminist theology of hope is needed, one which would serve to develop moral insight and propel just action.

Inclusivity: Beyond Christianity & Anthropocentrism

So far, this chapter has explored Johnson’s feminist reconstruction of the communion of the saints in which she researches the doctrine’s historical emergence and function within Christian tradition, critiques patriarchal deformations, and refashions it into a contemporary, life giving symbol, particularly for women. Her retrieval has five components, which will be recapped in order to conclude this section. I wish now to stress an aspect of her first element perhaps more than Johnson herself does, and to

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emphasize its connection to the fifth element, which has not yet been given sufficient attention in this presentation.

Clearly summarizing her reconstruction of the symbol in five dimensions, Johnson lists these as

The community of the living, ordinary persons as ‘all saints,’ in particular as this designation is used to characterize members of the Christian community and their relationship to the triune God; their working out of holiness through creative fidelity in ordinary time; their relation to the circle of companions who have run the race before, who are now embraced in the life of God and accessed through memory and hope; the paradigmatic figures among them; and the relation of this community, living and dead, to the whole community of the natural world.  

In particular, I wish to stress the religiously inclusive nature of Johnson’s understanding of “all saints.” She clearly states that this designates “all living persons of truth and love,” and “all persons of good will” because “the communion of saints does not limit divine blessing to its own circle.” On this point, she reminds readers of the figure of Wisdom in Proverbs who calls to all who will listen and follow the way of life rather than of destruction and death.

The particularly Christian element of this symbol must be held within the global context of creation theology that explores God’s relation to, presence with, and love for all that is. Johnson writes: “Recovering a sense of the holiness of the ordinary person is a first step in unleashing the symbol to its full, comprehensive scope.”

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367 Ibid., 219.
368 Ibid., 220.
369 Ibid.
cannot be over-emphasized, for without it, the symbol could function as an image of a privileged elite and a metaphor of exclusion rather than inclusivity.

Again, Johnson says, “The friends of God and prophets are found in every nation and tongue, culture and religion, and even among religion’s cultured despisers.”\textsuperscript{370} Though she writes so eloquently of the inclusivity of the symbol, this point is not as developed as her understanding of how it speaks to diversity within the Christian community, especially across lay and clerical life paths. It is crucial to stress that this symbol within the vocabulary of Christian faith can and must be understood to be open-ended in its embrace. It is a beginning to affirm that this symbol can include even ‘religion’s cultured despisers,’ but this perspective often remains a theory accepted (in some theological circles) intellectually only. The symbol of salvation more often functions in public as an elitist one. As a result, the truly ecumenical nature of Johnson’s retrieval of the symbol of the saints cries out for more.

For example, even in a very positive response to \textit{Friends of God}, a reviewer’s essay says that Johnson “combs through the many layers of meaning of the communion of saints so that the symbol can stand forth as a source of strength and hope in the struggle for equal human dignity, nurturing the whole church in being and becoming a community of the friends of God.”\textsuperscript{371} This statement seems to reduce the symbol to an intra-church event, ignoring the great strength of this Christian symbol to nurture far beyond the walls of the church. The communion of the saints, as reconstructed by Johnson, provides a Christian framework for deeply respectful relationship not only with

\textsuperscript{370}Ibid.

members of world religious traditions, but also with atheists. In fact, this is one of the strongest gifts this symbol offers.

Christians speaking among themselves need to hear ways in which their theological talk often ignores the spiritual vitality of non-Christian persons and communities. As Johnson says in *Quest for the Living God*, “It is not the case that divine nearness is checkered, close to some, far from others. Rather, with loving generosity holy mystery graciously offers the gift of divine life to everyone, everywhere, and at all times.”372 In response to *Friends of God*, Robert Kreig asks “what is the relationship between the church and the non-Christian saints?”373 Perhaps an important first step in addressing this question is the need for theologians to become more interested in developing this relationship, beginning by undertaking theological reflection in intentional awareness, as a disciplined practice, of the presence of non-Christian saints.

Anne M. Clifford, using a phrase from a poem by Adrienne Rich, describes a need for a “severer listening” to the religious other, especially in day to day contexts.374 Clifford argues that “what is required in this needful time is not theology about or even for dialogue with people who practice religions other than Christianity, but a theology of dialogue that emerges in and from interfaith neighbor-to-neighbor conversation.”375 A first step is becoming more open and aware, in intentionally disciplined ways, of the presence, value and perspective of religiously-other neighbors. As Paul Knitter has said,

372Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, 44.
375Ibid., 164.
he finds it very important to consider how he speaks of his own Christian faith in ways that will not offend. Theological language must “be language that allows for and fosters friendship.”

In her *Quest for the Living God*, Johnson treats four aspects of inter-religious dialogue emphasized in particular by Asian Roman Catholic bishops. These are the dialogues of life, action, theological exchange, and religious experience. In the last category, she shares an experience of her own in when she participated in a Mass in India, which, although Catholic, incorporated Hindu symbolism. Johnson shares that “the experience loosened the grip of my predominantly Western imagination which, despite all talk of God as mystery, is still fundamentally anthropomorphic.” Her personal narrative is a demonstration of the principle she discusses when assessing religious pluralism: “those who are confident in their faith are not threatened but enlarged by the different ways of others.”

In a 1994 essay, Johnson delineated her understanding of an emergent postmodern spirituality, in which God is experienced through questions, ache and longing: “The unknowing beckons to a deeper knowing.” In this essay, as in *Friends of God and Prophets*, Johnson asserts that “lament and celebration are both necessary.”

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378 Ibid., 173.

379 Ibid., 179.


381 Ibid., 22.
her theology is sensitive to and affirms the legitimacy of apophatic experience, it is always held within Johnson’s overall kataphatic and sacramental orientation. As noted earlier in this chapter, In “Between the Times,” she writes, “While there is no universal enactment of salvation, the sacred comes in the form of promise mediated through everyday, small fragments of healing, beauty, liberation, justice, and love. This does not remove the darkness, but it allows us to keep on walking.” 382 For some, the “small fragments” occur not only outside the church, and not only outside of Christianity, but outside of any religion altogether. As Johnson recognizes, “Saints may not necessarily be persons who have found God; in fact, they may experience in a profound way the absence of God. Yet they try to walk with others faithfully even in the darkness and their restless hearts do not stop seeking.” 383

As developed in Friends of God, the symbol of the communion of saints does not fully consider the experience of those who for any number of reasons find themselves exiled, unable to find or fit within an institutionalized religious community. Though Johnson’s work carefully attends to marginalized groups, there is an assumption in her approach regarding a group identity within marginalized experience. Despite the unquestionably painful tensions of being a feminist within Roman Catholicism, Johnson writes of the inclusivity of the symbol of the communion of the saints from the position of one held within the community, as a Sister of St. Joseph. I do not at all suggest this is an easy position; but perhaps her location as an insider, in a significant, though qualified, sense, affects her vision on this point.

382 Ibid.

383 Johnson, Friends of God, 231.
Attending to the voices of a few outsiders may serve to call attention to the shadows, to those living at the borders of faith communities. One such voice is that of Barbara Brown Taylor, who, in *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith*, uses the image of a map which has both a center and an edge as a metaphor for those solidly within a public faith community and those who find themselves on the edge of institutions.\(^{384}\) She also uses the image of a Mother Church, who naturally wishes to keep her children in the center, safe, in the yard. But some, she says, find themselves far beyond the backyard fence, pitching tents in the wilderness, wandering into unexpected encounters, yet often finding themselves sharing over campfires. Key features of the wilderness experience are focusing on “how we treat one another” and lack of certainty.\(^{385}\)

In Barbara Brown Taylor’s experience, the wilderness has a communal though not institutional dimension:

> I have learned to prize holy ignorance more highly than religious certainty and to seek companions who have arrived at the same place. We are a motley crew, distinguished not only by our inability to explain ourselves to those who are more certain of their beliefs than we are but in many cases by our distance from the center of our faith communities as well.\(^{386}\)

The communal aspect of this wilderness experience, while real, remains wild, undomesticated, not institutionalized, nomadic rather than planted, unpredictable rather than regulated by the rhythm of liturgical cycles. This is a space of unlikely, though often strong, personal relationships that may never be structured in a public group. In this space, a Christian may find a deeper bond with an atheist than with a fellow


\(^{385}\) Ibid., 225.

\(^{386}\) Ibid., 224.
Christian. It is difficult to name this exile experience because it is not an easily identifiable group experience, though relationships and communities can form out of this ground. This wilderness is not marginalization, for example, based upon ethnic identity or sexual orientation, enforced from without. Instead, this outsider experience arises from within, in response to what is available, and is known by those who cannot stay in the yard. Their reasons and their circumstances differ. Their common bond is being on the edge of the map.

It is difficult for those embedded within faith communities to recognize that the experience on the edge of the map is not necessarily a result of narcissistic individualism, antisocial rebellion, disrespect for authority and tradition, lack of faith, or some other fault within the persons who find themselves in wide open spaces. The experience on the edge is dismissed out of hand as inauthentic by phrases such as “cafeteria Christians,” implying shallow trendiness, gluttonous lack of discipline and inability to sustain commitments. No doubt, some wanderers have these weaknesses, but such judgments cannot be made before knowing a person’s journey. Barbara Brown Taylor’s memoir makes clear that a person can land in the wilderness precisely because of deep faith commitment and healthy spiritual journey, not for lack of these.

Simone Weil is a paradigmatic voice of a deeply spiritual religious outsider. In one of her letters to her priest friend, Father Perrin, in which she describes aspects of her spirituality, she writes, “It is the sign of a vocation, the vocation to remain in a sense anonymous, ever ready to be mixed into the paste of common humanity.”\(^\text{387}\) The suggestion of vocation is significant, for those outside may look with appreciation or

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\[^{387}\text{Simone Weil, Waiting for God, transl. Emma Craufurd} \ (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1951), 49.\]
even longing into the windows of church, yet be unable to go inside fully, or even at all. Though often painful and confusing, this experience, according to many who write their stories, say this, too, is an encounter with Spirit and a way of faith. For many, the place of outsider is not a cynical choice to criticize from the sidelines but is experienced as an unsought and difficult call. Not subject to systematization, many such experiences must also be honored as a way of faith, even for those who may appear to be most excluded from the community of saints.

The unpredictable, surprising gift of deep relational bonding between people of differing or no religious beliefs exceeds the theological discourse of inter-religious narrative and dialogue, which, despite their validity and continued promise, remain somewhat dry and cerebral. Paul Knitter has written that “dialogue is something you ‘do,’ but it is also something that ‘is done’ to you.”388 What is transformative in such encounter is the living, dynamic nature of connections which cannot easily be theorized or systematized into abstract description or analysis, even or perhaps especially for those living them. Perhaps such connections are especially appreciated and nurturing, given the unpredictability of the wilderness context. Though such connections may not be communal in a formal sense, they may yet be life-giving and deeply sustaining, functioning as community ties function for others in more institutionalized ways.

The above exploration has attempted to describe experience that Johnson acknowledges in theory but does not develop, in order to stress the importance of including such experience in the symbol of the communion of saints. The power of this symbol is the hope it offers in a postmodern and global world to image relationship

across religious borders, both inter-religious and religious/atheist divides. These borders, however drawn, remain entirely inter-human. In concluding this chapter on Johnson’s retrieval and reconstruction of the symbol, a final emphasis must be that the symbol points a way beyond the anthropocentric legacy of Christian history.

Johnson works within a panentheistic understanding of the God/cosmos relationship. She understands all aspects of the universe to have their own freedom, which makes it proper to understand an element of randomness or chance to be an ontological aspect of the world, within which predictable patterns also exist. “Chance, consequently, is not an alternative to law, but the very means whereby law is creative. The two are strongly interrelated and the universe evolves through their interplay.”

Johnson believes a Neo-Thomist perspective can accommodate the world’s freedom and randomness. In contrast to misperceptions, Johnson argues, “It is not as if God and creatures stood as uncreated and created instantiations of “being” which is held in common by both . . . Rather, the mystery of God is the livingness of Being who freely shares being while creatures participate.” This divine sharing is not a one-time act but a continuous upholding, such that “the life-giving Spirit of God is in all things not as part of their essence but as the innermost source of their being, power, and action. There is, in other words, a constitutive presence of God at the heart of things.”

Given this context, Johnson stretches an anthropocentric principle into a cosmological one, such that “according to its dynamism, nearness to God and genuine

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390 Ibid., 11.

391 Ibid., 11.
creaturely autonomy grow in direct rather than inverse proportion.” Since this is true for all creaturely existence, not just humans, Johnson’s expansion of Irenaeus’ teaching is that the glory of God is the cosmos, not just the human, fully alive. Each form of existence has its own integrity and value, each is an expression of its Creator and Sustainer. “Earth, in a word, is a sacrament.” The Spirit of Life which moves and breathes through the world is also the relationality at the heart of the symbol of the communion of the saints. The communion of this symbol points not only to an anthropocentric God/human dyad, but to the sacred relation of God, human and world, for the human exists as emergent creature, the world become conscious. Ultimately, the relational symbol is rooted in the character of God, for, as Johnson says, “the symbol of the communion of saints reaches its fullness as a symbol of effective presence and action of Holy Wisdom herself.” Among all the disparate expressions Johnson has examined, all the variety and diversity evoked by this symbol, its unifying power is the living God, the power of love at work in the world, the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit.

Practices for Renewing the Symbol

*Friends of God and Prophets* concludes with Johnson’s suggestions for liturgical practices to “let the symbol sing again,” including prayer of both thanks and lament, keeping All Saints Day, and use of litanies. The prayer of thanks expresses gratitude for those who have gone before and lived lives which continue to encourage and inspire.

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392 Ibid., 12.

393 Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Women, Earth, Creator Spirit*, 64.


395 Ibid., 244. This phrase is the title of the last chapter.
The prayer of lament, patterned after many biblical examples, is a necessary and prophetic expression of outrage for all victimization and suffering. Both shape the character of those who pray, with the latter form becoming “a social force confronting unjust ideologies and structures.” Prayers of thanksgiving and lament on All Saints Day can focus upon the living and the dead, the known and the unknown, the human, all creatures, and the earth itself. Finally, Johnson gives several examples of litanies, including moving examples of reciting not only the names but also the written words of such saints as Oscar Romero, Maura Clarke, and Jean Donovan. She also includes an excerpt from Joan Chittister’s “A Litany of Women for the Church,” and from a litany naming some of the female victims of the Inquisition who were executed as witches.

Johnson gives examples and suggests limitless possibilities for concretely nurturing remembrance in worshiping communities. While these suggestions are powerful, they are all practices for the sanctuary. Looking for practices which would help the symbol live outside the worship service, for those on the edges of the map, Johnson provides a helpful beginning, though contained in just one sentence, which lists home altars, contemporary icons and sculpture, newly crafted lives of the saints of all faiths, races, and nationalities and both genders, newly compiled calendars of holy people, hymns of companionship and accompaniment, movies, tapes of live addresses of paradigmatic figures, and gatherings on anniversary days.

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396 Including “Hagar’s complaint, Jeremiah’s lamentations, the tears of the companions of the daughter of Jephtha, Job’s challenge to heaven, and Jesus’ godforsaken cry from the cross,” *Friends of God*, 248.

397 Ibid., 250.

398 Ibid., 257.

399 Ibid., 261.
I wish to extend and amplify Johnson’s list above, by considering several educative and transformative practices for celebrating holy female lives outside the context of liturgy. Videos which bring to life the stories of Mary of Magdalene, Hildegard von Bingen, Julian of Norwich, and Sister Thea Bowman, and movies such as *Entertaining Angels*, which depicts the life of Dorothy Day, can spark awareness or renew appreciation for the contributions of women whose stories are known to the Christian tradition.

Celebrating holy female lives involves honoring the stories of diverse female experience from within the Judeo-Christian heritage, including women of all ages, educational levels, nationalities, ethnic groups, social class, and sexual orientation. Yet North Americans also have much to learn from post-colonial voices. Global consciousness-raising is essential in order for those living within Christian narrative and symbol to learn about and deepen appreciation for ways in which the Spirit moves across national and religious borders.

In *Introducing Feminist Theology*, Anne Clifford tells the story of India’s Chipko movement and its resurgence since the 1970’s, as women struggle nonviolently to protect the forest growth which gives life to their communities. After also recounting stories of women working to care for the Earth in Kenya and Venezuela, Clifford concludes with three important points. Firstly,

responses to the ecological crisis by ecofeminists cannot be universalized according to European and Euro-American patterns. Nor can the resolutions to particular ecological crises in India, Kenya, and Venezuela be minted by ecofeminists in the First World.

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401 Ibid., 252-53.
Each circumstance calls for its own particular response. Secondly, though each situation is unique, a commonality Clifford notes in these examples is that “many people in India, Africa, and Latin America still retain a sense of the sacredness of creation.”

Women throughout the world “present Euro-American and European ecofeminist theologians with important challenges to their understandings of God and their resolve to live in ways that embody the holistic global visions that they espouse.”

Clifford’s theological focus can be extended to living expression in terms of the communion of saints. North American Christians, whether located at the center or the edge of the church map, need the wisdom and the living stories of women from all nations and faiths. Women who struggle for life and well-being, ecological, political, and personal, are members of the communion of the saints. Their particular lives and work need to be publicized and celebrated, especially by those who have access to the resources necessary for doing so. Their stories may be prophetic by pointing to changes needed in First World lifestyles, and they may also provide inspirational fuel for making such changes. As Johnson wrote in her response to the Review Symposium on *Friends of God,*

across the dividing line of religious distinction, women are finding each other to be allies in the epic struggle for human dignity in society and their own religious traditions. In various combinations, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and women of other religious persuasions recognize each other as ‘holy’ and rejoice in that sacredness precisely in and through their difference.\footnote{Johnson, “‘Author’s Response’: Review Symposium,” *Horizons,* 133.}

\footnote{Ibid., 253.}

\footnote{Ibid.}
In addition to increasing global awareness and opening to stories of diverse national, ethnic and religious experiences, the communion of saints encourages personal stories of women who seek to name their own redemptive transformations. Spiritual autobiographies and memoirs are important resources both for lament proper to suffering and thanksgiving for renewed lives. As women share their own particular journeys, often of making a way where no clear road presented itself, they can inspire others to make their new ways as well, not by providing maps but by feeding connection, creativity and courage.\textsuperscript{405}

In an essay arguing that women’s spiritual autobiographies can be productive theological resources, Jane Kopas observes that particular stories are powerful demonstrations that redemption is always specific. Similar themes emerge but always in particular contours. “Autobiographical writings reveal that the path is made by walking it, and the particular goal is not known well until one arrives.”\textsuperscript{406} For her examples, Kopas turns to Nancy Mairs, Anne Lamott, Jill Kerr Conway, Denise Levertov, and Annie Dillard, all well-educated white women writing within the Christian tradition. Lamott and Mairs, however, have unique circumstances. Lamott is a single mother and has written about turning around her life of drug and alcohol addiction. Mairs has


\textsuperscript{406} Kopas, “‘Something Particular,’” Themes in Feminist Theology, 30.
multiple sclerosis, reflecting most explicitly upon this aspect of her identity and perspective in *Waist High in the World*.407

While these voices are each powerful in their own ways, their collective presence also points to an absence: the fact that many women have not and never will have the opportunity to craft their stories either in life or on paper.408 Johnson’s inclusion of the anonymous saints, both living and dead, is a continuing reminder of all those who stories will not be heard. This fact is a prophetic call to bring justice and well being to all communities and peoples.

The symbol functions on personal and structural levels, embracing persons as well as communities working for the good and for well-being in any context. As Johnson writes in *Quest for the Living God*, “God is present where life is lived bravely, eagerly, responsibly, even without any explicit reference to religion.”409 The symbol embraces the past, in the lives of those who have gone before, and the present living. Outside the liturgy, it can also embrace life stories which inspire and point toward redemptive transformation, including imaginative stories. It is not necessary to posit an historical Job for his story to be meaningful in the context of the communion of saints. The Spirit works in imagination, which is also a shaper of history. Theological attention to the empowering possibility of narrative includes, then, not only historical memory and autobiography but also imaginative story, which, while non-canonical, may well be inspired by Spirit. In imaginative stories, hope and courage can be nurtured in a feast for

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409 Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, 45.
the faint spirit. Imaginative narrative can function both as manifestation, revealing transformative power when the story celebrates such change, and as proclamation, when the story tells of what should not be.

2 Samuel 12:1-23 recounts an example of the power of imaginative story as Nathan tells a tale of a poor man and his ewe to King David. Because of the prophetic capacity of story, David is able to see his behavior truthfully, his rationalizations exposed by Nathan’s fictive tale. Important differences exist between Nathan’s construction of an allegorical parable specifically to confront David, and general enjoyment of the narrative arts. Various narrative genres also differ significantly among themselves. The point is not to collapse these or other proper distinctions but to note the function and the power of imaginative narrative. Ricoeur has argued that the parable “is not an exceptional literary genre, rather parabolization is a general procedure of the narrative form of imagination.”410

Narrative places those listening in the plot, in spaces of decision-making, and leads listeners into new perspectives and encounters. In his work on symbols, Edward Farley argues that “redemption is a release to otherness, a freedom toward the other, and this is a condition of facing up to, wondering about, accepting the real.”411 To the extent that imaginative narrative functions to open up the real, (though not factual) it can be a practice which increases awareness not only of who-we-now-are but also of who-we-may-yet-become, as persons and as communities.


411 Edward Farley, Deep Symbols, 72.
The following are brief examples of inspiring, imaginative stories which portray women experiencing the strength of a female community of spirit. Arranged is a delightful film depicting an interfaith female friendship, showing bonds of affection and respect across Jewish and Muslim faiths. The two young women in this film discover more similarities with each other than either feels with the secular American culture in which they live and pursue careers. Novels which portray strong female communities of Spirit, such as The Secret Life of Bees, and The Red Tent provide models of women who are transformed, healed and strengthened in female communities. In Our Lady of the Lost and Found, the Virgin Mary unexpectedly enters an isolated single woman’s life and teaches her a great deal about the value of relationship.

This effort to extend awareness and practice of the communion of the saints beyond liturgical practice is not intended to displace Johnson’s suggestions for worship. The examples of autobiography and imaginative work, in particular, are intended to further specify the inclusive nature of the communion of saints symbol. For the symbol to function again in empowering ways for women, it needs to embrace the dynamic, effective movement of the Spirit outside as well as within Judeo-Christian tradition and practice.

Just as eschatological hope has been compromised when used to escape responsibility, so imagination can also be escapist. People can avoid responsibility by withdrawing from contemporary injustice to enjoy theatre, film and novels. But, as with eschatological hope, the distortion is not inherent in the form itself. The power of

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narrative art is the conviction that this particular human story is true, though not historically factual. Sharing imaginative narrative can be a practice which nurtures the value and function of the actual community of saints, for the Spirit’s power manifests not only in what has been, as in historical lives, but also in what may be, which narrative arts can reveal. The power of imagination can inspire and fuel hopeful, concrete work in the present, which may in turn begin creating the future.
Chapter Four

Experiencing Redemption in Community: Explorations in Feminist Relational Soteriology

This chapter will consider *Journeys by Heart* and *Friends of God and Prophets*, as presented in chapters two and three, putting the visions of these texts in dialogue from within the theological perspective outlined in chapter one, examining respective weaknesses and strengths with attention to the ways in which these studies may inform and enrich each other. At first glance, this may appear to be an inappropriate or contrived venture because of the significant differences between these scholars and these two texts. Brock, a Protestant shaped by the perspective of process thought of the Claremont School, and Johnson, solidly located within the Roman Catholic tradition, may seem to have little common ground other than being contemporary female feminist Christian theologians.

The two books selected for this project also differ in significant respects. Brock’s book is her dissertation, written at the beginning of her academic career in the late 1980s, while Johnson’s book, written a decade later, is a more mature and thorough study of her topic, written after she had become well established as a theological scholar and had authored several previous books. While Brock has enjoyed a successful scholarly career of teaching, speaking and publishing, all of her subsequent book length works have been
co-authored. Despite the apparent imbalance in the relative scholarly weight of these two studies, since *Journeys by Heart* continues to stand as Brock’s only solely authored book, it is appropriate to focus primarily on its thesis, supplemented by attention to her essays and co-authored later work, as dialogue partner with Johnson’s *Friends of God and Prophets*.

This chapter will argue that despite the noted disparities, the perspectives of Brock and Johnson, as represented in these two books, can fruitfully dialogue across differences. Christian feminist reconstructionist theology maintains that genuine communication and connection can flourish across differences, enriching and enlarging all in respectful mutuality. This dissertation’s exploratory goal in feminist relational soteriology is not uniformity or seamless synthesis but increased awareness of and deepening appreciation for the mystery of redemptive grace which always exceeds intellection and analysis. Theological reflection which attends to human experience seeks, in both methodology and content, to affirm the good of diversity by surfacing unique contributions of each perspective.

Embedded within the understanding of theological dialogue pursued in this chapter is the conviction that such an exchange is not pointless cacophony or a contest among competing claims for a triumphal theory. This exploratory project seeks enrichment, both in the experience of and in systematic reflection upon the relationships between community and redemption. Theologically, a deepening understanding of redemption suggests not increased precision in a schematic sense, nor a narrowing of theory, but enlargement of faith, growing appreciation, and ever-expanding wonder.
As poet Marge Piercy has written, “. . . There is knowing with the teeth and knowing with the fingertips/as well as knowing with words and with all/the fine flickering hungers of the brain.” Piercy’s imagery of teeth and fingertips highlights the embodied quality of human experience, which can never be reduced to mental proposition. Dental records and fingerprints mark the uniqueness of embodied existence even as they depend upon recognition of similarity. While no two are ever identical, these biological structures are shared. This feminist soteriological reflection proceeds with a similar conviction that, while redemption occurs only in the concrete particular, this process of transformation can also be thematized and profitably reflected upon according to systematic methods, as long as care is taken in the process to honor the unique, the Spirit, and the mystery. As Brock and Johnson are put into dialogue in this chapter, focus will first be on three very broad similarities between the two. After reviewing their broadly compatible orientations, and noting two corollary criticisms, their individual weaknesses and strengths will be assessed. Finally, the chapter will conclude by suggesting ways in which their insights may be mutually enriching.

Brock and Johnson: Three Broad Similarities in Approach

1. *Christianity need not be defined by or trapped within patriarchy*

Brock and Johnson share three fundamental similarities in their theological approach. Firstly, both believe there is a liberating Christian truth which can be redeemed from patriarchal distortion and accretions. As feminists, they identify and deconstruct the harm of patriarchy in the tradition, yet both approach their work

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convinced that the Christian gospel continues to offer a liberating message. Drawing upon different resources to reclaim and reconstruct this good news, each theologian dismantles what she perceives to be heretical interpretations in order to free Christian faith to be liberating for women. Many feminists reject the possibility that Christianity can be emancipated from the sexist and oppressive forces in its historical development and tradition. These post-Christian critiques are significant but will not be referenced, since this dissertation proceeds, along with Brock and Johnson, in the conviction that Christianity can indeed be a redemptive faith when liberating interpretive work is accomplished. By implication, this position also acknowledges that certain positions within and forms of publicly identified Christianity continue to be deeply patriarchal and, therefore, not redemptive for women.

2. *Relational Ontology*

Secondly, Brock and Johnson also share a theological anthropology grounded in a relational ontology. While Brock’s thought is formed by process philosophy and Johnson identifies herself as a neo-Thomist, they nevertheless meet on common ground in understanding the human as constituted by relationships. “Relationships” here refers to all those connections which produce, sustain, and impact human life. This concept is all-inclusive, in the sense that it names connections, healthy and unhealthy, impersonal and personal, remote and intimate, conscious and unconscious. While not sharing identical anthropologies, each theologian finds and emphasizes recognizable patterns among differences of particular human experience. Because of this similarity, each has been criticized as being too essentialist in her theorizing.

3. *Positive orientation*
A final broad similarity between Brock and Johnson is a positive and hopeful orientation, another point on which both have been criticized. Though their positive orientation is a similarity, the foundations for their perspectives differ, as do the corresponding criticisms. Brock has been charged, as have many feminists, with jettisoning the transcendence of God in favor of an exclusively immanent perspective. This objection tends also to carry with it criticism for being too optimistic regarding the human capacity for good, or, put negatively, for not being fully cognizant of the reality of human evil.

Johnson is notable for developing a theology of hope, particularly in *Friends of God and Prophets*. Critiques of her theology of hope are not, however, the common charge against feminist theologians, i.e., neglecting divine transcendence, a charge which would be impossible to maintain against Johnson since she so clearly upholds the transcendence of God. Since the critiques raised against Brock and Johnson on this point differ quite a bit, they will be fully addressed separately, as each theologian’s vision is assessed later in this chapter. Before undertaking detailed analysis of each thinker, the following section examines two criticisms which correspond to the first two similarities between Brock and Johnson.

**Two Corresponding Critiques**

1. **Christian Feminist Theology is not authentically Christian**

Broadly speaking, two camps argue that Christian feminist theology is not “really” Christian. The first is composed of those thinkers outside Christianity who believe the many aspects of patriarchal worldview and behavior within scripture and the historical tradition determine Christianity. From this perspective, attempts to
“reconstruct” are often considered ploys to get around what Christianity “really” is, in order to create an essentially new, more user-friendly and politically correct religion. For example, many of the so-called “new” atheists do not acknowledge any awareness of forms of Christianity other than clichés of classical theism or fundamentalism, thereby limiting their understanding of what Christianity is to some of the most extreme and intellectually dated positions.

The second camp which does not accept feminist theology as authentically Christian is composed of those who self-identify as Christian and believe feminist reconstruction eviscerates the content of their faith. This camp includes a wide variety of positions and denominational adherents. For example, some Protestants who accept women’s ordination nevertheless reject much of feminist reconstructive theology. Adding in ordained women does not necessarily require the more global and critical rethinking undertaken by feminist theology, which goes beyond the “add women and stir” approach. Further description of these two camps would take discussion too far afield, but they are acknowledged in summary fashion in order to note those who do not even enter into dialogue with theologians such as Brock and Johnson because of the judgment that they are not authentically Christian voices. Critiques of the second similarity between Brock and Johnson, their relational ontologies, will require more sustained attention.

2. *Relational ontologies are essentializing*

An on-going challenge for reconstructionist feminist theology is the task of theorizing across differences. Is it possible to construct systematic thought while at the same time honoring distinctions? Can one speak from within a specific context yet make
universal claims? Some feminist theologians argue that any unifying theory will of necessity be totalizing and therefore violate the unique “otherness” of the other. The contours of this controversy shape response to Brock and Johnson, for, as noted above, both of these theologians work within broadly similar relational ontologies, which are significant for both their anthropologies and soteriologies. Critiques which have been raised on this issue, then, are especially important to investigate and address. This section will first briefly summarize and then more fully respond to critiques of relational ontology made by Serene Jones and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza.

_Serene Jones’ Critiques of Rita Nakashima Brock and Elizabeth Johnson_

In her essay, “Women’s Experience Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Theologies in North America,” Serene Jones argues that though a range of perspectives exists, feminist theologians can be divided into two camps in their understanding of “experience.” The thinkers in the group she identifies as the “rock” position “continue to employ universalizing and/or ahistorical frames of reference to structure their accounts of human experience.”414 Jones further identifies three subgroup of “rocks,” with Brock and Johnson in two of these. All three rock subgroups are distinguished from the other camp, which Jones names the “hard places.” The thinkers in the hard places group all hold to “descriptions of experience which are historically localized and culturally specific.”415 The two subgroups Jones identifies in the hard places approach experience through cultural anthropology and poststructuralism, not seeking and/or rejecting a universalizing or overarching framework.


415 Ibid.
In Jones’ assessment, Brock and Johnson are similar enough to be classified as taking “rock” positions, though they differ enough to be placed into two separate subgroups. Jones places Brock in a category that she calls a process/psychoanalytic group, in which thinkers “argue certain metaphysical things because they seem to be true to our experience.”\textsuperscript{416} Jones says that Brock, while opposing essentializing ideas of women, still uses atemporal categories derived from process theory, such as “feeling, memory, and creativity.”\textsuperscript{417} Jones faults Brock for not even being aware of her uncritical absorption of these categories; this works against her approach which, in other respects, seeks historical grounding. In this way, Jones believes that Brock works against herself.

While Jones judges that Brock has improved upon earlier process thought by incorporating psychoanalytic theory, she also argues that the psychological theories Brock uses are subject to critique, for both Alice Miller and Nancy Chodorow can be criticized for ahistorical understandings of the family and norms in parenting.\textsuperscript{418} Jones believes that Brock’s application of Miller’s theory on the construction of false and true selves to a general anthropology is problematically universalizing.

While Jones appreciates that Johnson does not have an essentialist view of women, Jones is, nevertheless, critical of Johnson as well, for her universalizing view of human experience. Placing Johnson in a category of phenomenological thinkers, Jones argues that Johnson’s universalizing thought is apparent both in her understanding of human nature and in her “discussion of symbolic language.”\textsuperscript{419} Deeply influenced by

\textsuperscript{416} Ibid., 40.
\textsuperscript{417} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{418} Ibid., 41.
\textsuperscript{419} Ibid., 36.
Karl Rahner and Paul Ricoeur in these two areas, respectively, Jones finds that Johnson does enlarge and deepen the insights of these men because of her feminist vision. However, Jones also believes Johnson has not sufficiently responded to the danger inherent in her theorizing about “the hoping subject.”

Jones appreciates feminist work in taking apart the Western modern subject, replacing it with relationality, such that relationality itself becomes “a new point around which the structural coherence of the subject . . . is secured.” Though this is an improvement, the “rock” position is nevertheless problematic in three respects. Firstly, Jones believes that holding to relationality as a universalizing philosophical category “holds back the potential of generating radically localized conceptions of experience and identity.” Secondly, Jones points out that holding to relationality as a universal systematizes those who have no community into community. She says, “The unmeasured, the marginal, and the silent—find a systematic home which ironically helps them ‘fit’ into an inclusive understanding of community.”

Jones’ third critique is pragmatic. She asks whether it is actually liberating for women to have such a focus upon relationality when, historically, this has imprisoned women. These three criticisms of relational ontology will now be addressed in turn.

Jones first raises the question of whether or not experience which does not fit into the universalizing category of relationality can or will be heard. Essentially, this criticism asks whether a relational ontology is a closed or open system. Can a theory of

420 Ibid.
421 Ibid., 38.
422 Ibid., 39.
423 Ibid.
relational ontology hear a voice that speaks from outside the parameters of its theoretical position? It seems to me that such a question can be fully addressed only in on-going dialogical exchange. Any revisions to a paradigm necessarily come from the edges, beyond the initially accepted worldview. The issue is whether the worldview in question is open enough to listen and be enlarged, allowing itself to be re-formed by new perspectives. Will it remain sealed shut, not admitting in what will not fit, thereby marginalizing those outside its frame of reference?

Theoretically, a relational ontology is explicitly and structurally open, since the assertion is that persons are constituted by a multitude of connections. Jones posits the possibility of a “radically localized” understanding of experience and identity which would have no point of contact with relationality, but does not seem to have an example or case in mind that would show how a relational ontology cannot respectfully encounter such experience. It is not clear how this question could be answered ahead of time; furthermore, though Jones objects to “rock” positions, the question itself seems to imply that an unmodifiable theory is desirable and attainable.

Jones leaves the three critiques she raises of the rock position of relational ontology as general points that implicitly apply to many thinkers. It is important now to consider specifically her criticisms of Brock and Johnson, beginning with Brock. Brock applies Miller and Chodorow as tools for understanding the severe damage abusive family relationships cause. The significance of her theory of the false self as a shield constructed to protect the true self lies in the hope that redemption is, indeed, possible, even after years of terrible harm. The true self may hide underground, alive only as a dormant seed, or an infant seedling, but it may yet be nurtured into health. Brock uses
psychoanalytic theory to explain how intimate abuse occurs, how it wounds, and how such wounds can be healed.

Although a sweeping cultural critique is made in Brock’s assessment of the ubiquity of such damage, she does not actually claim that all people everywhere and through all time have had such experience. She clearly writes for a contemporary North American context, as it has received and continues to perpetuate the Western patriarchal legacy. Early in Journeys by Heart, she explicitly states: “While patriarchy is not the only cause of human evil and suffering, in the social-historical religion called Christianity, it is a central factor.”\textsuperscript{424} In addition, she writes, “Patriarchy is not, I believe, a universal phenomenon, though it is virtually so.”\textsuperscript{425}

A weakness in Journeys by Heart is that Brock does not clearly outline limits or qualifiers in her use of this psychoanalytic theory. (It may have helped, for example, to explicitly note that mothers as well as fathers may abuse their children). However, the clear intent of her study is to place the abused child at the center of reflection upon redemption, and Brock writes for a social context in which people continue to struggle with the legacy of harm done in the patriarchal family. While it is true that her work would have been strengthened by explicit awareness of models other than the patriarchal family, her point is to understand dynamics of abuse, these integral connections with patriarchy, and the implications for Christology and soteriology. Her thesis is not that patriarchal family is the only way family is experienced.

\textsuperscript{424} Brock, Journeys by Heart, 3.

\textsuperscript{425} Ibid.
To the extent that abuse and patriarchy continue to shape childhood experiences, the psychoanalytic theory she uses continues to be a helpful model for tracing how damage is done and how healing can begin. As with all theological use of social science theory, when new developments emerge which are more helpful, then the task is undertaken again, and understanding will only be deepened and enriched. This does not mean Brock’s work will thereby have been made irrelevant.

While Brock’s work may not resonate with those whose experience arises outside of a patriarchal family context, I am not aware of any critique from those who work with the experience of abuse who have argued that her insight is not responsive to that experience. In Proverbs of Ashes, Brock writes about “spankings” she received as a teenager and her co-author in this spiritual and theological memoir, Rebecca Parker, writes about her own work of healing from the wounds of childhood sexual abuse by a neighbor. Parker’s deeply moving story, offered in tandem with Brock’s, and the congruency of their theological vision, suggests that Brock’s insights remain helpful for focusing upon wounds inflicted by abuse, even when the perpetrator is not a member of the family.

To return to Serene Jones’ first critique of relational ontology and investigate its application to Johnson, it will be useful to repeat that Jones’ criticism is leveled against these “methodological appraisals of experience” which she finds ahistorical, even as she remains very appreciative of the feminist reconstruction of major theological topics done by thinkers she places in the “rock” camp. Her criticism of Johnson is based primarily upon She Who Is and is most clear in the way Jones contrasts her critique of

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426 Jones, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place,” Horizons in Feminist Theology, 35.
Johnson with a more favorable assessment of Catherine Mowry LaCugna’s anthropology. Jones places LaCugna and Johnson in the “phenomenological” subgroup of the “rock” category. Johnson’s anthropology is problematic for Jones because it is rooted “in the territory of an epistemically universal rendition of experience,” whereas LaCugna defends her anthropology by appealing to the Judeo-Christian faith community experience. Jones implies that Johnson’s anthropology is too uncritically Western as she builds upon Rahner, Ricouer, and Metz, though she also appreciates that Johnson has not reified “woman” into an essentialist category.

Johnson’s *She Who Is* is targeted for those who have perpetuated and/or have been harmed by Western symbolization of God as male. *She Who Is* traces the way patriarchal theology has harmed women as its “God” symbol has functioned. This is not a dogmatic claim for the last word on all possible ways in which symbols do or do not function. It is, instead, a charting of the ways that male symbolization has historically shaped Western Christianity. As with the critique of Brock, then, Jones faults each thinker for not taking other possible ways of theorizing into account, not so much for a lack of helpfulness in what each thinker has actually accomplished in her theory.

Neither Brock nor Johnson establish a tone that indicates absolute closure on their investigations, and so it seems to me that each of their theoretical approaches could be open to new insights or could be modified in response to new developments. Jones’ concerns for the weakness of the relational ontologies she finds in Brock and Johnson seem to be future-oriented, concerns about positions which may not hold up, though she

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427 Jones, 38.
does not point out ways in which they are currently inadequate for their analytic purposes or counter-productive in their effect. I find this a somewhat strained criticism.

Jones’ second critique of relational ontologies is that those who actually have no community are wrongly theorized to have such experience because of the universalizing pressure of relational theory. This criticism conflates relational ontology with the actual, historical experience of healthy community, which are two related but quite distinct things. To posit that persons are constituted by their relationships is not the same as claiming that all people experience nurturing bonds of living human community.

“Relationship” in relational ontology does not refer only to the healthy, face-to-face, human interpersonal encounter, but includes all the connections, near and remote, which are continually making a particular life possible and affecting it either in harmful or in nurturing manners. This ontological claim proceeds from a cosmological perspective which understands the human to be emergent earth creature, born from and in relationship to the world, to one’s biological heritage, to care-givers, and to those with whom one interacts as one grows. These connections include even remote and unknown bonds.

In addition, a relational ontology does not preclude experiences of isolation, alienation, loneliness, or even willfully chosen indifference to or rejection of living human connection. A relational ontology need not claim that all persons actually experience healthy rather than damaging interpersonal relationship. Harmful relationship, after all, is Brock’s starting point in investigating intimate abuse. Instead, a relational ontology claims that all our myriad connections, remote and intimate, abusive
or nurturing, and our on-going responses to those connections, shape and constitute who we are and who we continue to become.

Despite the misperception in Jones’ conflation of community and relationality, her critique on this point does have some merit, though in differing ways, as applied to both Brock and Johnson. With respect to Brock, however, it must be noted at the outset that one of her strongest insights is the isolating nature of the experience of intimate personal abuse. She recognizes explicitly that while some oppressed groups may have or be able to develop a sense of community solidarity with each other in their suffering as a group, this is not at all the case for victims of intimate abuse. The nature of such victimization is terribly isolating and it wounds the relational capacity itself, a point which will be examined later. At this juncture, the important point is that Brock’s understanding of the woundedness from which so many need to be healed is precisely the damage which, if left unaddressed, prevents the person from being able to recognize and enter into healthy, nurturing community experience.

Nevertheless, Jones’ insistence that some people do not experience community is a very important insight that must be directed toward Brock, because of her argument that redemption occurs only in and through interpersonal, community relationship. While Jones does not address soteriology, her critique leads to several questions that will be quickly raised here in anticipation of further study of Brock’s relational soteriology.

What does redemption mean for those who never lived long enough to experience any healing from relational wounds suffered as infants, children or young people? Brock’s own focus on abuse leads to questions about the meaning of redemption for children who have been killed by their own abusive mothers, fathers, or other caregivers.
What of those who may have lived more years, but have known only harmful interpersonal relationships? What of those who have lived and died never knowing what it was like to experience sustained loving care from another person? What does redemption mean for those deprived of all opportunity for meaningful human connection by the cruelty of human oppression? What of those so isolated by severe mental or physical illness that nurture and love do not seem to penetrate their lives? A relational ontology is not in itself a guarantee or claim that each person will receive human love. Those whose human connections have repeatedly failed them must not be forgotten in soteriological reflection.

As the third chapter indicated, Johnson also seems to assume a certain degree of community experience in her reclamation of the symbol of the communion of the saints. Barbara Brown Taylor’s life story was raised as an example in order to argue that some saints do not easily find, perhaps may never find, a home which can clearly be identified as a coherent institutional community. The communion of the saints, a radically inclusive symbol, must have room for those who cannot be systematized into community experience. Jones’ important critique that relational ontologies universalize community and, therefore, leave out those who do not experience community has a certain validity, though in differing ways, for both Brock and Johnson. Later in the chapter, as this weakness is assessed for each thinker, I will argue that the problem is not due to an inadequacy in their respective relational ontologies per se, but in the specific development of each theologian’s project.

Jones’ third critique of relational thought is a pragmatic concern that it may be an unhelpful strategy for women, who have historically been so limited by focus upon
personal relationships, to now build theologies and theory upon a relational ontology. Again, I believe a misperception lies in this critique. Relational ontologies do not suggest that only women need relationships or that women ought to devote their time and energy to interpersonal relationships in ways that men need not. Those are the skewed perceptions that built the prisons Jones references. The relational perspective which informs this study, and which is found both in Brock and Johnson, seeks to address an aspect of reality in order to more fully understand what is redemptive for women and all who are marginalized.

Privileged men have historically been able to promote a “great man” perspective which created the illusion that accomplishments of individual men (the “self-made man”) were achieved apart from any web of connection, support, or structural advantage. A relational ontology seeks to correct this interpretive distortion of reality. Furthermore, sustained attention to the extent to which connections inhibit or harm well being can help women name what is imprisoning and what is liberating for them. Ignoring the web of connections diminishes the fullness of human life, either by devaluing its support or by tolerating harm. Far from re-imprisoning women in a patriarchally constructed, confining understanding of interpersonal relationship, a relational ontology expands awareness of the interconnected universe and exposes the illusion that some lives matter while others do not. It need not be anthropocentric but can be deeply ecological in tracing relationship. Thus it is not confining or limiting, but, on the contrary, expansive in its sense of women and their multiple connections.

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza’s Critique of Rita Nakashima Brock
Criticisms of universalizing theory claim to be valuing the specificity of the local and the particular in a way that broad theory cannot. Others, however, argue that a complete relativism, in which each voice is as legitimate as any other and none offers binding norms, would destroy feminist commitment to the well-being of those most oppressed. In *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza writes that

If feminist theologies relinquish the claim that their critiques and insights have universal validity, they are in danger of feeding into postcolonial attempts of crisis management that operate through the particularization, fragmentation, and regionalization of the disenfranchised and oppressed.\(^\text{428}\)

She notes a danger in opposing authoritarian perspectives by speaking from one locale, to only one ethnic group. The danger she sees is in being privatized out of the public project of naming and articulating Christian faith and the ongoing need for critical analysis of oppressive structures, both in contemporary experience of those at the bottom of power pyramids and in the history of Christian religious development. In her effort to analyze oppressive forces within Christian doctrines, Schussler Fiorenza turns to a critique of relational feminist Christologies, including, specifically, that of Rita Nakashima Brock.

According to Schussler Fiorenza, an “existentialist-relational christology” and a “liberationist-justice-oriented christology” are not compatible.\(^\text{429}\) Though she concedes that people are born into connections, she rejects relational ontology as a theoretical framework, insisting that it perpetuates oppression by privileging relationship over

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\(^{429}\)Schussler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child,* 50.
liberation. In her view, Brock’s communal Christology cannot possibly be as politically active and challenging as her own development of “ekklesia.” In general, in Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Schussler Fiorenza is quite dismissive of relational feminist theologians as a group.

In her view, the interpersonal interpretations these thinkers develop are not helpful at all but, on the contrary, serve to weaken activist work for justice. Her argument is that stressing mutuality and power-in-relationship “does not challenge power relationships but reinscribes them.” She sees no potential in this perspective for critiquing structural issues of oppression or providing means of structural change, even claiming that “‘power-in-relation’ is in danger of remaining another form of traditional feminine altruism, although it dresses up in terms of feminist liberation.”

She writes,

While I agree with the shift from a ‘heroic’ and ‘individualistic’ christology to a communal christological construction, I would insist, however, that such a reformulation must not be conceptualized in personalistic, individualistic terms as connectedness between individuals. Rather it must be articulated in sociopolitical categories.

Schussler Fiorenza’s harshest comments claim that relational Christologies absorb and baptize the traditional stereotypes of what is appropriate for women to be concerned about and so merely privilege traditionally feminine concerns over traditionally

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430 Ibid., 52.
431 Specifically, her comments are especially directed toward Carter Heyward, Mary Grey, Rita Nakashima Brock, and Manuela Kalsky.
432 Schussler Fiorenza, Jesus: Miriam’s Child, 53.
433 Ibid.
434 Ibid., 54.
masculine ones. In her view, relational theory is simply a lateral shift that does not actually critique or dismantle oppressive paradigms. The acceptable “feminine” concerns, which she notes with disdain, are interest in relationality, speaking as victims, and forming support groups, all of which, she says, are typical of European American middle class female experience.\(^435\) She particularly includes Brock’s thought in this criticism, without any acknowledgement of Brock’s Asian American identity, which Brock so specifically draws upon in her own work.

Perhaps Schussler Fiorenza’s most inflammatory statement, in which she seems to include all relational feminist theologians in general, specifically Brock, and even, by way of a footnote reference, Dorothee Soelle, is the following: “Women who read the Jesus story or have a ‘personal’ relationship to Christ take up the position that romance novels or films offer to women in relationship to men.”\(^436\) In order to make her critique, Schussler Fiorenza presses all relational feminist thought, (including that of Brock) into the “White Lady” mold, in which attention to “relationship” is simply code for compliance with oppressive structures which make the marginalized and mistreated invisible.

In order to deconstruct the White Lady discourse of relational feminists, which she believes she has demonstrated, Schussler Fiorenza turns to Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?” Commenting upon this speech, Schussler Fiorenza emphasizes Sojourner Truth’s “liberation” as her primary experience, the one which enables her to “anchor the articulation of christology in the revelatory struggle of women for survival and well-

\(^{435}\) Ibid., 55.

\(^{436}\) Ibid.
being.” However, even as Schussler Fiorenza opposes Sojourner Truth’s speech to relational (interpersonal) concerns, she writes that “Both her [Sojourner Truth’s] criticism of the myth of femininity and her christological arguments are rooted in her own experience that Jesus alone heard her in the hour of her greatest exploitation and dehumanization when slavery robbed her of her children.”

Sojourner Truth mourns, “‘I have borne 13 children/ and seen most all sold into slavery/and when I cried out a mother’s grief none but Jesus heard me.’”

Schussler Fiorenza refers to the quote above as a “religious experience of liberation.” I cannot follow this argument, for I can only hear this aspect of Sojourner Truth’s expression as deeply intimate and profoundly relational. While Schussler Fiorenza’s work to critique and transform oppressive structures has been unquestionably pioneering, this particular example and argument works against her insistence upon the social and the political as having primacy over the personal. It seems to me that in insisting upon the primacy of a liberationist paradigm, Schussler Fiorenza squeezes an emotionally wrenching, uniquely interpersonal story into a pre-packaged liberationist narrative. The word “liberation” strikes me as coldly inadequate to refer to the tenderness needed to approach such trauma.

Catherine Keller, herself a relational feminist theologian, takes up Schussler Fiorenza’s critiques of Brock with two preliminary rebuttals. Firstly, Keller notes that from its inception, relational feminist theology “drew its major motivation from activist

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437 Ibid., 59.
438 Ibid.
439 Ibid., 58.
440 Ibid., 59.
rather than academic sources." With respect to Rita Nakashima Brock, Schussler Fiorenza’s charge that relational theory weakens political activism is especially startling since a glance at titles in Brock’s bibliography or biographical record clearly demonstrates her scholarly and personal life commitment to social justice. Keller’s second rebuttal is that the anthropological distortion feminism needs to tackle remains Western liberal individualism, for that (not relationalism) continues to be the “implicit anthropology of the entire neocolonial free market project.”

While not acknowledging Keller’s critique explicitly (although she does cite Keller’s essay in footnotes), Schussler Fiorenza seems to be taking this point into account in her later Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation, when she writes that feminist thinkers, including theologians, have “turned more and more often against other feminists rather than against elite men who are still in charge and control.” Perhaps this could be read as a bit of a concession, though she also maintains that it is appropriate for feminist theologians to “rightly denounce the failures of their


443 Keller, “Seeking and Sucking,” Horizons in Feminist Theology, 63.


445 Fiorenza, Wisdom Ways, 87.
Christian feminist colleagues”\textsuperscript{446} as long as critique is leveled against structural oppression as well. It seems to me that denouncing failures is unnecessarily harsh language, indicating an unhelpful edge to her critical dialogue.

Keller’s primary argument against the charge that relational perspectives are essentializing is her counter-charge regarding a “slippage of antiessentialism toward a postmodern individualism,”\textsuperscript{447} which is troubling for those seeking a foundation from which to address global injustices. In her view, not all ontological theory is inherently essentialist and she takes issue with what she regards as a too hasty, perhaps trendy, employment of the “essentialist” critique. Additionally, Keller believes much of the feminist negativity toward relational perspectives is expressed in a “defensive, dismissive tone.”\textsuperscript{448} According to Keller, Schussler Fiorenza makes a hasty assumption that “because women have been constructed as experts in relationship, any feminist rhetoric of relation represents a regression to femininity.”\textsuperscript{449} Keller concludes that “[F]eminism’s coming-of-age means outgrowing late-adolescent revolts against mom as well as dad.”\textsuperscript{450}

Keller finds it astonishing that the Puerto-Rican, Asian-American Brock serves as Schussler Fiorenza’s epitome of a feminist theologian who develops a “White Lady” discourse. In her view, this points to an (ironically) essentializing criticism of all relational feminists and also highlights a dualistic opposition in the critique, which pits the individual against the group, psychoanalytic insight against political action, and all

\textsuperscript{446} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{448} Ibid., 68.

\textsuperscript{449} Ibid., 69.

\textsuperscript{450} Ibid., 78.
relational ontologies against liberationist thought. Despite Schussler Fiorenza’s feminist stance against such dualisms, her negative responses to relational thought manifest a lingering tension between the personal and the political in her own work.

In *Wisdom Ways*, Schussler Fiorenza writes:

[T]he social character of being human requires that the liberation of one human being from domination is intrinsically dependent on all others attaining it too. This requires a transformation not only of oppressive structures but also of individual consciousness.\(^{451}\)

At times, she acknowledges the legitimacy and importance of internal and psychological change, and does not oppose it to social or public transformation, as in the statement above, yet her strongly negative stance toward relational thought seems inconsistent with her concern for the need for feminist conscientization. Relational thought has much to contribute to an understanding of how the holistic process of transformation of consciousness occurs and it need not be pitted against liberation. Finally, it is interesting to note that even though Schussler Fiorenza is quite critical of relational theologians generally, in contrast to Serene Jones, who sees enough similarities between Elizabeth Johnson and Rita Nakashima Brock to place them in the same group, when Schussler Fiorenza criticizes relational thought, she does not mention Elizabeth Johnson at all.

The following sections will concentrate specifically on the weaknesses and the strengths of Rita Nakashima Brock and Elizabeth A. Johnson in turn, in order to prepare the ground for suggesting ways to integrate the two. As previously acknowledged, it could be argued that comparing *Journeys by Heart* and *Friends of God and Prophets* is

not appropriate, given the differences in scope and length of each book, the decade that stands between them, and their relative placement in each author’s theological development. Nevertheless, Brock’s sensibility and insight results from her psychological and interpersonal focus, while Johnson offers a systematic framework which may provide helpful structure for Brock’s ideas. First, Brock’s weaknesses will be examined and then her strengths assessed. After the same pattern is followed for Johnson, an integration of the best of both will be tested in a final synthetic conclusion.

Weaknesses and Strengths of Rita Nakashima Brock

In “Exploding Mystery: Feminist Theology and the Sacramental,” Elizabeth Stuart quotes from Brock’s Journeys by Heart as she argues that this book “collapses the divine into human experience to the point that it disappears. . .  Complete disappearance leaves us alone and self-sufficient.”452 In Stuart’s view, the self which Brock and other eros theologians posit is one which “absorbs all into itself including the divine and others under the guise of relationality.”453 On the one hand, Brock has been criticized for privileging relationality too much by making it a universal (the criticism that her thought is essentializing), and on the other hand, she is accused by Stuart of using relationality merely as a guise, which implies that relationality is not truly valued in her theorizing. Wide-ranging critiques of feminist work can often leave one with a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” feeling, so in order to contextualize the following assessment of weaknesses in Brock’s theology, a common critique of feminist theology will be surveyed first.


453 Ibid.
Contextualizing Common Critiques of Feminist Theology

Perhaps the most pervasive criticism leveled at much feminist theology, including authors who would disagree among themselves on various points, is that it abandons divine transcendence for immanence, which raises the larger issue of a theology of God. This, therefore, is a very important issue for feminist theology generally, and for Brock’s work in particular. A representative essay making this charge against several feminist theologians will be surveyed in order to outline the general approach of this criticism.

In his essay “Divine and Human Power: Barth in Critical Dialogue with Brock, Case-Winters, and Farley,” Gregory Anderson Love argues that the three feminist authors he names all collapse God into the human social network because “they deny the qualitative distinction and superiority of God’s power over creaturely power.” He summarizes what he believes to be an identical perspective among the three authors, saying that in their work,

God is not radically transcendent over creation. God is not the source of all things, nor a God whose life, power, and agency exist on a different plane from the power and agency of creatures. Rather, both God and creatures exist within the same plane or ‘web of connections’ of life, power and agency.

Clearly, Love rejects any understanding of God’s power and agency that does not preserve an above/below, dominative element. In his mind, “transcendence” must include being “over,” or it is not transcendence.

454 Though, as noted previously, the argument is much harder to sustain against Johnson.


456 Ibid.
In his particular critique of Brock, Love concludes that her language is not precise enough because of her use of “impersonal metaphors to speak of God, thus avoiding the question of whether God is an agent who has the requisite power to fulfill divine purposes.”\(^{457}\) Love believes that Brock’s theology fails because it does not clearly answer his dualistic question of who is more powerful (God or humans). His language and tone also imply Brock’s use of metaphor is calculatedly evasive, not a necessary, helpful, or legitimate way to theologize, but a tactic employed to refuse clarity. His essay faults the three feminists he discusses for rejecting the notion that humans “receive power from another who has absolute power” because they see this model as “an oppressive, patriarchal idea.”\(^{458}\) In his assessment, they all abandon the transcendence of God and do not provide a viable reconstruction of the notion of power.

Love’s essay is typical in its inability to recognize a genuine theology of divine power, agency, and transcendence which rejects dualism. The dismay with which many regard feminist theology as compromising or eviscerating the transcendent power and holy otherness of God often points to profound differences in sensibility toward what is holy, what is sustaining, and what is empowering in everyday life. These profound differences in understanding also raise questions about what it means to be faithful to Christian tradition.

Because of differing convictions on how tradition is best understood and honored, feminist theologians often see themselves as faithfully reconstructing tradition even as critics believe they abandon it. In his study *Deep Symbols*, Edward Farley understands

\(^{457}\) Ibid., 154.

\(^{458}\) Ibid., 159.
deep symbols as ideas, “God-terms” and words of power in a given culture. 459 In his analysis, the erosion of deep symbols in a North American context is bound up with the erosion of the interhuman sphere in which social groups exist but fall short of being genuine communities. He says “ours is not the antiquarian task of reviving an unrevivable past but the contemporary task of discerning, rethinking, and voicing the traces of the words of power.” 460 Feminist theology seeks to voice the traces of the words of power by focusing upon the immanent, how God works in and through interhuman space, in the spheres of relationship to one’s self, the human community and the human/earth relationship.

In assessing the common charge that feminist thought sacrifices God’s transcendence for the sake of immanence, I would like to further contextualize this controversy with a brief note on two well received non-feminist perspectives from the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. While this unlikely turn may appear digressive, my argument is that humanistic appreciation has been much more readily accepted when arising from a traditional and male perspective. I wish to raise questions about the intensity of the repeated conviction that feminist (but not male humanistic) approaches are so dangerous and inappropriate or even incompatible with Christian faith.

Thomas W. Ogletree, in his essay, “From Anxiety to Responsibility: The Shifting Focus of Theological Reflection” 461 argues that since Bonhoeffer, Christian theology has

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460 Ibid., 24.

become more aware of the need to address people in their strength, not only or primarily in their weakness. Interestingly, in 1969, in the context of the civil rights movement, Ogletree writes that

Being a man [sic] means that you do not permit others . . . to decide who you are or what your place in society shall be or what you can appropriately expect from society. You must decide these things for yourself, and begin to behave in ways that can give actuality to what you have decided.\textsuperscript{462}

Not taking responsibility for one’s identity is “an abdication of one’s basic humanity,” and, therefore, in his view, sinful.\textsuperscript{463} Furthermore, thought must take place within the context of responsible action and “a theology concerned with the ‘humanization of man’ [sic] cannot disregard the promise of the gospel which comes to man [sic] in society.”\textsuperscript{464} In his view, the task of theology for the future needs to be no longer a focus upon interior issues of anxiety and a personal sense of meaning but on responsible uses of power in the human community context. In his words, “the impact of the divine reality is not to make men [sic] more dependent, but to make them more responsible, more able to participate in shaping their own lives and the life of the world.”\textsuperscript{465} In Ogletree’s view, God’s presence in human life empowers people to take risks, to be willing to act not out of fear and anxiety but into transformation and an open future. Before the work of liberation theology was widely known in North America, Ogletree drew upon Bonhoeffer in this essay to argue that thought has to develop within

\textsuperscript{462} Ibid., 53.
\textsuperscript{463} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{464} Ibid., 58.
\textsuperscript{465} Ibid., 64.
the context of responsible action and also that “‘action springs not from thought, but from a readiness for responsibility.””

Walter Brueggemann’s work, *In Man We Trust: The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith* is not likely to be taken for a feminist text, but the points he makes about the Wisdom tradition are, I believe, germane to the sensibilities at issue in this controversy. According to Brueggemann, the anthropology of the Hebrew Wisdom tradition affirms that people are able to discern God’s truth and presence in their everyday lives, and that the goal and meaning of human existence is “healthy human community” in the here and now. The goal of life, then, is not extrinsic to the process of life and, in addition, ethical norms are those of human well-being. Brueggemann says, “Wisdom values human enterprises as an adequate norm in themselves.” In this textual tradition and its anthropology, humans have their destiny in their own hands; people are responsible for and capable of creating harmonious order in the natural and social realms, and this is the project of life meaning.

Brueggemann takes the church to task for historically having set itself up as an imperialistic gate-keeper between God and all of humanity, deciding what salvation is and outlining how it proceeds, in stark contrast to the Biblical wisdom ethos, which stresses that “man [sic] is invited to choose his full humanity as a creature of God, and

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466 Ibid., 57.
468 Ibid., 26.
469 Ibid.
obviously there is no monopoly on that process." It would seem, however, that when women choose how to proceed in pursuing their full humanity and developing theological perspectives integral to and supportive of that process, they do indeed run into a monopoly and often find themselves facing accusations of betraying or abandoning their faith heritage.

Brueggemann faults Protestant traditions in particular for having tended to be "religious despisers of culture" and stresses that, despite this heritage, it is consonant with Christian faith and trust not to underlive in a detached or postponed sort of existence, but to live in “celebration and responsibility.” Protestants, in particular, Brueggemann argues, have not developed a “theology of responsibility,” which is, in his view, a gift of the Hebrew Wisdom tradition. A significant Protestant deficit has been an understanding of transcendence which holds to “the decisive intervention of a personal God.”

Though Brueggemann does not develop his critique in this direction, traditional views of divine transcendence are clearly predicated upon the God of classical theism, a theology of God critiqued in chapter one of this dissertation. Brueggemann offers a revised understanding of transcendence as seeing “a given to the ordering of life which we cannot eliminate” and the sense that “there is a mystery to life that is not confined to our ignorance, incompetence or abdication,” such that even at our best, we do not

\(^{470}\) Ibid., 27.

\(^{471}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^{472}\) Ibid., 47.

\(^{473}\) Ibid., 61 [his emphasis].

\(^{474}\) Ibid., 62.
comprehend all mystery in the universe.\textsuperscript{475} He concludes that the Wisdom texts, which have historically been rather threatening in many Christian circles, question traditionally Christian understandings of God’s sovereignty as well as God’s graciousness because they affirm that God expects the human to grow up.\textsuperscript{476}

Without claiming Ogletree or Brueggemann were forerunners of feminist theory, or trying to co-opt them into a feminist paradigm, there are, nevertheless, connections to note between the points these men raised in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s and some contemporary feminist values. Ogletree advocated a theological focus upon responsible use of power in a human community context and the need for Christian theology to address people precisely in their human strength and sense of responsibility. Brueggemann’s approach does not find an antithetical relationship between a humanistic and a Christian vision, but, instead, a place of shared value evident in the Wisdom tradition itself. In addition, Brueggemann challenges the traditional Christian understanding of divine transcendence, indicating that it has been shaped by theological deficits.

For more than thirty years, Christian theology has moved toward a deepened appreciation of the Wisdom tradition and toward more focus upon human responsibility as integral to a life of faith. These two non-feminist representative examples are summarized precisely because they are not particularly controversial. Yet when feminist theologians move to interpreting, defining and identifying responsibility, to valuing the here and the now, to speaking of empowering relationality as experience of the divine

\textsuperscript{475} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{476} Ibid., 119-120.
within the finite, then uncontroversial yet similar themes become hotly contested, and the framework of discussion shifts to accusations of feminist diminishment of the divine.

Having contextualized common criticisms of feminist theology, it is time now to turn to an assessment of weaknesses in the theology of *Journeys by Heart*, before summarizing its strengths. The primary weakness I find, which is not judged a weakness at all by many process thinkers, is Brock’s lack of dialogue with systematic categories of theological thought. My contention is that Brock’s ideas can both enrich and be enriched by such dialogue. As a result, I address what I believe to be missed opportunities.

*Journeys by Heart* initially received positive attention in book reviews, but that notice has not been strongly sustained, and over the past twenty years, Brock has not returned to her book to bring it into dialogue with ongoing developments in systematic theology. The decision not to do so may well indicate significant differences between her concerns and my own. Nevertheless, I wish to be true to Brock’s insights while I link them to traditional categories.

My argument is not that systematic theology is the only acceptable form of theological investigation or reflection. On the contrary, the historical cordonning off topics within systematic thought, such as isolating pneumatology from soteriology, and dividing theology from spirituality have hindered much needed integration. The scientific impulse of analysis within systematic reflection is too often fueled by “divide and conquer” energy, as though credentialed expertise and intellectual precision could provide mastery in matters of mystery and grace. At the same time, legitimate systematic study cannot be made more holistic and humble unless its language is both employed and challenged. Without co-opting Brock’s work, connecting ideas in
Journeys by Heart with original sin, the imago dei, pneumatology, and feminist Trinitarian work would provide her insights with a larger framework.

Original Sin

As chapter two pointed out, Brock dismisses the concept of original sin hastily and casually, focusing entirely upon a psychological analysis that traces how innocent and vulnerable children are harmed by unhealed adults. Broken hearted people perpetuate the very harm they have received, since those who have not been loved or nurtured cannot properly love or nurture others. Thus, children are not born infected with sin, as if it were an ontological disease, but are injured within relational contexts. These injuries produce defensive and brittle patterns of living, a “false” self, until these patterns can be identified and the underlying pain of the true self healed. The process of healing begins with recognizing and taking responsibility for one’s own woundedness.

Rather than critique and reconstruct understandings of original sin, Brock dismisses the notion as irrelevant, and pursues only the psychological and interfamily investigation of woundedness. While this narrowed focus yields genuine insight and productive theological critique of an abusive patriarchal dimension to atonement theory, it is unnecessarily unmoored from a larger theology of sin, evil, and suffering in the world. Without contextualization, this limited range makes her vulnerable to several critiques.

Firstly, her reliance upon Miller’s analysis of abusive parenting tends toward a skewed blaming of primary caregivers, a position which must be handled carefully since it is especially dangerous to women. All parenting takes place within a complex field of factors which impact a child’s well-being, and exclusive focus upon the dyadic
parent/child relationship, while essential, must be contextualized and not exclude other influences. Secondly, a narrow focus makes her vulnerable to the critiques of those who claim feminist perspectives do not take full account of the reality of evil as well as those who, like Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, rush to judgment that personalistic investigation runs counter to liberationist energy.

In a sense, Brock’s limited focus colludes with such dualisms, though they are certainly not integral to her thought, by neglecting to situate her narrower range. The decision to forego a systemic structure omits a framework that may have helped her insight gain a stronger foothold in systematic dialogue. Her analysis of psychological dynamics in patriarchal understandings of power as dominative and abusive continue to be profoundly insightful and relevant. Further development of this perspective to critique social systems would only gain a larger audience for her insight and further serve to illumine the deep interrelationships between the public and the personal spheres.

For example, in a more systematic use of psychological theory, Patrick McCormick has developed a model of sin as addiction, noting that it follows similar assumptions in thinking found in those struggling with addiction, which are:

1. I am worthless, bad, evil.
2. No one can love me as I am.
3. No one can dependably meet my needs.
4. The addictive substance or process is my most important need.477

In the fourth assumption, the harmful pattern of living manifests, but, as Brock argues as well, visible sin is symptomatic of a deep inner wound. For McCormick, the wounds are the three false beliefs which produce what has traditionally been identified as

sinful behavior and habits. McCormick explores consumerism, colonialism and neo-colonialism, militarism, and sexism as examples of pathological patterns which an addictive model can help identify.\footnote{McCormick, 163-171.} His model uses psychological insight, yet draws it into the larger social context.

McCormick’s theology of sin, in its discussion of beliefs, implicitly raises the anthropological issue of the relationship between mind, heart, and spirit. The damaging power of the conviction, “I am worthless and unlovable” is not its rational force as a mental proposition which can be documented with sound argument. Its force and its ability to capture one within its destructive logic arise from a place much deeper than reason or logic. The arguments people use to defend and support such beliefs work only because of a prior conviction which is the lens through which all is experienced, remembered, and interpreted. In short, such beliefs are the evidence of a deeply wounded spirit, heart, or, as will be argued further in the next section, \textit{imago dei}.

Psychological insight requires theologically systematic grounding in order to avoid reducing the element of mystery in the experience of both sin and grace. Understanding how wounds occur is important, and Brock’s insistence upon the need for self-awareness to begin healing is also extremely important. But the process of how self-awareness is cultivated or resisted is left unexplored. The mystery of response and responsibility in a wounded context is not as developed as it needs to be for a full theology of sin. Precisely because “sin arises at a deeper level than that of conscious intention and explicit choice,”\footnote{Stephen J. Duffy, “Our Hearts of Darkness: Original Sin Revisited,” \textit{Theological Studies} \ 49 (1988): 611.} movement from the unconscious and the reflexive to
the aware and the intentional is deeply important, mysterious, and continually in need of investigation. What produces those first cracks in the stone walls of the false self? Why do some rush to reseal them while others begin to enlarge those openings to grace and healing?

The value of the symbol of original sin, as taken up by various contemporary theologians, is that it can evoke the complex mystery of victimization, when understood as the sin of the world which harms us before we are capable of choice, as well as the limited but genuine freedom persons have in the life-long process of facing and responding to the harm they have suffered, as well as the harm they have gone on to inflict, both interpersonally and, possibly, as participants in structures or lifestyles which harm others and/or are ecologically damaging. As chapter two noted, a very important strength of Brock’s is her refusal to divide people neatly into categories of oppressed/oppressors or innocent/guilty, yet in rejecting original sin, she rejects a resource for maintaining this complexity.

In his work on the symbol of original sin, Paul Ricouer has written that “sin is a power which binds man [sic] and holds him captive . . . It is the distance between ‘I want’ and ‘I can.’ It is sin as ‘misery.’”\(^\text{480}\) The internal sense of gulf, of feeling being trapped and defeated by forces stronger than one can manage is part of the value of the symbol of sin which is not fully addressed in Brock’s analysis, because it moves too quickly from brokenness in childhood to the healing which occurs as one finds and enters into loving, nurturing relationship. This model does not fully consider the strength of those walls of

shame and despair which prevent people from being able to recognize and separate from abusive relational patterns in order to form healthy connections.

In feminist theological reflection upon sin, which begins by attending to particular forms of women’s suffering, similar themes of shame and despair recur across differing contexts. Womanist Delores S. Williams’ starting point has been the degradation of Black women, and she finds a common wound of “depleted self-esteem” as a result of dehumanizing racism and sexism. Ivone Gebara starts with Latina experiences of poverty and writes that often the powerlessness of poverty “is characterized by a certain resistance to change, an insensitivity toward others’ troubles, immobility in one’s own suffering, inability to find some alternative.” Experiences of abuse and addiction also are intertwined with shame and despair.

Shame is a global sense of being unlovable, unworthy, and utterly unacceptable in one’s deepest being. It is more encompassing than fluctuating emotion; it functions as an interpretive lens which shapes all experience consistent with the perception of one’s failure and inadequacy. Shame gives birth to despair. Despair, writes Mary Louise Bringle, “ranges from apathy to anguish,” and is the result of seeing life as “bereft of promise, hope, vitality, and meaning.” In short, Bringle says, despair is “an offense


484 Ibid., 21.
against the spirit." It is a quenching of the spirit. In Brock’s language, it is a broken and wounded heart, a human heart which has lost its own relationship to its deepest self, its connection to Eros. In systematic theological language, it is being severed from God and from oneself because of the sin in the world which has taken root within.

Two important themes emerge as feminist theologians grapple with suffering and sin. First is the need for those who have been sinned against to be able to recognize the weight and the injustice of what has been done to them. The harm must not be hidden, minimized or trivialized. It must be brought out of the shadows where shame wishes to keep it. A second common thread in these differing reflections is the response of the wounded to harm and injustice, which is often despair. The sufferer must not only encounter the wounds but also develop healing ways to respond to suffering.

The pain of being deeply wounded by others traps the hurt one into a prison such that harm completely surrounds and defines her, not only in the actual moments of damaging and dehumanizing encounter, but in her entire identity as a person, for her past, present, and future. Redemptive grace is at work and healing begins when women are enabled to resist such totalizing definitions of themselves, their lives, the possibilities for their future.

The pressing questions are: What breaks through the cage? What breaks the cycle of harm which leaves the wounded paralyzed in shame and despair, fragmented within and alienated from both divine and potential human love, unable to experience herself as either lovable or loved? Brock’s work demonstrates how deep wounds are formed by abusive treatment and argues eloquently for the power of loving relationship, but what

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485 Ibid., 34.
bridges the chasm between the solipsistic nature of shame and despair and the openness necessary to receive love and begin to love oneself? Brock’s analysis diminishes the mystery and struggle in these questions by moving too quickly to the answer of loving community.

Wanda Warren Berry has suggested that recovering a sense of calling may be a way for feminist reflection to recover an aspect of tradition to liberate women from this pit. God as Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer calls to the devalued, the dehumanized, the one abused and left behind as worthless, and says to each woman in her own unique circumstance or trauma, “The evil which has been done to you and yours does not define who you are or who you may yet become.” Yet this helpful suggestion also begs a question: How does God’s call, God’s loving name, come to the wounded human, personally and communally? How is God’s voice ever heard when the wounded one’s ears are full of hateful voices and demeaning names? How does love break through the walls of the false self, the isolation of shame and the paralysis of despair?

The symbol of original sin keeps alive the agonizing depth of these questions, slowing down any rush to premature resolution. In effect, it works to preserve the mystery of healing and grace as it conveys the sense that all people are wounded (in varying degrees), and therefore need, can somehow experience, yet also, tragically, can resist healing grace.

Brock’s Image of Heart and Imago Dei

Just as Brock’s use of psychoanalytic theory of woundedness is provocative and useful but would be strengthened by connection with a systematic theology of sin, so,

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too, her creative and appealing metaphor of heart/self would be enriched by dialogue with feminist work on the *imago dei*. For Brock, heart is a metaphor for the ever-in-process, relationally-constituted self. Heart is a fluid, always-being-constructed way of being in the world, which includes one’s most private experiences, reaching down into the unremembered past and all that is not yet conscious, as well as one’s most far flung and seemingly peripheral connections.

She writes, “The self, the heart, therefore is recreated continuously through feeling, connectedness, and memory.”\(^487\) It is not a static entity, not a substance, but an image for the dynamic of living as a human person. Language requires the use of nouns and pronouns which tend to reify, in reference to person, self, and heart, but Brock seeks to name a fluid, responsive, creative, unique energy, the whole particular life of each person. Referring to the self/heart, Brock says, “That ontological structure need not be seen as an essence of self that endures through space and time, but as the fundamental character of the self recreated in every given moment by both its relationships and a sustained recollection of its past.”\(^488\)

Paradoxically, persons can be severed from relationship with their own hearts. This fragmentation and alienation indicates that heart is not simply a given in human experience but also a metaphor for capacity, potential and task. One’s heart must be found, mended, and nurtured in order to experience fullness and well-being. One of the reasons Brock’s image is so difficult to systematize is that it is inseparably gift and task, personalistic and communal, particular and universal. Both the wounding and the healing

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\(^487\) Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 17.

\(^488\) Ibid.
of heart are historical, relational processes, just as heart itself is within time and therefore continuously changing. At the same time, it is an ontological human structure.

Brock uses the word grace quite a bit, but without theological precision. Her explication of the metaphor of heart takes place under the heading “Original Grace and the Making of Human Character.” Her understanding of the divine/human relationship is appealing, yet also vague, which accounts for the accusation that her theology does not support divine transcendence. In her view, healing grace arises within human relationships, including the relationship to one’s own heart.

Those who find no transcendence in her work would likely point to a statement such as the following and hear it as denying the reality of the power of God in human life: “. . . we are called not to dependence on a power outside ourselves, but to an exploration of the depths of our most inner, personal selves [heart] as the root of our connections to all others.” Two paragraphs later, she also writes, “In exploring the depths of heart we find incarnate in ourselves the divine reality of connection, of love. The grace we find through heart reveals the incarnate graciousness, generosity, and love necessary to human life.” Yet at the same time, human relationships do not exist outside the reality of the divine/human connection, for our very humanity is gift. I believe that Brock’s dynamic vision of heart could help to reconstruct the imago dei as well as provide a structure for her more free floating descriptions of the deepest human identity. I do not claim Brock would favor this move, but I believe it is productive.

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489 Ibid., 16 [sub-headings in the book appear in italics].
490 Ibid.
491 Ibid., 17.
There is no question that the Christian tradition has developed and used the *imago dei* in ways deeply harmful to women. Many feminist theologians have analyzed this problem and the oppressive ways this doctrine has been, and in some cases continues to be promulgated. A further concern, beyond the specifically sexist ways the doctrine has functioned is also a damaging anthropocentrism. At the same time, feminists who wish to reconstruct much within Christian heritage argue that the symbol can have an empowering future.\(^{492}\)

Mary Catherine Hilkert asks, “So why bother to retrieve a symbol when its history of interpretation has proved so problematic?”\(^{493}\) The power traditional interpretations of this religious symbol have had to denigrate and devalue “the other” cannot be denied. In Hilkert’s view, that is exactly an argument for reclaiming it and working against such oppressive interpretations. Many feminist theologians see this symbol as a precious resource which can serve to ground the sacred value of human persons across all divisions. For some, this raises the specter of a universalizing and essentializing theory which would inevitably be harmful to some excluded groups. This is a legitimate and grave concern, yet at the same time, many argue that “it is possible to identify enough commonality in human experience to condemn what is unjust and inhumane.”\(^{494}\)

The first layer of value in the symbol, then, is its ability to provide a language for naming what is wrong when the image of God is defaced. Abusive treatment is wrong, no matter what the woundedness of the abuser or any extremity of circumstance. What

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\(^{492}\) Mary Catherine Hilkert, O.P. “*Imago Dei: Does the Symbol Have a Future?*” Public Lecture. Santa Clara University. April 14, 2002. [Santa Clara Lecture Vol. 8 No. 3 1-24.]

\(^{493}\) Hilkert, “*Imago Dei,*” 7.

\(^{494}\) Ibid., 10.
violates human dignity is wrong. Responses of outrage and protest against such violations are healthy human indicators of shared values even when positive images of full life may vary widely. I believe Brock’s focus on abuse as wounding heart can be strengthened by linking it to wounding the image of God.

Abuse tells someone that he or she is “different” in the sense of not deserving recognition as a human person. A person wounded by abuse learns that even if other people should not be treated in such cruel ways, she is in a different category and somehow merits this treatment. Thus, the wound of abuse is partly a loss of one’s place in humanity. The particular and the universal must be held together for the abused one to climb into a proper valuing of herself. A need in the broken hearted is to be included in the universal valuing of the sacredness of the human person and not be defined only by the particular abusive structure or relationship. When an abused person is able to value him or herself as fully human, in some sense defined beyond particular wounds and personal story, then abuse can be recognized as wrong and healing can begin.

Brock discusses the need for those wounded to develop self-awareness, to recognize harm done to them, and to learn self-acceptance. This psychological insight is enriched by a theological framework which unites the human and the divine in the *imago dei*. Loving and valuing oneself as a unique image of God is both deeply personal and yet not ego-driven or self-absorbed as some therapeutic models may become. Brock specifically states that “self-awareness comes with grief and the realization that those who are themselves wounded wound others. Such a realization allows us compassion for others as we take responsibility for our own woundedness.”

The symbol *imago dei*

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495 Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 11.
maintains the sacred value of human lives even when we realize that we have failed and have harmed even those we love. *Imago dei* provides sustaining value and ethical norm in a relational context.

In a feminist Trinitarian perspective, *imago dei* does not refer to atomistic individuals who are sacred in separateness. As Hilkert explains,

> While the dignity of every human being needs to be respected and protected, human persons do not image God primarily as individuals, but rather in “right relationship” with one another. The image of God is reflected most clearly in communities characterized by equality, respect for difference and uniqueness, and mutual love.

Feminist work on the *imago dei* develops this symbol as a relational one. It does not primarily refer to a trait which can be contained within an individual, but points toward the fullness of human life lived in healthy and nurturing communion. As with Brock’s metaphor of heart, it is relational and dynamic, not a substance or an isolatable component of an individual. Additionally, as with Brock’s image of heart, *imago dei* is both gift and task. It can be damaged and blotted out by others, but it can also be healed and strengthened. As task, Hilkert says, “human beings image God when we speak and act on behalf of life, whether that cry comes from the protest of the violated or the action of those who hold the power to change situations and structures that dehumanize or degrade.”

While Brock’s work over the years demonstrates ecological concern, heart, as it stands in *Journeys by Heart* is anthropocentric. Linking heart with *imago dei* can also

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broaden Brock’s early image into an ecofeminist perspective. In “When Being Human Becomes Truly Earthly,” Anne M. Clifford argues that an ecofeminist interpretation of *imago dei* understands God and humans as co-creators. In this view, humans are not above the world as God once was understood to be above creation; nor is nature a stage for a personalistic understanding of human salvation. Instead, she argues for solidarity as follows:

In an ecofeminist understanding of solidarity, the hierarchy of biological complexity of living and nonliving creation is not dismissed. It is tempered with an emphasis on harmony and mutual connectedness. The biological hierarchy of complexity is not a basis for valuing one part of creation over another, but rather a basis for appreciating every aspect of creation as reflecting the glory of God in distinct ways. When people image God by valuing and acting on behalf of life, this must include “how we relate to the whole of creation.” Solidarity involves not only the work of becoming informed about the state of threatened life forms and the plight of the planet, but also the empathic work of discerning appropriate life choices in light of such awareness. As Clifford concludes, “The anthropocentricism of North Atlantic culture is something that planet Earth cannot afford. To truly be earthlings, we must live in harmony with the Earth and embody an empathy with the plight of all of its peoples and with all of its life forms in our life choices.”

While I concur with Hilkert and Clifford that the *imago dei* symbol can be renewed and interpreted in ways which give women and other marginalized people

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499 Ibid., 185.

500 Ibid., 186.

501 Ibid., 187.
dignity and develop ecological solidarity, it also could be given new life by the immediacy and intimacy of Brock’s image of heart. *Imago dei* as abstract doctrine is somewhat cerebral and thinned out, even though what it symbolizes is not. Brock’s language and psychological sensitivity can also rejuvenate the systematic language and symbol.

**Pneumatology**

Brock is often referred to as an “eros theologian,” for her use of Audre Lorde’s work on Eros. She writes, “In expanding the feminist concept of erotic power to include its sacred dimensions, I am developing its theological implications as the incarnation of divine love. The presence and revelation of erotic power is the divine dimension of human existence.”

In *Journeys by Heart*, sometimes “Eros” is capitalized and sometimes not, as is also the case with [H]heart. One paragraph begins with this sentence: “In the beginning is the divine Eros, embodied in all being” and ends with this sentence: “Imagining the divine presence in the world as Heart leads us to a greater sense of the whole of life as sacred.” In the space of one paragraph God becomes Eros and Heart and further reading does not make clear whether these terms are entirely synonymous.

While I remain sympathetic to Brock’s resistance to systematization and believe this is a fully considered choice on her part in reaching for a holistic approach, I also believe that use of systematic language would serve to broaden and deepen the appeal of her work and would not necessarily extinguish the lively and dynamic, creative quality of

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503 Ibid., 46.
her ideas. In her essay “Ecclesial Discernment: Women’s Voices, New Voices, and the Revelatory Process,” Ann O’Hara Graff argues that “[D]iscernment is an effort to recognize revelation in the present.” Working with the concept of Eros is, I believe, Brock’s work to recognize and name the divine presence in human experience.

Even as Graff argues for the centrality of discernment, at the same time, she also argues that “as Christians, however differently located, we claim a common tradition and our interpretations of it make claims on each other. In that sense, we work analogically, we interpret analogically. This means we struggle with similarities-in-difference.” It seems to me that Brock’s work with Eros abandons an important analogical struggle. Her development of Eros and Heart are strong contributions but lack of dialogue with systematic thought and tradition is a weakness and a missed opportunity.

Brock describes Eros as she considers what the wounded heart needs in order to be healed. Though she describes and expresses what this means in many ways, her theme is that we are healed by and in loving relationship. Connections give rise to Eros; Eros does not descend from on high. Others, including Jesus, cannot and do not rescue or save us in any extrinsic sense. Brock “names Christ, not as the power of Jesus, but as the power of relationships.” At the same time, Brock only refers to personal relationships formed within Christian church communities. Even in a recent essay, she writes that


505 Graff, “Ecclesial Discernment,” 212.

“salvation is a complex process that is accomplished in communities of resurrection.”^507

She does not distinguish between Christian church communities which have healthy, life-giving relationships and those marked by abusive dynamics. Neither does she refer to any empowering relationships other than human-to-human.

While Brock does say that “Christa/Community is found in unexpected and expected places,”^508 a lack of systematic analysis results in missed opportunities to discuss redemption in a global, world religions context and within a sacramental, ecofeminist perspective which would see all the world as potentially revelatory of the presence of God. I suggest, then, that connecting Brock’s poetic descriptions of Eros to the work of the Holy Spirit in the world might be a fruitful project.

As chapter one of this study argued, redemption must be reflected upon within a holistic, creation theology context. From this perspective, God can be known through any aspect of creation because the cosmos itself is sacramental; that is, any particular of creation can mediate God’s presence. As Susan Ross has summarized, the sacramental principle is that “creation is sacred” precisely by its relation to the Creator.^509 The transcendent and infinite is known only through the bodily, the finite, the immanent and the particular. The immanence of God, understood as the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, or the Wisdom of God, is divine presence within finitude. God’s transcendence,

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^508 Brock, Journeys by Heart, 107.

therefore, is known through immanence, a presence which cannot be contained or captured by any one manifestation.

As a result, there is an element of ambiguity, not to God in Godself, but to the human task of recognizing and receiving presence, which can be discerned and accepted, yet also missed or rejected. Grace can be effectively received without ever being named as such, or only recognized later, in hindsight, but it can also be held at arm’s length. Furthermore, divine encounter is not subject to regulation, but is continually gift and often surprise. To use Ricoeur’s vocabulary, “events of disclosure” occur but the human as relationally present is an integral component of such events. If we cannot be relationally present, because of our woundedness, access to such events is limited.

Though relational wounds inhibit ability to receive grace, Christian faith proclaims that God’s loving presence is offered to all. Thus the soteriological question raised in previous analysis of original sin returns: What turns the wounded one toward the light of healing rather than further back into the deepest recesses of the isolated cave of pain? Given deep woundedness and engrained harmful habits, how does change occur? A relational ontology says that though our connectedness wounds, it also provides avenues for healing from those wounds. A contemporary song lyric suggests an image which evokes the healing struggle: “nothing worth having comes without some kind of fight --/Got to kick at the darkness ’til it bleeds daylight.”

While kicking at darkness may evoke the heroic, conquering, dominative paradigm, I use the songwriter’s image to suggest, instead, the power of heart/imago dei to recognize and respond to Eros, Life, Spirit is both gift from without and reconnecting and awakening deep within.

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Though Brock works only with human to human healing relationship, a relational ontology grounded in creation theology and, further, connecting Eros to the movement of Spirit abroad in the world, suggests that healing may begin in any of one’s connections, including those to one’s self and the natural world, as well as to other people. In an essay on being alone, Margaret Miles, drawing on St. Augustine, has written that “there is something which an individual knows only through gathering her/his most insightful self-knowledge and dwelling with it.”

At its deepest level, relationship to one’s own life and heart, including one’s woundedness and pain, is inseparable from relationship to God, because of the imago dei. Miles writes that this place of aloneness is also a deep place of relation to God: “this is the place at which we recognize our connectedness.”

Connection to one’s own heart enables healthy rather than parasitic or dominative human relationship.

Connection to the natural world is also a source of healing and encounter with Spirit. Each time a wounded person appreciates the hot sun on a summer afternoon, birdsong, or the glory of vibrant fall leaves, he or she kicks at darkness, refusing to let it swallow all existence, accepts a measure of light. Since all woundedness is unique, according to the givens of one’s particular context and experience, so are the fissures in pain, the cracks through which healing love may seep. Yet the suggestion that grace enters from outside the heart/self is not accurate for, at the same time, the trickle or flood of hope is also experienced as a welling up from within, an awakening of deep recognition. Here, again, lies the importance of linking Brock’s heart to the imago Dei.

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512 Ibid.
A relational ontology supports an understanding of redemptive healing which occurs in inner and outer directions simultaneously, as love flows both from within and is received from connectedness in a reciprocal dance toward fullness of life.

The relational energy of love, erotic power, in Brock’s work, offers a vital language for the empowering experience of Spirit which gives, sustains, reawakens dormant and heals crushed life. Connecting the language of Eros to Spirit can revive imagination and renew expression of discernment. Those who speak of the power of Eros speak of the wonder of the sacred, the surprising breaking through of new life and hope where none had been before. It is an incarnational, resurrection, transcendent language of human experience. It is impossible to parse out, as though a quantitative equation were possible, what portion of healing is accomplished by God as transcendent divine and what portion is accomplished by human action. The cosmos itself is graced, fullness of life is gift and the imago dei is both gift and vocation. The transcendent and immanent, infinite and finite need not be framed in dualistic opposition. Finitude knows infinity of number and variety, as countless blades of grass or grains of sand on a beach, and uniquely particular human faces. Spirit breathes through each, yet is not captured in any one material expression.

The mystery of grace, as Spirit is received yet also wells up from deep within, exceeds systematization. Since story tells the power of transformation more dynamically than theological discourse, a brief example will be summarized to flesh out this process. In Dead Man Walking, a film based upon Sr. Helen Prejean’s work with a convicted rapist/murderer in his time on death row, the murderer, from a disadvantaged background, is clearly guilty. Sr. Prejean’s work is to love him into accepting
responsibility for his horrific crime. Theologically, with no external evidence of it, she believes the image of God deep within him can be loved and awakened. In the movie, she establishes a relationship of respect with him, neither accepting his defensive denial of responsibility, nor rejecting him as unworthy of care. Once he admits his guilt and faces the irreparable horror he has done, then she tells him he can die with a dignity no one can take from him. This film portrays the deadened heart of a violent criminal being lifted into life just before he is executed.

I reference a gritty story precisely to counter the impression that feminist work with Eros does not take evil and suffering seriously or suggests a romanticized view of human relationality. The power of loving connection is a spiritual power; it may include but is not primarily about friends enjoying each others’ company in support groups, as it is sometimes caricatured. When the empowering work of Eros is connected to the power of the Holy Spirit to bring new life to what seems dead, then such misunderstandings are addressed more clearly. In addition, linking Eros to the empowering work of the Spirit addresses a potential anthropocentricism in much work on erotic power, making clear that grace and new life may be offered to some primarily through the natural world.

Feminist Trinitarian Perspective

A final opportunity for dialogue between Journeys by Heart and systematic theological tradition is with feminist Trinitarian work. Understanding God as Trinity, the holy community at the heart of all reality, making all relationality possible, has profound soteriological implications. As chapter one noted, feminist theology has critiqued Christian tradition for not being truly shaped by a deeply Trinitarian perspective but dominated by classical theism instead. The God of classical theism is not a God who can
save women in feminist soteriological reflection. When the testimony of the gospels regarding Jesus shapes theology of God, then a relational soteriology is not in tension with but understood to flow from Divine Love, named as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

In an essay responding to feminist Christology, Geoffrey Lilburne wrote that the second person of the Trinity is known in the ministry of Jesus precisely because of his radically mutual form of ministry. “[T]he full mutuality the Son experiences in the inner trinitarian relationship forms the ground and basis for Jesus' freedom in ministry.” Speculation upon the inner life of God goes beyond the range of these reflections, but the important point is to stress that the origin of the doctrine of God as Trinity is in the early Christian experience of both Jesus and the resurrected Christ, understood to be inseparable from God as Creator, the God of the Hebrews. Though Lilburne’s statement is made in a top-down fashion, when the direction is reversed, and the Jesus of scripture is understood as revelatory of Divine Power and how it moves salvifically in this world, then it becomes clear that the mutuality Jesus lived and the deep community testimony that Jesus was risen and continuing to empower his community in Spirit are inseparably Trinitarian and soteriological truths.

Chapter one reviewed the groundwork feminist Trinitarian, creation theology has laid as a necessary context for soteriological reflection. Without this context, the divine/human relationship swings unmoored and soteriology veers from emphasizing one at the expense of the other, unable to fully speak to the redemptive experience of their


514 See pages 32-51 of chapter one, which draw particularly upon the thought of Catherine Mowry LaCugna and Elizabeth Johnson.
unity. If *Journeys by Heart* were to dialogue with feminist Trinitarian work, its relational soteriology would be more clearly grounded by systematic ways of valuing both the human and the divine action necessary in redemption.

*Rita Nakashima Brock’s Strengths*  

Despite the systematic weaknesses which have been examined, Brock’s work in *Journeys by Heart* offers strengths as well. As she examines the dynamics of abuse, Brock stresses that genuine, transformative healing cannot begin until one achieves enough self-awareness to recognize the depth of one’s harm. This may sound self-apparent, but it is a point is worth stressing in a cultural milieu which ricochets between the extremes of pejorative labels of whiners or the equally harmful glorification of innocence for victims.  

Self-awareness is not automatic, easy, or comfortable, but is an on-going psychological and spiritual self-discipline. Properly exercised it leads away from self-pity to appropriate self-love and responsible living, away from hatred toward those who have done harm, not toward excusing them or trivializing the wrongs, but toward freedom from bonds of bitterness, resentment, and hate. Despite excesses which have been noted by many who critique a “therapeutic culture,” each of us must encounter the legacy of our own suffering, whether this be moderate or severe. In this context, despite the cliché, it is imperative for each person to name his or her own truth in order to begin to be set free.

Brock fruitfully uses Miller’s understanding of abuse to analyze ways patriarchy perpetuates abusive dynamics in some interpretations of the Christian faith. This

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515 As pp. 6-8 of chapter two noted, Brock has developed the argument that “innocence” is a harmful and, especially for women, a dangerous category.
important insight provides a framework for critique of atonement theories, highlighting
the personal and systematic nature of the harm such theories have done and continue to
 do. Additionally, Brock’s critique of a hero-paradigm in Christological thought is
insightful regarding ways in which even early feminist thinkers did not think outside the
patriarchal soteriological box. Brock sees how deeply harmful reliance on extrinsic
rescue has been and, as a corollary, sees how transformative loving mutuality in
relationship can be.

In Brock’s view, we awaken each other and empower each other into healing
when we participate in respectful, loving mutuality. Though broken relationship wounds,
loving relationship binds up those wounds and gives strength. In her communal
soteriology, Jesus is the whitecap on the wave, inseparable from the powerful swelling of
the relationships which surrounded him in his life and after his death. “The resurrection
affirms that no one person alone can overcome brokenness.” Redemption occurs not
by believing in a narrative regarding past events but through present communal heart and
life.

A final strength of Brock’s communal perspective is that it necessitates an
affirmation of the need for discernment, for relationality always entails risk, ambiguity
and responsible decision making. Navigating the relational web is the human task, both
receiving and giving love and care, which may entail embracing some connections while
distancing from others. Self-awareness and discernment of the Spirit are inseparable, for
we must learn to respond to what is calling us into new life and leave behind what seeks
only to crush the heart, and oppress the spirit, both from within and from without.

Brock, Journeys by Heart, 103.
Weaknesses and Strengths of Elizabeth A. Johnson

Weaknesses

As focus now shifts to an assessment of Johnson’s weaknesses, I wish to reiterate the sense in which “weaknesses” are understood in this dissertation. The search of this project is not for a perspective so all-encompassing that it has no need of others. This dissertation rejects what might be called an alchemist theological approach, in which elements of insight are valued only for their ability to together produce the one supremely valuable gold of a timelessly true theory which would never need modification. Limitations or weaknesses, therefore, are not regarded as failure or inadequacy in a moral sense, but as spaces of opportunity for deeper connection with other voices.

While Brock has been charged with losing God’s transcendence in her positive focus upon redemption as an event of human community, in an entirely different vein, Johnson’s theology of hope has been criticized. A limitation in Johnson’s *Friends of God and Prophets* is a corollary of her majestic, faith-filled vision. While her powerful explication of hope is inspiring and up-lifting, for some, it may also move a little too quickly through dark areas of suffering, but this limitation is one of tone rather than content. Johnson never blithely ignores or diminishes suffering. At the same time, her buoyancy may not fully convince some who are perhaps more oriented to the pervasiveness of pain in the world.

Jay McDaniel’s essay “The Holy Spirit and the Cosmos in the Work of Elizabeth A. Johnson” argues that while Johnson’s cosmology has much to offer, she does not fully

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517 Margaret Farley’s objection that Johnson’s hope does not go far enough and is not strong enough on personal existence after death, has been referenced in chapter three. See her “Feminist Theology and Ethics: The Contributions of Elizabeth A. Johnson,” Things New and Old: Essays on the Theology of Elizabeth A. Johnson, eds. Phyllis Zagano and Terrence W. Tilley (NY: Crossroad, 1999), 1-19.
address suffering in the evolutionary process. He finds deep affinities with her thought and his own process perspective, even acknowledging that “she says it so much more beautifully, and with a rich sense of ways in which the classical heritage can point in similar directions.”

He wishes to see more dialogue with her theology of hope and process work on creaturely suffering. For example, he asks how the Holy Spirit is present in the death of prey. How does the Holy Spirit’s guidance in creation function when needs of creatures are incompatible? His critique does not say that what she has offered is unhelpful, but he presses for more.

Though McDaniel’s questions are not framed in the vocabulary of the divine transcendence/immanence controversy, particularly as found in assessments of feminist theology, a similar theme emerges. How is God present in the everyday reality of creaturely experience, including experiences of suffering, pain, and apparent meaninglessness? How does Johnson’s incarnational, sacramental, hopeful vision speak to the terrified screams of a creature who knows its death is approaching? Johnson herself has responded to this critique by saying that “the natural world is cruciform; the shekinah lies in the dust.”

Though Johnson clearly encounters the surd quality of suffering in the world, her work does not stay in those affective spaces of pain, doubt, risk or deep ambiguity for long. While acknowledging these as important aspects of human experience, the strong current of her theology drives consistently toward faith and hope. While her trajectory is, in part, a corollary of her understanding of the transcendence of Sophia, or, as she has put


it, the character of God, it may also be due, in part, to her own deep sense of a theological home. The strength of Johnson’s deep rootedness in the stability of classical tradition may thus also be a limitation. As chapter three noted, her work on community does not fully embrace the experience of the exiled. Some find themselves without a home. This particular pain is not fully encountered in Johnson’s communion of the saints theology. As I argued in chapter three, many experience ache and longing in institutionally religious homelessness, a pain which may last a lifetime. For those experiencing such exile, risk and ambiguity, as more pressing constants in life, may color faith a darker shade.

Johnson’s positive focus can also be seen in two potentially significant omissions in her historical survey of the communion of saints. Firstly, since she clearly established the deep connection between this Christian teaching and the first martyrs, it may have been appropriate for her study to also note unholy links between glorification of martyrdom, the communion of the saints, and the crusades. While unhesitating in her critique of elitism in the patron model, which quickly came to dominate Christian understanding of sainthood, Johnson does not probe the underbelly of possible links between this model and the violence of the crusades in which laity were encouraged to become holy warriors, an image inseparable from martyrdom. By taking up the sword, in the crusades, an ordinary sinner could be transformed into a glorious martyr. In an anonymous account written during the First Crusade, the author says, “On that day more than a thousand of our knights or foot-soldiers suffered martyrdom, and we believe that they went to Heaven and were clad in white robes and received the martyr’s palm.”

Death in battle would instantly transform even a deeply soiled earthly life into holy purity.

In making holiness accessible only to the extraordinary, especially to martyrs, and not to the ordinary, may the patron model of saints have contributed to the motivations prompting thousands to attack and kill in the name of Christ? Johnson’s reconstruction of the symbol as liberating clearly critiques devaluing of ordinary people, especially women, in the elitist aspects of the patronage model. Further examination into the possible complicity between this hierarchical perspective and the unutterable violence which is part of the history of Western Christianity would be profitable. It is perhaps symptomatic of Johnson’s deeply positive orientation that her historical contextualization of the symbol makes no reference at all to the Crusades.

A second historical omission in Johnson’s study is one of emphasis. In her review of the feast of All Saints, Johnson acknowledges that “due to the growth of the idea of purgatory, people were no longer certain that all those who had died were covered by this commemoration.”521 Her critique of this function of medieval teaching on purgatory, however, is limited to this one sentence. In Johnson’s assessment, All Saints Day has failed to carry the comfort it ought to provide in large measure because of its lingering association with the Druid Samhain and the placement of All Souls on November 2. After briefly noting how the feast has been compromised, Johnson quickly

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521 Johnson, *Friends of God*, 98.
goes on to recover it. In a subsequent chapter, she also provides positive reinterpretation of purgatory.\textsuperscript{522}

A more extended assessment of the damaging weight certain understandings of purgatory placed upon the living for so many years, and the consequent effect this may have had upon causing the symbol of the communion of the saints to fall asleep for many would have been helpful to Johnson’s study. In \textit{Saving Paradise}, Brock and Parker write

> The living could pray for the dead, perform masses for them, or buy indulgences to lighten their purgatorial load. The church may have created these practices partly as a pastoral strategy to alleviate fears of hell and to offer hope for life beyond death. However, this focus on the dire fate of the dead meant that the deceased became a spiritual concern and financial burden to their survivors rather than a source of spiritual comfort and help to the living.\textsuperscript{523}

This assessment of the dead as continuing burden rather than source of inspiration, strength or comfort contributes to Johnson’s arguments for why the symbol fell out of use and how it can be revived. The symbol of purgatory need not be oppressive, but if it is imaged as a pain-filled place of torment, then loved ones are not only missed in the absence of death but continually grieved since death has only taken them into more suffering. The painful loss of death is made more difficult and memory of the departed can only bring grief. Additionally, and once again, if only extraordinary people can be understood to be holy, then all but a few remote spiritual heroes die not into the embrace of a loving God, but into prolonged pain, and the deceased become a drain on the resources of the living, not a great cloud of witnesses bringing hope.

\textsuperscript{522} Johnson, \textit{Friends of God}. History and assessment of All Saints is found on pages 97-99; reconstructionist suggestions for keeping this day are found on pages 250-262; contemporary interpretations of purgatory are offered on pages 187-189.

\textsuperscript{523} Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, \textit{Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire} (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), 311.
A final weakness, explored in the previous chapter, is that *Friends of God and Prophets* does not develop what Johnson has laid a solid foundation for in terms of dialogue with those in other world religions, atheists, and those with ecological values but no religious commitment. Her study has certainly provided a sure theological base which will contribute to these on-going conversations.

**Strengths**

Overall, Johnson’s *Friends of God and Prophets* richly merits the praise it has received. It is a work of mature scholarship and depth, a creative reconstruction of a symbol which arose deep within tradition. Johnson’s historical research is thorough, her feminist critique insightful, and her retrieval truly does free the symbol to sing again for women and others who have been defined out of sainthood. One of Johnson’s greatest strengths is the cosmological framework she brings to renewing the communion of the saints, freeing an historically deeply anthropocentric symbol into an inclusive, ecofeminist, relational vision. A holistic retrieval, it also brings forward the aesthetic dimension of this communal symbol, pointing toward the bonds between beauty, imagination, and the empowering presence of Spirit in the world.

**Journeys by Heart and Friends of God and Prophets in Dialogue**

*Friends of God and Prophets* only directly cites Brock’s text once. In some ways, it is surprising that Johnson herself did not at least note Brock’s feminist Christa/Community. It seems to me that, while appreciative of aspects of their work, Johnson keeps a certain intentional distance from the “eros theologians.”

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524 *Friends of God and Prophets*, 36. “…feminist theology works to heal patriarchy’s broken heart, in Rita Nakashima Brock’s beautiful metaphor.”
Even more strikingly, in her most recent work, co-authored with Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*, Brock does not reference *Friends of God and Prophets* at all in the chapter entitled “So Great a Cloud,” which surveys the early church’s understanding of the relationship between the faithful dead and the living in the context of the history of the early martyrs. Though it is not a systematic study of the development of the communion of the saints as symbol or doctrine, this chapter does survey its experiential presence in the first several centuries of the church. In concluding the chapter, the authors state, “Not isolated heroism, self-denial, or self-sacrifice, martyrdom was an act of participation in the communion of saints.” This chapter’s comments upon martyrs draws particularly upon Daniel Boyarin and Peter Brown, with no reference at all to feminist theological work on the meaning of the communion of saints, Elizabeth Johnson, or *Friends of God and Prophets*.

Perhaps even more surprisingly, even in chapter eight, “Hidden Treasures of Wisdom,” which begins with the very verses from the Wisdom of Solomon from which Johnson drew her title *Friends of God and Prophets*, Johnson’s work on Wisdom is not referenced. Though the focus of this chapter is historical and architectural in its discussion of the Hagia Sophia, since the study seeks to draw theological conclusions, the

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526 The third chapter, which begins by quoting Hebrews 12:1-3, from which the chapter title is drawn.

527 Brock and Parker, *Saving Paradise*, 82.

omission of reference to Johnson on these topics strikes me as rather thin scholarship on these points.\footnote{At the time of this writing, \textit{Saving Paradise} has been released for only a matter of weeks, published in July 2008. See \url{http://www.publishersweekly.com/engletter/CA6563102/2287.html?q=saving+paradise}; Internet; accessed July 23, 2008. When theological reviews come out, I would anticipate further criticism in the vein I have noted. Also, for example, in assessing the theological impact of the Black Death, the authors make no mention at all of Julian of Norwich. Despite its length (420 pages), such omissions suggest pointed selectivity rather than thoroughness of detail. The authors’ thesis that early Christian visual media is theologically significant is not supported by the presentation of the book itself, in the sense that when visuals are used, they are small, black and white figures. More often, no visuals are included and the reader must depend simply on the authors’ textual descriptions of mosaics, etc., which is often frustrating and tedious.}

\textit{Friends of God and Prophets} is only referenced once, in a footnote along with Mary Hunt’s \textit{Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship} (1991), to support a statement that Jesus’ relationships were audaciously outside the friendship norms of Greek philosophy. This casual reference does not indicate any genuine familiarity with Johnson’s thesis.\footnote{\textit{Saving Paradise}, 46, citation 32. The corresponding endnote gives the bibliographic information for the two books mentioned with no further textual comment.}

Although Elizabeth Johnson has singly authored texts and Rita Nakashima Brock’s book length works have been co-authored (with the exception of \textit{Journeys by Heart}), Brock’s theological voice is much more individualistic than Johnson’s. While Johnson refuses to abandon aspects of a heritage to which she is lovingly committed, Brock’s relationality does not extend to remaining in dialogue with traditionally systematic discourse. This contrast may in part reflect their respective Roman Catholic and Protestant heritages of interpretation. Brock might also assert, however, that this difference reflects her Asian-American identity, whereas Johnson’s style may also reflect a European heritage.

Having noted the lack of dialogue between Brock and Johnson directly, in their texts, I now wish to probe similarities and compatibilities in order to bring together
mutually enriching insights. Firstly, resonances in their language and imagery indicate a shared orientation. While Johnson remains clearly and solidly within the classical, neo-Thomist, Roman Catholic heritage, she shares an orientation to images of fluidity with the process-oriented Brock. Brock’s striking image of Jesus as a whitecap on a wave has been noted already. In Brock’s image, the ocean wave is meant to evoke relationships of nurturing and empowering community, which bring forth Jesus and his ministry, and receive him in his death. The image suggests that Christ is larger than Jesus and that the human community is coterminous with Christ. As Catherine Keller noted in her review of *Journeys by Heart*, Brock “leaves underdeveloped the links of Christa/Community to the cosmic Eros.”

For Brock, the fluid, empowering and sustaining connection, the ocean water, is the redeeming community itself.

Johnson uses a similar image when she refers to the history of faithful communities as “a continuous river of holy lives.” She also uses water imagery to evoke the divine when she refers to “Holy Wisdom who makes the world sacred and connects people to each other as a great sea of support.” The similarity and difference between these images encapsulates both the affinity and distance between how Brock and Johnson speak of the divine/human relationship.

Brock references transcendence consistently and exclusively as the patriarchal omnipotence of the classical theist God. She does not use the vocabulary of “immanence” at all. The language of *Journeys by Heart* cedes explicit vocabulary of

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533 Ibid., 26-27.
transcendence to a harmful atonement theory which portrays God as a Father who demands his own son’s death. In rejecting that theology, she also rejects the word transcendent. Nevertheless, the Erotic power flowing among human community, healing what has been broken by abusive relationship and bringing life into fullness, has an implicitly transcendent dimension. In her thought, although the relationship is not fully explained, community cannot be divorced from the Heart of the Universe or Erotic power, her language for the divine. At the same time, for her, healing, redeeming power is loving relationality expressed in human community. The great sea of support is the redemptive community. While the lack of systematic delineation of this relationship suggests rather than articulates this connection, I have argued that her language and imagery can be fruitfully used to evoke transcendence.

In speaking of the resurrection, Johnson says, “In their [followers of Jesus] experience, the power of the Spirit shaping them into a community of the friends of God in Christ was so strong that death could not break the relationship.”\textsuperscript{534} Brock could almost have written this statement, except that she would identify the community as Christ and for Johnson the emphasis is always on God. In Johnson’s language the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, flows through all, making all sacred. In an essay quoted in chapter three of this study, Johnson wrote that the Spirit dwells at the heart of the world,\textsuperscript{535} a similar image to Brock’s Heart of the Universe. Earlier reference was also made to this statement by Johnson: “the life-giving Spirit of God is in all things not as

\textsuperscript{534} Ibid., 64.

part of their essence but as the innermost source of their being, power, and action. There is, in other words, a constitutive presence of God at the heart of things.” Holy Wisdom is the fluid glue holding all in relationship. Johnson’s language, while fluid, dynamic and relational, is also thoroughly grounded in a systematic, panentheistic vision, explicitly naming God as both mysteriously transcendent and immanent. In addressing concerns raised regarding her use of the name Sophia, she clarified that in her work, Sophia does not “refer to an ontologically distinct object, but to the mystery of the transcendent God immanently present in the world.”

For those already convinced of the value of a relational perspective, Brock’s presentation is fresh and inspiring. For those skeptical or resistant to feminist perspectives, Brock’s presentation may appear idiosyncratic and inaccessible. Brock’s creative, evocative, passionate language and imagery is limited by murky analysis, which makes her dynamic presentation vulnerable to dismissive treatment. Elizabeth Johnson’s clearly systematic work demands more rigorous attention from potential critics in part because her arguments draw from deep within the tradition, even as she also works to creatively reconstruct it. She dismantles the false opposition of transcendent/immanent critiques in a straightforward manner while at the same time writing in a creative, at times even playful spirit. By this I mean her style as well as content conveys delight and exuberance.

The language Brock and Johnson use for redemptive healing is also similar. With vocabulary similar to Brock’s, Johnson writes that recalling the faithful deceased gives to

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the living “courage and heart for the journey.” In critiquing the patronage model which dominated Christian understanding of saints, Johnson argues it has been damaging to women because it has stolen from them “a sense of their own sacred power.”

Additionally, for Brock and Johnson redemptive community is not a static entity or an aggregate of individuals but a way of living, a way of participating in relationality. While Brock does not dogmatically identify this as exclusively Christian, *Journeys by Heart* refers to Christa/Community in ways that seem to assume a Christian church context, a weakness due to lack of specificity rather than an exclusionary impulse. Johnson explicitly investigates the inclusive nature of the communion of the saints symbol, though, as chapter three argued, its openness toward various religious and secular ways, as well as its deeply ecological value, need developed emphasis.

Both works, then, provide perspectives which could develop more dialogue with atheism, secular humanism, and the world’s religious traditions. Brock’s understanding of the transformative process of redemption, which she emphasizes as taking place in loving community, begins and continues with the task of ever deepening self-awareness, in which one is pulled away from deeply entrenched structures of meaning toward new openness. This is a risky, painful process for the dissolution of security does not lead quickly or automatically toward firm ground. This process has deep resonance with what mystics have called the dark night of the soul, described by Michael Buckley as “the progressive purification and transformation of the person through what he cherishes and

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539 Ibid., 131.
Buckley argues that apophatic theology is “not a theology about conclusions in statements. It is primarily an experiential process.”

Continual reflection and letting go of one’s religious projections is intertwined with coming to terms with the wounds and weaknesses, the inclinations which orient one to cling to that which is not God. On this point, Buckley finds “an intersection . . . of religious criticism” between atheism and contemplative practice of the apophatic tradition. The common ground between those who do not abandon the word God and those for whom “God” makes no sense may be sensitivity toward our historically situated thought and awareness of the deep psychological forces, known and unknown, which influence our understanding including our religious beliefs.

Johnson’s perspective does not examine the psychological dimension of transformation but emphasizes that the communion of saints includes all who seek and search in good will to live good lives, to live the truth to the best of their understanding. The passionate quest for meaning and truth, and an intentional devotion to living a loving, ethical life is not restricted to one faith or to theists of any stripe. Johnson does not look within persons to consider the internal workings of transformative grace, but emphasizes the unity in difference at the heart of the symbol of the communion of saints.

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541 Ibid., 690.

542 Ibid., 698.

543 In *Doubt: A History: The Great Doubters and Their Legacy of Innovation from Socrates and Jesus to Thomas Jefferson and Emily Dickinson* (New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), historian Jennifer Michael Hecht has argued that “[F]aith can be a wonderful thing, but it is not the only wonderful thing. Doubt has been just as vibrant in its prescriptions for a good life, and just as passionate for the truth” (Introd., xxi).
In this symbol, Christian faith articulates a way of valuing those outside church communities.

Without some shimmering glimpse of the beautiful, without some rumor of glory spread abroad in the world, spirit withers and fails. Both theologians also recognize an aesthetic dimension to redemption, which encompasses beauty, hope, imagination, memory, narrative, and solidarity in difference. Each of these distinctly important elements has both a social and an interior or psychological dimension. While I find this sensibility in Brock, her primarily psychological orientation stops short of an explicitly sacramental understanding of the world, which is a deep reservoir for Johnson’s perspective. I wish to survey these elements under a broadly sacramental and aesthetic umbrella to underscore the holistic value of considering them as interlocking and ultimately inseparable aspects of redemptive experience.

Beauty, hope, and imagination are closely linked. As Susan Ross has said, in *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology*, “We encounter God not by ‘leaving the world’ but by immersing ourselves more deeply in the world.”544 The touch of beauty in finitude awakens hope, imagination, and new life. The first cracks in the walls of wounds which close us off from love may be simple: the joy of violets blooming in a sidewalk crack, the play of light and shadow on translucent, green leaves, the eagerness of a pet for one’s attention, an unexpected gesture of kindness by a stranger. It is important to acknowledge that for a variety of reasons, grace may come to some

primarily in the wonder and awe they experience through the beauty and majesty in the natural world.\textsuperscript{545} 

Grace is offered in infinite variety, yet time is an essential ingredient in its penetrating effectiveness. Those who have been cut off from their own hearts know the deep, painful inability to absorb beauty, even when its allure may be intellectually recognized. Relational wounds entrench brittle, fearful responses, either aggressive or defensive, which isolate. Redemptive healing occurs not in cognitive assessment of beauty but in relational presence, when one’s heart is stretched open to receive such encounters. Immersion in the apparently small and simple forms of grace in everyday beauty may bathe wounded \textit{imago dei} into new life, both at personal and social levels.

Memory, narrative, and solidarity are also ideally intertwined with each other, as well as with hope and beauty, in redemptive living. Brock emphasizes the importance of becoming aware of one’s own woundedness, which is personal memory, and Johnson stresses the place of memory as a community practice. Both are necessary and can facilitate each other. A triumphalistic community which has no place for subversive memory or lament will suppress personal self awareness by pressing all experience into its mold. A community which remembers what must be mourned and grieved, what cannot be tamed by explanation, provides the emotional space for lament, necessary to self-awareness for the wounded.

Memory is shaped in narrative; telling the stories of outrage, injustice, and harm resists personal shame and despair as well as participation in oppressive structures, which

\textsuperscript{545} This is the ethos of what has been called religious or spiritual naturalism or naturalistic spirituality. A good example is Ursula Goodnenough, \textit{The Sacred Depths of Nature} (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998).
would seek to keep such experience hidden. Telling the stories, both personally and communally, kicks against the darkness, not by denying its presence but by bringing it into daylight. The creative work of narrating one’s experience can be a vital act of resistance for those who have been oppressed and deeply harmed. The task of structuring a story can be redemptive practice in that it affirms the teller’s humanity in the face of the dehumanizing treatment being recounted. “[T]he activity of re-creating life in art clashes with the terrible alternative of passive surrender to the lifelessness of despair.”

In *Writing as Resistance: Four Women Confronting the Holocaust: Edith Stein, Simone Weil, Anne Frank, Etty Hillesum*, the author argues that each of the women in the book’s title practiced the reflective writing of “self-introspection as a mode of resistance.” Their intellectual acts of ordering their present horror in writing about it helped them to live. Though each of these women wrote of the present rather than of memory, the extremity of their contexts points to the power of narrative for meaning making. The aesthetic dimension of narration was a source of life to which they returned until the Nazis took their lives (with the exception of Weil).

Narrative functions not only as personal and communal meaning making but also as ethical and empathic arousal to solidarity. The empathetic opportunity of narrative, imaginatively participating in another’s story, facilitates transformative living. As with Jesus’ parables, stories place us within a plot and offer the grace of responding in solidarity with the struggle recounted. Stories told from various perspectives provide possibilities for encounter with others in ways which can awaken new awareness. As


547 Ibid., 5.
Brock’s work emphasizes, life does not divide people into unilateral camps of oppressor/oppressed. We need each others’ stories to confront the ambiguity and complexity of our locations.

Solidarity is response to ethical appeal, to engaged recognition of the claim the other or the unjust situation has upon one. Feminist ethicists have examined the affective aspect of ethical action and have explored the role of experience in moral action. Margaret Farley writes that truth “asks for something less like a submission of will and more like an opening of the imagination and of the whole mind and heart.”\(^5\) Solidarity is more than submitting one’s will to a moral duty. It is action of awakened engagement, increased and deepened relational awareness. By eliciting empathy and expanding awareness, narrative can spur or deepen solidarity.

In conclusion, this chapter has argued that despite the quite apparent differences between Brock and Johnson, Journeys by Heart and Friends of God and Prophets can profitably dialogue with each other to inform a feminist, relational soteriology. Each of these theological voices offers helpful reflection and evocative language for the ongoing task of articulating what the word “redemption” means in Christian discourse. For those who claim this word and this experience, despite the harmful ways in which the Christian language of salvation has and often continues to function in North America, Brock and Johnson offer resources for tracing this mystery which exceeds the grasp of any one theological voice. Since redemption occurs in the particularities of lives, rumors of glory and grace are never at an end, never exhausted by one perspective. Each voice which lifts up a trace of divine presence blesses all.

Rita Nakashima Brock  (Primary Texts)


________. “Difficult Angels: Messengers from God are not Cute Cherubs: Their Job is to Make Us Pay Attention to What God Wants Us to Know.”  Church and Society 89 (May/June 1999): 13-21.


________. “The Greening of the Soul: A Feminist Theological Paradigm of the Web of Life.”  Setting the Table: Women in Theological Conversation.  Eds. Rita


“Response to Samir Amin from the US Minorities Perspective.” *Voices from the Third World* 22 (December 1999): 123-29.


Rita Nakashima Brock (Co-authored Texts)


Elizabeth A. Johnson (Primary Texts)


Elizabeth A. Johnson (Co-authored Texts)


Selected Resources


