

**LETTY M. RUSSELL: INSIGHTS AND CHALLENGES OF
CHRISTIAN FEMINISM**

by

Zohreh Abdekhodaie

**A thesis
presented to the University of Waterloo
in fulfillment of the
thesis requirement for the degree of
Master of Theological Studies**

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2008

©Zohreh Abdekhodaie 2008

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

Zohreh Abdekhodaie

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Zohreh Abdekhodaie

ABSTRACT

This study offers a critical assessment of Letty Mandeville Russell's contributions to feminist theology with a view to gleaning wisdom for Muslim women who also wrestle with the issue of justice for women. As a liberation theologian, Russell's definition and construction of feminist theology is based on two elements: commitment to Christianity and strong advocacy of feminism. Russell believes that in human communities, marginalized people, particularly women, are kept down and disempowered in society, history, and the church. Russell recognizes tradition as the key challenge for feminists and she struggles with "all oppressive expressions of Christian tradition."¹ She notes the androcentric and sexist elements of the Bible, but she refuses to leave the church. Rather, her attempt is to proclaim the "prophetic- messianic"² message of the gospel while advocating a critical approach to the biblical text.

Thus this thesis will explore the question: Is it possible to reconstruct a theology in a systematic way that is faithful to religious convictions while advocating feminism. In addition to Russell's books and articles, which form the primary sources for this study, two other Christian feminists (Fiorenza and Harder) will be drawn into the discussion in order to further illuminate the various building blocks that women use to link faith and feminism.

Chapter one provides a background for the feminist movement and introduces feminist theology, in order to position Russell within the wide spectrum of feminist

¹ M. Shawn Copeland. "Journeying to the Household of God: the Eschatological Implications of Method in the Theology of Letty Mandeville Russell." In *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell*. Ed. Margaret A. Farley and Serene Jones (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 28.

² Ibid.

theologians who attempt to reconcile their Christian faith and their convictions and vision for women.

Chapter two looks Russell's claim that she is both Christian and feminist. Russell's definition of feminism, faith, and their inter-relationship will be illuminated as a key to her identity as a feminist theologian. The chapter shows not only how Russell understands these two commitments, often understood as contradictory, but also shows how Russell's roots in liberation theology have aided her in building a bridge between faith and feminism.

Chapter three deals with the methodology that Russell uses to build a bridge between faith and feminism. She proposes a process of action-reflection in which women gain a new understanding of faith and add new perspectives to Christian theology.

Chapter four analyzes Russell's contributions in dealing creatively and faithfully with tradition while being both a Christian and a feminist. She proposes a paradigm shift for the community that does theology; a shift from a paradigm of domination to a paradigm of partnership. She believes that through this shift, all marginalized people, including women, can find their own voices and thus be included in the promises of God to his people.

The concluding chapter, chapter five, offers a grandstand view of all of the building blocks that Russell uses to construct a bridge between faith and feminism, thus making apparent how it is possible to advocate feminism and also be committed to Christianity. At the same time, this chapter will also consider whether the same building blocks can be used to build the same kind of bridge for Muslim women.

IN THE NAME OF GOD THE ALL-BENEFICENT, THE ALL-MERCIFUL
All praise belongs to God

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank many who helped me in the past few years in my studies and my research.

My greatest debt of gratitude is to my supervisor, Professor Lydia Neufeld Harder, for guiding me step-by-step throughout my research, for the great effort that she made to understand me as a Muslim woman who knew very little about Christianity and feminism, and for correcting me in various steps of the thesis writing. I will always remember her as a diligent, knowledgeable, patient, and kind-hearted woman whom God has granted a heart full of courage.

A large debt of gratitude is owed to my husband, Dr. Mohammad Sharifkhani, for his constant encouragement and fruitful discussions. I would like to express my appreciation to him for his sincere support throughout my two long years of intense studies. I also would like to thank my son, Mahdi, for bearing with me in the hectic days and nights of my studies. These are the ones who deserve the credit for making it all possible.

My special thanks are due as well to my professors at Conrad Grebel University College (CGUC). Namely, I would like to thank Professor A. James Reimer for motivating me at the beginning of my studies and for taking the time to teach me the basics of Christianity, and Professor Jim Pankratz for his cooperation as the director of theological studies in CGUC and the instructor of the course, “Christian Faith and Other Faiths.”

I would also like to thank the CGUC graduate studies committee for their financial support over the past two years. This work, which can also be seen in the framework of a dialogue between the two faiths of Islam and Christianity concerning one of the key challenges to both faith communities, could not have been possible without CGUC's generous support. I also would like to thank Mrs. Chris Matsuda, the graduate studies administrator, for her consideration.

It was a pleasure to be with great friends, Dalinda, Susan, Ann, Ruth, and Sue. I never expected that I could make so many Christian friends when I started my studies in CGUC. After being with them for two years, I feel very connected to them.

Last but not the least, I would like to thank Mr. Yousef Daneshvar for fruitful discussions.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my husband Dr. Mohammad Sharifkhani for his constant support throughout the preparation of the thesis.

Zohreh Abdekhodaie, 2008

Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	vi
Content	viii
INTRODUCTION	1
A. The Purpose of This Study	1
B. The Methodology of This Study	3
C. A Brief Overview of the Life and Writings of L.M. Russell	5
CHAPTER I: RUSSELL’S CONTEXTS: SITUATING RUSSELL WITHIN FEMINIST THEOLOGY	7
A. Historical Background	8
1. First Wave of Feminism and Religion	9
2. Second Wave of Feminism and Feminist Theology	11
3. The Approach to the Bible by Women in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries	11
B. Feminist Theology	13
1. Basic Definitions	13
2. The Nature of Feminist Theology	14
C. Russell’s Place among Feminist Theologians	17
1. Russell’s Theological and Religious Context	17
2. Russell’s Theological Vision	20
3. Russell’s Theological Method	22
CHAPTER II: RUSSELL’S THEOLOGY: EXPLORING RUSSELL’S SELF-DESIGNATION AS FEMINIST/CHRISTIAN	24
A. Commonalities of Feminism and Liberation Theologies	25
1. Common Themes (or Processes)	26
a. Humanization	27
b. Conscientization	27
c. Dialogue and Community	28
2. Common Perspectives	29
a. Biblical Promise	30
b. World as History	31
c. Salvation as a Social Event	31
3. Common Methodologies	32
B. Feminist Theology	33
1. Feminism	34
2. Faith	35
3. Two Become One	37
C. Concluding Discussion of Russell’s Theology	42

**CHAPTER III:
RUSSELL’S METHODOLOGY: IDENTIFYING INSIGHTS AND CHALLENGES
IN RUSSELL’S FEMINIST**

THEOLOGY	46
A. Feminist Methodology	47
B. Insights of Feminists that Arise out of a Shift in Methodology	55
C. Challenges for Feminists that Arise out of Feminist Methodology	58
1. Key Challenges that Arise for Feminists Because of their Emphasis on Experience	58
2. The Key Challenge by Feminists: How to Deal with Theological Traditions	60
D. Concluding Discussion of Russell’s Methodology	67

**CHAPTER IV:
RUSSELL’S CONTRIBUTION: INVESTIGATING FEMINIST
UNDERSTANDING OF AUTHORITY**

	73
A. Authority	74
1. Definition of Authority	74
2. Various Kinds of Authority	76
3. Source of Authority: The Relationship Between Human and Divine Authority	77
B. Russell’s Paradigm of Authority	81
1. Authority of Domination: Paradigm of Pyramid	82
2. Authority of Partnership: Paradigm of Doxology or Prais	84
3. Summary of Russell’s Paradigm of the Authority of Tradition	86
a. Privilege of Authority “in” Community over Authority “over” Community for Christian Feminists	86
b. Shift in Authority	88
c. Nonsexist Interpretation	89
C. Concluding Discussion of Russell’s Contribution	98

**CHAPTER V:
CONCLUSION: A MUSLIM WOMAEN’S PERSPECTIVE ON RUSSELL’S
THOUGHT**

	102
i. Russell’s Building Blocks and Self Designation	103
ii. Islam, Muslims, and Feminism	109
1. Islam as a Liberating Message for Women	110

2. Challenges I: Muslims' Traditions	118
3. Challenges II: Social Differences in the Scripture	119
a. Source of Authority	121
C. What I Have Learned From Russell	125

APPENDIX I:

CATEGORIES OF FEMINIST THEOLOGY

CATEGORIES OF FEMINIST THEOLOGY	128
A. Stuckey's Categorization	128
1. Revisionist	128
2. Renovationist	129
3. Revolutionary	130
4. Rejectionist	130
B. Slee's Categorization	130
1. Christian Feminists, Post Christian Feminists & Feminist Theologians	130
2. Feminists Liberal, Romantic Feminists, and Radical or Marxist feminists	131
3. Womanist Theology and Mujerista Theology	132

APPENDIX II:

SEVEN STEPS FIORENZA TAKES IN HER METHODOLOGY

133

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIBLIOGRAPHY	135
A. Primary Sources	135
1. Russell's Books	135
2. Russell's Articles	135
B. Secondary Sources	136
1. Reviews of Russell's work	136
2. Dissertations on Russell's work	137
3. Critical Discussions of Russell's Work	138
4. Feminist Theology: Other Approaches	138
5. References in Persian	141

INTRODUCTION

From the beginning of the various feminist movements, women have observed that injustice toward women is rooted in patriarchal societies. They have indicated that to establish justice, there is a need to examine every institution, including religious institutions, to see how both the thought patterns and the structures contribute to oppression. Since Christian theology was in the hands of men for many years, women needed to study the Bible and to reconstruct a theology that considers women's experience. Some feminists highlight the anti-women aspects of the Bible and feel that it is hopeless to try to change the patriarchal attitude of the church. In contrast, some Christian feminists hope to reconstruct a theology in such a way as to liberate women. It is this reconstruction that may be helpful to me as a Muslim woman who is interested in women's liberation from oppression.

A. The Purpose of This Study

I was born and raised in a religious family belonging to the Shi'a³ Muslim tradition. My parents say that they had been waiting for a daughter for several years, so that they recognized me as a gift of God that was bestowed on them. During the twenty-nine years of my life, I have never felt that there was any difference in how my brothers and I were treated in our home. Therefore, I grew up with the belief that one can be a religious person and also think that men and women are equal.

When I was getting my undergraduate degree, I studied the issue of women's rights in Islam and the portrayal of women in the Qur'an⁴ alongside the feminist

³ This spelling is more true to the Arabic.

⁴ This spelling is more true to the Arabic.

movement of my country. It appeared to me that the roots of injustice against women arise in two places: on the one hand, there is the misunderstanding of the word of God among those who claim to be religious authorities, and on the other hand, there is the disregard for and total rejection of God's word among the unreligious and in secular societies.

Throughout this study my challenge will be to find the answer to this question: is it possible to reconstruct a theology in a systematic way that is faithful to religious convictions and also advocates women's liberation. Therefore I will explore the thinking of one Christian feminist theologian who believes that the answer to the above question is: yes, it is possible. Throughout the thesis, I will attempt to trace the development of this theologian's thinking and to illuminate her contribution to feminist theology. Thus my focus will be on Letty Russell's approach with an eye to seeing whether and how it could be useful in my own Muslim context.

I have chosen Letty Mandeville Russell because she has had a significant role in the development of feminist theology. Since Russell identifies herself as a person who is committed to both Christianity and to feminism, her writings are particularly suited to understanding the development of a theology that considers both faithfulness and liberation. My study will explore some of Russell's theological writings and point out her significant contribution to an understanding of feminist theology while also suggesting that her paradigm of authority is a key challenge for feminist believers.

The reason that I have chosen Russell as a resource is that, despite the attitude of many who left the church, seeing it as hopeless and antithetical to women's liberation, she stayed in the church. She believes that the experiences and stories of a variety of people are not a threat to the Gospel but an invitation to expand our understanding of how "the

Word of God is believed.”⁵ There is no doubt that she is known as a pioneer in feminist theology. Through her writings, teaching, and ministry, Russell continued the development of feminist theology. Her extensive writings focus on feminist theology and particularly on the interpretation of the Bible from a woman’s perspective, therefore, she has a theological vision that covers both faithfulness to “The Tradition” and interpretation of the text in the interests of liberating women from domination and oppressive systems.

In sum, Russell’s writings will provide me with a conversation partner that can help me work out my own approach to justice for women.

B. The Methodology of This Study

This thesis will offer an exploration and analysis of Russell’s contribution to the issues that feminists raise. The overall goal will be to look for the answer to these questions in Russell’s work. Is it possible to be a feminist and a Christian? How can feminists deal creatively and faithfully with tradition? What are the problems and challenges that arise in a reconstruction of theology?

The analysis will identify the various articulations of Russell’s understanding of feminist theology and the problems feminists face in re-reading and re-constructing theology. It will explore the evolution of Russell’s thought in the past few decades and describe the current state of her theology. In other words, I am attempting first of all to understand how Russell defines a commitment to Christianity, secondly, to examine the way in which she understands feminist theology, and thirdly, to identify key issues in

⁵ Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 22.

doing feminist theology. My goal therefore is not to give a comprehensive account of all of Russell's works but rather to explore her works as a good example of how Christian feminists do theology.

To better understand Russell's works, it is necessary to consider her theological thought in the broader scope of feminist theologies. For this reason, this study considers two other feminist scholars' thoughts in order to better recognize Russell's place and unique contribution within feminist theology more generally.

My study of Letty M. Russell will focus on several books and articles written by her. *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A Theology*, *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, *Household of Freedom*, and *Church in the Round* will be the major sources of this study. In addition to these and other primary sources, some secondary sources, including reviews of Russell's work, are examined, because they shed additional light on these issues.

In sum, the central themes of the thesis will be as follows:

1. An exploration of the definition, goals, and methods of feminist theology as understood by feminist/Christians
2. An exploration of the insights and challenges that feminist theologians face in reconstructing theology
3. An exploration of the key solutions to these challenges

The thesis will conclude with my own observations and critical reflections on the approach of Christian feminists, particularly the suitability of this approach for other religious traditions.

C. A Brief Overview of the Life and Writings of Letty Mandeville Russell

Letty Mandeville Russell was born in Westfield, New Jersey, in 1929. She was a feminist liberation theologian in the Presbyterian tradition. She was a professor at Yale University Divinity School and also served as advisor and co-coordinator of the International Feminist Doctor of Ministry program in San Francisco. In addition, she was involved in the National Council of Churches, the World Council of Churches, and the YMCA. Before moving to these positions, she was a pastor for twenty years in East Harlem and was ordained by the United Presbyterian church of the United States. Letty Russell has published over twenty books and 110 articles. Her first writings were *Daily Bible Reading* and the *Christian Education Handbook*. Both helped the Christian community to improve their understanding of the Bible. *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A Theology*, *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, *Household of Freedom*, *The Future of Partnership*, *Growth in Partnership*, and her recent book *Church in the Round* are known as her famous books. She died on July 12, 2007, in her home in Guilford, Connecticut, at the age of 77.

One of Russell's main themes is sisterhood, which can be seen in her personal life as well. Irma Fast Dueck, assistant professor of practical theology at Canadian Mennonite University in Manitoba names her "our grandmother."⁶ That is because not only is Russell known as a "foremother" of Christian feminists, those who wish to engage in theological discussion about feminism while remaining in the church,⁷ but also because of her

⁶ Irma Fast Dueck, in oral discussion at the Shia-Mennonite Conference. Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, Canada. May 2007.

⁷ Throughout the thesis "Christian feminists" will be defined in this way.

personal character. “She is a nice woman,” Dueck says. Barbara Ann Keely, who wrote her doctoral dissertation on Russell’s work, calls the theologian “foremother” as well:

My most vivid image of Letty as foremother and mentor comes from my trip to Connecticut in 1990 to interview her as part of the work on my dissertation. She invited me to stay in her home, visit her classes, and attend a conference with her. The first evening I was at Letty’s, we were sitting and visiting in her study. I asked about her early years in ministry, those formative years in the parish before her work was being published. She disappeared into a storage closet and emerged with an old box. Sitting down on the floor, with the box beside her, she began to sort through unpublished speeches and manuscripts, reminiscing as she handed them to me. “Here, take anything that might help,” she said.⁸

I did not have a chance to see and talk to her personally; although I sent her several emails during the writing of my thesis, from April to October 2007, I did not receive any reply. Now, I realize why she didn’t reply to me. She is mourned by many for the contribution she made to a theology that is inclusive of women. In the next chapters I will explore why this is so.

⁸ Barbara Anne Keely. “Educating for Partnership.” *Faith of Our Foremothers: Women Changing Religion*. Ed. Barbara Anne Keely (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), 177.

CHAPTER I RUSSELL'S CONTEXT: SITUATING RUSSELL WITHIN FEMINIST THEOLOGY

Letty Russell is well known as a shaping voice in feminist theology. Since the 1950s, her work has influenced women and men who seek theological and biblical frameworks that liberate and empower.⁹

Letty Russell has been one of the pioneering feminist activist church leaders, as well as theologians, in the American church for more than forty years.¹⁰

Letty Russell has been the towering feminist theologian of her generation. She devoted her theological career to making it possible for women in various parts of the world to do theology, to dialogue and to collaborate with one another, and with all women and men of good will in mending creation. The seeds she has sown have flowered and will bear fruit for years to come.¹¹

Letty Russell is a recognized feminist theologian, known for her insights and methods in the development of a Christian feminist theology. The key words in the introductory quotations already indicate something of her reputation. She was “a shaping voice in *feminist theology*,” “one of the *pioneering feminist* activists,” and “the towering *feminist theologian*” (Italics added). In order to demonstrate the magnitude of her work, this thesis begins by providing a background for the feminist movement and introducing feminist theology. In addition, the chapter positions Russell within the wide spectrum of feminist theologians who attempt to put together their Christian faith and their convictions and vision for women.

⁹ Ibid., 168.

¹⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether. “The Theological Vision of Letty Russell.” In *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell*. Ed. Margaret A. Farley and Serene Jones (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 16.

¹¹ M. Shawn Copeland, an African-American scholar and associate professor of systematic theology at Boston College.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section presents a brief historical background of feminism and its journey toward women's liberation. The aim of this section is to name the forerunners of Russell's theology and to gain some understanding of the cultural and social setting that shapes her theological thinking. However, in the space permitted, there is only room to review these aspects and invite the interested reader to find more details in the literature. (Some sources for further reading are included in the bibliography).

The second section gives an overview of the importance of the woman's perspective in constructing theology from the viewpoint of several feminists. The chapter presents a general definition of feminism and theology. In addition, Russell is situated within feminist theology more generally.

To study the development of Russell's thought it is necessary to know the main events that affected her personal life and shaped her way of looking at theology. The chapter will end with pointing out her experience in working with the poor and marginalized women in East Harlem ministry. Thus this chapter indicates the general direction that her theological thinking took as she attempted to bring her faith to bear on her experience with the oppression and domination of women.

A. The Historical Background

In modern societies, civil movements and feminism have gone hand in hand in the move toward liberation. This section gives a brief overview of this history, discussing in particular the question of the relationship between religion and feminism.

1. First Wave of Feminism and Religion

The feminist movement arose concurrent with other civil movements in the nineteenth century, first becoming influential in England and United States. Consciousness of oppression and domination by males arose in the context of the social structures of slavery, prevalent in both those countries. Some Protestant women were actively attempting to abolish slavery, with the primary goal of eradicating systematic social injustice. Through this movement, women began to understand that women's subjection is the result of the male dominant position. Consequently, a new mind-set was born which was called feminist.¹²

These women did not consider themselves feminists; rather they emphasized that their aim was to work for the rights of women in all spheres of life. The movement began in the 1840s, and the initial vision of these feminists was broad; "it included reform of the structure of the home and family, education and social life, work in industrial society, the church and political participation."¹³ Most women in this movement took for granted Christendom with its integral relationship between society and church.

In terms of theological thinking, there was a dual response to Christian faith by these nineteenth-century feminists: some of them refused to accept Christianity as a liberator; they often criticized the Bible's view on women, and they attacked the Bible as anti-women, while others remained devout and based their feminism on their religious convictions. For example, the American writer Sarah Grimke's¹⁴ writings of the 1830s

¹² Mary T. Malone. *Women and Christianity*. Vol. 1 (Ottawa: Novalis, 2000), 38.

¹³ Anne E. Carr. *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 11-14.

¹⁴ Sarah Moore Grimké (November 26, 1792 - December 23, 1873) was born in South Carolina, the daughter of a plantation owner who was also an attorney and a judge in South Carolina. Without question,

make clear that although she does not want to dismiss her Christian tradition, she names some parts in the Bible “anti- women.”¹⁵ However, somewhat later the American suffragist¹⁶ leader Elizabeth Cady Stanton¹⁷ indicated that religion put down women and did not let them reach their full position. In contrast, like some American feminists, Canadian writer Nellie McClung¹⁸ considered religion to be responsible for the inequality of women and men in her society, although she remained a devout Christian nonetheless.¹⁹

Sarah’s early experiences with education shaped her future as an abolitionist and suffragist. Throughout her childhood, she was keenly aware of the inferiority of her own education when compared to her brothers’ classical one, and despite the fact that many recognized her remarkable intelligence and abilities as an orator, she was prevented from substantive education or from pursuing her dream of becoming an attorney. (“Sarah Moore Grimke.” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia* 12 April 2007 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarah_Grimk_%C3%A9>.)

¹⁵ Johanna H. Stuckey. *Feminist Spirituality* (Toronto: York: Center for Feminist Research, 1998), 17.

¹⁶ By definition “suffrage” means the right to vote in an election; in this context suffragist refers to women who fought for the right to vote.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Cady Stanton (November 12, 1815 – October 26, 1902) was an American social activist and leading figure of the early woman's movement. Her Declaration of Sentiments, presented at the first women's rights convention held in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York, is often credited with initiating the first organized woman's rights and woman's suffrage movements in the United States. Before Stanton narrowed her political focus almost exclusively to women's rights, she was an active abolitionist together with her husband, Henry Stanton, and cousin, Gerrit Smith. Unlike many of those involved in the women's rights movement, Stanton addressed a number of issues pertaining to women beyond voting rights. Her concerns included women's parental and custody rights, property rights, employment and income rights, divorce laws, the economic health of the family, and birth control. She was also an outspoken supporter of the nineteenth-century temperance movement. (“Elizabeth Cady Stanton.” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia* 12 April 2007 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Cady_Stanton>.)

¹⁸ Nellie McClung, born Nellie Letitia Mooney (October 20, 1873 – September 1, 1951) was a Canadian feminist, politician, and social activist. She was a part of the social and moral reform movements prevalent in Western Canada in the early 1900s. She was also the grandmother of outspoken Alberta judge John McClung. (“Nellie McClung.” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia* 12 April 2007 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nellie_McClung>.) Through the 1930s McClung's writing career flourished with the publishing of newspaper articles, short stories, a novel, and her memoirs. Supporter of women's right to be ministers in the United Church of Canada, delegate to the League of Nations, and the first woman appointed to the CBC's Board of Governors were added to the continuing list of her accomplishments. Through the Canadian Authors' Association and Canadian Women's Press Club she was also a strong promoter of cultural nationalism. (“Nellie McClung 1873-1951.” *Canadian Studies at Mount Allison University*. 12 April 2007. <http://www.mta.ca/faculty/arts/canadian_studies/english/about/study_guide/famous_women/nellie_mcclung.html>.)

¹⁹ Stuckey, 17-19.

2. Second Wave of Feminism and Feminist Theology

The second wave of feminism began in the mid-1960s. The twentieth-century women's movement had similar connections and splits from the churches to the first wave. However, in a more secularized society, there was also a wider secular movement for the liberation of women that struggled against sexism in institutional life, including family and education, and also within professions, industry, and politics. In the church, the feminist movement focused on the ordination of women and argued for expanded roles in ministry and seminary education.²⁰ In the 1970s, feminist Jewish theologians like Judith Plaskow²¹ asserted that Western theology is seen only through the "male eyes";²² therefore, there was no sign of women's experience in traditional theological writings. To more explicitly add women's experience to theology, feminist theologians began their scholarly work in the 1970s, and within the next decades feminist theology became a strong movement both within the church and within most theological schools.

3. The Approach to the Bible by Women in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Lydia Harder has briefly summarized the history of women of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in a somewhat different way. She points out the critical shifts that happened in the way women approached the Bible as they became more conscious of their own secondary role in history.

²⁰ Carr, 14-18.

²¹ Dr. Judith Plaskow is Professor of Religious Studies at Manhattan College. Her scholarly interests focus on contemporary religious thought with a specialization in feminist theology. Dr. Plaskow has lectured widely on feminist theology in the United States and Europe. She co-founded *The Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* and co-edited it for its first ten years.

²² Stuckey, 19-21.

1) In the early 19th century the Bible was used meticulously to define the differences between men and women, usually in ways which made women both different and secondary in creation and redemption. This hierarchical interpretation was often used to justify women's place in society.

2) By the middle of the 19th century a rising feminist consciousness called for discrimination between those parts of the Bible which were essentials and those which were culturally relative. The masculine bias of biblical interpretation was recognized in the way essentials had been defined in the past.

3) By the 1880s women recognized the need to do their own serious study of the Bible to counteract the oppressive use of the Bible. During most of the 19th century biblical studies by women attempted to compensate for the inequality, marginality, and oppression which they experienced by glorifying women's place [in Jesus' time] as a special calling to serve God in a unique way. They studied the lives of great women and examined the roles of women in the Bible.

4) In the early 20th century women's studies began to stress not only the differences between sexes but also their equality and common humanity. Alternative images of biblical women are highlighted and stories were remembered which allowed women to claim their history and to emphasize the equality and complementarity of women and men. These studies were considered supplementary, like the studies of other minority groups, and were thus situated on the edges of the academic world.

5) Feminist studies in the later 20th century have begun to use the material and methods cultivated in women's studies to critique past assumptions and to create a new interpretive framework. This means that not only those texts dealing directly with women but every biblical text must be approached through inclusive questions. The goal for feminists is to reconstruct theology by liberating the faith (including the Bible) from oppressive patriarchal patterns of thought and action.²³

Letty Russell fits into the twentieth century in her seeking of a new interpretive framework for her theology, although her work builds on past developments as summarized by Harder.

²³ Lydia Harder. "Biblical Interpretation: A Praxis of Discipleship?" *The Conrad Grebel Review*. 10 (1992), 19. She bases this on Barbara Brown Zikmund's summary of the modern history of American women's relationship to the Bible.

B. Feminist Theology

Women beginning to enter theological education and ministry likewise became aware of the pervasive sexism in church teaching and practice. Their critique of these traditions and practices was the seedbed for a new feminist theology that arose in the 1970s.²⁴

In order to find their voice, women reconstructed traditional theology so that it reflected the woman's perspective.

1. Basic Definitions

The word **theology** comes from the Greek words *theos* (God) and *logos* (words or thought). So a possible definition for theology is "the field of study and analysis that treats of God and of God's attributes and relations to the universe; the study of divine things or religious truth..."²⁵ However, feminist theologians believe that the meaning of theology is broader than reflection about God, or even the traditional stress on the rational, objective character of religious thinking. They realize that theology can be shaped by economic status, job security, childhood experience, gender, and race. Therefore, feminist theology begins with the assumption that "women are fully human, made in God's image and loved and valued by God."²⁶ Feminists' thinking about God and God's relationships to the world arise out of this foundational assumption.

This assumption challenges Christian theologians who have generally done theology with the assumption that male experience is the "universal experience."²⁷ Therefore, the first task of feminist theology was to expose the male nature of this so-

²⁴ Ruether, "Theological Vision," 19.

²⁵ Stuckey, 13.

²⁶ Lynn Japinga. *Feminism and Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 20.

²⁷ Stuckey, 15.

called universal experience and secondly to insist on making women's experiences central to their theology. Feminist theologians concerned themselves with a wide variety of issues such as ordination of women, the place of women in Christianity and the church, and the challenge posed to them by the maleness of God in the language and images used in the sacred book and liturgy. In addition, the larger themes of Christian faith were re-examined, such as the theology of salvation and redemption, Christology, and church and ministry. Based on their background, feminist theologians vary in terms of their understanding of the Bible and the tradition. Therefore, feminist theologies have been categorized in a variety of ways. The next section presents a possible categorization of feminist theology that is helpful in understanding Russell's place within the feminist theology more generally. Interested readers can find some other categorizations in Appendix I.

2. The Nature of Feminist Theology

Pamela Young, in *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology: In Search of Method*, identifies several agreements among feminist theologians (including Russell) despite the variation in their structures. First, they all agree that traditional theology is patriarchal, because it has been written by men in a patriarchal culture. Patriarchy is the domination of men over women because of their sex. Consequently, the theology is about men and when it talks specifically about women, it is about them in "negative ways,"²⁸ not as part of the larger "human category." Second, due to patriarchal attitudes, traditional theology has ignored or caricatured women and women's experiences. Third, the patriarchal nature of theology is

²⁸ Pamela Dickey Young. *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology: In Search of Method* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 15.

harmful for women, because it inevitably deprives women of their rights. The solution, therefore, is that women need to reconstruct a theology of their own.

In order to reconstruct a theology, Christian feminist theologians present various methodological approaches. Although their methods are slightly different, they regularly use one another's work and adapt it to their own purposes. Therefore, the different subgroups among feminists have been categorized in a variety of ways.

Ron Rhodes, in his article, *The Debate Over Feminist Theology: Which View is Biblical?*, classifies feminists as secular feminists, New Age feminists, liberal Christian feminists, and evangelical feminists.²⁹ The reason for proposing these categories is to see how various feminists have responded to the issue of the relationship between faith and women's liberation, and to see Russell's place among them. A brief description of each of these types follows:

a) Secular Feminists: These feminists, though they may have been deeply religious, are those who have reached the conclusion that there is no hope in the Bible for women's liberation. Secular Feminists disallow God, revelation, and religion in their discussion of feminism but may discuss the Bible as a major source for chauvinistic ideas.

b) New Age Feminists: These feminists have accepted the worship of a feminine deity or goddess and also usually some of the ideas surrounding a feminine deity that may be associated with pagan traditions.

c) Liberal Christian Feminists: These feminists believe that the Bible has been written, translated, and interpreted by men. Liberal Christian Feminists are devoted to Christianity, but their method of dealing with the Bible is with a hermeneutic of suspicion that tests

²⁹ This is only one possible categorization. Appendix I will discuss some other categories that have been used.

every single word of the Bible to see whether or not it gives a messianic message of liberation.

d) Evangelical Feminists: These feminists generally have a conservative view toward the Bible, accepting fully that the Bible is the inspired word of God, but they insist that with proper interpretation every single word of the Bible can be used to support women's liberation.³⁰

Thus, some feminists have concluded that Christian tradition is patriarchal to the core. Mary Daly arrives at this conclusion in *Beyond God the Father*. For her there is no room for women in the Christian tradition. Some other feminist theologians believe that although the church fathers had a significant impact on the church's view of women and sexuality, their ideas do not represent the mind of God for all time. For them tradition does not have authority for all historical periods. Other feminist theologians remain within the tradition by identifying particular aspects that represent the essence or core of the gospel, which they believe is not patriarchal but rather stems from God. Those who stay with tradition try to construct a theology that considers women's perspectives.

Rosemary Radford Ruether is one of those who stay within the church. She insists that in order to stay within the church, feminist theology must do three tasks; first, it must provide a critique of the tradition, pointing out the ways that the Christian tradition has been limiting or destructive for women. Second, it must try to recover women's stories from the past and the present in order to demonstrate the gifts and insights of women through history. Third, it must re-envision and reshape traditional Christian doctrines.

³⁰ Rhodes, Ron, "The Debate Over Feminist Theology: Which View is Biblical?" *Reasoning from the Scripture Ministries*. 26 April 2007. <<http://home.earthlink.net/~ronrhodes/>>.

Feminist theology can therefore help the tradition and the church to be more responsive to the needs and experiences of all its members.³¹

Generally, feminist theologians define three tasks for feminist theology that empower women: criticizing the tradition, telling the stories of women, and valuing women's experience. The experiences of women include bodily experience, socialized experience, and the experience of oppression or suffering.

Feminist theologians engage in these tasks of critique, recovery, and re-visioning because they hope to empower women and men to live as whole people with thoughts and feeling, bodies and minds, autonomy and relationships, and confidence that they are valuable human beings.³²

C. Russell's Place among Feminist Theologians

Russell is known as a liberal feminist theologian. As such, she claims that it is possible to be a feminist and to stay in the church. In order to do this, she attempts to test out every doctrine of the church in order to liberate women from oppression with the help of the messianic message of the gospel. Through the next chapters it will be demonstrated why she was considered a foremother in feminist theology and how her thought influenced that movement. Her definitions, insights, and methods build up a framework for feminist theology. Before moving on to the next chapters, this thesis will briefly examine the main events of her life and give a brief overview of her theological thinking.

1. Russell's Theological and Religious Context

³¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether. "The Future of Feminist Theology in the Academy." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (1985): 703-13.

³² Japinga, 22.

As already mentioned, Letty Russell grew up within a strong religious background as a member of the Presbyterian Church of Westfield. Her theological background was broad, creating an excellent context for discussion with more mainline theology.

In 1951, she graduated from Wellesley College in biblical history. In 1952, she began her work with East Harlem Protestant Parish as the Director of Religious Education at the Church of Ascension, and as a home missionary of the United Presbyterian Church of the United States, and she continued this work until 1967.

In 1958, she graduated from Harvard Divinity School. She was one of two women attending Harvard Divinity School at that time and was one of the first women ordained to the Ministry of the Word and Sacrament in the United Presbyterian Church of the United States.

In 1967, she earned her S.T.M. from Union Theological Seminary (New York) in Christian Education and Theology, and two years later she completed her Th.D. at Union Theological Seminary in Mission Theology and Ecumenics. From 1969 to 1974, Russell taught at Manhattan College. And during that time, in 1970, she married Johannes Christiaan Hoekendijk, Professor of World Christianity at Union Theological Seminary. (He died in 1975, because of a sudden heart attack.) By 1970, she believed that her response to God's call for freedom and service was to live as a feminist Christian. She finished her first book, called *Ferment of Freedom*, in 1972, while she was teaching at United Theological College. She saw this as a study guide that would help women of Christian organizations join in the process of liberation.³³

³³ At the time Russell wrote this study book, she also worked for the National Board of the YWCA (Young Women Christian Association), as a part-time religious consultant.

In 1974, Russell found a way to develop her thought more globally by writing the book *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A Theology*. Russell says about this book: “Here I came to describe liberation as an attempt to reflect on the experience of operation in the light of our participation in God’s liberating actions in the creation of a more human society.”³⁴ In this book, Russell points out that the style and theme of all types of liberation theology are common, since they are contextual.

In 1976, Russell continued with her goal to empower women by editing *The Liberating World: A Guide to Non-Sexist Interpretation of the Bible*, in which she points out that “the Word of God is liberating when by the power of the Holy Spirit it comes alive again in our hearts and actions.”³⁵ She emphasizes that although she believes that the Word of God is a liberating word, it is often spoken and interpreted in male language, so it needs to be “liberated” to become “bread of life.” Working on the issue of human liberation encouraged Russell to “re-examine the way God is a partner with God self [this is a way to speak in a non-sexist way about God himself] and with all creation and the way in which we share this partnership through Jesus Christ.”³⁶ Thus partnership with God in God’s creative venture on Earth became the key emphasis for her over the past decade. During the 1970s, she wrote two books on partnership: *The Future of Partnership* and *Growth in Partnership*. In *The Future of Partnership*, she describes her understanding of the biblical notion of *koinonia* (partnership, participation, communion, community) and

³⁴ Letty Russell. “Bread Instead of Stone: How My Mind Has Changed.” *The Christian Century* 97 (1980 June): 666.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 667.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 667.

its similarity with the paradigm of partnership that she had described previously and that is more commonly understood by that word.

In the last decades of her life, from 1974 to 2001, she was a faculty member of Yale University Divinity School, where she inspired many students with her teaching. When she died in July 2007 she was remembered and honored for her many contributions. Even during her life she received many honors as this summary by Barbara Anne Keely demonstrates:

Russell has received an honorary doctorate from Dickson College and Coe College and honorary masters degree from Yale. She was the first Wellesley alumna to receive the Emmavil Luce Severinghaus Award for her work in the field of religion. She received the distinguished alumna Rabbi Martin Katzentein Award from Harvard Divinity School in 1998 and the Woman of Faith Award from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) in 1999.³⁷

2. Russell's Theological Vision

As has been discussed, Letty. M. Russell had been doing theology for more than thirty years. She believed that the basic style of her thought and commitment to the church had not changed in the past decades. M. Shawn Copeland, in her review of Russell's theological thought,³⁸ agrees with this analysis but mentions that Russell does clarify and develop her thought through the years:

The basic content of her theology as well as her method have not changed decisively during this period. Rather, they have been clarified and amplified through the prism of her wide reading, self criticism, and

³⁷ Barbara Anne Keely. *Christian Educator: Letty Russell*. Talbot School of Theology. 12 April 2007. <http://www.talbot.edu/ce20/educators/view.cfm?n=letty_russell>.

³⁸ Copeland, 28.

commitment to solidarity with marginalized persons—women in particular.³⁹

Russell understood that her work grew out of two directions: her experience and her theological commitments:

My experience is that of life in a Christian community set in the midst of poverty, failure, and despair that has nevertheless learned to give thanks (Eph 5:15-20). My theology is based on the conviction that the resurrection and victory of Christ is the starting and ending point of Christian life and nurture (1 Cor. 15:51-58).⁴⁰

Russell's experience throughout her ministry influenced her understanding of theology. Working with poor and oppressed people in the East Harlem ministry helped her to adapt her thinking both theologically and socially. She discovered a theology that addressed that experience: a liberation theology. Copeland names Russell's theology a "churchly feminist theology of liberation."⁴¹ This theology considers a feminist perspective while addressing the church directly. Rosemary Ruether suggests that Russell's aim is to develop feminist theology and to continue a prophetic voice.

In addition, Russell's theological thinking includes two complementary dimensions: thinking from "other ends" and thinking from the "bottom." By thinking from "other ends" she means total liberation or "New Creation." The concept of "New Creation" is seen in her writings and indicates her eschatological thinking, the theology of hope.⁴²

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Letty .M. Russell. *Christian Education in Mission* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 9.

⁴¹ Copeland, 28.

⁴² *Eschatology* is part of theology concerned with the final events in the history of the world. For Moltmann, eschatology is not the ending chapter of the world; rather it is the key or central concept from which everything else in Christian thought is to be understood and which gives it the proper meaning. Based on this vision God is known through his promise of the full liberation of the world, but it is not yet fulfilled. Christians hope that with the second coming of Jesus full liberation will occur. According to them, the Christian task is to move toward the liberation of marginalized people.

Influenced by Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*, Russell describes how Christian theology does not lie in the past but rather in the future. For Russell, the "usable past" should be used to build a "usable future." In addition, for Russell, thinking theologically from the "other end" is complemented by thinking socially from the "bottom." By thinking from the "bottom," she means thinking from marginalized perspectives. Consequently, these two dimensions complete each other. Russell's aim is to make a bridge between theology and society; she adds marginalized people's contribution to theology, on the one hand, and constructs a theology that considers full human liberation, on the other hand. This is the meaning of "New Creation."

To move toward total liberation, and to add the marginalized voice to theology, Russell proposes the concept of partnership, by which she means the equality of all human beings; equality of white women with black women and white men with black men.

3. Russell's Theological Method

For Russell, traditional Christian theology does not consider the woman's perspective; therefore it is an "unfinished theology." Russell proposes a method that adds women's contribution to theology. She calls her method "action-reflection." This method is based on the experience of oppressed people, particularly women, and also on the historical context of the text. Copeland summarizes Russell's theological method as "a spiral-reflection on experience, an analysis of social reality, the questioning of biblical and

church traditions, the pursuit of clues for transformation, and action on behalf of justice,”⁴³ explaining that

She [Russell] has located her theology within a horizon of proleptic eschatology. Within this horizon, salvation is not conceived in otherworldly or a historical term but rather conjugates humanity and the cosmos in the future tense. Within this horizon, freedom is rooted in the Tradition, that is, the dynamic saving praxis of God’s love, and it appeals to the authority of the Word of God. Loyalty to this authority is measured by solidarity with the poor and marginalized, action for justice, and new spiritual and practical disciplines for holistic living. This is what Russell calls full partnership with one another and with God in Christ in the power of the Spirit. And it is just for this, Russell writes, that the created universe is waiting on tiptoe—to see women and men arrive at what they are, God’s own household.⁴⁴

In this chapter the background of the feminist movement and Russell’s main concerns through her life were described briefly. The next chapters will explore Russell’s development as a feminist theologian as she refines her definition, her method, and her concerns, also pointing to the main challenges that she faced as she attempted to be both a Christian and a feminist theologian. The next chapters will attempt to describe and evaluate her solution to these challenges.

⁴³ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 42

CHAPTER II

RUSSELL'S THEOLOGY: EXPLORING RUSSELL'S SELF-DESIGNATION AS FEMINIST/CHRISTIAN

Several years ago, when I was lecturing on feminist theologies in Japan, a woman stood up and asked me whether it is possible to be a Christian and a feminist. I wasn't surprised, for many women and men discuss this question in the United States as well as in Japan and around the world. Sometimes their conclusion is that it is not possible for the Christian faith, feminism and the church to go together. I, of course, took the opposite position at the lecture and responded that it *must* be possible because I myself am committed to Christ, and I am also committed to working in the Church for the full human liberation of women together with men! I believe in the importance of treating women as full human beings because I understand that this is the message that was lived out in the life of Jesus Christ.⁴⁵

Russell knows herself as a person who is committed to Christ and at the same time advocates feminism. This means that she sees her identity as both feminist and Christian, something other people think is not possible. The goal of this chapter is to explore the claims she makes by giving an overview of a number of aspects of Russell's thought that allow her to make a strong link between her views as a feminist and her convictions as a Christian believer. As already noted in the introductory quotation, this linkage is not always self-evident. Therefore, in this initial discussion of Russell's thought, her definition of feminism, faith, and their inter-relationship will be illuminated or put forward as key to her identity as both Christian and feminist.

This chapter will discuss these aspects by showing not only how Russell understands them but also how her roots in liberation theology aided her in building this bridge. In addition, two other Christian feminists (Fiorenza and Harder) will be drawn into the discussion in order to further illuminate the various building blocks that women use to link faith and feminism.

⁴⁵ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 22.

Since the overall goal of this thesis is to explore and evaluate the development of Russell's thought as a model for religious feminism more generally, the chapter will include final remarks and critical comments about the usefulness of this development for other faiths.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section discusses the roots of Russell's thought in liberation theology. Although, the relationship between liberation theology and feminism is not the main focus of this chapter, this section is included in order to explore the roots of Russell's thought and methodology but also to illustrate her position more fully. Section two unveils Russell's definition of feminism, faith, and their inter-connection and offers a basic understanding of both feminism and faith from her perspective. Faith is understood as a liberating message that can include advocacy for feminist ideas. Furthermore, definitions of feminist theology from the perspective of other feminists such as Fiorenza and Harder are brought in to show Russell's commonality with other Christian feminists. After establishing this basic relationship between faith and feminism, the chapter ends with a summary of the basic building blocks that Russell uses to bring together her identity as Christian and as feminist.

A. Feminist Commonality with Liberation Theologies

It was in the early 1970s that the second wave of the feminist movement created discussion and new ideas.⁴⁶ Because liberation theology was also at its height during this time, many aspects of its emphases were also considered by feminists in their movement. It was about that time that Russell took her first step into the realm of liberation theology by defining freedom. According to her, when one tries to define freedom, the first word

⁴⁶ See chapter I for more information on the first and second wave of the feminist movement.

that comes to mind is liberation. The meaning of freedom as well as liberation varies from culture to culture and situation to situation. Therefore, there is no one term that fully defines the meaning of liberation and freedom. Yet we know that people seek liberation, because of external or internal oppressive situations. Marginalized people, those who have suffered oppression within society, look for freedom and justice for their cause. The actions and theological processes of liberation theologies grew out of this search for freedom and justice. Women, like other marginalized people, struggled to find their own voice in society as well as in theology and they also began to construct feminist theology with liberation and justice as primary themes. Thus feminist theology has common roots with Third World liberation theologies⁴⁷ and participates in similar theological processes.⁴⁸

1. Common Themes (or Processes)

Liberation theologies' aim was to help oppressed people find the courage and theological basis for insisting on their own human rights. Owing to the widespread discrimination and oppression of many groups in various societies, such theologies were welcomed all around the world and among different groups and races. Despite some diversity as the popularity of this theology has grown in various communities and cultures, several common processes have been developed, three of which Russell draws attention to in her works: humanization, conscientization, and dialogue and community.

⁴⁷ According to Russell's *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A Theology*, Third World people are those who live outside of United States and Western Europe (First World), and of countries in Eastern Europe (Second World).

⁴⁸ Details of these subjects are beyond the scope of this thesis and can be found in the literature.

a. Humanization

The first theme common to various liberation theologies is humanization. Liberation theology was most concerned with treating every person, including women and other marginalized people, as fully human. This means that they are not measured by what males are but rather are human in their own right. Based on this definition, to dehumanize someone is to treat someone as less than human, to deprive them of human qualities and dignity. Women were often not seen as fully human and therefore were not treated well.

Russell identifies human beings as subjects of God's love and she suggests that as responsible persons they should be aware of what they do or how they think and act and the consequences of these actions.

Biblical anthropology seems to indicate that a human being is to be understood as a subject of God's love and concern and, therefore, as a responsible subject of her or his own individual and collective actions.⁴⁹

Consequently, a human is accepted as a subject, as the one who has the right to think and act; one who is responsible for his/her actions. In addition, based on this vision, she considers the notion of humanization to include the reflections of all human beings, for all have dignity before God. Therefore, marginalized people also have an active role in society. However, a correct response and action can only be expected from sufficiently educated people and that is the reason why liberation theologians suggest conscientization as a second theme to complement humanization.

⁴⁹Letty M. Russell. *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 65.

b. Conscientization

Conscientization is a process of learning to help people to know their own rights, to change personal and social inequality, and also to lead them to take action against oppressive situations. Conscientization refers to a type of learning that is focused on perceiving and exposing social and political contradictions. Conscientization also includes taking action against oppressive elements in one's life as part of that learning. Often persons have become passive and have accepted their situation of oppression. Therefore persons need to be able to bring their experience of oppression into a self-conscious understanding of a situation and learn to articulate the social inequality in society that leads to injustice.

It is a description of the importance of coming to awareness about the particular world in which people dwell in order to contradict the dehumanizing elements in that world.⁵⁰

In other words, this process begins by learning and is followed by acting. Each action in turn contains a reflection and again each reflection includes learning. Therefore, this process consists of a cycle of learning, acting, and reflecting. It is obvious that no one can do this process by himself or herself and therefore it needs a social movement so that persons can learn from each other and from each other's action, acting together and passing reflections on to others. Therefore, this process demands dialogue and community.

c. Dialogue and Community

Dialogue helps people to understand each other and each other's concerns and challenges. In response to the vision of equality and humanization and the conscientization that has

⁵⁰ Ibid., 67.

occurred, oppressed and oppressors are urged to enter into dialogue but with equal ability to speak. Dialogue pushes both of them to act toward social salvation. For Russell, it is this third process, dialogue and community building, that is particularly important in order to create the new human social world that she envisions. However, the dialogue must be based on mutual trust. The oppressor and oppressed groups cannot talk to each other unless they are in an equal position.

A new position of consciousness, confidence, and leadership can give women and Third World people an opportunity to dialogue in a relationship of equality and growing trust.⁵¹

When members of both groups are in equal positions and are working together, the dialogue becomes possible and constructive. Therefore, the oppressed groups develop their own power based on a new identity of equality.

For liberation theologians, this identity of being fully human is not really new. This is the promise of the Bible that is seen through the history of God's liberation of oppressed people. And this is the message of salvation not only as an individual event but also as a social event as understood in the Bible. These liberation themes already point to some common perspectives that create a new vision for what is central in theology.

2. Common Perspectives

Russell identifies three common perspectives within liberation theologies that provide theological foundations to them: the biblical promise of liberation, the world as history, and salvation as social events. These perspectives primarily focus on how God liberates

⁵¹ Ibid., 69.

the oppressed as a supreme liberator but they also assume the need to work at the conscientization and humanization of all human persons.

a. Biblical Promise

The Bible's promise is to liberate all people. It stresses two major motifs: liberation and universality. According to both the Old and New Testaments, God is the liberator, and not just the liberator of one small nation, but also the liberator of all humankind. For Russell, feminist theology, like all types of liberation theologies, mentions that the gospels' good news is the liberation of all humankind from oppression.

Christ has set the captive free and, therefore, there is a future and hope. This hope stems, not just from human actions and strategies that are often weak and misguided, but from God's promise for all humanity.⁵²

Russell stresses that "God's *oikonomia* or action for the world is the history of salvation."⁵³ Based on this attitude, she encourages the participation of women in liberation movements. According to her, patriarchal attitudes influenced the Bible, so women in the liberation movement must reject some part of that text. On the other hand, she emphasizes that women should not abandon the story of Jesus of Nazareth, with its history of salvation. Because the liberation and universality message is central to God's action of salvation, women should wrestle with texts that are not liberating in order to move toward liberation.

⁵² Ibid., 58.

⁵³ Ibid., 57.

b. World as History

According to liberation theologians, humanity and the world are both understood as historical, which means that both are changing and changeable. Based on this vision, Russell stresses two points that help her to build her theology. First, she suggests viewing the world as history that is a dynamic process of change. This means that the past experience and the interpretation of those events shape the future. In addition, she notes that a fundamental element in Christian theology is the “coming of God’s future.” Christian women believe in hope in the “coming of God’s future,” the promise of liberation. Therefore, their aim is to be involved in the process of changing the world and shaping the future (historicity), in light of the hope for the “coming of God’s future.” In that sense, women should consider themselves as subjects who participate in this historical process or “historicity” toward the fulfillment of God’s plan and purpose of salvation.

Through *hoping* in the coming of God’s future they find new courage and strength to enter into the difficult process of *planning* and acting on behalf of human liberation.⁵⁴

c. Salvation as a Social Event

According to the Old Testament and also in Christian theology individual salvation is tied to the social relationship with others. Salvation and eternal life is expressed through the action of sharing God’s gift by liberating oppressed people.

In liberation theology salvation is understood as good news because it includes concrete social liberation in oppressive situations.⁵⁵

The concept of salvation and social liberation is the good news mentioned from Genesis to Revelation. As a liberation theologian, she proposes the concept of “salvation today.” She

⁵⁴Ibid., 60.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 61.

extends the concept of salvation from individual salvation to a responsibility to be active in terms of the liberation of all oppressed. The emphasis on the historical, “horizontal” movement in history is a main theme in liberation theology and differs from what is generally understood as a “vertical” movement of revelation of truth from the transcendent God to humans. In liberation theologies, God’s primary action is social salvation within history and the dynamic movement within history to fulfill the promise of salvation is of paramount importance. In that sense, the human response to salvation is by “working with God” for liberation “to make God’s promise come true.”⁵⁶

3. Common Methodologies

Along with common themes and perspectives, liberation theologies have a common methodology that is based on human experience. According to liberation theologies, all people, particularly those living in oppressive situations, should become conscious of their own experience and then share these experiences with others. This approach, which moves experience beyond individual understandings to more social descriptions of reality,

⁵⁶ In my thought, on the other hand, social salvation through history can only be built by “working according to God” and what humans do in accordance with His revelations. Yet this response by humans is for their own salvation, which in turn brings about liberation.

Salvation is also an important notion in Islam and it is referred to as “final success” or “felicitousness.” In the Qur’ān there are forty verses that talk about this notion and its conditions. I believe that the Qur’ān talks about both social salvation and individual salvation and that these two are correlated.

As for individual salvation, the Qur’ān indicates that salvation in the afterlife depends on one’s beliefs and actions in this world. In the Qur’ān’s view, the people who believe in God and who act correctly are those who are saved.

The Qur’ān says: “Then [in the resurrection day] those whose deeds weigh heavy in the scales- it is they who are felicitous.”

There is no concept of “original sin” in Islam. In Islamic theology, a child is born innocent, and he/she does not carry sin. He/she should do good deeds and avoid sins to achieve success in the afterlife.

As far as social salvation is concerned, Islamic sources identify obedience to God as the only way to salvation:

The Qur’ān says: “Such He has written faith into their hearts and strengthened them with a Spirit from Him. He will admit them into gardens with streams running in them, to remain in them [forever], God is pleased with them and they are pleased with Him. They are God’s confederates. Look! The confederates of God are indeed felicitous!”

helps to open up theology, creating many insights and questions. Consequently, the contribution of everyone in the faith community transforms many aspects of theology and adds new dimensions to the theological enterprise.

Feminist theologians, who believe that women's perspectives in theology were omitted in formal theology in the past, are persuaded that this approach is crucial. Those who seek for liberation from oppression begin their reflections with individual and communal experience. These feminist theologians ask new questions and come up with new insights that are used for constructing their theology.

It is a process of seeking out the right questions to ask and trying out different hypotheses that arise. It becomes a theology of constantly revised questions and tentative observations about a changing world....⁵⁷

Because of the experimental nature of this approach, every single doctrine that shaped the life of women is challenged. According to Russell, women have tried to develop this method in order to add women's contributions to the larger Christian context. The questions they address to biblical passages and church tradition arise out of their own experience in order to liberate women from those ideas that have created oppression.

In sum, Russell's understanding and categorization of these fundamental elements in liberation theologies provides a solid preamble to her definition of feminist theology; a theology that advocates both feminism and commitment to Christianity.

B. Feminist Theology

In the women's liberation movement, many feminists reject religious texts and traditions as the main obstacles to the liberation of women. They believe that there is no hope in the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 54.

Bible for women's liberation and they leave the church. Some others, however, wrestle with the text and try to find out how the universal message of the good news of liberation by God can be applied to their experience and give them hope for freedom. They believe that they can advocate feminism and remain faithful Christians. Substantiated by evidence in the text and in history, they discover ways to combine these two to create a feminist theology. Russell as one such feminist draws important points from both feminism and faith and, based on these points, she proposes her definition of feminist theology.

1. Feminism

Russell presents her first definition of feminism in one of her earlier works: *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A Theology* (1975). This definition is based on an invitation for women and men to eradicate sexual inequality and injustice against women and to liberate them from oppression. Russell defines feminists as those who advocate changes in various aspects of the political, social, and economic spheres in order to reach equal rights for men and women. With this definition, she echoes the main processes of liberation theology, with its emphasis on humanization and conscientization. In her last two main books she is particularly concerned with the church and its advocacy for women. Thus she also focuses on the third process: dialogue and community. It should be noted that for Russell, the emphasis of her kind of feminism is on humanity rather than merely on masculinity or femininity.

In the later works, *Household of Freedom* and *Church in the Round* (1993), she develops her definition. Russell mentions that the word feminism, like other words ending in *ism*, indicates an advocacy. She emphasizes that feminism is the advocacy of women. It

is built for the sake of women's liberation. Therefore, this movement is not against men or pro-women; women and men can stand shoulder to shoulder working for women's rights.

From my point of view as a feminist theologian, it [feminism] represents a search for liberation from all forms of dehumanization on the part of those who advocate full human personhood for all of every race, class, sex, sexual orientation, ability and age. This means that men can also be feminists if they are willing to advocate for women.⁵⁸

Russell in *Church in the Round* emphasizes that feminism is “a set of ideas”⁵⁹ to change and to eradicate social injustice against women.

Most certainly, feminism is a modern word, an ideology in the sense of a set of ideas used to bring about social change.⁶⁰

Thus, Russell presents the meaning of feminist thought as a theoretical notion, but she also follows the liberation theologies' emphasis on action and social change with its move toward equality. As a Christian theologian, she points out that one of Jesus' concerns was that all people from margin to center are equal in “the household of God.”⁶¹ This leads directly to the revised notion of faith in her theological thought which will be considered next.

2. Faith

Russell notes something important when she suggests that the call for liberation is a common theme for both those who advocate feminism and those who are committed to Christianity. Already in 1974, Russell states that the call for liberation is not a new theme

⁵⁸ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 22.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 23.

⁶⁰ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 23.

⁶¹ Ibid., 21.

in Christian theology. She suggests that the message of Jesus is liberation for all nations and generations in all places and all situations. Based on this biblical promise, Russell illuminates the meaning of faith and how faith influences the current life of believers in her further writings.

In *Household of Freedom*, Russell indicates that faith is a gift from God. She points out the importance of the role of God's Spirit as guidance. According to her, no one can fully know how God's Spirit works with people. Therefore, from the biblical perspective, there are many ways to understand the various dimensions of faith. The classical Reformation identified the three dimensions of faith as knowing, acting, and trusting:

Faith as knowing is taking notice of the actions of God in Jesus Christ: getting to know the story of the person in whom we believe, through study, worship, and sharing the story with others. *Faith as acting* is assent to active participation in this story: trying it out by joining others in actions of service and justice. The third dimension, *faith as trusting* is confidence or complete trust in God's love in Jesus Christ.⁶²

For Russell, all these three dimensions together are the result of God's work through the Spirit. By using these dimensions as aspects of faith, Russell implicitly approves one of the main themes of liberation theologies, conscientization. She points out the importance of knowing and acting, which is very similar to what liberation theologies propose; learning and acting. She also mentions some of liberation theology's perspectives in her understanding of faith. She emphasizes the biblical promises and the challenge to change the world by participating with God in establishing justice.

After considering this commonality between those who advocate feminism and those who are committed to Christianity, Russell indicates that these two can become one,

⁶² Ibid., 23.

and based on that she proposes her definition of feminist theology. She claims that in her theology both commitment to Christian faith and advocating feminism are considered.

3. Two Become One

Russell redefines the meaning of theology as a first step for combining feminism with theology. In 1974, she criticizes western culture, saying that it has distorted the meaning of theology. According to Russell, theology is about God from a human perspective. But the conventional western notion of theology was not complete; it was defined from only a man's perspective, therefore, women's contributions did not have a place in theology.

In 1975, Russell calls for completing the theology. Since, theology was written by the hand of men, to complete the theology women's contribution must be added. To reconstruct a complete theology she encourages people to think and reflect in a new way in which women can raise their insights and questions. This includes articulating the meaning of faith from their own perspectives and consequently adding their own contribution to the theology to make it more complete. Therefore, according to her, feminist theology is nothing but a complete theology, a theology in which women and men have equal rights in understanding the faith and in voicing this understanding.

In a Christian context, they [Christian feminists] reflect on how theology can become more complete, as all people are encouraged to contribute to the meaning of faith from their own perspective. Such action and theory forms the basis of feminist theology. It is feminist because those involved are actively engaged in advocating the equality and partnership of women and men.⁶³

⁶³ Letty M. Russell. "Liberation Theology in a Feminist Perspective." In *Liberation, Revolution and Freedom*. Ed. Thomas M. McFadden (New York : Seabury Press, 1975), 89.

Thinking and reflecting and having a voice to describe the meaning of theology are important for those who are on the margins and especially for women. Based on this attitude, rooted in liberation theologies, Russell describes her understanding of feminist theology. In her definition, she considers God's message of human liberation and social equality as a common theme for both feminism and Christianity:

I will describe feminist theology as reflection on the meaning of God's will to bring about full human liberation and the partnership of women and men in church and society. This theology is called feminist because it is professed by those who advocate the equality of the sexes. Yet, such theology is not necessarily limited to the female.⁶⁴

Furthermore, Russell develops this brief definition of feminist theology to include the notion of experience and to stress advocacy in her more comprehensive definition in 1991, in the *Encyclopedia of Reformed Faith*.

Feminist theologies reflect on God as God is known in and through the experience of those who advocate the full humanity of women together with men.⁶⁵

Feminist theologians are exposing the cause of painful divisions and calling for repentance and new life in the church.⁶⁶

There is no one description of feminist or one type of feminist theology. But there is a consensus that a feminist is one who advocates the human dignity and equality of women and men. Such advocacy includes all women and men, not just white educated inhabitants of North Atlantic nations.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Ibid., 95.

⁶⁵ "Feminist Theologies." *Encyclopedia of Reformed Faith*. Ed. Donald McKim (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 137.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Letty M. Russell. "Unity and Renewal in Feminist Perspective." *In Mid-Stream*, 27 (Jan. 1988), 58. Russell states something very similar to this definition in "Feminist Theologies," in *Encyclopaedia of Reformed Faith*, 137: "There is no one description of feminist or one type of feminist theology. But there is a consensus that feminist theologies seek to act and reflect upon the search for liberation from all forms of dehumanization, joining God in advocating full human dignity for each and every person. Such advocacy includes all women and men, not just white educated inhabitants of North Atlantic nations."

Russell frequently emphasizes her commitment to Christianity while being a staunch advocate of feminism. However in 1993, she recognizes that there is a challenge for feminists: how to understand and trust God while she reads the Bible. Yet it is in this struggle that she discovers how the two, that is feminism and theology, become one.

In the struggle to understand and interpret the meaning of our faith and our feminism, many of us discover that two become one.⁶⁸

According to her, feminist theology is not a static theology but one that is there in the movement that comes through struggle. It is always dynamic and changing according to interpretation, always moving toward the eschatological goal of true humanization. This struggle has resulted in various methods used by those who call themselves Christian feminists.⁶⁹

But before moving to the next section, it is helpful to test and compare Russell's thought by presenting two other Christian feminists' definitions of theology. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's⁷⁰ definition is similar to Russell's in that she first explains feminist attempts to change societies to establish justice and then defines Christian feminism. Fiorenza, like Russell, considers liberation theologies' themes and perspectives in building her theology. According to Fiorenza, Christian feminism emphasizes the gospel

⁶⁸ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 25.

⁶⁹ In the first chapter it is indicated that what is meant by a "Christian feminist" is the one who wishes to read the Bible faithfully while he/she advocates feminism.

⁷⁰ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, professor of New Testament studies in the Department of Theology, University of Notre Dame (Notre Dame, IN), is the author of many articles, including "Discipleship and Patriarchy: Early Christian Ethics and Christian Ethics in a Feminist Theological Perspective." Her famous book is "In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins." (This information is given in Fiorenza's article: "To Set the Record Straight: Biblical Women's Studies." *Horizons* 10 (1983).)

message, the equality and freedom of women and men in Gal 3:27.⁷¹ For Fiorenza the notion of autonomy (that is, women's right to self-government) is crucial and is the basis of any equality that women need to have. There is no fundamental difference between the definition of feminist theology that is offered by Russell and the one presented by Fiorenza. The only difference is their approach or emphasis in defining this notion; Fiorenza is particularly focused on political access to power by women.

In contrast to Russell, Fiorenza explains her definition by turning to the historical role of women in Christianity. She strongly criticizes the situation of women in Christian history. According to Fiorenza, in a sexist society women were put down because of their gender. In such a society the aim of feminists is to reconstruct the society and offer a correct image of women, including their political and economic rights.

The women's liberation movement demands a restructuring of societal institutions and redefinition of cultural images and roles of women and men, if women are to become autonomous human persons and achieve economic and political equality.⁷²

For Fiorenza, since the cultural image and self-understanding of women is of an "oppressed people," to abolish this thought, feminists must attempt, firstly, to maintain and develop the notion that women are full human persons who have autonomy, and secondly, to emphasize that human rights are beyond sex and gender. So women and men must become independent economically and socially to understand their value as free persons. Therefore, feminists criticize all institutions that look at women as inferior to men. For feminists one institution that emphasizes the inferiority of women is the Christian church. As a result of this attitude, feminists see "Christianity responsible for the

⁷¹ In Christ Jesus there is "neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female."

⁷² Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. "Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology of Liberation." *Theological Studies* 36 (1975), 607.

rationalization of women's inferior status in our culture."⁷³ In the other words, they see "feminists as anti-Christians."⁷⁴ This view is challenged by feminist theologians such as Fiorenza, who puts the blame at the feet of the church and human persons rather than the Christian faith itself. Therefore Fiorenza's notion of Christian feminism advocates that the church must be changed as well as society.

Similarly to Russell and Fiorenza, Lydia Harder also approves the possibility of being committed to Christian faith and community and looking at the scripture in order to find a new vision that permits the equality of women and men. Harder's definition of feminist theology is similar to that of Russell and Fiorenza. However, unlike them, Harder barely mentions liberation theology as a main source for her definition of feminist theology. Alternatively, she takes into account the Mennonites' understanding of faith in her definition of feminism. Harder raises the concept of discipleship as a common theme for both Christian feminists and Mennonites, and states

Some of these feminists [those who stay in the church] have named themselves disciples in order to speak of their full inclusion in the Christian tradition.⁷⁵

The concept of discipleship for both feminists and Mennonites indicates the equality of women and men: brother/sister hood. This equality is established through a common following of Jesus. It should be noted that there is a difference between the feminists' definition of discipleship and that of Mennonites. In the next section, this will be briefly examined since the concept of discipleship is a core notion for theological

⁷³ Ibid., 610.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Lydia Harder. *Obedience, Suspicion and the Gospel of Mark: A Mennonite-Feminist Exploration of Biblical Authority* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier Press, 1998), 64.

construction and a framework for biblical studies for many Mennonites. But at this point what is important to note is that other Christian feminists share the notion of equality and full inclusion in the community that does theology. For all of them, advocacy for justice for women is included in their understanding of feminism, and these notions are also found in their understanding of the Christian faith. Thus all are able to bring together faith and feminism.

C. Concluding Discussion on Russell's Theology

This section has explored Russell's self-designation as a person who is committed to Christianity, and at the same time advocates feminism. What shines through in Russell's understandings is her definition of feminist theology as a call for liberating women. She highlights the fact that the gospel message is consistent with the feminists' message: both indicate that all humans are equal and both emphasize the establishment of justice.

The concept of "justice" is not a new theme raised by liberation theologians; this is a common theme among all Abrahamic faiths. That is because this concept is rooted innately in humans. This concept is referred to as *fetrah* in Islamic thought; the closest English translation for *fetrah* is human origination.⁷⁶

Consequently, since religions do not belong to specific people in specific times and situations but rather are the ways of life for people of all times and in all situations, important attributes of a religion are based on the origination or *fetrah* of human beings:

⁷⁶ By origination, I mean the factor that is *present at birth but not necessarily hereditary that is acquired during fetal development*. In other words it is *not established by conditioning or learning*; a child or even an absolutely illiterate human tends to have these innate elements which construct *fetrah*. An example is the feeling of the love of a mother towards her child. As another example, consider a human who comes from another planet to the Earth and does not know anything about the formal meaning of justice and injustice. If you ask her to work for food and after she fulfills her work she is deprived of her food then she, as a human, will have a feeling of injustice. That is because this notion is an innate concept.

So set your heart on the religion as a people of pure faith, the origination of Allah according to which He originated mankind⁷⁷ (there is no altering Allah's creation; that is the upright religion, but most people do not know).⁷⁸

Therefore, since the call for eradication of injustice is an innate characteristic of human beings, the aim of a religion that comes from a righteous God is to establish justice. In that sense, a religion's attempt is to liberate oppressed people.

Certainly, We sent Our apostles with manifest proofs, and We sent down with them the Book and the Balance, so that mankind maintain justice...⁷⁹

Justice, at least in its abstract form, is therefore not originally a human construct but rather an innate characteristic that God bestowed upon all human beings in their nature.⁸⁰

Since it is generally accepted through the witness of history that women are oppressed, there is no doubt that God's revealed theme is to establish justice for women as well as for other persons, a principle that all free humans should be able to agree on.

Russell proposes a theology that is aimed at eradicating injustice against women. The challenge, however, appears when the method of eradicating "injustice" is presented. The first step in this theology is to define the meaning of "injustice." The problem is that in practice, the interpretation of "injustice" differs from culture to culture and time to time and Russell's definition of justice needs to address this fact.

⁷⁷ In my view, considering the original Arabic word, it is better to replace O mankind with O human beings (or O humankind).

⁷⁸ The Qur'ān, translated by Sayyid Ali Qarai (The Center for Translation of the Holy Qur'ān, Qum, Iran: 2003) Sūrat Al-Rūm, 30 (30:30).

⁷⁹ The Qur'ān, Sūrat Al-Hadid, 25 (57:25).

⁸⁰ The process of becoming conscious about the lack of freedom and of justice is important to liberation theology. This is called "salvation" by liberation theologies and is connected to themes of salvation in the Bible, where God creates justice by liberating people. The notion of justice in my thought as a Muslim woman is based more on the revelation of God, who places the knowledge of justice within people and who sends prophets to elaborate that in the context of society.

In her theology, Russell presents a dynamic theology in which the meaning of “justice” and “injustice” is determined based on an ongoing interpretation that is developed as a result of a relationship with God in history that brings salvation. However, the dynamics of the society cannot necessarily unveil the true meaning of “justice” from God’s perspective. In other words, the dynamics of history cannot impose the meaning of justice on the faith. The history of humankind includes numerous examples of misinterpretations of the meaning of justice that were acceptable by the faith communities at the time. In fact, I believe that the faith has come to articulate the pillars of the definition of justice so that the dynamics of the society have to move toward it to bring about salvation. According to the Qur’ān, such articulations are consistent with the *fetrah* that was discussed previously.

Russell then goes on to speak of her “action reflection methodology” that creates the link that brings together experience and context with the tradition of faith. In the next chapter this will be discussed in more detail. The chapter will explain how she uses this method as a solid block to build her bridge between faith and feminism.

This chapter provided a larger sphere in which to study Russell’s self-designation as a Christian feminist. This self-designation is the first step of the development of her thought as a Christian feminist, and was studied primarily through her definition of feminist theology. But the footprints of liberation theology’s themes and perspectives are clearly visible in her feminist theology. As will be made apparent in the next chapters, these themes influence the development of Russell’s thought in her later works.

In addition, the chapter allowed a reader to look at Russell’s thought along with that of other scholars like Fiorenza and Harder. For me as a person who is looking at

feminist theology as a believer of another faith, Russell's self-designation has both suggested some possibilities as well as raised several questions that will be more fully explored in the final conclusion.

CHAPTER III

RUSSELL'S METHODOLOGY: INSIGHTS AND CHALLENGES IN RUSSELL'S MODEL

These are especially exciting and challenging times for women. Exciting, because so many new ideas, life-styles, and ways of service are opening up. Challenging, because women are often moving away from old securities along new paths where there are many questions and few answers. Every field of learning, every skill, every life-style, becomes a new arena of experiment as women seek out their own perspectives, the contribution that they would make in building a new house of freedom.⁸¹

Russell's commitment to the Christian faith combined with her advocacy of feminism encourages her to adopt a new method. This method becomes the primary bridge that brings together her faith and her commitment to women's rights. She promotes the education of women so that they can identify their rights through a process of action and reflection, a reversal of the more usual approach in theology from theory to practice. As already mentioned in the introductory quotation, through this process, women gain a new understanding of faith and add new perspectives to Christian theology. This method results in significant ideas and insights, however, it creates numerous methodological challenges for feminists as well. The aim of this chapter is to explore the challenges and insights that feminist Christians experience when there is a shift in method that affects every aspect of theology.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section offers a broad view of a feminist methodology that is proposed by Russell, that advocates women's liberation through the method of action-reflection. This method is based on the experience of women and the relationship of that experience to tradition. Furthermore, this section

⁸¹ Russell, *Human Liberation*, 18. In addition to this book, this statement is repeated by Russell in the article, "Liberation Theology in a Feminist Perspective," 88.

provides a basic understanding of the relationship between tradition and social context (including women's context) from a feminist perspective. Fiorenza and Harder's methodologies are included as a way to enlarge the discussion of the relationship of the texts of tradition and the context of women. This understanding paves the way for the more in-depth discussions of tradition that follow in chapter four.

The second section identifies sisterhood, corporate style, and consciousness-raising as three key results of the method that bind women together in this process of moving toward women's liberation. In addition, Fiorenza's thoughts are noted so that it becomes clearer what implications flow naturally out of the methodological shift that has been described above.

The last section begins by pointing to various challenges faced by feminists as they pursue this method of action-reflection, and moves quickly on to a discussion of the key challenge faced by feminists according to Russell: how to understand authoritative tradition in the context of a dynamic process that changes many aspects of that tradition. Various definitions and understandings of tradition are explored in an attempt to shed light on this issue.

A. Feminist Methodology

Many Christian feminists, including Russell, who know their commitment to Christianity as their identity frequently indicate that what women do in feminist theology is not to replace the current theology with a new one, but rather to add women's understanding of faith to the Christian tradition, thus deepening and enlarging it. The immediate result of

naming themselves feminist theologians has been a shift in basic theological methodology.

Russell started the development of her methodology in 1974. Her method is common to the various theologies of liberation, but she applies this method to her context. Russell's articulation of her method comes primarily from her critical reflection on her own experiences, particularly her role as a female pastor among black and Hispanic Christians in East Harlem. She emphasizes that theology without women's voices is an incomplete theology, so women's contribution to theology is to cover the unfinished dimension of Christian theology.

Women add their small piece of experience about the way God is known to them to all the other pieces, so that theology becomes more holistic and comprehensive.⁸²

In order to make theology more comprehensive, Russell extensively describes the action-reflection methodology as a widely applicable methodology of liberation theology. In feminist theology, Russell further defines the method of action-reflection by basing it on two pillars: women's experience and women's context. For Russell, feminist theology was born from women's experience in a variety of contexts.

The first pillar of Russell's method of action-reflection is women's experience. This pillar encourages every person of the faith community to raise her concerns and questions in an effort to find a new way of thinking and to establish a new understanding of the faith. Based on this approach, every person in the faith communities has her own voice and offers her own insights into the faith. These new insights enable the community to act to establish greater equality and justice for community members. Each action in turn

⁸² Russell, *Human Liberation*, 53.

is followed by a theological reflection. As a result, women's theological reflections make a contribution to the understanding of the Christian faith tradition. Therefore, this contribution, far from leading feminist theology away from the Christian faith, looks at the Christian faith from women's perspective and offers a more comprehensive view of Christian thinking.

Out of the reflection on tradition in the light of concrete situations come new models of thought and action. Such a methodology does not lead liberation theology away from the basic *paradosis*, but helps us continue the liberating action of God's mission in the world. This opens the way for the discovery of the presence of the living tradition and sets people free to take risks in shaping the future.⁸³

The second pillar of Russell's action-reflection method is to consider context. In 1993, she organized and developed her thoughts about the relationship of the two notions of context and tradition in a more in-depth way. According to Russell, how the context of the tradition is described and interpreted is dependent on who interprets it, how he or she does it, and in which situation it is interpreted. Therefore, since there are varieties of contexts, the interpretation of the text is dependent on the variety of readers and their situations. Based on this vision, Russell points out that since contextual theologies depend on interpreters, "contextual theologies are suspicious of any theology which proposes abstract statements that can be expected to hold true in every circumstance."⁸⁴ For instance, the story of Hagar and Sarah (Gen 16:1-16) is understood and interpreted differently in white free culture than in cultures in which slavery is dominant. The meaning of the story of Hagar for black women is the survival message of God. Not only did she survive living in the wilderness but she cared for her family as well. On the other

⁸³ Russell, "Liberation Theology," 104.

⁸⁴ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 32.

hand, this story might have different meanings for white women. In a free culture where the original context is studied and considered, the text could mean something quite different. In other words, there is one text written in a specific time and situation, but it is read and interpreted differently in different times and cultures.

To work on context, it is necessary to consider both unity and diversity; that is, the unity of text and the diversity of cultural situations. Russell admits that it is complex to consider the social contexts when the Bible is read and interpreted. To deal with this complexity, she describes “a spiral method of action and reflection.”⁸⁵ This method is a good tool for theologians in that it can show the dynamic work of God in human lives as it considers connections between context and tradition. This work of God is always particular, and not abstract or static.

This method assumes that we each view our theology, our understanding of how God is at work in our lives, through a particular lens of language, thought and action.⁸⁶

In addition to various cultural situations, there is also the change in time as well. Consequently, the questions related to the interpretation of the scripture and the tradition depend on how the social, cultural, political, and economical situations change over time. Russell’s metaphor of a spiral emphasizes the dynamic nature of interpretation. The key aspect of this method is to open up new insights and move to a higher level of understanding rather than going around a circle and returning to the same point.

The reason that table talk is described as a spiral rather than a circle is that the movement of action and reflection does not simply go around the same

⁸⁵ Ibid., 27.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 30.

circle. Rather, it moves to discover new clues and new questions in a continuing spiral that never comes out in exactly the same place.⁸⁷

Russell understands that as a new approach to the relationship to tradition. The method of spiral action-reflection doesn't separate feminist theology from scripture and tradition; rather it returns to the tradition but not to the same point as previously. It goes back to the tradition with new clues that enable readers to come up with new interpretations.

At this point, Fiorenza and Harder's methods will be drawn in to the discussion in order to show the broader methodological approaches that feminists have used to connect the Christian tradition with the present context of women. In contrast to Russell, who emphasizes the addition of women's contribution to theology, for Fiorenza the goal of Christian feminists is "to reconceptualize and to transform Christian theology from a feminist perspective."⁸⁸ Fiorenza suggests that all Christian feminist methodologies are similar in terms of analysis and cultural critique, but that they offer different strategies, depending on the scholarly discipline that they are part of. Thus, Russell's background in systematic and practical theology substantially influences her approach to her feminist methodology in that she tries to make a bridge between the doctrines of the church and context in the society. In contrast, Fiorenza, a well-known New Testament scholar, takes a biblical historical approach in her methodology, concentrating on the way that history is written in the first place.

They [Christian feminists] attempt to bring to bear their feminist analysis and critique in order to set free the traditions of emancipation, equality, and genuine human personhood which they have experienced in their Christian

⁸⁷ Ibid., 34.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 611.

heritage... They attempt to reconceptualize and to transform Christian theology from a feminist perspective.⁸⁹

Compared to Russell, who proposes an action-reflection method, Fiorenza presents an action-research oriented methodology.⁹⁰ As a liberation theologian, Fiorenza, like Russell, emphasizes the importance of women's experience to act, replace, and reconstruct androcentric (that is male-centered) views of society. In comparison to Russell, who emphasizes the role of learning from an action to create another reflection, Fiorenza stresses the role of research in that process.

The integration of research into the liberation struggle and process implies that changing the status quo becomes the starting point for a research project.⁹¹

For Fiorenza, the research process is a process of conscientization. A feminist scholar uses research tools in order to help women understand their subjugation and thus helps them move to a new self-understanding of dignity and autonomy. Many women who assume that the Bible is the Word of God submit themselves to the Church, even in situations of oppression. Fiorenza's research tools help women to understand that the patriarchal parts of the text are not "the Word of God," but rather the "word of men." So, this awareness helps women to reject "the patriarchal submission to the society and the church."⁹² For instance, Fiorenza, deals with the household code (Ephesians 5:21-6:9) by saying that the author of Ephesians did not sufficiently Christianize the household codes, to "household of God." She shows that "the 'gospel of peace' has transformed the

⁸⁹Ibid.,611.

⁹⁰ Fiorenza adapts her method on seven steps. Appendix II is briefly talks about these seven steps.

⁹¹ Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. "Roundtable Discussion: On Feminist Methodology." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1 (1985), 75.

⁹² Ibid.

relationship of gentiles and Jews in those scriptures, but not the social roles of wives and slaves within the household of God.”⁹³

In the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Fiorenza summarizes the action-research oriented method and emphasizes the various points that feminists should consider in order that they may still be unified in terms of their liberation struggle. For her it is important that the various actions and research interrelate in their struggle for liberation.

If we would accept the action-research oriented approach and method outlined here as the unifying perspective for the JFSR,⁹⁴ then we need to articulate more clearly how our research functions to strengthen the women’s movement. Moreover, we need to specify the segments of the women’s movement to which we feel especially accountable and that determines our research questions and projects. Finally, we need to show how such particular research serves the whole movement and how our different experiences, approaches, and research communities interrelate and reinforce each other in the liberation struggle.⁹⁵

Harder, as a Mennonite feminist, bases her method on the theological notion of discipleship. As previously discussed, the concept of discipleship for both feminists and Mennonites indicates the equality of women and men: brother/sister hood. Based on the notion of discipleship, Harder sheds light on experience and context from her own perspective. In terms of experience, she endorses the “communities of experience,”⁹⁶ in which both men and women participate to explain their experiences. Moreover, as for context, Harder mentions that the socio-political context influences members and reshapes their interpretation of the text. But her emphasis is on “convictional or hermeneutic communities that consciously interpret scripture in light of their experience of God’s

⁹³ Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. *In Memory of Her* (Crossroad Publishing Company: New York, 1983), 270.

⁹⁴ *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*.

⁹⁵ Fiorenza, “Roundtable Discussion,” 76.

⁹⁶ Harder, “Biblical Interpretation,” 22.

salvation.”⁹⁷ She holds to the hermeneutics of suspicion when it comes to being wary of human interpretation.

In addition to this commonality with other feminists, Harder draws more specifically on the understanding of discipleship that comes from her Mennonite community to help build her method. Anabaptist Mennonites know themselves as the followers of Jesus who are obedient to God, so they build their discipleship based on obedience to God within the context of a faith community. Therefore, Mennonites insist on trust in God and obedience to Him as important in the way that the biblical texts are approached. Based on this vision, Harder proposes reader-response methodologies to further work on the relationship between tradition and context. For Harder, this method not only promotes self-consciousness in the readers but also it provides a “particular context that shapes the way the text is read.”⁹⁸ This context is the church, a community of those who worship God and place their confidence in him. Since the word “disciples” refers to both women and men, it is inclusive. This method allows women to trust in God while they look critically at the sacred book. In this way, it encourages readers to make faith choices even within the reading process. Thus the connection of experience and tradition is furthered within a community of faith that values discipleship. Harder’s method thus includes faithfulness to the values of the tradition as well as women’s full participation.

These approaches to biblical studies focus on the readers of the text and on particular contexts that shape the way the text is read. These approaches have developed the notion of a “resisting reader” who does not automatically assent to the text but is open to looking at the text from new

⁹⁷ Email discussion with the author.

⁹⁸ Email discussion with the author.

perspectives and with new assumptions, nurtured in particular contexts.⁹⁹ These methodologies urge readers to become more self-conscious about their Bible reading practices, about the assent or resistance they give to particular biblical texts and about the community which authorizes specific interpretations.¹⁰⁰

In sum, from Russell's perspective, the action-reflection method of feminist theologians is based on experience, the experience of those who are oppressed and ask, "How God is involved in that struggle?"¹⁰¹ After analyzing the experience and raising questions, they look at the biblical text, reinterpreting it to answer those questions. The important feature of this reinterpretation is looking at the text from marginal perspectives, that is women's voices. Russell's method particularly focuses on a feminist approach that adds women's contribution in order to make the theology more complete.

B. Insights of Feminists that Arise Out of a Shift in Methodology

Russell briefly describes feminists' insights in her early work *Liberation Theology in a Feminist Perspective* (1975), which is a chapter of the book *Liberation, Revolution and Freedom*. Unlike her usual habit of repeating, clarifying, and amplifying her words in different works, she explains the following insights only in that book in a few pages with little or no elaboration. Russell admires feminist insights, which are considered as a part of the movement toward liberation. As a liberation theologian, she believes that these insights can be shared with other liberation theologies as well.

⁹⁹ Judith Fetterley. *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978). Quoted in Harder, *Obedience, Suspicion*, 6.

¹⁰⁰ Harder, *Obedience, Suspicion*, 5.

¹⁰¹ "Feminist Theology," 138.

Emphasis on “sisterhood” is the first insight for feminists. Russell mentions that since most of the theological writings were out of men’s experience, it becomes necessary for women to support each other in order to change this theology. This may seem like an expected result of the shift in method, but it is probably no accident that when women speak out of experience, they need to support each other.

Supporting each other binds women together, that is, there is “the emphasis on sisterhood leading to collective effort in theology.”¹⁰² This effort encourages women to discover their active role. It empowers the oppressed women to feel that they have a voice and to express their contribution. Consequently, it helps women to eradicate the patriarchal tradition that has governed the faith community for centuries.

For Russell, “other insights grew from corporate style.”¹⁰³ What she means by “corporate style” is not individualistic but rather a communal taking into account of each other’s experience. Russell believes that the discussion and argument that is usual in scholarly discussion is not enough to expressing a holistic view of life. Therefore, for her, a privilege of feminist theology is that women share the experiences of their life through music, drama, celebration, etc. This has implications for scholarly theology as it has often been done. The focus on critical discussion alone changes when women begin to relate experiences and look at tradition differently. Women are finding different ways to do theology, as can be seen from the focus on story and poetry in many feminists’ theological writings.

¹⁰² Russell, “Liberation Theology,” 96.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

In addition, “consciousness raising”¹⁰⁴ encourages women to conduct new research to discover their own place in the biblical stories and in Christian history. Consciousness-raising has not been seen as the primary task of theologians, at least not in terms of concrete liberation. Neither has there always been a place for the personal in theology. The shift in method has given many instances for consciousness-raising that have resulted in new research. For instance, for Russell, the sexist language of the Bible is a challenge for women, because women find themselves omitted in the text. The word Father and the pronoun of He for the transcendent God and the term brotherhood for the believers give the sense that women are excluded from this community. Therefore, women are encouraged to seek “pronouns that indicate that both women and men are included in the words expressed.”¹⁰⁵

For Fiorenza, consciousness-raising and sisterhood are the main characteristics of the feminist movement, and she maintains that consciousness-raising helps women to be aware of their situation in the past and present and leads them to construct their future. Moreover, establishment of a sisterhood relationship among women helps feminists to be aware of other sisters’ situations and supports them in eradicating oppression against them. According to Harder, “Each of these insights has created some turmoil in the theological and church community, but women are willing to continue their work because of what they have received through this theological approach.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 96.

¹⁰⁶ Email discussion with the author.

C. Challenges for Christian Feminists that Arise Out of Feminist Methodology

1. Key Challenges that Arise for Feminists Because of Their Emphasis on Experience

Russell indicates a number of challenges faced by feminists in their movement. Some of these challenges are worthy of consideration, although they do not ultimately contribute to her methodology in practice.

Like many other types of liberation theology, feminist theology comes out of experience and it recurrently emphasizes the importance of women's voices in doing theology. Sometimes this emphasis diverts the goal of theology. In 1974, Russell warns of the danger of "genitive theology: a theology of women,"¹⁰⁷ emphasizing that feminist theology is not merely a theology by or about women, but rather that theology is about God. Feminist theology is not a form of *ego-logy* in which women talk about themselves from their own perspective; women too need to speak with openness to hearing God's words.

When women do it [theology], they speak of feminist theology in order to express the fact that the experience from which they speak and the world out of which they perceive God's words and actions and join in those actions is that of women seeking human equality.¹⁰⁸

While emphasizing that feminist theology is not a theology about women, Russell mentions that when women are doing theology, they "join in God's action."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Russell, *Human Liberation*, 53.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Russell, "Liberation Theology," 97.

What they [liberation theologians] are about is doing *theo-logy*: using their *logos* (their mind) in the perspective of God, as God is known in and through the Word in the world.¹¹⁰

This is an important aspect of her insight that the goal of this type of theology is to join in God's action. In that sense, in feminist theology women express their perspective and make a new contribution to the "unfinished dimension of Christian thought."¹¹¹ Russell notes that the result of the focus on "genitive theology" is often racism and classism. Although she does not explain at length what she means by racism and classism, what she is trying to avoid is women becoming oppressors in a different way according to race or class. According to her, the result of "genitive theology" may be oppression according to race or class; women have at times been oppressors as well. What is clear is that Russell's aim is to emphasize that feminist theology's goal is to add a small piece of women's experience to the theology rather to replace it entirely.

There is another danger, mentioned by Russell, that feminist theology faces when it begins with experience. She warns that feminists can be "overwhelmed with their new consciousness of selfhood or with bitterness toward the injustices of the church,"¹¹² which results in leading feminists to the danger of a narrow looking at the "self story of women."¹¹³ In writings that come out of the bitterness of women's experience, the focus of the writing is more on the telling of a story and an experience rather than articulating a theology; consequently, these writings are in danger of looking at theology too narrowly.

¹¹⁰ Russell, *Human Liberation*, 52.

¹¹¹ Russell, "Liberation Theology," 97.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

2. The Key Challenge by Feminists: How to Deal with Theological Traditions

In 1975, Russell emphasizes that feminists attempt to find a way to make the “message [of the Christian gospel] to come alive in their lives,”¹¹⁴ identifying the male-dominant culture of tradition as an important hurdle to overcome in this. She supports this with three facts:

First, they [the male-dominant culture of tradition] reinforce inferiority and superiority stereotypes. Second, they are causing the alienation of some women from the life and worship of the church because the consciousness of these women no longer allows them to accept exclusive language. Third, they run the risk of making God too small! If we think of God as a baal or idol of one group, we are forgetting the mystery of One who cares for all human beings and welcomes their love.¹¹⁵

Clearly, she recognizes male-oriented tradition as a key challenge to feminists because it is the main supporter of the patriarchal culture. To deal with this challenge, Russell identifies a range of meanings for Christian tradition as a key step in addressing feminists’ problems with the tradition.

From within the discussion of Christian theology, tradition has a range of meanings, all of which need to be reinterpreted from a feminist perspective. Since the twentieth century there has been an ever increasing rate of historical change in the world, and at the same time an increasing interest in understanding how tradition continues to connect the church to the sources of its faith and life and yet also allows it to change and evolve.¹¹⁶

Russell struggles with how to define tradition and defines it in several different ways as she develops her thought. In 1975, she makes a distinction between “Tradition” and “traditions” based on historical and theological investigation, proposing a simple

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 98.

¹¹⁵ Letty M .Russell. *The Liberating Word: A Guide to Nonsexist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), 18.

¹¹⁶ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 36.

definition for each. According to Russell's understanding of the Bible, Tradition is Jesus Christ himself, the object of tradition.¹¹⁷ She identifies tradition as the confessional pattern of the church. Therefore, with the help of events in the past, Tradition, that is Christ, shapes the present and future. In this way, unlike traditions, which are in the hands of ecclesial institutions, Tradition is present in all generations throughout time.

The tradition is thus God's handing over of Jesus Christ into the hands of all generations.... The action of tradition is God's missionary activity in sending Christ. The object of activity is Christ himself. The means by which people participate in the tradition is sharing in the receiving and passing on of Christ.¹¹⁸

It is important to note that for Russell tradition is a very active term; all the words describing it are verbs.

Early in her writings, in 1979, Russell indicates that the Tradition is the "universal dimension of the Gospel message"¹¹⁹ in sending Christ. The Tradition invites all people to participate in this action, which means that, just as Christ was incarnated, so too the Tradition needs to continue to be "incarnational and contextual."¹²⁰ Thus particular church traditions are the passing on of the Tradition in the ecclesial dimension of Christian faith in a particular historical context. However, this form of tradition creates an identity by which persons relate not only to Christ but also to an ecclesial, cultural, racial, and sexual

¹¹⁷ Matthew 12:22, Romans 8:31-32.

¹¹⁸ Russell, "Liberation Theology," 102. It seemed that it should have been a capital T for tradition in terms of God's handing over of Jesus Christ. I think Russell's discussion is unclear. I wonder if it is the sharing and receiving and passing on of Christ in the church, that is not capitalized. The capitalized is only used for Christ himself and not for the action in history.

¹¹⁹ Letty M. Russell. "Universality and Contextuality." *The Ecumenical Review* 31 (1979): 24.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

identity. Therefore, traditions are changed depending on the cultural contexts. Hence, traditions are able to construct a theology based on their own context, but this theology may not be appropriate for all contexts. Here the important aspect is the difference between the particular nature of church traditions, even though Tradition is universal.

In 1993, Russell uses three distinctions taken from the Faith and Order study of the World Council of Churches. The Faith and Order study distinguishes between the meanings of “The Tradition (or Tradition)” and both “tradition” and “traditions.”¹²¹

According to the Faith and Order study:

“The Tradition” refers to Christ as the content of the traditioning process by which God hands over Christ to coming generations and nations and the scriptural witness to God’s action. The total traditioning process that operates in human history and society is called “tradition,” and “traditions” is used for patterns of church life such as confessions, liturgies and polities.¹²²

Russell believes that the categories of the Faith and Order Study do not adequately emphasize the importance of the church¹²³ with its interest in and commitment to handing on the faith. However, she does affirm the traditioning process as important for the church. So, Russell further develops these categories and comes up with four distinct definitions, dividing the first category of the Faith and Order Study, named Tradition into two categories.

¹²¹ Russell, in her book *Church in the Round*, briefly talks about the historical and theological background of the distinction. She says: “In historical and theological investigation, distinction are made between *Tradition* (*paradosis*, the ‘handing over’ of Jesus Christ {Matt, 17:22; Rom.8:31-32}) and *traditions* (particular confessional patterns of faithfulness). The 1963 Faith and Order study of the World Council of Churches on Tradition and traditions summarizes an ecumenical consensus that distinguishes between tradition, traditions and the Tradition (or Tradition). The Faith and Order Study makes three distinctions as a general category that includes both the process of transmission and the content of what is transmitted. (*Church in the Round*, 36.)

¹²² Russell, *Church in the Round*, 37.

¹²³ Considering the importance of church for the Roman Catholic and Orthodox tradition.

The first category recognizes that all the distinctions are seeking to make clear the way the church continues to stay connected to “the Tradition” as the action of God’s mission in sending or handing over Jesus Christ to the world. A “new” second category, the “deposit of faith” in the witness of scripture and church doctrine, could be called “tradition” because this is one of the most frequent ways of referring to the Christian tradition... A third category would be the process of handing over that is part of the human way of shaping history and could be called “traditioning”... The fourth and final category would be the confessional patterns of church life, which could be called “traditions” because of the emphasis on their variety in the different confessional groups.¹²⁴

Note that in Russell’s most recent understanding, Tradition with a capital T refers only to God’s action and therefore to Christ. The next three categories all refer to the content and transmission of what is passed on in the church. This includes the “deposit of faith” by God within scripture, the traditioning process in the church, and the confessional patterns of church life. This means that for Russell there is a difference between the salvific action of God and what she perceives as the more static deposit of faith in scripture and tradition. Therefore, Russell stresses the necessity of examining this deposit of faith tradition in order to deal creatively and faithfully with the Tradition, namely Jesus Christ. For Russell, the deposit of the past, that is tradition, is usable in shaping the present and future. But it is a functional category that is not the same as the universal category of Tradition.

What Russell suggests is that in order to find a “usable future,” feminists have to combine the “usable past” and the “contemporary history of actions.”¹²⁵ This combination helps to transform the oppression that is present in the world into a just and equitable world. Note that both the past and the future are historical notions and not universal and

¹²⁴ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 37, 38.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

therefore each can be changed in their interaction. It is only God's sending of Christ (Tradition) that is the universal element of the gospel.

In sum, what Russell points out is that tradition, though including some content, is not a "block of static things" but a "dynamic action of God's love."¹²⁶ For her, it is important to understand that the tradition is in human hands. She claims that human tradition is there because of "God's handing over of Christ into the hands of all generations and nations until Christ hands all things back to God."¹²⁷ The action of God that is the Tradition is sending Christ; the traditioning process is God working through humans. And God's action continues in the present through the tradition that all women participate in by sharing their experiences and handing these over to others.

...It is possible to recover the true meaning of tradition as God's sending of Christ and to look to Christ's power to be present in struggling to speak and act the good news in the present and future.¹²⁸

Because of the important role of tradition in feminist interpretation, Russell's aim is to change traditional ecclesiology, that is a theology of the church, to open a new method of understanding the Tradition. She wants to build a community of women and men who together in partnership interpret the tradition in order to really understand God's action.

In 1975, Russell mentions that feminist theology, like other types of liberation theologies, is a process based on asking questions and seeking observations. So, such a theology is "experimental in its nature."¹²⁹ Consequently, because of this characteristic,

¹²⁶ Russell, "Liberation Theology," 103.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 101.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 104.

¹²⁹ Russell, *Human Liberation*, 54.

this theology leaves “no doctrine unchallenged in the search for a faith.”¹³⁰ Although she does not talk explicitly about the hermeneutics of suspicion either in this book or in her other major books, it does seem apparent that for her the method of feminist theologians is a hermeneutic of suspicion. For instance, in 1993, she mentions:

As you know, feminist theology and ethics are full of this talking back by means of hermeneutics of suspicion and reconstruction of biblical and church tradition,¹³¹

and goes on to say,

....We need to be critical of the text because of our suspicion....¹³²

Certainly many theologians consider Russell a supporter of the hermeneutics of suspicion and much of her theology is based on a challenging of the patriarchal tradition, including the challenge of the nature of the church.

According to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, the structures of society, culture, and church keep women inferior. Fiorenza criticizes sexist society and she believes that society and culture disregard the social role of women and keep them down.

In a sexist society woman’s predominant role in life is to be man’s helpmate, to cook, and work for him without being paid, to bear and to rear his children, and to guarantee him psychological and sexual satisfaction.¹³³

But Fiorenza also emphasizes that despite the presentation of men and women as equal in some parts of the Bible, the traditional domination of males has meant that women’s freedom was suppressed within the church. Yet feminist historical research

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 200.

¹³² Ibid., 205.

¹³³ Fiorenza, “Feminist Theology,” 606.

demonstrates “how difficult it was for the ecclesial establishment to suppress the call and spirit of freedom among Christian women.”¹³⁴ Fiorenza points out the resilience of women and tries to show how that spirit shows through despite the androcentric nature of the Bible. But it is clear that within the Bible and within ongoing tradition, women’s place has been severely restricted. In other words, similar to Russell, Fiorenza recognizes tradition as the main challenge to feminist theology, and therefore encourages feminists to look with critical eyes and great suspicion on Christian tradition and history.

In contrast to Russell and Fiorenza, who look at the tradition as a key challenge for feminists, for Harder the tradition also has a “pre-understanding” function in the dynamic process of interpretation. Harder doesn’t reject the tradition but she does not accept it totally. She “wrestles”¹³⁵ with the tradition in her interpretation of the text.

Harder suggests a critical look at the scriptures. However, in contrast to Russell and Fiorenza, who propose the theory of suspicion as an approach to the text, Harder believes in trusting the Bible. In her view, most of the feminist writings suggest that it is impossible to be a committed reader of the Bible and at the same time have a critical look at scripture. In other words, they suggest that there is no way to consider both trusting the Bible and including experience as a major part of the process of interpretation. To respond to this issue, Harder is faced with a paradoxical “wrestling”:

This wrestling with the tradition, with feminist consciousness and with the biblical text seems at first to move me into conflicting directions. The first direction, which asserted the relationship between the divine and human, was not surprising, for it is assumed in my methodology and was only clarified more clearly through the process of study and reflection. The second, which insisted on the radical difference between divine and human

¹³⁴Ibid., 617.

¹³⁵ Harder, “Biblical Interpretation,” 146.

authority, interrupting my assumptions, forcing me to change and qualify some of my earlier convictions.¹³⁶

Harder mentions that the two directions, at first glance, seem to be paradoxical. This is because humans tend to compare God's authority with humans' authority and power. For Harder, it is important to find a way to say that God's work is different from human work, is altogether unique and the origin of anything that happens. She thus wants to protect God's superiority and transcendence. However, she does acknowledge that in the process of interpretation both human and divine participate, although in her approach, human experience and interpretation do not have the last word. Even feminist interpretation can be interrupted by a word from God.

D. Concluding Discussions of Russell's Methodology

This chapter has explored feminist methodology as understood by Russell and two other Christian feminists. It has shown how the basic action-reflection methodology connects context and the text by beginning with experience and then moving in a dynamic reflection to the interpretation of the tradition. This exploration has shown clearly how Christian feminists are trying to bring together their faith and their identity as Christian. These concluding comments will point to some understandings as well as give several critical comments about this basic methodology that come from my own perspective.

Russell defines the meaning of context and its diversity in a helpful way, as well as its role in encountering the issue of unity of the text. I agree with her that God's message is one for a diversity of contexts; however, I look at this from a somewhat different perspective. In my view, God creates human beings, setting them into a variety of

¹³⁶ Ibid.

physical, social, cultural, and economic contexts, but he bestows on them a single message: that all humans are equal and that there is no biological priority. By biological priority I mean priority based on gender. In other words, the Qur'ān indicates that women and men are equal. This message comes through clearly in this passage from the Qur'ān:

O mankind! Indeed We created you from a male and a female and made you nations and tribes that you may identify with one another. Indeed the noblest (or the most honored) in the sight of Allah is the most Godwary¹³⁷ among you.¹³⁸

However, there is the question that if God's written message literally opposes our current understanding of context and interpretation, how should we deal with this paradox? Which one has a priority, God's written message or our interpretation as believers? I would like to consider a more general example to elaborate this question; in the Old Testament several animals are mentioned as unclean and people are instructed not to eat them. In our current situation, people's interpretation is that there is no sensible reason for the uncleanness of these animals. The question for believers is, which one has a priority; God's law through the Old Testament or our understanding of the context? This question will be addressed in the final chapter; however, the dilemma is clear. Is there a priority in God's revelatory Word or is the priority in a dynamic interpretation that creates relevance to today's issues?

For me, the aim of all three methods pointed out in this chapter, the action-reflection method of Russell, the research-action method of Fiorenza, and the reader-response method of Harder, are attempts to eradicate biological priority and to establish equality. Each of these three methods has some methodological advantages in practice. I

¹³⁷ My translation, The one who considers only God's will in his/her life.

¹³⁸ The Qur'ān, Sūrat Al- Hujurāt, 13 (49:13).

feel that these methods complement each other. The correct action requires research on both sides of the story: what women infer from their experience and what the tradition suggests about the text. In addition, the aim of the interpretation is to make the texts come alive in the various situations of the readers. So, a response from readers of the text is needed. In my opinion, since all of these methods have an element of experience, they are consistent with each other and can complement each other, and thus they move in the same direction.

In the meanwhile, there are questions about the framework of each of these methods and the boundaries for the application of the methods. Do feminist theologians consider any limit to the extent of the application of their method on how far such methods can challenge the tradition, on the one hand, or the notion of what is socially considered as “justice for women,” on the other hand? Is there any criterion by which feminist theologians can test their method?

The importance of this criterion comes out clearly with examination of the notion of “the spiral method of action-reflection.” When the spiral metaphor is first looked at, it seems that the method helps feminists to move upward or forward to find the truth. An action raises a series of questions related to the context. As a result, this action offers a broader view to the tradition; a reflection. The reflection, in turn, leads toward a new action. This process continues onward to find the truth, the peak of the spiral, which is the addition of women’s voices to the theology, thus permitting a holistic view. However, in my opinion, the possibility of going downward or backward in the spiral should also be considered. Looking at the theology only from women’s perspective is subject to the problem of sexism in theology. In this methodology, a feminist can narrow the theology

down to a theology that applies only to women instead of adding their perspective to the theology to make it more comprehensive.

One example might be the use of inclusive language for God. Some feminists criticize the male pronoun used in the Bible for the transcendent God and their aim is to replace the male language with neutral terms. Some others, on the other hand, have raised the notion of Goddess instead of God as a result of their reflections, even appealing to ancient goddesses for further characteristics of this goddess. In my view, this is indeed a spiral that goes downward, instead of up or even forward. For God is transcendent, and even the limitations of grammar cannot hinder God's revelation if God chooses to make God's will known as I believe God does in the scriptures.

Russell has pointed to interesting positive results of the methodology employed by feminists, results shared also by other liberation theologies. As Russell points out, sisterhood is one of the important insights of feminist theologians because it creates a coalition among women to liberate them from the oppression. The beautiful word "sisterhood" indicates that though there is some dissimilarity between persons, yet all belong to one family, all are God's creatures.

Consciousness-raising is another insight in the movement for the liberation of women. According to Russell, women need to know that using male pronouns in the text is a major reason for the development of a patriarchal culture. Hence, their response is that language has to be changed. In my view, there is no doubt that the text is written in a male-dominant culture and there is a need to make it clear that God is beyond gender. I also agree that history has tried to make light of and marginalize the role of women in the process of interpretation. And of course, a feminist theologian should proclaim the role of

women as equal to men. Women should be aware of the past and current situation of women. However, my understanding about the importance of this notion differs slightly from Russell's.

From my perspective, the main objective of a feminist theologian is to raise consciousness among women so that they discover their place in God's image. In my view, the concept of what history, including tradition, has done to women is different from what God's will was/is for women as revealed in the scriptures. However, I face this dilemma a little bit differently than Russell does in practice. For instance, unlike what Russell suggests, changing the male language of the text or similarly reconstructing history so that women find themselves as God's "heroes" is not necessarily the best approach to bringing about the goals that feminists have set for themselves: that is, identifying themselves as created in God's image. For me, if women have enough awareness of their identity, they can construct a new theology without a need to change the text. This identity can come from a basic trust in God's Word, in the revelation of God that affirms women before any historical action by humans. For me this revelation is there in the Qu'ran, even in its human grammatical shape that does not give inclusive pronouns. That is because in at least two places in the Qu'ran God makes it clear that He is beyond gender. Therefore, the only reason for the male pronouns is the grammatical shape of the language that God has chosen to address humans.

A strength in Russell's thought is the distinction that she draws between the various understandings of tradition. For her, the Tradition that indicates God's will is totally acceptable. Here she does separate God's action from human action. Conversely, she suggests examining the traditions that are created through the history of church. This

distinction is important. In my opinion, the value of the word that has come from God is not comparable to that of the one that comes from human interpretation of that word, even if I trust the interpretations to some extent. In that sense, tradition has the value of a “pre-understanding” and no more. The last chapter will look at how this approach can be applied to the interpretation of the Qur’ān and its effect on the movement for liberation of women. However, it is first necessary to look more closely at the authority of tradition. This will be done in the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV

RUSSELL'S CONTRIBUTION: RUSSELL'S UNDERSTANDING OF AUTHORITY IN FEMINIST THEOLOGY

This guide is an invitation to all women and men to work together toward a more holistic and inclusive interpretation of the biblical message for our time. By means of explanation, interpretation, and suggestions for translation, it seeks to provide assistance to those who want to take the Bible seriously and are concerned with issue of nonsexist interpretation. Those who share the view of the writers that the Bible is an important source of our own faith will want to join in this task in their own local situations. As they experiment with new ideas and images, many more problems and clues than this book could ever mention can be found and shared.¹³⁹

Russell believes that there is a need to open up a new method of understanding the authority of faith traditions. She insists that it is necessary to examine the paradigm of authority that has been assumed in the past and to construct a new paradigm based on a social reality that includes women. Therefore, she proposes a feminist vision of authority that she names an authority of doxology or an authority of partnership. The aim of this chapter is to understand how this understanding of the authority of the interpretation of “the Tradition/ tradition” is legitimated and defended by Russell. The larger purpose is to discover whether there are ways to deal creatively and faithfully with the faith tradition while rejecting a false authority that comes out of patriarchy.

The chapter includes two sections. The first section studies the definition of authority, various kinds of authority, various perspectives on authority, and the source of authority more generally. The second section focuses more particularly on two opposite paradigms of authority: the paradigm of domination and the paradigm of doxology or partnership. Russell talks extensively about the paradigm of partnership as the only way

¹³⁹ Russell, *Liberating Word*, 19-20.

that feminists can achieve a non-sexist interpretation. As in the other chapters, two other feminists will be drawn in to add further insight into the issues. The chapter will conclude with some critical and constructive observations about the usefulness of these discussions for further work on authority.

A. Authority

Russell believes that authority is an important notion in the theological tradition of churches influenced by the Reformation. For Russell, the authority of interpretation of the Bible has historically been in the hands of men, therefore, women have played almost no role in the interpretation of the Bible. In order to achieve a non-sexist interpretation, the whole question of how authority is defined and understood needs to be explored.

1. Definition of Authority

In her writings in 1987, Russell begins by making a clear distinction between the meaning of authority and power. She defines authority as “legitimated power”; for her, authority is power legitimated by the structures of society. The important fact is that authority is completed by “evoking the assent”¹⁴⁰ of the respondent in each situation. Therefore, the meaning of authority may be different from one interpretive situation to another.

I understand authority as legitimated power. It accomplishes its ends by evoking the assent of the respondent. Authority is more than a form of power; it is power that is legitimated by the structures of society. It is exercised in most situations through hierarchy and is control.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Letty M. Russell. *Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), 21.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

Russell also defines authority as a “relational bond.” In order to better explain the issue, Russell gives an example of authority in human relationships. For Russell, “human relationships include dynamic authority and power.” When the relationship is distorted, then the authority takes the form of domination. In that sense, this kind of authority is not “legitimated power.” One example of this is the relationship between a teacher and his/her students. The teacher has a right to give a lecture and this is agreed between the teacher and the students. Additionally, in a structural position, the teacher legitimately has a right to lecture, unless the teacher is not a competent lecturer. If the teacher is incompetent and still continues her work as a lecturer, then the teacher oppresses the students and the authority is distorted.

In 1988, Russell mentions that the root of the English word authority came from the Latin word *auctoritas*, which in turn is from the verb *augere*, meaning to augment or increase. This could be interpreted as the ability to influence, but Russell believes that the concept of authority in Western civilization came from its roots in the Roman Empire. The Empire’s idea was that those who had the authority tried to augment the foundation of their ancestors. This type of authority based on patriarchal culture became power that depended on domination and enforcement rather than the ability to persuade.¹⁴²

Yet this understanding of authority as ability to influence because of the relationship to the origins of life, faith and society is overshadowed in the patriarchal paradigm by its association with the power to enforce obedience or dominate.¹⁴³

¹⁴² In 1987 Russell also talks about this concept. She notes, for instance, that “the authority of the founding fathers is understood as the legitimization or authorizing of domination in politics, culture, and household.” (*Household of Freedom*, 25)

¹⁴³ Letty M. Russell. “Authority and Hope in Feminist Theology.” In *Love: the Foundation of Hope*. Ed. F. Burnham (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 85.

For Russell, questions of authority are understood in this context. She feels that it is important to make the context clear because even our understanding of authority is shaped by it. She thus invites all people from different groups within society to study their own view of authority and how it shapes their interpretation of the tradition.

2. Various Kinds of Authority

Russell believes that “there are many different ways that the relational bond of authority is established.”¹⁴⁴ She recognizes four forms of authority: “structural authority,” “authority of knowledge,” “charismatic authority,” and “authority of wisdom.”¹⁴⁵

There are many different ways that the relational bond of authority is established. Besides the *structural authority* that comes from a position of influence in the social, economic, and political sphere of the world, there is *authority of knowledge*, which is considered valuable by those who give assent. *Charismatic authority* is usually gained because particular persons have the ability to gain the assent of others through their gifts as leaders and speakers. *Authority of wisdom* comes to those who through long experience develop an understanding of the world and human nature that helps others to cope with their lives.¹⁴⁶

Returning to the example of the relationship between a teacher and his/her students, as previously mentioned, a teacher has a right to lecture and this power is legitimately given to her by the school. This is an agreement between the teacher, students, and the school. The position of the teacher as a lecturer is known as structural authority. The teacher, as the one who has the authority to give a lecture, has the authority of knowledge. The teacher in her/his relation to the students has the authority of wisdom.

¹⁴⁴ Russell, *Household of Freedom*, 21.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 22.

And because a teacher may be particularly gifted as a brilliant speaker she may also have charismatic power. When all of these are in place, the teacher has a great deal of authority. If several of these relationships are missing, then her authority may have to be enforced, creating domination and oppression, and the students will no longer assent to the teacher.

In this definition, Russell stresses the assent and agreement between the one who has authority and those who accept authority, between the authorizing and authorized persons. For Russell, if there is no agreement, this power and authority is distorted and can be exercised through domination, rather than partnership. She emphasizes that most of the time, power and authority are exercised through domination, because of the patriarchal pattern of the world, but that they can be exercised through “empowerment and authorizing,”¹⁴⁷ in a partnership pattern.

3. Source of Authority: The Relationship Between Human and Divine Authority

Already in 1975, Russell emphasizes that the foundational source of authority in Christian faith is “the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ and through the Spirit.”¹⁴⁸ She mentions that the gospel emphasizes that Jesus has authority as the agent of God. From the Christian perspective, Jesus had authority to “forgive sins, cast out unclean spirits, and preach the good news. He taught with authority because he spoke of God’s will directly and not only on the basis of scriptural interpretation (Mark 1:22).”¹⁴⁹ In addition to Jesus’ own authority, his disciples and followers also had the authority to forgive, to cast out

¹⁴⁷Ibid., 23

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 24

unclean spirits, to heal, and to preach the good news.¹⁵⁰ The church as community follows Jesus by proclaiming and embodying his ministry of service and caring. For Russell, this cannot be a dominant ministry because it seeks to incarnate Jesus' kind of authority. Therefore, within the church there is mutuality about any kind of authority. In that sense, the authority of the church cannot be hierarchical authority, authority in which some people are on top and over other people.

The authority of this ministry of service and care is the life-style of Jesus Christ. The mutual ministry of the church only shares this authority when its witness in word is lived out in actions of love so that the Word of God continues to be incarnated in our world. In this sense the authority of faith which builds on this foundation is every bit as much dependent on its *orthopraxy* as upon its *orthodoxy*. A teaching evokes our consent when we see it leading toward the actualization of Christ's ministry in both word and deed.¹⁵¹

Consequently, if the authority of the church continues as the mutual authority that follows the life-style of Jesus in caring and service, the "Word of God" continues to be incarnated in the actions of love for today's world and must therefore not only be interpreted in ideas but also lived out in practice within the community.

In addition, Russell proposes human experience as a source of authority for interpretation. According to her, experience does not refer to individual experiences; rather it refers to "a social insight drawn from society of knowledge. This insight is that our understanding of reality is socially constructed."¹⁵² Based on this, Russell and other liberation theologies, including feminist theology, make experience the criterion of authority.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid., 30.

Russell believes that “all theology is rooted in the experience of particular theologians and communities.”¹⁵³ This statement includes two claims; the first is that a theology and its authority in the community depend on the cultural situation in which the process of interpretation happens, and the second is that its authority also depends on the inclusivity/exclusivity of the persons who participate in the process of interpretation.

The first claim points to the background cultural situations, including the time, culture and other environmental situations, that affect the interpretations of the text. For Russell, people live in their particular time, language, and culture; therefore what they read and understand and accept from the Bible depends on their position in time and culture. This includes aspects such as class, race, and gender that are valued in a particular way in the structure of a culture. For example, she believes that the text was written, translated, and interpreted in a patriarchal culture organized in a pyramid style of authority. Therefore the view of authority in that society was not a partnership authority but a distorted form of authority, and a critical look at the Bible is needed.

The second point focuses on the persons who do the interpretation in a theology. That is where the gender situation comes into play in a more direct way; over the years, the process of interpretation was in the hands of white male interpreters. Therefore the interpretations were not comprehensive and the assent of women was not asked for, and authority was distorted there as well.

Russell uses these two pillars of interpretation to build her theology and faces these problems head on. To deal with the first point, Russell argues out that to read and to understand the biblical text one must be “related” not only to the text but also the context. Therefore, the interpretation of a particular text depends on the situation in which that text

¹⁵³ Ibid., 31.

was written and interpreted. In other words, the variable situations affect the particular sociological framework in which we understand “how God is present with us in our lives and how we will respond to that presence through praise and service.”¹⁵⁴

Secondly, Russell indicates that the aim of feminists is to have a deep and correct “vision of God’s promise by understanding that everything is related.”¹⁵⁵ She articulates that understanding is related to context; therefore, to deal with the text, it is important to know who translates or interprets the text and in which believing community the text is interpreted. Consequently, in a culture in which both the interpreter and the community who had a right to speak were male, women’s perspectives were excluded. Therefore, she insists on a non-sexist community so that women’s experience would not be left out.

In sum, Russell recognizes “attention to the context” as the only way that an authoritative theology that shapes and grows the Christian life can be attained. For her, the experience of women is as important as that of men in the process of interpretation.

In doing theology with particular attention to context, the experience and stories of very diverse peoples are not considered a threat to the gospel but, rather, an invitation to expand our understanding of how God’s Word is believed and lived out in many different parts of the world.¹⁵⁶

Based on the fact that the English word context came from the Latin word *texto* (to weave or join together), Russell points out the importance of studying “historical circumstances” as well as “contemporary circumstances.” For her, studying historical circumstances enables readers to understand “what [the text] was intended to say,”¹⁵⁷ while to study contemporary circumstances of different situations helps people to

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 29.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 31.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 32.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

understand “how we all are one in Christ Jesus yet all express Christ’s presence in our lives in different ways.”¹⁵⁸

In 1988, Russell proposes a comprehensive definition of what she calls the source of authority. She points out to the self-revelation of God in Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit as the source of authority in Christian life.

Christian community has a pattern of criteria for what is an authoritative witness to God in Jesus Christ. Usually that configuration includes the resources of scientific knowledge and human experience as well as those of Scripture and church tradition.¹⁵⁹

Consequently, although Russell frequently mentions scripture and church as the sources for Christian faith, she explicitly pays attention to the context and contemporary circumstance as an essentially *practical* formula for the criterion of an authoritative witness to God. However, when Russell changes these criteria to include the experience of women, she realizes that there is a need for a shift and development in the interpretation of the biblical text as well. Thus she proposes a paradigm shift; a shift from a paradigm of domination to the paradigm of partnership.

B. Russell’s Paradigm of Authority

Each time there is a paradigm shift in the field of theology, much earlier theological understanding continues, yet there is a new understanding of that which evokes consent of faith and action. Each theological shift involves a change in what counts as authoritative in the tradition.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 32.

¹⁵⁹ Russell, “Authority and Hope,” 81.

¹⁶⁰ Russell, *Household of Freedom*, 33. This statement is repeated in “Authority and Hope,” 82, and repeated in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 144.

Russell recognizes that the authority that has been assumed in the Christian tradition is the authority of domination. According to this paradigm, there is a pyramid of authority and those on the top are authorized to interpret the text. Russell frequently emphasizes that this type of authority is harmful for feminists, and envisions a new framework in which authority is understood as partnership. Sometimes she also names it an authority of doxology. For this paradigm, all people are equally authorized in the process of interpretation. These opposite paradigms need further exploration.

1. Authority of Domination, Paradigm of Pyramid

According to this paradigm, every authority is seen in the form of a hierarchy or pyramid, with God at the top, men next, women after men, then male slave, female slave, and so on down to the animals, plants, and non-personal nature.¹⁶¹ In this paradigm, in addition to sex and gender, race is also important, because race has frequently played a part in where people are placed in the pyramid. Therefore, according to this pyramid, women and third-world people have no or little voice in the structures that determine the interpretation. These structures may be explicit but are often assumed and not always articulated.

In 1976, and also in her further writings, Russell, criticizes the paradigm of domination and emphasizes its inadequacy for several reasons. First, this paradigm opens up a gate for the domination and oppression of the weaker people, and therefore this perspective is totally against the “prophetic-messianic promise of God’s welcome to all

¹⁶¹ Russell in *Household of Freedom* explicitly expresses her statement about the shift in authority of domination to authority of partnership. In her further writings, for instance in “Authority and Hope in Feminist Theology” (1988), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (1987), and “Unity and Renewal in Feminist Perspective” (1988), she frequently explains her thought.

the outsiders (Luke 4:16-30).”¹⁶² In addition, for Russell, in the diverse world that we live in, it does not make sense “to get people into such a rigid view of theological and social truth.”¹⁶³ Besides, according to this model, a competitive rather than cooperative style of relationship is encouraged. People try to reach to the “top spot” so that they will not be dominated, but then they frequently dominate others!¹⁶⁴

Russell explains that this kind of authority is authority over community. Since, in the pyramid of domination, there are some people on the top and they are allowed to engage in the process of interpretation, this paradigm prevents “peace, unity and purity of the church.”¹⁶⁵ That is because there are some people on the top and some others on the bottom, so there is no equality and cooperation in the process of interpretation.

Russell suggests that those who support this paradigm give as their example and theological justification the threefold work of Christ as prophet, priest, and king. Prophecy is understood in terms of the proclamation of God’s Word, “a call to new obedience to the God at the top.” Priesthood is understood in terms of forgiving people through the process of sacrament, “needs of the people at the bottom.” The kingly role of Christ appears in his resurrection, and in the order of “the continuing life of Christ’s glorified body, the church.”¹⁶⁶ Russell strongly criticizes this view and she says that it is “one-sided,” as it divides those on the top from those on the bottom, looking at the text from the perspective of only one group of people, those on the top.

¹⁶² Russell, *Household of Freedom*, 34.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ This statement is repeated in “*Authority and Hope*,” 82-3.

¹⁶⁵ Letty M. Russell. “Women and Ministry.” In *Sexist Religion and Women in the Church: No More Silence!*. Ed. Alice Hageman (New York: Association Press, 1974), 78.

¹⁶⁶ Russell, “Unity and Renewal,” 79.

2. Authority of Partnership, Paradigm of Doxology or Praise

For Russell, as well as other feminist theologians, the paradigm of domination is not rational. They seek a way to interpret the biblical text and theological truth in a form that considers all humans as equal. This new paradigm does not require that there be one person at the “top,” but rather proposes that all people can participate in the interpretive community.

Authority is exercised in community and not over community and tends to reinforce ideas of cooperation, with contribution from a wide diversity of persons enriching the whole. When difference is valued and respected, those who have found themselves marginal to church and society begin to discover their own worth as human beings.¹⁶⁷

According to this paradigm, all people are created in God’s image, and since all are creatures of God, they all praise God. Thus it is a paradigm of doxology.

The ordering of reality in such a paradigm is not seen as a pyramid but as rainbow of praise. In this view people tend to value the possibility of diversity and inclusiveness even when this breaks the pyramid of values open into a rainbow spectrum of colors, peoples and ideas; and people are empowered for partnership.¹⁶⁸

In comparison to the metaphor of the pyramid used for authority of domination, Russell uses the metaphor of the rainbow for authority as partnership.

In contrast to hierarchal order, imaged by the pyramid of authority as domination, rainbow order consists of the wider variety of colors, and it gains in beauty as more of the colors and more of the entire circle may be seen. The rainbow appears most often in the midst of the storm, and thus is appropriate for portraying a new reality in the midst of struggling with the

¹⁶⁷ Russell, *Household of Freedom*, 35. Russell uses this statement in her further writings such as "Unity and Renewal in Feminist Perspective," 59.

¹⁶⁸ Russell, "Unity and Renewal," 81.

old. The rainbow is also a familiar sign to us of God's covenant with creation after the flood (Gen 9:12-13).¹⁶⁹

The metaphor of the rainbow indicates that all people participate equally in God's promise; however, it doesn't properly express all of what Russell expects from the authority of partnership. Russell mentions that the image of the rainbow is a very brief image in the cloudy sky. Therefore, she also uses the metaphor of the household of freedom. From Russell's view, in this diverse world, there is a need to accept the differences between people just like the rainbow accepts different colors and to get together in a "household of freedom."¹⁷⁰ This new paradigm helps to establish the cooperation, peace, and unity of the church. There is no one at the center or in a principle place and no one in the margin, but all are equal. This is the interpretative community.

Russell believes that in the paradigm of doxology, the three-fold work of Christ can be seen as servant prophecy, servant priesthood, and servant kingship. Servant prophecy is understood in the way that the church's speaking comes out of love. So it can be called "God in our midst." Servant priesthood is understood in terms of sharing the experience with suffering people, and servant kingship is understood in terms of "servant hood and lordship together."¹⁷¹

The paradigm of partnership constructs the new theological consensus that those who want to join the community of interpretation are welcomed. Consequently, it is

¹⁶⁹ Russell, *Household of Freedom*, 35.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁷¹ Russell, "Unity and Renewal," 84.

important for feminist theologians to engage everyone who has a new insight in the process of interpretation.

3. Summary of Russell's Paradigm of the Authority of Tradition

The Bible is especially dangerous if we call it “the Word of God” and think that divine inspiration means that everything we read is right. But divine inspiration means that God’s Spirit has the power to make the story speak to us from faith to faith. The Bible is accepted as the Word of God when communities of faith understand God to be speaking to them in and through its message.¹⁷²

In 1976, Russell emphasizes that the Bible was written in a patriarchal culture and that translation and interpretation of the Bible over the centuries has also been in a male-centered culture. Therefore, since the universal message of God is “love for all human kind,”¹⁷³ and the gospel clearly expresses “oneness in Christ,” the task of women is to change the pattern of domination; to “stop structuring our lives according to divisions of super-and sub-ordination.”¹⁷⁴ As she works out her paradigm she notes that these theological convictions have several practical consequences.

a. Privilege of Authority “in” Community over Authority “over” Community for Christian Feminists

¹⁷² Letty M. Russell. *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*. Editor (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), 141.

¹⁷³ Russell, *Liberating Word*, 19.

¹⁷⁴ Russell, “Unity and Renewal,” 64.

Russell identifies three ways in which the privilege of authority in community works itself out. The first way is that the authority of partnership creates a synergetic¹⁷⁵ process. Each person's power increases as all are welcomed into the community. In communities of equal people, all persons work together and share God's gift in community.

...Women can still look for ways of increased power and authority in community, promoting unity through welcoming others to the Lord's table rather than "fencing them out."¹⁷⁶

Second, Russell recognizes that when the authority is in community it can overcome: "the pinnacle complex." According to her, the need for credibility and authority tempts persons to see themselves in higher position than others. The priority of authority in community prevents this thought. It helps subordinate persons learn and grow until they become equal or better than the dominant ones, thus creating a more horizontal relationship among persons in the community.

Third, Russell believes that it is necessary to break up "the top-down chain of command," since when the organizational structure and attitude opens, people can understand what is happening in the community. Therefore, in a community of partnership, there is always a "subversive possibility," because everybody has an active voice and is able to make a decision and challenge the assumptions of the group, yet there is no coercive element that allows those on top to force or coerce those at the bottom.

¹⁷⁵ Definition of Synergism in theological dictionary: The teaching that we cooperate with God in our efforts of salvation. This is opposed to monergism which is the teaching that God is the sole agent involved in salvation. Cults are synergistic in that they teach that God's grace combined with our efforts are what makes forgiveness of sins possible. (http://a-z-dictionaries.com/theological_dictionary/dic_s.htm#_1_169)

¹⁷⁶ Russell, "Women and Ministry," 87.

In any case, authority exercised in community makes it possible for all of us to stand together in our search for critical principles of feminist interpretation. In this view there can be no one archetype of unchanging basis of authority. Like the power of God's love, authority as partnership does not coerce people into consent.¹⁷⁷

In 1988, Russell further explains why the process of authority in community is so hopeful; maintaining that the future belongs to God and God is the one who is against injustice and domination in the community. According to an eschatological view, women can work with the patriarchal tradition because theology is dynamic and therefore can change based on the messianic message of the Bible.

The authority of the future is a key to feminist theology because it is this eschatological understanding that provides a way of working with a patriarchal tradition that has long since built the master's house without the voice of women, children, and slaves (Eph. 5, 6). The Bible appears in most instances to be hopelessly patriarchal, but as Phyllis Trible has said, it gives us two loaves and a few fish... and that is enough. Those who find that it can be enough, do so because they continue to hope in God's promise of "more to come."¹⁷⁸

b. Shift in Authority

According to Russell, the necessity of a paradigm shift usually implies that one continues with some previous theological understandings while some new understandings are being shaped. The challenge for feminists, in this paradigm shift, is that there is a shift in "what has been understood as authoritative in every aspect of biblical religion, including the use of scripture in academic and faith community."¹⁷⁹ This creates more than a simple change.

¹⁷⁷ Russell, *Feminist Interpretation*, 145.

¹⁷⁸ Russell, "Authority and Hope," 91.

¹⁷⁹ Russell, *Feminist Interpretation*, 140.

In Russell's view, the promise of God that is mentioned in Galatians 3:28; "there is neither Jews nor Greek, neither slaves nor free, male or female, but all are one in Christ Jesus" justifies this shift. "This is the authority of God in new creation."¹⁸⁰ All people participate in the authority. This is the authority of partnership or community. "In this view, reality is interpreted in the form of a circle of interdependence."¹⁸¹

In 1985, Russell mentions that the shift in the feminist interpretive framework means that "we no longer need to divide feminist experience and biblical witness";¹⁸²

The two belong together, as communities of struggle and faith in every age respond to the invitation to partnership with God in the mending of creation and discover that their lives and their understanding of the biblical witness have been changed.¹⁸³

Consequently, for Russell if the authority is understood as partnership and all humans are in "a rainbow spectrum of faithful witness," there is no need for feminists to choose one option; to be a feminist or to be faithful to Christianity. But feminists cannot reach this point unless they propose a non-sexist interpretation of the Bible.

c. Non-sexist Interpretation

There are long discussions among feminist theologians on the authority of the interpretation of the Bible. In most of the feminists' view, "the texts are not only contradictory but also sexist, racist, and triumphalist. No interpretation of authority that

¹⁸⁰ Russell, "Authority and Hope," 80.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 84.

¹⁸² Russell, *Feminist Interpretation*, 146.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 145.

reinforces a patriarchal structure of domination would be acceptable for feminist interpretation.”¹⁸⁴

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, like Russell, recognizes Christian tradition as the key challenge faced by feminists. She also concurs that since the traditioning process was in the hands of men, women’s role in Christian history should be studied again.

Fiorenza, like Russell, recognizes experience as the main source of theology. For her, “feminist theologians maintain that theology has to become again communal and holistic. Feminist theology expresses itself not only in abstract analysis and intellectual discussion, but it employs the whole range of human expression, e.g. ritual, symbol, drama, music, movement, or pictures.”¹⁸⁵ So, women should express their experience and also their new vision and hope.

Since the Bible is used against women in our liberation struggle, and perpetuates alienation from ourselves and at the same time has provided and still provides authorizations and visions for Christian women in our struggle against patriarchal racism, sexism, classism, and colonialism, this double experience must become the starting point for biblical interpretation. The task of interpretation is to reclaim, through a critical process of evaluation, the early Christian vision as a resource for our theological authorization and self-affirmation.¹⁸⁶

As discussed above, Russell encourages feminists to build a partnership community. In such a community, women and men participate equally in the process of interpretation of the Bible. In contrast, Fiorenza believes that women-church (*ekklēsia gynakōn*) is the ideal community that can interpret the Bible. For Fiorenza, women-church is “the movement of self-identified women and women-identified men in biblical

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 141.

¹⁸⁵ Fiorenza, “Feminist Theology,” 617.

¹⁸⁶ Fiorenza, “Roundtable Discussion,” 75.

religion.”¹⁸⁷ In Fiorenza’s view, women-church’s aim is not the “full humanity of women” as humanity is commonly understood. That is because “humanity” itself is defined by men. Instead, women-church should attempt to empower and liberate women from oppression and false definitions of being human. In other words, the focus on women-church is more on self-determination and autonomy within that community. For Fiorenza, the privilege of women-church is to encourage women to move shoulder to shoulder toward eradicating oppression against women all around the world.

“Equality from below” must become the liberative goal of women-church. In other words, as long as social and religious patriarchy exists, women are not “liberated” and must struggle for survival and self determination.¹⁸⁸

From Fiorenza’s perspective, the authority of women-church is spiritual authority that is the “experience of grace,”¹⁸⁹ and the task of feminists is to challenge scriptural authority in the name of this experience of grace and to explore “how the Bible is used as a weapon against women in our struggle for liberation.”¹⁹⁰

Historical and contemporary circumstances are two aspects of context raised by Russell for her new paradigm. Fiorenza mentions that her model should include a “feminist-critical and a historical-concrete model,” thus also noting both contexts. Fiorenza, like Russell, emphasizes that this new model considers the text to function in its historical setting as well as in the contemporary situation of women.

¹⁸⁷ Russell, *Feminist Interpretation*, 126.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁹⁰ Russell, *Feminist Interpretation*, 129.

It should not search for a feminist formulized principle, a universal perspective, or a historical liberating dynamics but should carefully analyze how the Bible functions concretely in women's struggle for survival.¹⁹¹

So while Russell tends to use a historical liberating dynamic as a principle, Fiorenza works more with individual texts.

In addition, as was discussed in chapter three, Russell only briefly mentions the hermeneutic of suspicion as a method in feminist theology, perhaps since biblical hermeneutics is frequently about individual texts. Instead Russell talks more about a critical approach to the authority of doctrines. Fiorenza, on the other hand, as a biblical scholar, believes in a hermeneutics of suspicion, and she frequently emphasizes this notion. Her model of the hermeneutics of suspicion includes five elements.

The first element is “suspicion rather than acceptance of biblical authority.”¹⁹² According to this element, the Bible was written, translated, and interpreted in a male-dominated culture. So the first task of feminists is to apply the hermeneutics of suspicion to the authority of the Bible. According to Fiorenza, feminists should explore the biblical text in order to discover the anti-patriarchal view of the text, which is invisible because of the male-dominated culture.

The second element of Fiorenza's model is “critical evaluation rather than correlation.” She is more hesitant than Russell to move too easily to a relationship between women's experience and the biblical text. (Russell makes a correlation between the prophetic messianic movement of liberation in the Bible and feminist movements,

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 130.

¹⁹² Ibid.

while Fiorenza is cautious about doing this too soon.) According to Fiorenza, the criteria of a hermeneutics of suspicion are to test out and evaluate the biblical material, critically.

...In a process of critical evaluation we are able to find some liberating paradigms and resources in biblical texts. This is not because a correlation between feminist and biblical critical principles can be presupposed but because the historical experience of women-church with the Bible allows us to do so. Yet in order to find feminist biblical resources, we have first to bring to bear the full force of the feminist critique upon biblical text and religion.¹⁹³

Thus for her the experience of women-church is suggested as the basis of critique. The third element is the “interpretation through proclamation.” According to Fiorenza, feminists’ task is to proclaim that the texts suggesting oppression are not the “Word of God.”

The fourth step is “remembrance and historical reconstruction.” The hermeneutics of proclamation should be accompanied by the hermeneutic of remembrance. For Fiorenza, the hermeneutics of remembrance develops the critical method and historical model. Through this element, feminists move beyond the history and find those women that had a remarkable role in the Christian faith, but whose role has become invisible due to androcentric language.

The final element is the “interpretation through celebration and ritual.” This method encourages women to retell the biblical story from a feminist perspective. In addition, it suggests that the feminists reformulate the patriarchal prayers. Through song, poetry, and drama, women celebrate their own voice.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 132.

In sum, Fiorenza knows her model as a feminist critical hermeneutics of liberation. This model enables Christian feminists to read the Bible in the context of women-church, and locates women in the discipleship of equals.

I have therefore suggested that we understand the Bible as a structuring prototype of women-church rather than as a definite archetype; as an open-ended paradigm that experiences in motion and invites transformations... such an understanding of the Bible as formative prototype allows us to explore models and traditions of liberating praxis as well as of patriarchal repression. It allows us to reclaim the whole Bible not as normative but as an experiential enabling authority, as the legacy and heritage of women-church.¹⁹⁴

For Fiorenza, a critical perspective is based on the life experience of women. For her “the canon and the rules about authority that come out of a patriarchal mind-set of domination must not decide the basis for feminist interpretation.”¹⁹⁵ Russell compares Fiorenza’s thought about the concept of authority with hers and says that Fiorenza believes that the permitted authority is the one that come from the experience of women. Russell mentions that Fiorenza “rejects the correlation of a biblical critical principle with a feminist critical principle,”¹⁹⁶ which is a key to her own understanding of biblical authority.

If Russell presents the paradigm of partnership and Fiorenza suggests the notion of women-church, Harder offers a comparable notion of the hermeneutic community. As do Russell and Fiorenza, Harder also recognizes the tradition as the key challenge of feminist theology. In order to speak to this challenge, Harder believes that the notion of hermeneutic community emphasizes two points: “the dynamic process of tradition

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 136.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 145.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

formation,” which includes tradition as a political discourse that is based on power differences, and “tradition as pre-understanding.” From Harder’s perspective, the notion of pre-understanding can shift the focus from looking at tradition as the key problem to seeing the tradition as a pre-understanding that can function positively in the dynamic process of interpretation. For Harder, this model makes a connection between text and community, in other words, between text and experience.

By bringing tradition as pre-understanding and tradition as political discourse together in the notion of hermeneutic community, a strategy is encouraged that includes the possibility of both commitment and critique.¹⁹⁷

In comparison to Russell, Fiorenza, and many other feminists who emphasize only the hermeneutics of suspicion, Harder also presents a hermeneutic of obedience. Based on her Anabaptist Mennonite tradition, she offers the notion of discipleship as obedience to God that includes a critical look at how humans have distorted the message of God.

From Harder’s perspective, Mennonite and feminist theologians both believe that they must attend to both human and divine authority in the process of interpretation. However, in terms of methodology, while Mennonites emphasize the visibility of the divine in the activity of the Holy Spirit in community, other feminists tend to stress the human dimension much more in the process. Feminists do this in order to point out the importance of the voices of women and other marginalized people in that human process.

Harder’s theory differs in that she is not willing to completely identify God’s Word with human authority, even feminist authority. She attempts to separate God’s authority from human authority.

¹⁹⁷ Harder, *Obedience, Suspicion*, 17.

The difference between divine and human authority is so great that it must be clearly articulated in terms of a duality that explicitly differentiates between the authority of God and the authority of humans. Therefore, notions of biblical authority cannot be articulated solely in terms of connectedness between the human and the divine.¹⁹⁸

For Harder, it is important to stress that there is a relationship between the text and personal experience in Christian hermeneutic communities. “But within that community the text will also have power to change the community tradition, rather than only the community changing the interpretation of the text. This includes the power of the text to change a feminist community as well as a Mennonite community.”¹⁹⁹

The authority of the Bible, therefore, arises out of the distinctive ways in which the power of the text to form community tradition and the authority of the discourse partners in the interpretive process come together in hermeneutic communities that continue to read and interpret the Bible.²⁰⁰

The authority of the Bible in Mennonite tradition is rooted in the self-identity of the community as expressed in its discourse patterns as well as in the social/ political shape of the church as a voluntary community of conversation.²⁰¹

Like Russell, Harder believes in God as the primary source of authority. From the Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective, “biblical authority rests with the triune God and God’s continuing presence in history.”²⁰² That means that the knowledge of revelation is based in Jesus and is then interpreted through the work of Holy Spirit. But she does suggest that

The present authority of God is mediated by the embodiment of God’s activity in a human text, a human community and a human discernment

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 146.

¹⁹⁹ Email discussion with Lydia Harder.

²⁰⁰ Harder, *Obedience, Suspicion*, 8.

²⁰¹ Harder, *Obedience, Suspicion*, 37.

²⁰² Ibid., 37.

process. Discipleship is defined as the response of obedience to this authority of God.²⁰³

Harder has struggled with tradition and the church. She notes that early Anabaptists challenged the tradition and for them, “tradition too could be sinful.”²⁰⁴ Thus she appeals to tradition in order to create a tradition. Harder says that “Mennonites have not only been critical of tradition, they have also created a tradition.”²⁰⁵ Harder sees tradition as “a self-involving process,”²⁰⁶ implying that one can never get away from some pre-understanding that comes from the past. This pre-understanding coming from her Mennonite faith tradition gives permission to wrestle with tradition.

This means that communal tradition cannot be understood as a static entity but must always be understood as changing and evolving as interpreters judge between rival claims to truth.²⁰⁷

According to Harder, for Mennonites, the church is composed of congregations of disciples who are committed to God. So they emphasize the authority in discipleship and oppose authority in hierarchical term. In other words, Anabaptist Mennonites believe in “congregational authority.”²⁰⁸

Any exploration of the authority of the biblical text needs to come to terms with the authority and function of the tradition of discipleship in each hermeneutic community.²⁰⁹

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 10.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 16.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 9.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 11.

In addition to God as the primary source of authority and authority among congregations, Harder presents “the authority of discourse patterns.”²¹⁰ These are the human patterns of relationships. There are some issues that need further discussions and theological dialogue among members of communities. For Harder, women as members of congregations should participate in these discussions. The discourse patterns should be based on mutual discipleship. If they become dominating, these power relationships must be questioned. This is where suspicion belongs.

They question the discourse patterns that have been established in the church institutions and in the scholarly domain and challenge power relationships and their effect on the communal discourse. They wonder how inclusive the term discipleship really is if women are excluded from the discernment process.²¹¹

In sum, based on the authority of both tradition as pre-understanding and as discourse pattern, the methodology, that Harder presents, is “a double strategy” that includes both “listening and suspicion, commitment and critique.” For Harder, the result of this strategy is to allow “the political patterns of relationships to be revealed, critiqued and transformed.”²¹²

D. Concluding Discussion on Russell’s Contribution

As already mentioned in previous chapters and discussed in this chapter, Russell recognizes the authority of tradition as the key challenge faced by feminists. As has been discussed, Russell identifies various meanings for authority and for tradition. Throughout this chapter, it was indicated that Russell’s aim is to emphasize the importance of

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid., 12.

²¹² Ibid., 15.

authority in reforming the theological tradition and to resolve the feminists' challenge. She believes that the pyramid structure of authority is the result of tradition and so she feels that she must challenge tradition, including the biblical text.

Although Russell makes a distinction between "The Tradition" and various kinds of tradition, in my view, she does not recognize clearly enough a difference between divine authority and human authority. Russell defines authority as power legitimated by the structure of the society; for her, authority is an agreement between the one who has the authority and those who accept the authority of that person. In my opinion, this stance on authority can only be correct if divine nature and divine authority are fully equated to human nature and authority. However, these are not comparable. In my theology, authority only belongs to God and the one to whom God assigns that authority. That is because of the transcendent nature of God.

Therefore, in my view, just as Russell makes a distinction between "The Tradition" and "traditions," there is a distinction between divine authority and human authority as well, as Harder points out. I believe that God is not only the "primary" source of authority, but also the only source of authority, and that the other sources receive their truth only from the transcendent God. Russell's definition of authority is acceptable only if this definition applies solely to authority among humans. That is because the notion of "assent" does not apply to the authority of the Creator over the created. In other words, in human societies, no one has priority over others because of race or gender, and any priority in the authority should be assigned by the Almighty God. It is important to say here that divine authority does not create oppression, since the transcendent transcends oppression. On the other hand, the oppression due to the pyramid structure in the religious

societies is mainly due to the patriarchal nature of the culture in which the society exists rather than the religious nature of it.

Similarly to Russell, I believe that the problem of religious societies is that the context or situation of a society is associated with its religious understanding and interpretations. For instance, Russell points out that the pyramid structure that is part of the structures of the larger society is also associated with religious understanding even though it is against the prophetic-messianic message of the gospel. She also points out that the Bible is written, translated, and interpreted in a male-dominant society, and that this attitude has affected the message that is offered by the Bible. In other words, though the nature of the Bible is against patriarchy, patriarchal societies have influenced the text of the Bible in terms of writing, translating, and interpreting, and she concludes that “it is dangerous to call the Bible the Word of God.”

Although I agree with her that the universal message of the Bible is justice, and the fact that the patriarchal nature of society has influenced the writing, translating, and interpretation of the text, the question remains: Does this fact allow us to influence the text according to our current understanding about justice? In other words, not to consider the text as the Word of God and to change the text according to our current context could be as distorting as the traditional influence of patriarchal culture was on the text.

In sum, it seems to me that Russell’s discussion on authority has shown that in practice she has brought her feminism and her faith together by equating human and divine authority. Although I, personally, have reservations about equating these two forms of authority, I do affirm that human authority should be respected to some extent in order to have a correct understanding of the true meaning of the text in various contexts. The

next chapter will discuss how these two forms can be separated from each other; in other words, how divine authority can be divided from human understanding and interpretation of the text. In addition, the next chapter will further show how these various aspects of Russell's theology give both insights and challenges for further theological work on bringing together feminism and faith.

CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION: A MUSLIM WOMAN’S PERSPECTIVES ON RUSSELL’S
THOUGHT

The previous chapters have explored Russell’s thoughts as a faithful theologian who believes that God’s call for her is to be a “feminist of faith.” Russell attempts to build a bridge between faith and feminism from a Christian faith perspective. This thesis has studied the building blocks that she uses to bridge the gap and observed how she utilizes the Gospel’s liberation message on one side and the feminists’ experience of liberation on the other side. The aim of this chapter is to offer a grandstand view of all of these blocks together to see how it is possible to advocate feminism and at the same time be committed to Christianity. In addition, this chapter will consider whether the same building blocks can be used by Muslim women to build a similar kind of bridge.

As was noted in the previous chapters, for me, as a Muslim woman, based on my Islamic theological vision, Russell’s thought has raised some insights and created some questions. In this chapter I will raise, explain, and address some of them. Moreover, in order that readers can have a clearer understanding about my opinion about her thought, I will present a brief preamble regarding the position of women in the view of Islam and in Muslim societies. I will conclude by noting what I have learned from the writings of Russell.

Before beginning the first section, I would like to emphasize that there is an important difference between this chapter and the previous ones. Unlike the previous chapters, which had a philosophic and systematic approach but were primarily descriptive of Russell’s thought, this chapter is based primarily on well-known social examples and Quranic witnesses. That is because explaining the details of the systematic Islamic thought

behind these witnesses would be too deep and extensive to fit in this thesis. Additionally, the aim of the thesis is not to make a comparison between the approaches of the two faiths about feminism, although it does open a window for a potential dialogue for that. In fact, some of my critical remarks about Russell may also be made from a Christian point of view.

A. Russell's Building Blocks and Self-Designation

Russell was introduced to me as a feminist theologian by my supervisor and I got to know her through her works. However, I never realized the magnitude of her work until I had an eye-opening experience in which I observed the effects of the secular society of Canada on the way people think. As a woman who comes from a religious society, where every thought is connected to religion, the effort of Russell in bridging the gap between feminism and faith only became clear to me when I went to a proof-reading center last summer to show my writings on being a “feminist Christian.” The expression “feminist Christian” was taken as a grammar mistake by the proofreader. It was only then that I realized how wide the gap is between feminist movements and thought and Christianity. I only realized how hard it is to bridge this gap when I spent an hour arguing with the proofreader that not all feminists are necessarily secular.

Russell frequently emphasizes that she is a Christian feminist to challenge this dogma that feminism is equal to secularism. Based on this fundamental vision, she builds up her methodology by constructing a bridge between faith and feminism. She stresses the similarity between the definitions of feminism and faith, indicating that the aim of both is to establish justice.

Her experiential approach opens the door of faith to the real, day-to-day life of believers in the faith community. Experience influenced her theological life significantly. Russell explicitly mentions that her changing and not changing her thought is affected by her life experiences. She admits that her theology was influenced by her work experience in East Harlem Seminary where she worked as minister. Her motivation in her ministry was to find how to live and work with marginalized people as “God’s good gift” instead of as second-class citizens. Russell believes that “the structure of the church and of society often undercut the reality of this gospel message and the good gifts God offers to the children of God turn to stone.”²¹³ Her concern is to find ways in which “God’s good gifts can be experienced as *bread* instead of *stone*.”²¹⁴ This is an important element in her thought; Russell constructs her methodology based on experience and context.²¹⁵ As a Muslim woman, I believe that in Muslim tradition the role of experience has been played down and should be emphasized in certain contexts, although the nature of its role is quite different from the one that Russell advocates in her method. This will be discussed in the subsequent sections.

Russell proposes an action-reflection method in which women’s experience is seriously considered in the interpretation of the Bible and the creation of theological thoughts. Therefore she suggests that feminists must be suspicious of the texts or tradition as they reflect on their experience. Her method enables women to find their voice and add

²¹³ Russell, “Bread instead of Stone,” 666.

²¹⁴ Specific words taken from the Bible (Matthew 9-11).

²¹⁵ The concept of experience and context is an important concept in constructing theology for all feminist theologians.

their own contribution to the theology. In addition, she defines a general framework for constructing a Christian theology, and talks about David Kelsey's limits:

According to David Kelsey in *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, the construction of a Christian theological framework or paradigm has three limits if it is to be recognized as in touch with Christian tradition. It must be reasoned and intelligible form of discourse, it must make use of the structure of Christian tradition and biblical interpretation, and it must speak of what is "seriously imaginable" in a particular time and place.²¹⁶

All these three limits sound reasonable; however, it seems to me that this can create a challenge in practice because Russell does not define a more universal understanding of truth that judges the theologies that are within Kelsey's three limits. In other words, according to her, there are many ways of construing the meaning of God's presence, so she does not consider a critical framework by which feminist theologians test out their suspicion about the text in the development of their theology. For me, recognizing a universal limit that directs, examines, and relates to experience can keep feminists from succumbing to the danger of "genitive theology": a danger against which Russell herself warns.

The lack of such a boundary is not limited to her proposed feminist theology. In general, it is a fact that today there is a tremendous emphasis on ethics, politics, and individual freedom rather than truth, metaphysics, and transcendence in modern theologies, including liberation theology. Hence, there is little or no room for eternal truth based on God's revelation. In that sense, liberation theology is more interested in salvation as a process of liberation that happens within history than in eternal life. I, on the other hand, believe that obedience makes more sense because we are accountable to God.

²¹⁶ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 39.

Therefore, both Christians and Muslims need a theological framework that suggests this accountability to God's revelation.

I should point out that by suggesting the need for a critical framework or a boundary I do not mean a static criterion. Rather, the boundary for me is more like a caution sign; it allows thinking about further movement but it also warns of danger and suggests a slowing down. For instance, I think the notion of a *discipleship of obedience* in Mennonite tradition is like this caution sign. This notion makes clear that the goal is obedience to God and prevents feminists from moving too far away from the main message of the text and the whole purpose of the faith. This framework not only helps Mennonite feminists to move toward their goal but also encourages them to think and act faithfully,²¹⁷ and is applicable for Muslim feminists because they believe in the notion of obedience in relationship to "the holy word of God: the Qur'ān." The next section will discuss why the Qur'ān is important as a reliable source among all Muslims.

Two more important insights in Russell's thought are consciousness-raising and sisterhood, insights that are also applicable for Muslim feminists who would like to change the patriarchal structures of the society. For Russell, it was crucial to have a community of like-minded persons to work together for change. Recently in Iran, research centers have arisen that focus on women rights in Islam and aim at educating women about these rights.

As a final stone in her bridge, Russell proposes partnership authority: A legitimate power that is created by new structures of equality in a society. It is an agreement between

²¹⁷ As was noted in the previous chapters, especially chapters three and four, Harder, as a Mennonite woman, proposes a method that emphasizes commitment to Christ. Her stress is on a *discipleship of obedience*, and her method is based on following Christ while looking critically at the Bible. For me, Harder's method includes this kind of framework, in which suspicion of human authority, including one's own subjective experience, must always be tested within the framework of a *discipleship of obedience*.

authorizing and authorized; an authority *in* community rather than *over* community. Russell defines the equal structure of a community where all people look like partners: brothers and sisters. From these equal positions people feel free to raise their insights and concerns. She understands that equality is a gift from God and therefore the authority that arises out of that is an authority born of thankfulness to God. In Christian theology, it is called the theology of praise. This is what makes her thinking theological. She understands that any equality is really a gift of God. That is why for her partnership is not only an approach to human authority but also a response to divine authority. However, in my opinion, this approach does not function sufficiently as a boundary because of its lack of emphasis on accountability.

I think this is because Russell does not consider the priority of divine nature and divine authority over human authority enough. She mentions that the text of the Bible was written, translated, and interpreted in a patriarchal society, therefore the pyramid structure of the society has influenced the text and she concludes that “it is dangerous to call the Bible the Word of God” with the idea that it is full prior authority. Instead she considers the Bible as partly the word of God and partly the word of men. This approach paves the way for reinterpretation of the Bible by both men and women equally. However, this does not give an easily applicable criterion as to which part of scripture is the true word of God and which is merely human.

One point of ambiguity that is left for me in Russell’s view about the Bible is that if the Bible is not the Word of God just because some parts of it are not consistent with our understanding of the liberation message, then what priority does the Bible have over other ancient ethical books? In other words, do we not need a theology of the Bible as

God's Word to show the divine nature of the book itself?²¹⁸ Is a historical/ethical theology enough or do Christians also need a theology that focuses more on the eternal divine truth within the Bible?

This section will conclude with one last concern that has occupied my mind after studying quite a bit of Russell's works. Although some scholars believe that Russell did not change her mind through her works, I believe that she changed her point of emphasis from one side of the bridge that she created to fill the gap between feminism and Christianity, to the other side of this bridge. In her earlier works, she often highlights her commitment to the church, emphasizing God's promise of liberation, the good news of the gospels and the consistence between liberation theology's theme and the message of the gospel. In her later articles, her stress is more on consciousness-raising, in challenging the male-dominant tradition. She elaborates on the fact that the key challenge is the pyramid structure of tradition and that the only way for women's liberation is a radical paradigm shift. In other words, the proclamation of her commitment to Christianity is not as strong in her later writings, in which she highlights a critical and suspicious attitude rather than obedience to the Bible. This raises the question for me about how she ranks the importance of commitment to the church and to the text and her advocacy of feminism when there is a contradiction. In other words, is she a Christian feminist or is she a feminist Christian?

For me, a Christian feminist is the one whose aim is to advocate feminism and whose commitment to Christianity is secondary; conversely, a feminist Christian's first

²¹⁸ As was mentioned in chapter four, Harder also believes in a difference between human and divine nature and authority. However, she does believe that the divine and humans participate in the process of interpretation together.

priority is her commitment to Christianity. Such a person may look at the scripture critically, but in the end she trusts in God. In other words, her theology is based on obedience rather than suspicion.²¹⁹ I should add that I cannot answer the question of which priority predominates for Russell with any confidence.

Her personal life suggests that her commitment to well-known areas of Christian tradition such as marriage ebbed quite a bit despite the pressure from the church in the later years of her life. She explicitly indicates that she is a homosexual, and yet a Christian. However, for some, that leaves her out of the circle of the faith community.

B. Islam, Muslims, and Feminism

This section briefly describes the state of women in Islam and in Muslim societies historically and explores whether or not the faithful feminist approach suggested by Russell is applicable to Islamic contexts. It will begin with a brief pre-Islamic history of people of Arabia and the situation of women, observing that Islam was considered a liberating movement for women in a societal context that included many patriarchal structures. Moreover, the role and dignity of women in Islamic sources as well as the way women have been treated in terms of social position since the birth of Islam will also be studied.

In subsection two the question of why women are deprived of their rights in Muslim societies and how the Muslim tradition may be an obstacle will be addressed, and it will be shown that there are instances of Muslim patriarchal traditions that have no roots in the main sources of Islam yet have influenced the life of Muslim women for centuries.

²¹⁹ Evidently, Russell's emphasis on a "hermeneutic of suspicion" is not as strong as that of Fiorenza. Also, Russell and Harder are on different sides in this context considering the fact that Harder's method is based on a "hermeneutic of obedience."

On the other hand, in subsection three the true social differences between male and female in the Islamic sources are considered. It will be demonstrated how the same sources can be used creatively as a tool to revise these differences within the framework of faith, on one hand, and how, on the other hand, religion answers some of the concerns that women have about such differences.

1. Islam as a Liberating Message for Women

History witnesses that Islam is not against women's rights but also can be known as a women's liberation movement against injustice, especially when it is considered at the time of its birth. Studying the situation of women before the birth of Islam allows for a better understanding about what Islam has brought to women.

According to Islamic historical writings,²²⁰ several important things can be said in terms of the dignity and status of women. Before Islam's birth, around the seventh century B.C.E, the people of Arabia believed in the inferiority of women, but they had two types of attitudes: one group kept women down at the level of animals, while the other believed that women are human but not fully human so they must be submissive to men. Men must not allow women to think and act as free persons. Only in this situation, with the submission of women, were men protected from women's evil. They believed that women's sins were the woman's fault, but that any beneficence came from their dependence on men.

²²⁰ Pishvae Mahdi. *Islam's History: From the Pre-Islam History to the Death of the Prophet of Islam*. 2nd ed. (1993), 48-53. Ja'far Sha'hidi. *The Analytical History of Islam*. 26th ed. (1991), 23-29. Ja'far Sobhani. *Parts of the History of the Prophet of Islam*. 12th ed. (1991), 9-27. A'llāme Seyyed Hose'in Tabatabaee. *The Exegesis of the Holy Qur'an*. Vol. 2, 402. (I couldn't find an English translation of any of these books.)

In terms of the social rights of women, there was also no doubt about their inferiority. There were two ways of thinking. Some people looked at women as slaves; for them, men had a right to use women's ability and power. The second group believed that women were not part of human society, that they were part of men's lives and men just had to cope with them. Women's role in men's lives was similar to that of a house or clothes. In other words, women's role was as a basic need for men. In addition, daughters had no rights to receive any goods when their father died.

Women were deprived of all human rights. Men's behavior was based on the supposed superiority of men over women. To have a daughter was a sign of shame and disgrace for a man. People of the Arabian Peninsula had a custom of burying alive some of their daughters, although some must have stayed alive to produce more children.²²¹ Moreover, the wife of a dead person could be inherited by his family, just like his money, house, and other wealth.

In such a horrific situation, the Prophet of Islam (Peace be upon him) proclaimed a liberation message for women. He had only one child in his entire life and this child, a girl, was honored several times by him and also in the Qur'ān.

There are many places in the Qur'ān where the liberation message can be observed in a variety of aspects, some of which specifically support women. In terms of the dignity and status of women, four types of verses suggest that women and men are equal.

²²¹ Although this was a custom of most of the people, there were some people who were against this horrific action; for instance, *Khadijah's* (the Prophet's wife) house, even before she married the Prophet (PBH), was a shelter where women could bring their daughters to save them. Sometimes, mothers hid their newborn baby girl from their fathers, out of fear, saying that the baby was born dead. Then the mother sought a place to care for her daughter for several years with the hope that someday, her husband might change his mind about killing their child.

The first type comprises the verses that speak about the creation of women and men and notes that they share one nature. There is not a dualistic view of the nature of women and men in the Qur'ān. From this perspective, women and men are equal in their basic nature and there is no innate superiority or inferiority. Many verses support this attitude.²²²

O mankind! Indeed We created you from a male and a female and made you nations and tribes that you may identify with one another. Indeed the noblest (or the most honored) in the sight of Allah is the most Godwary²²³ among you.²²⁴

The Qur'ān explicitly mentions that the only cause of superiority is *ta'qvā*, which has been translated as God wariness.²²⁵ Hence, according to the Qur'ān, such a person is admired whether male or female.²²⁶

Second, there are verses that indicate that everybody is responsible for their own actions regardless of their gender and that God's salvation does not depend on gender,²²⁷ which seems close to Russell's ideas about humanization, discussed in chapter two.

Whoever acts righteously, [whether] male or female, should be faithful, We shall receive him/her with a good life and pay them their reward by the best of what they used to do.²²⁸

²²² Tabatabaee, 402-405.

²²³ My translation, The one who considers only God's will in his/her life.

²²⁴ The Qur'ān, Sūrat Al- Hujurāt, 13 (49:13).

²²⁵ However, in my view, the meaning of *ta'qvā* is broader than this English translation. The person who has *ta'qvā* is one who considers God and God's will in all aspects of life. The famous Shia exegesis mentions that *ta'qvā* has various aspects, such as having a high quality of belief in God (*īmān*), a high quality of wisdom (*elm nāfe'*), and a high level of good character traits like patience and meekness (*kholgh fezeleh*).

²²⁶ Abdollāh Ja'vādi Āmoli. *Women in the Reflection of Dignity and Beauty* (1992), 40-45. (I couldn't find the English translation of this book.)

²²⁷ Tabatabaee, 406.

²²⁸ Sūrat Al-Nahl, 97 (16:97).

And whoever does righteous deeds, whether of male or female, and he/she is a believer such shall enter paradise and they will not be wronged [so much as] the speck in a date-stone.²²⁹

According to this verse the criterion and the important factor for salvation is good works rather than gender.

In a social context in which men were the source of welfare and blessing and in which women were the source of temptation and evil, the message of the Qur'ān is that everybody is responsible for her/his own actions:²³⁰

I do not waste the work of any worker among you, whether male or female....²³¹

Third, some verses emphasize the equality of women and men in their status before God. According to the history of Islam, this verse was revealed to the Prophet (PBH)²³² in response to a woman who asked about the equality of woman before God.²³³

Indeed, the men who surrender unto Allah and the women who surrender unto Allah, the faithful men and the faithful women, the obedient men and the obedient women, the truthful men and the truthful women, the patient men and the patient women, the humble men and the humble women, the charitable men and the charitable women, the men who fast and the women who fast, the men who guard their modesty and the women who guard their modesty, the men who remember Allah greatly and the women who remember Allah greatly- Allah holds in store for them forgiveness and a great reward.²³⁴

²²⁹ Sūrat Al- Nisā, 124 (4:124).

²³⁰ Tabatabaee, 406.

²³¹ Sūrat Al- Nisā, 195 (4:195).

²³² (PBH) is abbreviation of Peace be upon him

²³³ Tabatabaee, 37.

²³⁴ Sūrat Al- Ahzāb, 35, (33:35).

There are numerous verses that use this technique of mentioning men and women in a parallel way so as to emphasize their equality.²³⁵

Fourth, the Qur'ān admires two women as examples and prototypes of believers: those who have faith. The Qur'ān does not describe these women as examples for women or for one particular faith; rather, they are known as prototypes for all people, for all nations in all times.²³⁶

Allah draws an example for those who have faith: the wife of Pharaoh, when she said, "My Lord! Build me a home near You in paradise, and deliver me from Pharaoh and his conduct, and deliver me from the wrongdoing lot." And Mary, daughter of Imran,²³⁷ who guarded the chastity of her womb, so We breathed into it of Our spirit. She confirmed the word of her Lord and His Books, and she was one of the obedient.²³⁸

It is clear that in these verses the reason that these women are examples is that they followed only God's will and that they were obedient to God.

In terms of the social rights of women, the Qur'ān brought a significant change for women because it recognized the right of possession and it gave them the right to decide what happened to their wealth. For instance, the Qur'ān not only criticizes situations in which the wife of a dead was part of his wealth, but also explicitly mentions that women have a right to inherit from their fathers and that, as the owner of this wealth, they have the right to make decisions regarding it.²³⁹

²³⁵ There some other verses that emphasize this subject such as 9:72, 48:5, 57:12, and so on.

²³⁶ Āmoli, 153.

²³⁷ Mary, Mother of Jesus

²³⁸ Sūrat Al-Tahrim, 11,12 (66:11,12)

²³⁹ Morteza Motahhari. *The Collection of Writings*. Vol. 19, 216 (In Persian ed).

O you who have faith! It is not lawful for you to inherit women forcibly, and do not press them...²⁴⁰

Men have a share in the heritage left by parents and near relatives, and women have a share in the heritage left by parents and near relatives, whether it be little or much, a share ordained [by Allah].²⁴¹

... To men belongs a share of what they have earned, and to women a share of what they have earned....²⁴²

Additionally, it is necessary to mention that in Islam, it is the responsibility of men to spend their wealth on their family, their wife and children. In other words, a man's wealth should be spend at home for his family but a woman's wealth is for herself; she is not obliged to spend her money at home nor to do household chores; instead her duty is to prepare an appealing environment at home for her family with her care and love.

In addition to the Qur'ān, there is much historical evidence that women were socially active during the Prophet's time and even after his death.²⁴³ There is no evidence indicating that the Prophet Mohammad (PBH) relieved women of their social responsibility. The public sermons of the only daughter of the Prophet (PBH) are famous. The importance of these sermons is not their publicity but the high quality of knowledge that she possessed. The granddaughter of the Prophet Mohammad (PBH) was known as a scholar, and her lectures are well known.

240 Sūrat Al- Nisā, 19 (4:19).

241 Sūrat Al- Nisā, 7 (4:7).

242 Sūrat Al- Nisā, 32 (4:32)

243 Women's Research Center, *Well Known Women in Islam and their Works*. 1-45(The Farsi version is available in the following address: <http://www.hawzah.net/Per/E/do.asp?a=EHL5.htm>).

In addition, history witnesses that women took part in several types of activities in early Islamic society.²⁴⁴ In terms of education, women spoke in mosques and asked their questions. Some parts of a chapter of the Qur'ān talk about a woman complaining about her husband's oppression in front of the Prophet (PBH), in response to which God revealed a number of verses in support of the woman.²⁴⁵

Another example is a woman who asked the Prophet (PBH) about women's rights in Islam, and raised challenges from a woman's viewpoint about some verses. The Prophet (PBH) answered her publicly and he began his speech with admiration for the eloquence of her remarks.²⁴⁶ This indicates not only that women were allowed to speak in front of the Prophet Muhammad (PBH), but also that they asked questions and raised challenges. In addition to this type of public participation, women took classes in order to achieve a better understanding of the Qur'ān and its exegesis. By the middle of the first century in the Islamic calendar (that is, the eighth century), there were many women who were able to exegete the Qur'ān or re-tell the Prophet's explanation of the Qur'ān. For instance, A'smā, Sūdeh, Ūm Kolsūm, Ūm Hāni, Ūm Al-Banin, and many more are known as those who re-told the Prophet's explanation of the Qur'ān.²⁴⁷

Furthermore, in terms of social activity, some women participated on the battlefield alongside the Prophet (PBH), taking care of the injured soldiers. Safīyeh was

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Sūrat Al- Mojadeleh (58)

²⁴⁶ Tabatabaee, 37.

²⁴⁷ Women's Research Center, 1-45.

known as the one who participated in most of the battles, and when she realized that a spy was making an attempt on the Prophet's life, she herself defended the Prophet (PBH).²⁴⁸

In terms of human rights, as has already been mentioned, the Qur'ān comes in a context in which fathers used to bury their daughters alive as a sign of virtue. The Qur'ān not only criticizes this situation but also unveils the news of God's punishment for these kinds of actions.²⁴⁹

When one of them is brought the news of a female (newborn), his face becomes darkened and he chokes with suppressed agony. He hides from the people out of distress at the news he has been brought: shall he retain it in humiliation, or bury it in the ground! Look! Evil is the judgment that they make.²⁵⁰

Another verse warns the punishment of this action in the Day of Judgment.

[In the Day of Judgment, fathers who buried their daughter alive will be asked], "for what sin she was killed."²⁵¹

In that horrific situation, the Qur'ān proclaims the good news of the birth of a daughter to the Prophet Mohammad (PBH). One small chapter of the Qur'ān introduces the baby girl as "abundance" and states that the Prophet (PBH) should thank God for this gift and pray to God as a sign of thanks.

Indeed We have given you abundance. So pray to your Lord...²⁵²

As already noted, unlike what Russell indicates, the challenge is not about the dignity and status before God of women in Islam. In fact, the faith was initially a kind of

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ This event is so famous that almost all books written about women's status in pre-Islam talk about that.

²⁵⁰ Sūrat Al-Nahl 58-59 (16:58-59).

²⁵¹ Sūrat Al-Takwir,9 (81:9).

²⁵² Sūrat Al-Kawthar (108).

feminist movement, especially when seen in its historical context, just as early Christianity could be viewed this way. However, after the Prophet's death, women's role in Islamic societies changed quite a bit. This thesis will show that the challenge of women in Islamic society is created by two facts: 1) Muslims' patriarchal tradition and 2) social differences in the Islamic sources that come about because of different responsibilities that men and women are assigned according to their physical and emotional differences.

1. Challenge I: Muslims' Tradition

After considering the issue of equality of women and men in the Qur'ān, it is still necessary to consider the question: why are some women still oppressed in Muslim societies and why is there still discrimination against them in certain areas?

Before addressing this question, it is necessary to clarify an important point regarding the notion of justice. The second chapter observed that, according to Russell, the goal of feminist theology is the eradication of injustice. However, Russell does not offer a clear-cut definition of justice. In my critical discussion at the end of the chapter, I suggested that the original understanding of justice was as an innate concept.²⁵³ But on the other hand, various aspects influence the definition of justice in practice. In addition to culture and situation, the thought, attitude, and the philosophy behind an action or social pattern also affect the understanding of it from a justice perspective. For instance, to a Christian woman in North America, wearing *hijab* might be seen as a sign of oppression that has its roots in patriarchal thinking. But for me, this reflection does not sound rational at all, because for me a philosophy lies behind this form of dress code. In fact, when I hear that in some countries there are laws against this form of dressing, I feel that that is unjust,

²⁵³ Chapter two, Section C. Discussion.

and that these laws and attitudes marginalize my understanding about the form of dress code that I choose. Conversely, for me, the *borgha*’ of an Afghan woman does not seem necessary, but there might be a philosophy behind that dress code as well, although I might not agree with that style. Consequently, the meaning of “injustice” and “oppression” may be different from culture to culture, and forcing one particular understanding about the notion of justice onto another cultures might also be oppressive.

Another challenge for Muslim women is that men have tried to marginalize them in the history of Islamic civilization (just as is true in other non-Muslim societies), and they have magnified the patriarchal side of the religion to achieve this goal. However, a basic study of the main sources of Islam indicates that many of the oppressive patriarchal patterns in Muslim societies have no root in the religion and must be considered as a remainder of the patriarchal traditions that existed in these societies before Islam. For example, in some Muslim countries women do not have the right to vote, or they are not allowed to drive a car. Although many of these countries try to justify these patterns by proclaiming that they are a part of religion, there is no evidence that the main sources of the faith support these patterns. That is where Russell’s approach, which stresses consciousness-raising and sisterhood, is applicable to undermine such patriarchal patterns.

2. Challenge II: Social Differences in the Scripture

As was already mentioned, there is no difference in terms of language or women’s dignity in the main source of faith, the Qur’ān, which is the undisputable word of God to Muslims. Yet, the Qur’ān assigns women and men different tasks and responsibilities in society and accordingly grants them their social “privileges” differently, which could

create a challenge for some Muslim women. These challenges do not belong only to women of the twenty-first century. Even during the Prophet's lifetime, women asked their questions and raised their concerns about these subjects. In some cases, the Qur'ān answers them by saying that the differences are not because of superiority or inferiority; rather that physical difference creates different tasks. For instance, women asked the Prophet (PBH) why a woman inherits a smaller share than her brother from a dead person's inheritance and a verse of the Qur'ān answered:

Do not covet the advantage which Allah given some of you over others. To men belongs a share of what they have earned, and to women a share of what they have earned.²⁵⁴

According to the Islamic scholars' understanding, the aim of the verse is to mention that although there is a difference between women and men, these differences do not reflect the superiority of one gender over another from the perspective of their humanity. In other words, men have some advantages over women and women have some advantages over men in terms of their financial responsibilities, and hence they have a different share of inheritance: that is the wealth of a man should be spent on his family while a woman's wealth belongs to herself, as the Qur'ān indicates in a different verse, and this difference creates different levels of financial privilege when it comes to inheritance.²⁵⁵

One question remains: is it true to say that the Islamic commands form a static "building block" that cannot be changed from its initial seventh-century form? I believe that it is not the case. There is no doubt that Islam is not limited to prayers or ethics, but

²⁵⁴ Sūrat Al-Nisa, 32 (4:32)

²⁵⁵ Motahhari, *Collection of Writings*, 216.

rather that it includes the explanation of the relationship between God and humans as well as the relationship among humans. Consequently, such a religion should consider the importance of interpretation in different times and situations.²⁵⁶ Islamic scholars believe that there are several factors in Islamic theology that enable the Islamic laws to be dynamic.

There are extensive discussions in Islamic thought about how time, culture, and situation affect the interpretation of the Islamic sources and how these interpretations constitute social rights and responsibilities for various groups in Islamic society. Islam has opened the way for creative and methodological interpretations and provided guidelines for remaining faithful in encountering the text. This paves the way for the next topic, which is the source of authority for interpretation in Islam.

a. Sources of Authority

As was already noted, there is a difference between divine and human. In the Islamic view, God is not only the primary source but also the only source of authority. Among all the different branches of Islam, the infallibility of the Qur'ān and that it is the direct word of God is a common theme. There is no doubt nor are there disputes in the entire Islamic thought spectrum about whether the Qur'ān is revealed word by word and vowel by vowel to the Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him), the servant and the Prophet of God. In that sense, Muslims believe that the patriarchal nature of the society could not have influenced this source.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁶ Morteza Motahhari, *Women's Right in Islam*, 96 (in Persian ed).

²⁵⁷ The reason for this claim is beyond the scope of this thesis. Interested readers can find further details in the literature.

Muslim scholars believe that the best source of the exegesis of the Qur'ān is the Qur'ān itself, because of its infallibility and consistency. It means that the most reliable and trustworthy way of exegesis is to consider the verses that talk about the same subject together in order to obtain a clearer interpretation of those verses.²⁵⁸

In addition to the Qur'ān, the person who is assigned by God, in other words, the person who receives the authority of interpretation from God, has the authority to interpret the text and explain it. By the witness of the Qur'ān, the Prophet (PBH) is the one who has that authority.²⁵⁹

We have sent down the reminder to *you* [the Prophet] so that *you* may clarify for the people that which has been sent down to them, so that they may reflect.²⁶⁰

This is indeed [a Book] sent down by the Lord of all the worlds, brought down by the Trustworthy Spirit, upon your heart, (so that you may be one of the warners), in a clear Arabic language.²⁶¹

Your companion [that is, the Apostle of Allah] has neither gone astray, nor gone amiss. Nor does he speak out of [his own] desire: it is just a revelation that is revealed [to him].²⁶²

These two sources are understood as divine authority: the Qur'ān as God's revelation in the first place and secondly the Prophet (PBH) as the one who is assigned by God to proclaim and clarify God's message.

In terms of human authority, neither race nor gender creates superiority. Human authority in the exegesis of the Qur'ān is based on a deep understanding of it. A

²⁵⁸ A'bās A'li A'mid Zanjani. *The Basis and The foundation of The Exegesis of The Qur'ān* (1993), 362.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 364.

²⁶⁰ Sūrat Al-Nahl, 44 (16:44).

²⁶¹ Sūrat Al-Shu'arā, 192-195 (26:192-195).

²⁶² Sūrat Al-Najm, 2-4 (53:2-4).

fundamental element in such understanding is using the intellectual power that is bestowed on both males and females. The Qur'ān frequently invites people to reason and to think, emphasizing the role of intellectual power when they read it:

...Thus do We elaborate [articulate] the signs for people who apply reason.²⁶³

[It is] a blessed Book that We have sent down to *you*, so that they may contemplate its signs, and that those who possess intellect may take admonition.²⁶⁴

According to these verses, the Qur'ān has granted authority to the power of thought *to understand* the verses of the Qur'ān and to relate them together to have a clearer understanding about the Qur'ān's vision on various subjects.²⁶⁵ It is needless to say that the authority of reasoning can only be used effectively if it is accompanied by tools of understanding, such as knowledge about the historical background of verses, the Arabic language, and of course other verses related to the same subject, as well as the explanation of the Prophet (PBH) about the subject of the verses.²⁶⁶ In that sense, the Qur'ān is the framework or boundary that Muslim believers should take into consideration in order to remain faithful interpreters of the God's message. So, the notion of suspicion is not applicable to the Qur'ān itself, unlike what Russell suggests. In contrast, the notion of obedience is the only applicable approach in dealing with the Qur'ān.

To return to the initial question, that of how to deal “creatively and faithfully” with the Qur'ān while considering an individual's context and experience, the fact of the matter

²⁶³ Sūrat Al-Rūm, 28 (30:28).

²⁶⁴ Sūrat Sād, 29, (38:29).

²⁶⁵ Zanjni, 329-35.

²⁶⁶ Zanjni, 397-405.

is that the Qur'ān itself has fixed commands and flexible commands for different situations and contexts. In many cases, the flexible commands of the Qur'ān have been transformed to fixed ones because of the patriarchal nature of the societies. That is where the new vision for the interpretation of the Qur'ān can shed light, in order to reexamine the flexibility of these commands and to change the understanding of them.²⁶⁷

For instance, based on the philosophy of *hijab*, both women and men are commanded to wear *hijab*, although of course different types.²⁶⁸ However, the exact form of *hijab* for women is not explicitly mentioned in the Qur'ān. Consequently, the form of *hijab* can be different from time to time and culture to culture as long as the base and boundaries that are mentioned in the Qur'ān are respected. According to this interpretation, a woman who wears a traditional dark cloth as *hijab*, in certain conditions, may choose to use a different cloth at a different time and still remain faithful within the boundaries of the Qur'ān.

Another example that speaks to the notion of social difference in Islamic law is the right of divorce. Islam gives the right of divorce to men. Many scholars have tried to justify this difference, which is beyond the scope of this thesis,²⁶⁹ but the noteworthy point is that Islam has given women the right to stipulate whatever conditions they would like to have for the marriage. These conditions could include the right of divorce. In other words, although the man has the right of divorce in a family, the woman can stipulate that she should have this right as well as a precondition for the marriage. In this example, when a man gives his word to give his wife the right of divorce, the priority of commitment to the

²⁶⁷ Motahhari, *Women's Right*, 94-105.

²⁶⁸ Women are commanded to wear a scarf and talk in a manner that is modest with men, and men are commanded to not look at women and to treat them with modesty.

²⁶⁹ For instance, Morteza Motahhari or Allameh Tabatabaee.

promises—that is also mentioned in the Qur’ān—is used to create an equal right for the woman as well.

C. What I Have Learned from Russell

In the Muslim world, there is no separation between the secular society and the religious community. This is opposite to Western culture that attempts to keep a clear separation between the two. In the view of Muslims, Islam is engaged with the various aspects of day-to-day life and work. Therefore, Russell has encouraged me to see how crucial it is to develop a feminist theology to eradicate social discrimination against women in Muslim societies. For me, such a theology is based on two elements, with commitment to Islam as the first priority, and advocating women’s rights within the framework of religion as the second. The importance of this definition becomes clear when we study “women activist” movements in Islamic countries. Based on my personal observation, in my country, since “women activists” do not consider theological approaches to achieve women’s rights, their attempts are not welcomed by a large portion of people, including women. I believe that in a country where the majority of the people consider themselves as committed to the faith, only an Islamic feminist theology that is based on Islamic commands can find a way to liberate women. This includes Muslim countries that have a secular governing system. Consequently, I think the best tool to eradicate injustice against women in Muslim countries is Islam itself.

I believe that the role of women and their experience in Islamic society is played down in social Islamic laws related to them. In order to find out what Islam says in various cultures and times, the task of feminist Muslims is to study Islam in order to

participate in the development of Islamic commands about women, just as, in the example discussed earlier, women's experience in combination with Islamic laws provided the right of divorce to women.

Islam has opened the way of thinking about the text and its interpretation for both females and males equally, leaving no doubt about the equal status of women when it comes to the religion. However, the challenge to a Muslim feminist is the patriarchal social traditions in Muslim societies that either have no roots in the main sources of the faith or have not been studied enough along with other Islamic laws to consider women's concerns.

Russell identifies Christian tradition as the root cause of the challenges of Christian feminists. For her, the attitude of inferiority of women and the patriarchal pyramid structure of the society influenced the writing, translating and interpreting of the text. Consequently, she believes that "it is dangerous to call the Bible the Word of God."

I agree with her that the roots of the challenges of Muslim feminists are also the patriarchal Muslim traditions. Just like Russell, who believes that the genuine message of the Bible is to liberate women, I believe that the message of the Qur'ān is to change these patriarchal structures. However, unlike Russell, I do not believe that the Qur'ān was affected by the society in which it was revealed. Rather, it influenced and influences the society. Therefore, for me the Qur'ān is not only the Word of God, but also it is a criterion that I can use as a tool. I strongly oppose the patriarchal Muslim traditions that do not have a root in Islamic sources, and carry the label of Islam because of the male-dominant structure of the society. However, concerning the social differences that have roots in the

Islamic sources, I believe that women and men can participate equally in the processes of understanding of the Qur'ān—as the Qur'ān itself suggests.

In conclusion, I have learned much from Russell about how faith can be a challenge and at the same time an effective remedy for oppressed women in Christian thought. An important aspect of her work is to seek God's help, through His message, in bringing justice to a much-oppressed fraction of the society, women. As Russell points out, "God's good gifts" can be shared among all human beings to liberate the oppressed, including women; however, the point is how faithfully we identify these gifts.

APENDIX I

Categories of Feminist Theology

There are a variety of ways to categorize the common and differing elements within Christian feminist theology, and this section will review some of these. Carr talks about some of these similar and disparate aspects for Christian feminists. She believes that feminist scholarship within the Christian context is unified in its critical perception of sexism as a distortion in the historical and theological tradition that denigrates women, affirms women's inferiority and subordination to men, and excludes women from full participation in the church and society. It is also unified in its attention to the interpreted experience of women as a source of religious and theological reflection. The differences within feminist religious scholarship as it relates to Christian theology are accounted for by different perceptions of the pervasiveness of sexism within Christianity. For example, Japinga and Slee mention three groups of feminists while Stuckey mentions four.

Other feminists have concluded that the Christian tradition is patriarchal to the core. "When God, Christ, priests, saints, and symbols are all male, the Christian faith cannot function positively for women."²⁷⁰ Mary Daly arrives at this conclusion in her book *Beyond God the Father*. Some feminist theologians believe that although the church fathers had a significant impact on the church's view of women and sexuality, their ideas do not represent the mind of God for all time. Ivone Gebara believes that tradition need not be repeated in perpetuity without change or challenge. Some feminist theologians remain within the tradition by identifying particular aspects that represent the essence or

²⁷⁰ Japinga, 20.

core of the gospel. Rosemary Radford Ruther criticizes the some principle of the Bible that ignore the full humanity of the women.

However, Stuckey believes that most Christian feminist theologians regularly use one another's work and adapt it to their own purposes, and outlines feminist theological writing in four categories. She uses Carol Christ's ideas in developing her own categories. These categories may give slightly different insights into the range of feminist theology.

A. Stuckey's Categorization

1. Revisionist

This position is the least extreme of the four categories. Those who take this stance argue that the correct interpretation will reveal the librating message that is at the core of a tradition. They also suggest replacing male language with gender-neutral language. Recovery of church and Christian history is in their research area. Feminist historian-theologians are recovering the names, lives, and the roles of Christian women from the past. Related to recovery work is the work of feminist re-interpretation of the Bible.

2. Renovationist

Those who take this position argue that it is not enough for interpreters merely to reveal its librating core, but they must expose and refuse to accept the parts of a tradition that are sexist. The language of religion, especially that referring to God as male is a central focus for them. For example, Rosemary Reuther states that use of the word "Father" indicates that God is male, and is thus is "idolatrous." Then she suggests the use of the word God/ess instead of God.

3. Revolutionary

Those who take this position suggest importing language and imagery from other traditions or from outside tradition. Goddess spirituality is often such a source. For example, the result of the research of Charlotte Caron is the development of a “feminist ritual theology,” which she defines as a ritual description of women’s experience of deity.

4. Rejectionist

Those who take this stance have judged the tradition to be irremediably sexist and usually have left it.²⁷¹

B. Slee’s Categorization

Nicola Slee identifies two advantages in valuing differences between women theologians. First, each woman is open and explicit about her own context in writing and speaking. Second, feminists have an opportunity to dialogue and to explore the lives of other women in different situations and with different experiences. Then Slee mentions three key issues about which feminists are divided.

1. Christian Feminists, Post Christian Feminists & Feminist Theologians

Feminist theologians are divided in their analysis of religious systems and the solution to their corruption. All feminists agree that religion has been profoundly shaped and distorted by sexism, but they disagree when it comes to the possibility of reform. Christian feminists, such as Elaine Storkey (UK) and Letty Russell (US), affirm that Christianity is capable of being reformed, “so that it may become truly inclusive of all humanity,” although not without big change. On the other hand, post-Christian or post-traditional

²⁷¹ Stuckey, 16-17, 76-81.

feminists, such as Mary Daly (US) and Daphne Hampson (UK), argue that it is a “hopeless” cause. The only solution is to leave and forge new religions that are based on women’s experience. Feminist theologians such as Carol Christ (US) and Melissa Raphael (UK) orient their thinking around the figure of the Goddess.²⁷²

2. Feminists Liberal, Romantic Feminists, and Radical or Marxist feminists

Feminist theologians are divided in their analysis of the human condition and the remedy for its unjust state. Feminists agree that there is a fundamental injustice in the relationship between the sexes, but they analyze the relationship differently and recommend different solution to this injustice. Liberal feminists, coming out of the Enlightenment tradition, affirm the basic equality of all human beings. Romantic feminists affirm male and female as complementary opposites that together constitute human beings and reflect the image of God. In this view the male has become corrupt through the exercise of power, and the female represents salvation and wholeness. Radical or Marxist feminists, such as Rosemary Radford Ruether (US), “affirm humanity as male and female and as potentially revelatory of the image of God, but assert that, because male and female exist in a structurally unjust relation, both masculinity and femininity as traditionally defined represent different types of human alienation from its full potential.”²⁷³ Post-modern feminists reject any notion of a permanent, unchanging self or a particular “essence” of human being around which feminists can unite; rather they posit a much

272 Nicola Slee. *Faith and Feminism: an Introduction to Christian Feminist Theory*. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003).

²⁷³Slee, 10.

more “fragmentary,” “differentiated notion of human being which celebrates diversity and the freedom to create the self anew continuously.”

3. Womanist Theology and Mujerista Theology

Feminist theologians operate from a range of diverse social and cultural contexts. Although feminists worldwide share a common struggle against injustice, the injustices and struggles of women in Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America are not the same. Womanist theology has been claimed as a distinctive form of black feminist theology, and is represented by African American woman. Mujerista theology was done by Korean feminists.²⁷⁴

²⁷⁴ Slee, 6-12.

APPENDIX II

Seven Steps Fiorenza Takes in Her Methodology

Fiorenza indicates that as the first step, the notion of “objective” should be replaced by “conscious partiality.” For her, the feminists’ task is to replace “value-neutrality and impartiality” by speaking out of their commitments.

The second step is to replace “view from above with view from below.” This is what Russell always encourages feminists to do. For Fiorenza, there is a need to read the Bible in order to replace and reconstruct its androcentric view.

Whereas biblical studies as theological studies are concerned with the authority of the biblical androcentric text, a feminist hermeneutic must become a critical-evaluation and transformative interpretation subjecting the Bible to its own canons of liberation.²⁷⁵

Fiorenza’s third step is to replace “spectator knowledge” with “participation in actions, movements, and struggle.” According to Fiorenza, it is not enough to understand the androcentric text; rather the feminists’ task is to elaborate the texts and to transform contemporary patriarchal oppression.

As noted earlier, Russell stresses the process of action- reflection, and for her this reflection moves feminists toward new actions. In comparison, Fiorenza emphasizes action-research:

The integration of research into the liberation struggle and process implies that changing the status quo becomes the starting point for a research project.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ Fiorenza, “Roundtable Discussion,” 75.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

According to the fifth step, “the research process must become a process of conscientization.” For Fiorenza, a feminist scholar should use research tools in order to help women. In her view, a feminist’s task is to increase the awareness of women that the patriarchal parts of the text are not “the Word of God,” but they are the “word of men.” So, it helps women to reject “the patriarchal submission to the society and the church.”²⁷⁷

In addition, as the sixth step, women should participate in the study of women’s individual and social history. In order to show that they have been active participants in biblical religion, women have to revive their own version of history, which includes their role.

As the final step, Fiorenza emphasizes that, as the one who is committed to the struggle for women’s liberation, a feminist cannot choose one research area; rather her attempt should point out the issues critical for women.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. PRIMARY SOURCES

1. Russell's Books

1971

Women's Liberation in a Biblical Perspective. New York: Young Women's Christian Association, National Board, 1971.

1974

Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A Theology. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974.

1976

The Liberating Word: A Guide to Nonsexist Interpretation of the Bible. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976.

1985

Feminist Interpretation of the Bible. Editor. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985.

1987

Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987.

1993

Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993.

1996

Dictionary of Feminist Theologies. Co-edited with J. Shannon Clarkson. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996.

2. Russell's Articles

1974

"Women and Ministry." In *Sexist Religion and Women in the Church: No More Silence!*. Ed. Alice Hageman. New York: Association Press, 1974. 47-62.

1979

"Universality and Contextuality." *The Ecumenical Review* 31 (1979): 23-26.

1980

"Bread Instead of Stone: How My Mind Has Changed." *The Christian Century* 97 (1980 June): 665-669.

1983

“In Search of a Critical Feminist Paradigm for Biblical Interpretation.” *Feminist Hermeneutic Project*, AAR (April, 1983).

1984

“Changing My Mind about Religious Education.” *Religious Education* 79 (Winter 1984): 5-10.

“Women and Ministry: Problem or Possibility?” In *Christian Feminism*. Ed. J. Weidman, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984. 75-92.

1985

“Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation.” In *Feminist interpretation of the Bible*. Ed. Letty M. Russell. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985. 137-146.

“Exploring the contexts of our faith.” In *Changing the Contexts of Our Faith*. Ed. Letty M. Russell. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985. 21-35.

1988

“Authority and Hope in Feminist Theology.” In *Love: the foundation of hope*. Ed. F. Burnham. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988. 77-93.

“Unity and Renewal in Feminist Perspective.” *In Mid-Stream*, 27 (Jan. 1988): 55-66.

1991

“Feminist Theologies.” *Encyclopedia of Reformed Faith*. Ed. Donald McKim. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991.

1992

“The Feminist Touch in Theological Education.” *Sewanee Theological Review* 35 (1992): 355-364.

“Two Become One.” *Sewanee Theological Review* 35 (1992): 335-343.

1993

“Authority: A Christian Feminist Perspective.” *Creative Change* 2 (1993): 2-4.

B. SECONDARY SOURCES

1. Reviews of Russell’s work

1974

Human Liberation in A Feminist Perspective: A Theology

Beare, Marianne G. *Religion in Life* 44.2 (Summer 1975), 247-248.

Clarkson, Margaret. *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 12 no 3 (Summer 1975): 427-428.

Kennel, LeRoy E. *Homiletic* 2 (1977), 35-36.

Rogers, Isabel. *Interpretation* 30 (1976), 325-326.

1985

Feminist Interpretation of the Bible

- Brueggemann, Walter. *Theology Today* 44 (July 1986): 282-284.
Harder, Lydia. *Conrad Grebel Review* 8 (Fall 1990): 331-333.
Marshall-Green, Molly. *Review and Exposition* 84 (Winter 1987):146.
Osiek, Carolyn. *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 48 (July1986): 584-585.
Thompson, Marianne Meye. *Reformed Journal* 37 (January1987): 7-31.
Tillman, William M., Jr. *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 31 (Fall 1988): 53.

1987

Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology

- Brueggemann, Walter. *Theology Today* 44 (Ja 1988): 538-539+.
Crawford, Janet. *Judaism* 36 No 4, (Fall 1987): 494.
Goldsmith, Dale. *Interpretation* 42 (January 1988): 101.
Green, Tom. *Ethics* 98 (July 1988): 902.
Hinze , Christine, Firer. *Journal of Religion* 69 (October 1989): 571-573.
Kay, Judith W. *Perspective in Religious Studies* 16 (Fall 1989): 275-278.
Kroeger, Catherine. *Reformed Journal* 38 (March 1988): 31 .
Marshall -Green, Molly. *Review and Expositor* 85 (Summer 1988): 572.
Palmer, Beth. *Cross Currents* 39.1, (Spring 1989): 119-121 .
Peterson, Deane A. *Word & World* 8 (Summer 1988): 309-314.
Peters, Ted. *Currents in Theology and Mission* 15 (October 1988): 450-451.

1993

Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church

- Barnes, Elizabeth B. *Interpretation* 49 (January 1995): 103.
Monge, David J. *Dialog* 33 (Spring 1994): 158-159.
Quitslund, Sonya A. *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 31 (Winter-Spring 1994): 190-192.
Sanks, T. Howland. *Theological Studies* 55 (March 1994): 181-182.
Slee, Nicola. *Expository Times* 105 (March 1994): 188.

2. Dissertations on Russell's work

- Epp- Stobbe, Eleanor. "Practicing God's hospitality: the contribution of Letty M. Russell toward an understanding of the mission of the Church." Diss. Emmanuel College and the University of Toronto, 2000.
Keely, Barbara Anne. "Partnership and Christian Education in the Work of Letty M. Russell." Diss. Presbyterian School of Christian Education, 1991.

3. Critical Discussions of Russell's Work

- Copeland, M. Shawn. "Journeying to the Household of God: the Eschatological Implications of Method in the Theology of Letty Mandeville Russell." In *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell*. Eds. Margaret A. Farley and Serene Jones. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999. 26-44.
- Freeman, Arthur. "Letty Russell's Changing Contexts of Faith." *Ecumenical Trends* 14.8 (Summer 1985): 122-123.
- Keely, Barbara Anne, "Educating for Partnership." *Faith of Our Foremothers: Women Changing Religion*. Ed. Barbara Anne Keely. Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. "The Theological Vision of Letty Russell." In *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell*. Eds. Margaret A. Farley and Serene Jones. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999. 16-25.

4. Feminist Theology: Other Approaches

- Boys, Mary C. *Educating in Faith: Maps and Visions*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989.
- Bunch, Charlotte. *Building Feminist Theory*. New York: Longman, 1981.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *Biblical Authority: a Personal Reflection*. *Christian Century* 118.1 (Ja 2001): 14-20.
- Carr, Anne E. *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988.
- Carr, Anne E. *Religion, Feminism, and the Family*. Ed. Anne Carr, Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996.
- Carmody, Denise Lardner. *Christian Feminist Theology: a Constructive Interpretation*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995.
- Carmody, Denise Lardner. *Feminism and Christianity: A Two-Way Reflection*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1982.
- Code, Lorraine, Sheila Mullett, and Christine Overall. *Feminist Perspectives: Philosophical Essays on Method and Morals*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988.
- Coll, Regina. *Christianity & Feminism in Conversation*. Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1994.

- Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1978.
- Davis, Ellen F., and Richard B. Hays. "Beyond Criticism: Learning to Read the Bible Again." *Christian Century* 121.8 (Ap 2004).
- Donovan, Josephine. *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions of American Feminism*. New York: Continuum, 1991.
- Hampson, Daphne. *Theology and Feminism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.
- Harder, Lydia. "Biblical Interpretation: A Praxis of Discipleship?" *The Conrad Grebel Review*. 10 (1992).
- Harder, Lydia. *Obedience, Suspicion and the Gospel of Mark: A Mennonite-Feminist Exploration of Biblical Authority*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier Press, 1998.
- Hooks, Bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press, 1984.
- Hays, Richard B. "Salvation by Trust? Reading the Bible Faithfully." *Christian Century* (Feb 1997).
- Loades, Ann, Ed. *Feminist Theology: A Reader*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990.
- Japinga, Lynn. *Feminism and Christianity: an Essential Guide*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999.
- Klaassen, Walter. "Anabaptist Hermeneutics: Presuppositions, Principles and Practice." *Biblical Interpretation*. Elkhart, Ind : Institute of Mennonite Studies (1984).
- Kourany, Janet, A. James P. Sterba, and Rosemarie Tong. *Feminist Philosophies: Problems, theories and applications*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1992.
- Malone, Mary T. *Women and Christianity*. Vol. 1. Ottawa: Novalis, 2000.
- Mickelsen, Alvera, Ed. *Women, Authority and the Bible*. Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1986.
- Midgley, Mary, and Judith Hughes. *Women's Choices: Philosophical Problems facing Feminism*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1983.
- Minogue, Sally, ed. *Problems for Feminist Criticism*. London: Routledge, 1990.

- Moore, Mary Elizabeth. "Inclusive Language and Power: a Response." *Religious Education* 80 (Fall 1985): 603-614.
- Pinnock, Clark H. "How I Use the Bible in Doing Theology." In *Use of the Bible in Theology*. Atlanta, Ga: John Knox Press, 1985.
- Parsons, Susan Frank. *Feminism and Christian Ethics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Rhodes, Ron. "The Debate Over Feminist Theology: Which View is Biblical?" *Reasoning from the Scripture Ministries*. 26 April 2007. <<http://home.earthlink.net/~ronrhodes/>>.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Disputed Questions: On Being a Christian*. New York: Orbis Books, 1989.
- Ruether Rosemary Radford. *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974.
- Ruether Rosemary Radford, *Womanguides: Readings toward a Feminist Theology*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985.
- Sarding, Sandra. *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987.
- Scanzoni, Letha, and Nancy Hardesty. *All We're Meant to Be: A Biblical Approach to Women's Liberation*. Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1976.
- Schüssler Fiorenza, Elizabeth. *In Memory of Her*. Crossroad Publishing Company: New York, 1983.
- Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. "Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology of Liberation." *Theological Studies* 36 (1975).
- Schüssler, Fiorenza, Elisabeth. "Roundtable Discussion: On Feminist Methodology." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1 (1985).
- Schüssler, Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction*. Vol. 1. New York: Crossroad, 1993.
- Schüssler, Fiorenza, Elisabeth. "To Set the Record Straight: Biblical Women's Studies." *Horizons* 10 (1983).
- Slee, Nicola. *Faith and Feminism: an Introduction to Christian Feminist Theory*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003.

- Stuckey, Johanna H. *Feminist Spirituality: An Introduction to Feminist Theology in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Feminist Goddess Worship*. Toronto: Centre for Feminist Research, York University, 1998.
- Tolbert, Mary Ann. "Defining the Problem: The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics." *Semeia* 28 (1983).
- Webb, Val. *Why We're Equal: Introducing Feminist Theology*. St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1999.
- Weidman, Zudith L., ed. *Christian Feminism: Visions of a New Humanity*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984.
- Wijk-Bos, Johanna W.H. van. *Reformed And Feminist: A Challenge to the Church*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991.
- Wright, N.T. "How Can The Bible Be Authoritative?" *Vox Evangelica*, 21 (1991). (Also available on the web: http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Bible_Authoritative.htm)
- Woodward, Kenneth L. "Feminism and the Church." *Newsweek*, 1989.
- Yoder, John Howard. *The Use of the Bible in Theology*. Atlanta, Ga: John Knox Press, 1985.
- Young, Pamela Dickey. *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology: In Search of Method*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990.

5. References in Persian

- A'mid Zanjni, A'bās A'li. *The Basis and the Foundation of the Exegesis of the Qur'ān*. 1993.
- Ja'vādi Āmoli, Abdollāh. *Women in the Reflection of Dignity and Beauty*. 1992.
- Motahhari, Morteza. *Women's Right in Islam*. (Available in Persian at <http://www.hawzah.net/>)
- Motahhari, Morteza. *The Collection of Writings*. Vol. 19. (<http://www.hawzah.net/>)
- Pishvae, Mahdi. *Islam's History: From the Pre-Islam History to the Death of the Prophet of Islam*. 2nd ed. 1993. (There is no English translation for this book.)
- Sha'hidi, Ja'f'ar. *The Analytical History of Islam*. 26th ed. 1991.
- Sobhani, Ja'far. *Parts of the History of the Prophet of Islam*. 12th ed. 1991. (There is no English translation of this book.)

Tabatabaee, A'llāmeḥ Seyyed Hose'in. *The Exegesis of the Holy Qur'ān*. Vol. 2. 402.

Women's Research Center, *Well Known Women in Islam and their Works*. 1-45. (The

Farsi version is available at the following address:

<http://www.hawzah.net/Per/E/do.asp?a=EHL5.htm>.)