

portance for women and for all people in the future, the focal point for a great variety of energies. Women have already begun a Pentagon action both in the eastern and western parts of the U.S. In unity there is strength; coalitions and organization are of immense significance for the future. All will be politically marginal unless ways are found to make alliances with others in the struggle.

Finally, a word on the significance of the women's movement for the wider context. A multitude of women have already had the experience of a living movement in which thousands of women have shared ideas with love. Sheila Rowbotham writes of this as "the source of a most extraordinary power." The networking of women has not only effectively challenged self-subordination and the role of the "friendly helper" but also has challenged the underpinnings of all oppression and exploitation. In this networking, women have learned new ways of organization that emphasize local control and the importance of each person in shared leadership. Women have discouraged forms of leadership that leave some people uninvolved. A new mode of organization is evolving which is a rejection of elitism ("Father knows best"), the undervaluation of the majority of human beings. To put this in the religious terms of Latin American liberation theology, it is the "option for the poor" like that of Jesus, for the outcast, the oppressed, the unimportant people. This option is not merely the compassion of "lady bountiful charity"; it is the option for the inclusive community of human beings across all the false barriers of race, sex, class, culture, and religion. This mode of leadership and organization, while still in its first stages, is a powerful challenge both to society and to a hierarchical-patriarchal Church.

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CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY: A BREAKTHROUGH OF POWER

Women's Christian spirituality today is the experience of a breakthrough of power. Power is the central experience for three reasons: (1) it is the heart of all spirituality; (2) it is characteristic of Christian spirituality; (3) it is what women, especially, are feeling.

Spirituality is the actualization of the human capacity for self-transcendence. It is the experience of the energy and empowerment to reach out beyond oneself to truth, to loving relationships, to free decisions and commitments. It is to become oneself by deepening one's affectivity, expanding one's horizons, moving to realize one's self-creating values.

Christian spirituality is the actualization of this self-transcending capacity through the self-gift of God, in the risen Jesus, by the empowerment of the Spirit. The Christian experience of God, Jesus, the Spirit, is precisely the experience of power: energizing love, life-giving vision, growth-producing gift of our true embodied self to ourselves flowing from God's presence in the deepest core of our being. It is power experienced not as control or manipulation or

domination, but always as supportive energy, as the capacity for greater affectivity, intelligence, and freedom in relating to ourselves, to others, to political and social structures, to the cosmos, to God.

Women's Christian experience of God or spirituality in our time is a "breakthrough" of empowerment to incarnate God in ourselves. Many women feel energized to be the feminine embodiment of God, in the Spirit, to be God's wisdom in the world. That is, many experience the paradoxical power of the cross, of love in the midst of struggle—a love of ourselves in a new way, and of others "according to the mind of Christ." Christian feminist wisdom is gospel wisdom: valuing community, mutuality, empowerment, equality, transformation; promoting women's mature autonomy and equality in society and the Church.

In what ways does this experience demonstrate the characteristics of a breakthrough?¹ First, it had a long remote preparation: women have longed to see themselves truly as the image of God, and to have their culture and Church reflect this vision in its institutions and practices. Second, it had an immediate preparation: recent socio-political events and the insights of critical historical and biblical studies have shaken us from our settled expectations and attitudes about women, thus creating a "weak spot" which opened the way for women to move toward the experience of wholeness and complete affirmation which they intuitively recognize as "home."

Third, there is the breakthrough of the past twelve years: the thrust of our whole personalities across a gap of the still unknown, the momentum through the birth canal of difficulties associated with the current need to recover and reconstruct our entire patriarchal Christian tradition in a way that will truly embody women's experience.² It is this impetus, this overcoming of difficulties which makes women's spirituality today so energetic, so passionate, so much a release of power for self-transcending knowledge, love, and decisive action. This breakthrough is evident in its effects: a release of power to appropriate our own personalities and to create networks of wider communication with others—especially with other women. The power is extensive because so many experience a deep need to breakthrough and because many are so willing to be broken open to new possibilities. The last aspect of breakthrough is a characteristic search for language in which to understand and express this powerful experience. Future possibilities depend, in part, on what concepts, symbols, and life-models are available for understanding and action.

A few concrete examples of this breakthrough and its recent effects can illustrate four dimensions of women's empowerment: images and language, recovered history, contemporary stories or descriptions, consequent action.

The significance of language and imagery cannot be underestimated today. Women (and some men) insist that masculine God-language be balanced by feminine language in order to show that all of it is metaphor. Exclusively male

¹For the term "breakthrough" understood as a discovery that I and God are one, I am indebted to Meister Eckhart's sermon fifteen in Matthew Fox's collection *Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality in New Translation* (New York: Doubleday Image Book, 1980), p. 218. For the outline of the characteristics of a breakthrough see Rosemary Haughton, *The Passionate God* (New York: Paulist, 1981).

²For more analysis and examples Joann Wolski Conn, "Women's Spirituality: Restriction and Reconstruction," *Cross Currents* 30 (Fall 1980), 293-308.

language is idolatry.³ A few male authors have begun to use both feminine God-language and women's religious experience as basic components in their work.⁴ Women have begun to speak about the personal effects of being in touch with Goddess symbolism as well as the feminine images of the divine in Jewish-Christian tradition.⁵

Discovering the history of women's religious lives has demonstrated the advantages and ambiguities of the fact that women's power in the Church has always been rooted in charism and holiness, not in office or in title.⁶ We are beginning to uncover ways in which personal autonomy was a necessary and integral aspect of holiness in women saints of the past.⁷ We are also recovering in a more systematic way models of discernment and spiritual growth that have been designed by women. Two examples are Catherine of Siena's pattern of discernment and Teresa of Avila's "four waters" of religious life-span development.⁸

Descriptions of the concrete experience of contemporary feminist Christian spirituality are only beginning to appear since the experience itself is so new. Women describe an experience that reconciles a single-nature anthropology with real differences between women and men. Some emphasize an experience of God's presence through others in a discipleship of equals that is continually recreated in the power of the Spirit. Some stress the challenge to traditional Catholic religious authority, while others simply ignore church structures. Some highlight awe in the face of the mystery of one's own life.⁹

Actions which express women's breakthrough of power are both creative and conflicting. Talented women are leaving the Jewish-Christian tradition in order to search for a religious experience nourished by a creative post-patriarchal women's spirituality. These women judge that Christianity is so sexist that it cannot be reconstructed; it can only restrict, paralyze, enervate women's

³Gail Ramshaw Schmidt, "The Gender of God," *Worship* 56 (March 1982), 117-31.

⁴See, for example: John Carmody, *The Progressive Pilgrim* (Notre Dame: Fides/Claretian, 1980); Matthew Fox, *Whee! We, wee All the Way Home . . .* (Wilmington: Consortium Books, 1976); Donald Gelpi, *Experiencing God* (New York: Paulist, 1978); Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979); William M. Thompson, *Jesus, Lord and Savior* (New York: Paulist, 1980).

⁵For example, Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (eds.), *Womanspirit Rising* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979); Charlene Spretnak, (ed.), *The Politics of Women's Spirituality* (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1982).

⁶Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin (eds.) *Women of Spirit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979).

⁷Joann Wolski Conn, "Thérèse of Lisieux From a Feminist Perspective," *Spiritual Life* (in press); Catherine Cress Romano, "A Psycho-Spiritual History of Teresa of Avila: A Woman's Perspective," in *Western Spirituality: Historical Roots, Ecumenical Routes*, (ed.) Matthew Fox (Notre Dame: Fides/Claretian, 1979), 261-95.

⁸Sandra M. Schneiders, "Spiritual Discernment in *The Dialogue* of St. Catherine of Siena," *Horizons* 9 (Spring 1982), 47-59; "The Woman, The Water, The Way," 116 slides and text by Constance Fitzgerald, OCD (Carmelite Monastery, 1318 Dulaney Valley Road, Baltimore, MD 21204).

⁹Anne Carr, "On Feminist Spirituality," *Horizons* 9 (Spring 1982), 96-103; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Gather Together in My Name . . . Toward a Christian Feminist Spirituality," *Women Moving Church*, (eds.) Diann Neu and Mary Riley (Washington, D.C.: Center of Concern, 1982), 11ff.; Mary E. Giles (ed.), *The Feminist Mystic* (New York: Crossroad, 1982); Mary Jo Weaver, *New Catholic Women: A Contemporary Challenge to Traditional Religious Authority* (forthcoming).

capacities. Women who decide to remain within the Catholic Christian tradition are also acting creatively: designing feminist Christian rituals; reaching out to other women in spiritual support networks; writing articles about "mainstreaming" women's studies in all areas of theology; using feminist religious sensibilities in their spiritual direction ministry; speaking candidly to bishops about sexism in the Church; moving away from a Eucharist-centered spirituality so long as only men can lead the community in this celebration.¹⁰

What remains to be done? A great deal! Here are ten of the most urgent items on the agenda. (1) Have feminine images and language of the divine permeate sacramental and other prayer expression as well as official church statements. (2) Act to reverse the present trend away from a Eucharist-centered spirituality; e.g., immediately admit women to the diaconate. (3) Develop feminist models of Christian faith development and create models of church that arise from women's experience. Then train ministry candidates in a context that uses these models. (4) Officially recognize and promote women's spiritual ministry; e.g., extend to women the full Catholic certification for pastoral counseling as chaplain that now is given only to clerics. (5) Mainstream women's religious experience in general works on spirituality and insist on inclusive language in these books and articles. (6) Actively promote the work of women writing on spirituality. How many potential Henri Nouwen's are there waiting in the wings? (7) Promote formal dialogue about spirituality among feminists within and apart from the Jewish-Christian tradition. Dialogue is needed, e.g., on the question of deliberately creating a feminist religion. Is some of current feminist religion re-cycled nature worship? Dialogue is also needed between lay-women and nun-women. How can the spirituality resources of the latter be more available to the former? (8) Continue serious theological discussion of such issues as: How can Christianity survive and benefit from the pervasive challenge to its self-understanding present in feminism? How can a male savior save women? Where is the Christian celebration of the mother-daughter relationship? (9) Use current research on the significance of feminine God-representations in all spiritual direction and psychotherapy. (10) Work diligently to have the accomplishments of women's empowerment "trickle down" to the general public.

Promoting these projects will support women's contemporary spirituality: a breakthrough of power.

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¹⁰Madeline Birmingham, "The Spiritual Direction Relationship," *Human Development* 2 (Spring 1981), 28-30; Denise Lardner Carmondy, "Feminism and World Religions," *Horizons* 9 (Fall 1982); Linda Clark, Marian Ronan, and Eleanor Walker, *Image-Breaking/Image-Building* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1981).