

EXPERIENCE AS A SOURCE FOR THEOLOGY

My task is to consider experience as a source for theology today. Of course experience has always functioned in theology although its function has not always been recognized. The question, according to Bernard Cooke, is not "whether experience is a basic source of theology but *how* we can accurately and critically use it."¹ The changing answer to this question lies at the heart of the contemporary transformation of theology.

This presentation has three parts: Part I will consider some shifts in how experience is being used as a source for theology today, with an emphasis on the foundational role of present experience and a recognition of the widening experiential base for theological reflection. Part II will consider aspects of my experience as a Canadian woman, focusing on three parallel transitions within the Canadian and the feminist context. Part III will suggest how my Canadian and feminist experiences may be used as a source for theology.

Before I begin it is necessary to clarify what I mean by experience. I am not using the term "experience" in a specialized philosophical way but in a common sense way. By experience I include all that contributes to our situation, both our political and personal context and our near and distant histories. Such an understanding of experience is open-ended and flexible rather than definitive. I speak of "religious experience," not in the restricted sense that William James used the term, as possessing an element which can be found nowhere else and which he defined as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men [*sic*] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine."² Rather I am referring to what Rahner calls "transcendental experience," the human subject's orientation toward holy mystery which constitutes our essence as subject and as person.³ In this sense all experience is "religious."

¹Bernard Cooke, "The Experiential 'Word of God,'" in Leonard Swidler, ed., *Consensus in Theology? A Dialogue with Hans Küng and Edward Schillebeeckx* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980) 72.

²William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered in Edinburgh 1901-1902 (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1935) 42. For a critique of William James' understanding of religious experience, see Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia; London: SCM Press, 1988).

³Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), especially the Introduction and Chapters I and II. On p. 20 Rahner describes *transcendental experience* as "the subjective, unthematic, necessary and unending consciousness of the knowing subject that is co-present in every spiritual act of knowledge, and the subject's openness to the unlimited expanse of all possible reality."

Experience needs to be interpreted in order for us to make sense of it and to allow it to become shared experience. In our interpretation we use the language we have received, the stories we have been told. For Christians it is particularly the story of Jesus which provides meaning for our own story. Bringing together our experience and the Christian story is the task of Christian theology. Scripture and tradition are themselves codified collective human experience which we draw upon to illuminate our present experience.⁴ There are significant shifts in the way that codified experience and present experience interact in theology. These shifts involve not only a change in method, but a change in the nature of theology itself.

I. SHIFTS IN THE USE OF EXPERIENCE AS SOURCE

Often the experience of the past, rather than the present, has been reflected upon by professional theologians, and then applied to contemporary situations. The newer use of experience in theology begins with communal contemporary experience and attempts to rediscover the tradition in light of this present experience. In the 1982 Marquette Theology Lecture Monika Hellwig described this process as "the real revolution in Christian theology."⁵ Hellwig delineates two major strands in this shift in the very nature of theology. The first is the recovery of present experience in its full social and political dimensions as foundational for theology. The second is the concern to correct the bias in the experience which plays a foundational role in theology. Her question, one which challenges all of us, is "Whose experience counts in theological reflection?"

Focus on Present Experience. The roots of this emphasis on present experience may be found in earlier writers. One might think of George Tyrrell or Friedrich von Hügel, or of Vatican II's call to consider the "signs of the times." Rahner taught the Catholic theological world to recognize God's self-communication within the ordinary experience of ordinary people so that any authentic experience of self may be interpreted as an experience of God.⁶ The implications of Rahner's insight about human experience as ground for theology are being worked out by many others. Anne Carr, writing in 1973, saw his work as "the bridge or transition between the old in Catholic thought and the yet unformed new."⁷ In the past fifteen years that new has been taking shape.

Rahner's student, Johannes Baptist Metz, criticizes Rahner's transcendent theology as idealistic, individualistic, and ahistorical, arguing for a narrative and practical Christianity which takes more seriously the concrete historical and social

⁴Rosemary Radford Ruether makes this point in *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983) 12.

⁵Monika Hellwig, *Whose Experience Counts in Theological Reflection?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1982) 6.

⁶Rahner, *Foundations* 126-33; "Reflections on the Experience of Grace," *Theological Investigations* 3 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1967) 86-90.

⁷Anne Carr, "Theology and Experience in the Thought of Karl Rahner," *Journal of Religion* 53 (1973) 376.

situation in which subjects are placed.⁸ He sees himself as continuing the work of his teacher by critiqueing and correcting it, just as Rahner had critiqued and corrected neoscholasticism.⁹ This work of correction continues as theologians explore the complexities of contemporary experience and the focus shifts from the experience of individuals to the experience of communities.

The recovery of present experience as foundation for theology does not mean that the past is ignored, but rather that the past is appropriated by the present community in the light of present experience. James Dunn and James Mackey in their collaborative work, *New Testament Theology in Dialogue*, refer to the "merging of horizons of past and present."

Most positively the point has been put that the past can only emerge at all for us, and the present can only come explicitly to consciousness, in the course of what has been called the merging of horizons of past and present, as we come with all the presuppositions of contemporary culture to a set of documents which, we must keep reminding ourselves, survive from an entirely different age.¹⁰

The task of hermeneutics is to bring together these horizons of past and present. But even in this merging the focus is on the present community which interprets the stories of the past in the light of its present concerns.

The Correction of Bias. I turn to the second shift in the use of experience as a source of theology: the correction of bias. Experiences previously ignored are becoming a source for theological reflection. The process is facilitated as the theological task is undertaken by women as well as men, by lay people as well as clerics, by communities as well as individuals. As persons and communities previously overlooked or externally defined reflect on their experiences of particularity, theology is being transformed.

The correction of bias includes a recognition that no theology can claim universality, that all theologies are political, shaped by their own context, and that this is true not only for contemporary theologies but for the theologies found in the Bible, in the great works of the early Christian and medieval theologians, and in the statements of the hierarchical magisterium.

Traditional Western theology is now seen as determined by dominant world powers and groups. The critique of this theology comes from the "new theologies" which argue that Western theology is culture bound, church-centered, male-dominated, age-dominated, procapitalist, anticommunist, nonrevolutionary, and overly theoretical.¹¹

⁸Johannes Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical, Fundamental Theology*, tr. David Smith (London: Burns & Oates, 1980); first published in German as *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1977). Matthew Lamb in *Solidarity with Victims: Toward a Theology of Social Transformation* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 117-21 describes Metz's critique of Rahner's transcendental theology as "a dialectic of suspicion and recovery."

⁹Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 11, n15.

¹⁰James D. G. Dunn and James P. Mackey, *New Testament Theology in Dialogue* (London: SPCK, 1987) 142.

¹¹Tissa Balasuriya, an Asian theologian, makes this critique in *Planetary Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1984) 2-10.

Gutiérrez comments on the "new theologies":

The theological schools that are growing up in the so-called Third World countries, or among the radically and culturally oppressed minorities of the wealthy nations, or in the context of women's liberation, are expressions of the new presence of those who have previously been "absent" from history. Their efforts spring from areas of humanity that have previously been arid, theologically speaking, but in which Christian faith has old and deep roots. Hence their present fruitfulness.¹²

As the literary critic, Elaine Showalter, points out: "In the past, female experience which could not be accommodated by androcentric models was treated as deviant or simply ignored."¹³ This happened to the experiences of other groups who constitute a *muted group*, the boundaries of whose culture and reality overlap with, but are not wholly contained by, the *dominant group*.¹⁴ A rich source for theology lies in the experience of these muted groups. Observation from the outside is not the same as a voice speaking from within.

The experience of women becomes a valuable source for theology—the experience of oppression in all its myriad forms, including experiences of sexual harassment and violence; the experience of being a daughter, a sister, a mother; the experience of being a female body, with its own rhythm such as menstruation and menopause; the experience of giving birth; the growing consciousness of sisterhood with women everywhere. All of these experiences are recognized as a locus of the divine and a source for theology. Likewise the experience of native peoples, including their relationship to the land, their struggles to overcome internalized as well as external oppression, and their efforts to reclaim their culture, becomes a new source for theology.

However, it is not simply a matter of adding the experiences of those who have been previously ignored. There is a need to correct what has been presented as "human experience" by showing that the base for this experience is limited and distorted. Feminist theorists argue for a new epistemology. The work of Sandra Harding and Merrill Hintikka demonstrates the inadequacy of the experiential base for all knowledge:

What counts as knowledge must be grounded on experience. Human experience differs according to the kinds of activities and social relations in which humans engage. Women's experience systematically differs from the male experience on which the prevailing claims have been grounded. Thus the experience on which the prevailing claims to social and natural knowledge are founded is, first of all, only partial human experience only partially understood: namely, masculine experience as understood by men. However, when this experience is presumed to be gender-

¹²Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Speaking about God," in Geffré, Gutiérrez and Elizondo, eds., *Different Theologies, Common Responsibility: Babel or Pentecost? Concilium* 171 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1984) 27.

¹³Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1981) 199.

¹⁴The categories of muted and dominant have been used by anthropologists to study women in different societies. See Shirley Ardener, ed., *Perceiving Women* (London: Malaby Press, 1975).

free—when the male experience is taken to be the human experience—the resulting theories, concepts, methodologies, inquiry goals and knowledge-claims distort human social life and human thought.¹⁵

Harding and Hintikka's analysis applies to theology as well as to philosophy and the social and natural sciences. It is necessary to identify how exclusively masculine perspectives on masculine experience have shaped systematic thought in theology and to identify aspects of women's experience which provide resources for a fuller understanding of human experience. This does not mean simply adding information about women to male categories of thought but critiquing the very categories themselves, our ways of knowing and the organization of society.

There is no universal human experience, nor is there any universal "women's experience." New knowledge which is becoming available through women's studies enables us to recognize the pluralism of women's experience across different cultures, races, and classes.¹⁶ Problems of sexism are interstructured with racism and classism. Patterns and structures of patriarchy, domination, and exploitation are deeply engrained in all societies, and are evident in the home and church as well as in other institutions.¹⁷

In the past twenty years feminist theologians have begun to critique this patriarchal bias in theology. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and others emphasize, "Sexism in theology is not so much a personal fault as a structural evil that distorts and corrupts theology and the Christian message."¹⁸ If it is true that sexism does distort theology and the Christian message, it is crucial to study how this is so, and to begin the work of correction.

II. A CANADIAN AND FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

In Part I, I considered two shifts in the way experience functions as a source in theology, the recovery of present experience and the correction of bias in the experience which is foundational for theology. In Part II, I will consider two forms that contemporary "corrective" theologies have taken: contextual theologies over

¹⁵Sandra Harding and Merrill Hintikka, eds., Introduction to *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1983) x.

¹⁶As Sandra Harding notes: "Feminism has played an important role in showing that there are not now and never have been any generic 'men' at all—only gendered men and women. Once essential and universal man dissolves, so does his hidden companion, woman. We have, instead, myriads of women living in elaborate historical complexes of class, race, and culture." "The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2 (1986) 647.

¹⁷See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Anne Carr, eds., *Women, Work and Poverty, Concilium* 194 (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1987) for a study of these patterns in different cultural situations.

¹⁸Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Towards a Liberating and a Liberated Theology: Women Theologians and Feminist Theology in the USA," in Jossua and Metz, eds., *Doing Theology in New Places, Concilium* 115 (New York: Seabury, 1979) 27-28.

against a theology which claims to be universal but which in fact is conditioned by its own cultural context, and feminist theologies over against androcentric theologies.

I will consider how these "correctives" are shaping my theology as a Canadian Catholic woman. I know that my theology is influenced by the fact that I am a woman rather than a man, a single woman who is a member of a religious congregation rather than a married woman; a woman living during the closing decades of the twentieth century rather than at any other period in human history; a Catholic woman rather than a Protestant or Jewish woman but one who teaches theology in an ecumenical context; a woman from a middle-class background; Canadian rather than British, American, or Latin American; a Torontonian rather than a Quèbeçoise, a Maritimer, or a Western Canadian. Out of my particular contexts arise experiences which are a source for my theology, which in turn can impact your theology. The rest of this paper will reflect on these experiences as a source for theology.

Some Common Transitions. Some beginning points for Canadian contextual theologies are emerging.¹⁹ I have selected from the Canadian experience three transitions which have shaped the Canadian context: from survival in the wilderness to the survival of the world; from colonial status to global responsibility; from maintaining French and English culture to the acceptance and affirmation of pluralism. Three parallel transitions emerge from feminist experience. Just as Canada has moved from survival in the wilderness to concern for global survival, feminists have reflected on the transition from the identification of women with nature to women's concern for ecology. As Canada has moved from colonial status to global responsibility, women are moving from a position of being dominated to one of mutual empowerment. Canada's progression from the maintenance of two distinct cultures to the affirmation of pluralism is paralleled by the feminist move from woman's special role to the recognition of many different women's voices. The experience of each of these transformations challenges our image of God, of humanity, and of church.

Survival. As Mary Jo Leddy observes, "Between the facts of our Canadian society and the theological reflection on them, we need the mediating images of poets and artists, the revealing stories of writers, to give us some decisive insight into our reality here."²⁰ Margaret Atwood, in her search for shapes and patterns that characterize Canadian literature, argues that survival is the unifying and informing symbol for Canada. This image is explicitly chosen in contrast to the fre-

¹⁹At the CTSA in 1986, Dan Donovan presented the "Canadian Story" as part of the "Historical Context of North American Theology." Donovan ended his presentation by stating that "what is required at the moment is a greater sensitivity to the Canadian scene and to the need for an indigenous theology." *Catholic Theological Society of America. Proceedings* 41 (1986) 22. For the beginnings of such a theology see Mary Jo Leddy, "Exercising Theology in the Canadian Context," in Leddy and Hinsdale, eds., *Faith That Transforms: Essays in Honor of Gregory Baum* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987) 127-34; Christopher Lind, "An Invitation to Canadian Theology," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 1 (1985) 17-26.

²⁰Leddy, "Exercising Theology in the Canadian Context," 129.

quent choice of conquest as a symbol of the relationship with the lost frontier in the literature of the United States.²¹ Literary critics may disagree with Atwood's analysis of literature, but the symbol of survival does throw light on who we are as Canadians.

The survival of Canada as a nation is truly remarkable. Thirty years ago Northrop Frye wrote:

In defiance of every geographical and economical law, Canada has made itself not simply a nation but an environment. It is only now emerging from its beginnings as a shambling, awkward, absurd country, groping and thrusting its way through incredible distances into the west and north, plundered by profiteers, interrupted by European wars, divided by language, and bedevilled by climate, yet slowly and inexorably bringing a culture to life.²²

The struggle for survival as a nation described by Frye continues, and has been made explicit in the current debates on free trade. Even larger issues of survival face us, the survival of our planet and all its inhabitants, including humankind. Pollution, acid rain, irresponsible use of natural resources, militarism, and the possible future of annihilation through nuclear war or through some other form of environmental holocaust threaten the survival not only of individuals and nations, but of life itself as we know it.

A similar transition has taken place in feminist thought. Women have been identified with the body and with nature. The same attitudes of control and exploitation which have been directed towards women and the native peoples are also directed towards nature.²³ As feminists reject the hierarchical dualistic thinking which devalues the body and nature, they seek a more holistic understanding of humanness and of our relationship to nature. The experience of exploitation calls for a new approach to creation, an approach which recognizes our interconnect-edness with all of creation and our co-responsibility for our world. As Sallie McFague rightly observes:

The ecosystem of which we are part is a whole: the rocks and waters, atmosphere and soil, plants, animals, and human beings interact in dynamic, mutually supportive ways that make all talk of atomistic individualism indefensible. Relationship and interdependence, change and transformation, not substance, changelessness and perfection, are the categories within which a theology for our day must function.²⁴

²¹Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1972).

²²Northrop Frye, "Ned Pratt," in William Kilbourn, ed., *Canada: A Guide to the Peaceable Kingdom* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1970) 303.

²³See Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Ecology and Human Liberation: A Conflict between the Theology of History and the Theology of Nature?" in *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 57-70.

²⁴Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) 8. See also Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Woman, Body, and Nature: Sexism and the Theology of Creation," in *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983) 72-92.

Rosemary Radford Ruether expresses the same conviction:

We must start thinking of reality as the connecting links of a dance in which each part is equally vital to the whole, rather than the linear competition model in which the above prospers by defeating and suppressing what is below.²⁵

The hierarchical patterns of relating to one another and to other forms of life need to be replaced by patterns of interdependence and mutuality. The transition from women's identification with nature to women's concern for ecology challenges how we view the world as well as the ways we theologize about God's relationship to that world and our responsibility for the future.²⁶

Both the Canadian experience and the feminist experience are concerned with survival. For the first time in history humankind has the power to destroy ourselves and other forms of life. This terrifying situation demands a fresh theological response based on nurture and care rather than on domination.

Empowerment. The second transition taking place within our context is one of empowerment as Canadians move from being a colonial people to becoming an independent people with contributions to make to the global community. Canada has suffered and continues to suffer from a "colonial mentality," which takes it for granted that important decisions will be made elsewhere, in Paris, London, Washington, or New York, and for Catholics, in Rome. It is easy for us to fall into the "myth of our collective innocence," a "branch plant morality" which places moral and political responsibility elsewhere.²⁷ As Canadians we are challenged to grow up and to take responsibility not only for ourselves but as members of the world community with global responsibilities.

Canadians also need to acknowledge the colonies within our colony, particularly our native peoples who remain colonized. We are responsible for their continued colonization as well as for the ways that we contribute to the economic colonization of other peoples throughout the world. Our awareness of our interconnectedness must lead to actions which will empower those who still suffer the effects of colonization.

A parallel movement of empowerment is occurring as women move from a position of inferiority and domination to one of equality and full personhood.²⁸

²⁵Ruether, *To Change the World*, 67. Nature may be better understood in terms of plentitude and cooperation than in terms of scarcity and competition. See Michael Gross and Mary Beth Averill, "Evolution and Patriarchal Myths of Scarcity and Competition," in Harding and Hintikka, eds., *Discovering Reality*, 71-95.

²⁶A dramatic instance of women's concern for ecology was described at the Third International Congress On Women which met in Dublin in 1987. Kamla Bhasin, Program Officer for the Food and Agricultural Organization in New Delhi, reported that women in northern India resisted deforestation by practicing *chipko* or "hugging the trees" which men were about to cut down, saying: "The trees are our sisters and brothers: if you wish to chop them down you must chop us first." See Paul Surlis, "Third International Congress on Women," *The Ecumenist* 26 (March-April 1988) 38.

²⁷Leddy, "Exercising Theology in the Canadian Context," 133-34.

²⁸Dorothee Sölle writes of the need for "liberation from colonialism" in her discussion of women's internalization of powerlessness, "Mysticism, Liberation and the Names of God," *Christianity and Crisis* 41 (1981) 181-82.

Such transformation begins with the refusal to be victim. In the words of the protagonist in Margaret Atwood's novel, *Surfacing*:

This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. . . . Withdrawal is no longer possible and the alternative is death.²⁹

The process of empowerment involves dying to old ways of relating and awakening to a new consciousness of oneself as subject rather than as object. It demands a new understanding of power in relational terms and a recognition of our interrelatedness. This movement from powerlessness to empowerment calls for radical changes in family, church and society.

Liberation theologies, including feminist theologies, urge the whole church to make a "preferential option for the poor," the majority of whom are women: elderly women in single rooms afraid to go out, single mothers struggling to support their children, third world women unable to feed their families. Constance Parvey, in her essay on "Re-membering: A Global perspective on Women," asks:

Is not the solidarity of the women's movement undermined by the very fact that it is educated and privileged women who have the *space* to speak, while silence is still the major "language" of those who are not admitted into the system, those who work for the lowest pay, the longest hours, in the least humanizing employment? Pornography and prostitution symbolize this silence, not making use of women's minds, but reducing women's bodies to objects governed by laws of supply and demand.³⁰

The transition from powerlessness to empowerment must reach the poorest and the most abused women who are our sisters.

The Canadian experience of moving from colonial status to global responsibility and the movement for the liberation of women from a position of inferiority to one of full personhood can both be summed up by the word empowerment. This word symbolizes new approaches to power and new ways of relating to one another.

Pluralism. The Canadian experiment has been one of pluralism, based on compromise and continuity, characteristics necessary for survival. From our earliest days there has been an explicit commitment to protect minority rights. Unlike the United States, Canada has never made a dramatic break with the past. In 1867 confederation brought together four struggling colonies into a precarious union, balancing the claims of French and English, of Catholic and Protestant. It is significant that the British North America Act set up communal objectives of peace,

²⁹Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (New York: Popular Library, 1972) 222-23.

³⁰Constance F. Parvey, "Re-membering: A Global Perspective on Women," in Judith Weidman, ed., *Christian Feminism: Visions of a New Humanity* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 165.

order and good government, in contrast to the more individualistic American objectives of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.³¹

The churches have been intimately involved in the political and social life of Canada from pioneer days to the present. Since there has been neither a "separation of church and state," nor any established religion, churches have been free to contribute to the life of the various communities both in grassroots activities as well as on the level of church leadership.³² In the past twenty years much of this work has been done ecumenically. Many of the churches participate in inter-church coalitions, a particularly Canadian form of ecumenism which is believed to be unique in the world.³³

Gregory Baum, commenting on "the alienation of many Americans in their institutions, their government, their political parties, their entire system," notes that: "In Canada, we are not as alienated from our institutions. We are not an empire, our institutions are more amenable to political actions."³⁴ It does seem that there is in Canada a more tolerant attitude toward religious and moral diversity.³⁵ The experience of pluralism and of working together for a solution has been part of Canadian history from its beginning with our two founding nations and has continued with the subsequent arrival of persons from many cultures.

Just as Canada has grown from the recognition of two cultures to an acceptance of cultural pluralism, a similar transition has taken place within the history

³¹For an analysis of differences between Canada and United States from a political science perspective see O. Kruhlik, R. Schultz, and S. Pobihushchy, eds., *The Canadian Political Process* (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada, 1970), especially S. M. Lipset, "Revolution and Counterrevolution: The United States and Canada," 13-38, and G. Horowitz, "Conservatism, Liberalism, and Socialism in Canada: An Interpretation," 47-74.

³²Canadian Catholics have had good leadership in the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops since its inception in 1943. Because there is no "separation of church and state" the Catholic bishops have been recognized as a legitimate institution in the political and social fabric of the nation, representing 47 per cent of the Canadian population (25 per cent francophone, 22 percent anglophone). The two sectors of the Conference, the francophone and the anglophone, have had to develop the skills of working together while respecting legitimate differences. See E. Sheridan, ed., *Do Justice! The Social Teaching of the Canadian Catholic Bishops (1945-1986)* (Toronto: Jesuit Centre for Social Faith and Justice, 1987); Gregory Baum, *Compassion and Solidarity: The Church for Others* (Toronto: CBC Enterprises, 1987).

³³Remi De Roo, Bishop of Victoria, describes these coalitions in *Cries of Victims—Voice of God* (Ottawa: Novalis, 1986) 95-105.

³⁴Gregory Baum, "The Grand Vision: It Needs Social Action," in Anne Lonergan and Caroline Richards, eds., *Thomas Berry and the New Cosmology* (Mystic CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1987) 54-55.

³⁵This tolerance, as well as less interest in evangelism, is noted by George Gallup in his foreword to Reginald Bibby, *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1987) ix. Reginald Bibby considers that history has produced two very different religious marketplaces in North America: Canada, characterized by an effort to achieve working agreements among diverse parties, and the United States with its aggressive, persistent claims to truth (215-18).

of the women's movement which may be seen as a transition from woman's special role or moral mission to the recognition of different voices. Our nineteenth century foremothers were convinced that they had special gifts which were needed in the public domain. They resolutely worked for the inclusion of women in public life. Feminists today reject the complementary view of female and male which speaks of "woman's special nature" and which assigns to women a "special role," but they insist on the recognition of the diversity of women's experience. As Anne Carr emphasizes: "Since the experience of women is particular and varied, feminist theology is radically pluralist. Each voice is only one in a wider conversation."³⁶ Women of color and third world women have raised their voices. Women are striving to learn to hear the different voices in the conversation and to accept alternative traditions.³⁷

The ability to work within existing structures with persons who have very different perspectives may be seen in Canadian feminism.³⁸ The institutions of state and church are viewed as potentially emancipatory. For example, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women set up by the Canadian government in 1967 helped to mobilize women's groups and to shift public attitudes towards women's issues. The dialogue of women with the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has had somewhat the same results within the Canadian Catholic Church.³⁹ Both in the larger society and in the church there is a willingness for different groups of women who do not share the same vision to work together on a common project and to share their different visions.⁴⁰

There are deep divisions both within Canadian society and within the women's movement, and yet the experience of working with groups that have different languages, different histories, different traditions in ways that contribute to the good of all has marked our history. The word that describes this experience is pluralism. The lesson is desperately needed in our global village. "If we do not learn to live together we will die together."⁴¹

³⁶Anne E. Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 166.

³⁷For some examples of this conversation with women from different contexts see Letty Russell, ed., *Inheriting Our Mother's Gardens: Feminist Theology in Third World Perspective* (forthcoming); The Amencida Collective, Carter Heyward, Anne Gilson, eds., *Revolutionary Forgiveness: Feminist Reflections on Nicaragua* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987; Janet Silman, ed., *Enough is Enough: Aboriginal Women Speak Out* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1987).

³⁸For information on feminism in Canada see Roberta Hamilton and Michele Barrett, eds., *The Politics of Diversity: Feminism, Marxism and Nationalism* (Montreal: Book Centre, 1986), especially the Introduction.

³⁹See Elisabeth Lacelle, "From Today to Tomorrow: Women in the Canadian Catholic Church," in *Grail: An Ecumenical Journal* 1 (1985) 25-32 and the recommendations of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops on "Role of Women in the Church," 33-35.

⁴⁰Hamilton and Barrett note this: ". . . Canadians talk to each other—indeed shout at each other—across barriers of theory, analysis and politics that in Britain, for example, would long since have created an angry truce of silent pluralism." *The Politics of Diversity*, 1.

⁴¹McFague, *Models of God*, 53.

III. THESE EXPERIENCES AS SOURCE FOR THEOLOGY

In Part II, I have described three transitional experiences which may be summarized as survival, empowerment, and pluralism. I turn now to how these Canadian and feminist experiences have caused me to rethink my theology, particularly my image of God and my understanding of anthropology, christology, and ecclesiology. This is a formidable task which is very much in process. In the time that remains I will suggest some directions for revisioning in each of these areas.

Image of God. In the face of nuclear destruction, are our ways of thinking and talking about God, and God's relationship to the world, helpful or harmful for our survival? Do they contribute to domination or to empowerment? Do they reflect the rich diversity of human experience, especially the experience of those who have been excluded? These questions lead to a critique of the imagery used for God in theology and in liturgy.

The image of a white male God over against the world has legitimated many forms of oppression. This was illustrated by Mary Daly twenty years ago in her powerful critique, *Beyond God the Father*.⁴² The feminist critique of language about God and reformulations in the light of women's experience leads to a new awareness of the absolute mystery who embraces all creation. The process is described in a vivid way by Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* as Celie, a black woman who has suffered great oppression, gradually comes to a new vision of God and herself.

Trying to chase that old white man out of my head. I been so busy thinking bout him I never truly notice nothing God made. Not a blade of corn (how it do that?) not the color purple (where it come from?). Not the wildflowers. Nothing.

But as Celie experienced, ". . . this hard work, let me tell you. He been there so long, he don't want to budge. He threaten lightening, floods and earthquakes."⁴³

The issue of survival makes this "hard work" crucial. The almost exclusively male imagery which envisions God as father, king, lord, and master suggests a one-sidedly masculine transcendent God who is "in charge." Such images easily lead to either militarism (God is on our side) or escapism (God will take care of us). Neither view encourages human responsibility for the world. A God who suffers with the world and who shares responsibility with us for its survival provides a corrective to the image of a powerful transcendent God distant from creation.

The new consciousness of women as image of God has encouraged the use of female imagery for God. This imagery frees the idea of divine transcendence from its notion of domination and provides a more holistic view of God's relationship with the world, a view which empowers women and men to assume their responsibility for this world. We need to critique not only the nouns that we use for God, but also the verbs with which we describe God's activity. Words such as direct,

⁴²See Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

⁴³Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982) 179.

control, rule, judge, destroy, overcome, describe a God who dominates while verbs such as empower, liberate, nourish, support, enliven, leave room for our human response to a God who invites us to be responsible.⁴⁴ Even the structure of the language that we use for God needs to be rethought in the light of Mary Daly's presentation of God as Verb. The urgency of our present situation calls for images of God which encourage us, who are made in God's image, to assume responsibility for our world which is God's world and to discover ways of relating to one another which are empowering.⁴⁵

The rich diversity of human experience invites the use of multiple images for God. As Elizabeth Johnson suggests: "The very incomprehensibility of God demands a proliferation of images and a variety of names, each of which acts as a corrective against the tendency of any one to become reified and literal."⁴⁶ The use of many different images for God purifies our God-talk of literalism and even idolatry.

Recognizing that all language about God is metaphorical, Sallie McFague proposes that the world be imaged as God's body. In place of triumphalist, monarchical, patriarchal models for God, she develops the models of God as mother, lover, and friend of the world.⁴⁷ These images of God are found in our tradition, although they are less prominent than those which refer to God as father, lord, and king.⁴⁸ It is the task of theology to revision God in the light of contemporary experience, especially the experience of the excluded ones. The message of Jesus seems to have been that such persons are a privileged presence of God in our midst.

Anthropology and Christology. The issue of survival, the transformation from domination to empowerment, and the acceptance of pluralism, not only challenge our images of God but also how we understand ourselves, made in God's image. We look to anthropology and christology and realize that these have been based on "only partial human experience only partially understood." As those who have been excluded reflect on their experience and on the Christian tradition they become aware that the tradition has legitimated domination by certain groups who have imposed servitude on other groups.⁴⁹ Such attitudes of domination threaten

⁴⁴Dorothee Sölle discusses the relationship between language and liberation in "Mysticism, Liberation and the Names of God," 179-85.

⁴⁵John B. Cobb in a joint work with David Tracy, *Talking About God: Doing Theology in the Context of Modern Pluralism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983) explores how the challenges of modernity, including the challenge of feminism, provide resources for this task.

⁴⁶Elizabeth A. Johnson, "The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female," *Theological Studies* 45 (1984) 444.

⁴⁷McFague, *Models of God*.

⁴⁸See Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Beyond Father and Son," in C. Lind and T. Brown, eds., *Justice as Mission: An Agenda for the Church* (Burlington, Ontario: Trinity Press, 1985) 108-19; Sandra M. Schneiders, *Women and the Word: The Gender of God in the New Testament and the Spirituality of Women* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986).

⁴⁹For a study of how this took place in early Christianity see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

our survival. We need to discover ways of relating to one another that are mutually empowering and that are open to the many voices in our world.

An example of how experience suggests the need for reinterpretation of symbols and doctrines may be seen in feminist understandings of sin and salvation. The experience of sin is different for those who are powerless than it is for those with power. The traditional emphasis on sin as pride and rebellion against God does not fit the experience of those whose self has been devalued by the dominant culture and who consequently lack a sense of self. Sin for such persons is the passive acceptance of their situation while salvation involves transformation from being victims to becoming responsible subjects. Feminist theology suggests that both sin and salvation need to be rethought in ways that are relational, communitarian, and pluralistic.⁵⁰

This understanding of sin and salvation is based on an awareness of our solidarity with all humankind, and with all of creation. Such solidarity, as Metz insists, is not only with the present but with the past and future, a "backward solidarity" with the silent and forgotten dead, as well as a "forward solidarity" with coming generations.⁵¹ Salvation needs to embrace all of creation in a way that empowers all of us to build our future.

For Christians Jesus is the Christ, the one who empowers us to do this. However, feminist scholarship shows that the Christian story has been handed down (recorded, interpreted, analyzed) in ways that are oppressive for women. At the same time the Bible and tradition have been and are a source of wisdom and liberation for women. The present experience of women, who find within their religious tradition sources both of oppression and of liberation, becomes the hermeneutical principle for judging what is empowering. The Bible, and Jesus himself, are viewed as historical prototype rather than mythical archetype.⁵² In this way they are a resource for the present as Christian women remember the domination of our sisters, but also celebrate their wisdom and courage.

The figure of Jesus, often seen as the legitimator of male superiority, is revealed in the gospels as one who renounced domination and who sought to empower those on the margins of society. Christ as body includes all the baptized, black and white, young and old, female and male. Rosemary Radford Ruether poses this question:

⁵⁰Anne Carr, *Transforming Grace*, 186-87. For an example of such theologizing from third world women's perspective see the final document of the intercontinental conference of women theologians from the third world which met in Oaxtepec, Mexico, December 1986. They wrote: "Suffering that is inflicted by the oppressor and is passively accepted does not lead to life; it is destructive and demonic. But suffering which is part of the struggle for the sake of God's Reign or which results from the uncontrollable and mysterious conditions of humankind, is redeeming and is rooted in the Paschal Mystery, evocative of the rhythm of pregnancy, delivery, and birth." *Fish-Eye Lens* (April 1988) 20.

⁵¹Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 130.

⁵²Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Emerging Issues in Feminist Biblical Interpretation," in *Christian Feminism*, 33-54; see also Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 134-38.

As our perception of our incompleteness changes with new sensitivities to racism, sexism, and European chauvinism, must not the image of Christ take ever new forms: as woman, as Black and Brown woman, as impoverished and despised woman of those peoples who are the underside of Christian imperialism?⁵³

The answer is surely yes, we must discover Christ in our sisters as well as our brothers. Rather than being a symbol of domination, the Christ or the Christa can be a symbol of empowerment.⁵⁴

But theology must also consider the effects that Christian symbols and doctrines have had in history. As Anne Carr indicates,

Feminist reflection on the doctrines of God and of Christ that shows that God is not male and that Jesus' maleness is a purely contingent fact must further attend to the effective history of these doctrines, their practical and political uses. Only if the effects of these symbols and doctrines are transformed now and in the future can it be claimed that the symbols and doctrines are not intrinsically patriarchal, and that they can be made available to women.⁵⁵

Carr here issues a challenge to systematic theology and to practice in the church. Unless it can be met, we cannot speak of Christianity as a redemptive possibility.

Ecclesiology. The place where mutual empowerment should take place is the church. However, relationships within the church, both on a local and a universal level, often reflect the divisions in society, rather than the empowering Spirit of Jesus. This is true of the relationships of women and men within the church. For this reason the World Council of Churches has launched a world-wide ecumenical decade from 1988 to 1998 on the theme of "Churches in Solidarity with Women" in order to consider how churches can empower women to claim their full humanity. The concern is two-fold: the position of women in the churches and the churches' responsibility to improve the conditions of women in society as a whole. This concern is not a "women's issue" but an ecclesiological issue which bears on the nature and mission of the church.

An ecclesiology which begins with contemporary experience must draw on the experience of local Christian communities.⁵⁶ Catholic ecclesiology of the past and even the ecclesiology of Vatican II is challenged by the different experiences of

⁵³*Womanguides: Readings Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985) 112-13.

⁵⁴For "Reflections on the Christa," see *Journal of Women and Religion* 4 (1985), particularly Edwina Hunter, 22-32.

⁵⁵Carr, *Transforming Grace*, 109.

⁵⁶As Joseph Komonchak states, the church is "always first of all a concrete reality, *this* group of men and women, at *this* time and in *this* place, within *this* culture, responding to the Word and grace by which God gathers them in Christ." "The Church Universal as the Communion of Local Churches," in G. Alberigo and G. Gutiérrez, eds., *Where Does the Church Stand? Concilium* 146 (New York: Seabury Press, 1981) 32. For a more developed presentation on the emergence of the local church and the eucharistic community as starting point for ecclesiology see my forthcoming articles on "Differing Gifts" and "Differing Responses to Mission," "Theological Trends in Ecclesiology," *The Way* 28 (1988).

church coming from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and women gathered as church.⁵⁷ The question raised by Metz, "Can the 'church for the people' become the 'church of the people'?" still needs to be answered.⁵⁸ As he insists, it is not just that people need theology—but theology needs the self-expression of people—their symbols, stories, and collective memories.⁵⁹ It especially needs to hear from those who have been silent. Their voices may show us how the Spirit is forming the church in our day.

There are numerous examples of previously "muted ones" gathering as church. I will mention only two. In September 1987, 10,000 *campesinos* from remote mountain villages in Peru met for two days of reflection and prayer in a Theological Eucharistic Congress in which they spoke their theology and proclaimed: "We are the people. We are the church."⁶⁰ In a very different context 3000 women and some men from twenty-five countries and a variety of denominations met in Cincinnati, Ohio, in October 1987 as "Women-Church Claiming Our Power." But even more significant than these large ecclesial gatherings are the small ecclesial communities in many parts of the world where Christians are articulating their theology and discovering what it means for them to be church.⁶¹ These experiences of empowerment and of diversity express the richness of unity in faith.⁶²

However, the church does not exist for itself, but for the world. Christians from different traditions are coming together as church in response to the needs of the world. The issue of survival urges Christian churches to enter into the wider ecumenism with other religions. The task of working together in ways that respect differences challenges the church today if it is to be truly a "world church" which contributes to the unity of humankind.

To sum up, ecclesiologies for our age must take seriously the threats to our survival as they reflect on the church's mission to the world. The church should facilitate the empowerment of all persons if it is to be true to its nature as "uni-

⁵⁷As Tissa Balasuriya observes: "Christianity is only now beginning the process of purifying itself from being the religion of the Holy Roman Empire, Western culture, and Euro-American capitalism." *Planetary Theology*, 121. For reflection on women gathering as church see Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985).

⁵⁸Metz, "Church and People: The Forgotten Subject of Faith," in *Faith in History and Society*, 136-53.

⁵⁹Ibid. 148.

⁶⁰Greg Chisholm describes this gathering in "Sow Life to Reap Peace," *Scarboro Missions* 69 (1988) 20-22.

⁶¹For theological reflection on the experience of base communities, see Rahner, "Basic Communities," *Theological Investigations* 19 (New York: Crossroads, 1983) 159-65; Alvaro Barreiro, *Basic Ecclesial Communities: The Evangelization of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984); Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1985); Boff, *Ecclesiology* (New York: Orbis, 1987); Marcello de Azevedo, "Basic Communities: A Meeting Point of Ecclesiologies," *Theological Studies* 46 (1985) 601-20.

⁶²See Yves Congar, *Diversity and Communion* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1985) for a study of diversity of customs and opinions which have been accepted in the unity of faith.

versal sacrament of salvation." And finally, ecclesiologies must reflect the pluralism of our experiences of church. In place of the pyramid, Letty Russell suggests the image of the rainbow as a paradigm for diversity and inclusivity within the church.⁶³ It is a fitting image, since it is also a symbol of God's promise to humankind.

CONCLUSION

In Part III, I have suggested some of the ways that attention to particular experiences can help us to revision our images of God, humanity, Christ, and church. In conclusion I wish to stress that by listening to the stories of various groups, we discover how God is revealing God's self today. The theologians' task is to listen with attention and humility to what God is doing in our complex world. New voices are being raised and these voices need to be heard. This is an important step in the process of discernment. It is not enough that the new voices speak to one another. As David Tracy writes:

. . . the voices of the others multiply—all those considered "non-persons" by the powerful but declared by the great prophets to be God's own privileged ones. All the victims of our discourses and our history have begun to discover their own discourses in ways that our discourse finds difficult to hear, much less listen to. Their voices can seem strident and uncivil—in a word other. And they are. We have all just begun to sense the terror of that otherness. But only by beginning to listen to those other voices may we also begin to hear the otherness within our own discourse and within ourselves. What we then might begin to hear, above our chatter, are possibilities we have never dared to dream.⁶⁴

Such a willingness to listen actively and critically demands conversion.

I find myself listening and speaking both as privileged and as outsider, privileged as a North American, and yet sharing some of the experiences of the outsider. Canadians have historically been the victims of other empires and women have historically been "voiceless" in the discourses of faith and politics. These "muted voices" need to be heard in interpreting our faith and in shaping our future. The correction of bias in the use of experience as a source for theology includes an option for the oppressed who are God's privileged ones.

As I listen to my own experience as a Canadian and as a woman, I have discovered that the Canadian experience of survival, overcoming of a colonial mentality, and acceptance of pluralism, paralleled by a feminist concern for ecology, empowerment, and respect for different voices contributes to a theology which uses present experience as a source, particularly the experiences of those who have been ignored or devalued. I discover that it is possible to understand the larger issues through the personal and the particular. In my experience as a Canadian woman I recognize God's presence calling me to be responsible for this world, to work for the empowerment of all peoples, and especially of women, and to listen

⁶³Letty Russell, "Women and Ministry: Problem or Possibility," in *Christian Feminism*, 75-92.

⁶⁴David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 79.

to the voices of my sisters and brothers in my local community and in the larger world community.⁶⁵

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⁶⁵After this address a participant who had worked in L'Arche communities spoke to me of his concern that we learn to listen to the voices of those who are physically unable to speak. Such people are an extreme example of muted voices.