

## WOMEN IN THE CHRISTIAN STORY

*"Your sons and daughters shall prophesy . . ."*

For many, feminism and the Judaeo-Christian tradition have seemed to be at best incompatible and at worst irreconcilable, despite a growing body of scholarship which attempts a reconciliation. Such attempts are probably most important to people who are convinced that the claims of Christian truth are normative for their lives but who also find the claims of feminism to be true to their experience. Before true reconciliation can occur, the claims of each must be explored and understood. This article examines aspects of both experiences of truth, working with a model of interpretation which will do full justice to the Scriptures without slighting the difficulty women have felt in seeing and being seen as part of the Christian tradition.

The enormity of the difficulty women have felt may be illustrated by an incident from John Barth's novel, *The End of the Road*. In this novel, a doctor prescribes mythotherapy for a troubled patient. Mythotherapy is the assigning of roles to oneself and to others; it is making coherence out of the shapelessness of life by assuming that one is the hero of his or her own life story, only occasionally and briefly assuming the role of minor character when necessary. He uses this example to explain the therapy to his patient: ". . . suppose you're an usher in a wedding. From the groom's viewpoint he's the major character; the others play supporting parts, even the bride. From your viewpoint, though, the wedding is a minor episode in the very interesting history of *your* life, and the bride and groom both are minor figures. What you have done is choose to *play the part* of a minor character: it can be pleasant for you to *pretend to be* less important than you know you are, as Odysseus does when he disguises as a swineherd. And every member of the congregation at the wedding sees himself as the major character, condescending to witness the spectacle."<sup>1</sup> To exist self-consciously, this analogy implies, is to recognize that one is both a major and minor character in some kind of life story—an individual and a person in relationship with others. Such a recognition seems to carry with it a corollary recognition: that other persons too perceive themselves as major characters and perceive ourselves as minor characters.

Because the patient in Barth's novel never practices mythotherapy consistently, it is not clear whether or not it provides a means of survival.

---

*Joyce Quiring Erickson is an Associate Professor of English at Seattle Pacific University.*



but the therapeutic or truth value of the doctor's theory is not important here. What is important is that this analogy between fiction and human life illuminates the universal human characteristic to make stories out of all life, stories which explain our relationship to other people, to history, and to the cosmos. These stories become myths when they are shared by communities and when the stories themselves shape or determine our lives as much as or more than we self-consciously choose to see ourselves as characters in the story. Given this understanding, one could step outside of Barth's novel to suggest that the patient's paralysis is caused not only by his personal inability to assign himself a role but also by the fact that he is not part of a community which provides a larger controlling myth or story. In fact, as many have noted, one reason life may seem so mean and meager to many people in twentieth century America is because no story has the power to provide a context from which they may create a rich human life.

People who call themselves Christians have a story which, like other great myths, explains the origins and destiny of the community and of the myriad individual lives which are part of the past and future life of the community. That story is told most vividly in the Scriptures, although many individual tellers of the story have added glosses or interpretations which too have become part of the story because they help determine how and where it is told. However the story is told, growing up in the community and finding one's identity within the context of the community requires coming to terms with the story, recognizing its claims on one's life and identifying oneself as a "character" in a story which has not yet ended.

But for women who are just becoming conscious of themselves as persons, the Christian story presents serious problems because it has most often (perhaps nearly always) been told in a way that virtually excludes women as characters or as actors in the story. It violates a fundamental perception of reality for self-conscious women—that they are persons who are major characters in their own life story—by seeming to cast women, at best, in the role of minor character in the community's story.

The more crucial violation of perceived reality, however, is the sense that the story is never told from the point of view of or by the women who were ostensibly part of the community from the beginning. If women are always the Other in the story, the Christian story cannot be their story, for to be part of any tradition one must see oneself and be seen as part of the community which bears and carries on the tradition. To be only an Other in the Christian story jeopardizes women's sense of belonging to the community.

Reviewing Simone de Beauvoir's discussion of the concept of otherness as a "fundamental category of human thought" and its application to the status of women may clarify this point. A basic aspect of human consciousness in relationship is the setting up of one consciousness over against another consciousness. She continues, "Thus it is that no group

ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself. If three travelers chance to occupy the same compartments, that is enough to make vaguely hostile 'others' out of all the rest of the passengers on the train. In small-town eyes all persons not belonging to the village are 'strangers' and suspect; to the native of a country all who inhabit other countries are 'foreigners'; Jews are 'different' for the anti-Semite, Negroes are 'inferior' for American racists, aborigines are 'natives' for colonists, proletarians are the 'lower class' for the privileged."<sup>2</sup> Otherness seems to be a fundamental fact of human existence; its pernicious effects are obvious but those effects are somewhat mitigated by the fact that in most cases the conception of otherness between consciousnesses is reciprocal. The stranger traveling through a small town sees the inhabitants as "small town types," the Jew sees the non-Jew as goy, blacks see whites as The Man. As time passes, as things change, as the stranger moves into the small town and becomes an inhabitant himself, as Jews and Gentiles become fighters for the same cause, as blacks and whites share each other's culture, each group comes to realize the reciprocity of the other relationship. One group understands that it too is considered as Other, and as the historical or social situation changes, the relativity of the concept "other" becomes apparent. De Beauvoir points out that in many historical instances where stronger groups have subjugated the weaker, the reciprocity of otherness is not acknowledged. But this non-reciprocity is a historical condition which eventually changes, often because the weaker group refuses to accept being defined always as other. And even if the weaker and stronger group itself does not see the reciprocity of its otherness, an outsider who is part of neither group has no trouble recognizing the reciprocal nature of the relationship.

The case is different with men and women, says de Beauvoir. There is no human outsider. "The division of the sexes is a biological fact, not an event in human history. . . . The couple is a fundamental unity with its two halves riveted together, and the cleavage of society along the line of sex is impossible."<sup>3</sup> It may be possible for a weaker or oppressed social group to change its condition as time passes but the division of the sexes is true of all times and places; it is not rooted in history.

Almost without exception, and certainly in our western traditions as interpreted and created by historians, philosophers, politicians, social theorists and theologians, maleness has been the norm for the human group. To be female is to be other. Even those who have no intention of denying women the status of being human imply (often without being aware of the implication) that femaleness is an aberrant humanness rather than one of two manifestations of humanness, as some illustrations from homely conversations reveal: "Women run funny;" "Girls can't throw softballs right"; "She thinks like a man"; "In a society which considers itself democratic, it is wrong to deny our women their political rights." In all of these examples, maleness is the human norm. Even in the statement

who  
←  
demies??

which appears to be arguing for equality of the sexes, the grammar of the sentence—"our" women—implies a "we" which excludes women. Another example, cited by Estelle Ramey and others, is the study of three groups of psychotherapists. Asked to describe a normal woman, one group used the terms dependent, submissive, conscientious and masochistic. Another group, asked to describe a normal man, used the terms independent, aggressive, creative, and active. A third group, asked to describe a normal human being, used the terms independent, aggressive, creative, and active. The message is clear: normal women and normal human beings do not belong in the same category.<sup>4</sup> When a woman does perform or exhibit behavior which is comparable to the male norm, she is often either singled out as having risen above the limitations which her sex naturally imposes on her (as exemplified in the presumed compliment that she thinks like a man) or she is accused of being "unfeminine." In either case, her behavior is not considered to be human behavior which either sex may, without notice, engage in. This is obvious in the way in which these male norms of humanness can be turned against males who do not subscribe to certain expectations. The accusation that such a male is feminine means that he is less than a man and an aberrant (not just different) human being.

Why, since men and women are both obviously necessary for the preservation and procreation of human life, have women not forced the recognition of reciprocity, a recognition that slaves or the proletariat or other oppressed groups have forced? Why have they not asserted that they too define humanness instead of acceding to a valuation of themselves as less than human?

Feminists in the Christian tradition have responded to the status of women as Other in the Christian community in myriad ways: the responses range from attempts to reinterpret or appropriate some aspects of the tradition while repudiating others, to outright rejection of Christianity *because* it seems to have been one of the primary forces in preventing the recognition of the reciprocal relationship of male and female.<sup>6</sup> However, any response short of outright rejection which attempts to retain a link with the community must come to terms with the story, particularly the story as it is conveyed in the Scriptures. In the interface between community and tradition lies the importance of the Scriptures. Even though different elements of the Christian community have held different views about Scripture, they have all held that in an important, not-to-be-denied way, the Scriptures define the community because they tell its story.

For women, coming to terms with the Scriptures means asking how they are part of the story. If it is true that women were always the Other in this story too, then it does not tell them who they are, except negatively; having no identity of their own in the community, they cannot be seen or

see themselves as integral members of the community. If it is true that they are always and only the Other in this story, then the story has lost its power to provide moral and spiritual meaning for sensitive men, as well as for sensitive women, just as the American dream story (which for many became a substitute for the Christian story) has been shown to be inadequate for interpreting or sustaining human life in the latter half of this century. The causes for the failure of both will have been the same: they will have lost their power to provide communal identity because they were not inclusive enough. Some Americans, for example Mark Twain, saw long before Vietnam that the American dream as story was inadequate as long as it made Others of the people who already lived on this continent when the Europeans came, and excluded those people who were brought over as chattel on slave ships. Mark Twain also provides an example of a person whose life was marked by a desire to live by the American dream even as he saw it become less and less telling. His bitterness increased because he found no substitute story (the Christian story had not been adequate for him either, partly because he had been taught that the Christian story and the American dream story were almost synonymous).

\* *The Mysterious Stranger* is the ultimate expression of what it means to live with no story, its solipsism the ultimate exclusion—a bitter solution to the human problem of One and Other.

Alex Haley's *Roots* is another example of how a story can be the means for sustaining life; in some sense *Roots* is an attempt to retell the American dream story so that it corresponds more closely to the real American experience. (It is no accident that Haley calls it the story of an American family.) But important as Haley's story is for our national health, it is not inclusive enough either. In fact, no national story is ever inclusive enough, especially in our shrinking world. And that recognition—that a story cannot be tied to mere historical accident—is an important point of the biblical community's story. It is a community which transcends ethnic and national boundaries, even though kingdoms, from the early Israelites to Constantine to the Crusaders to Americans have tried to appropriate the Biblical story as their own, to make it an exclusive property by making it a national story.<sup>7</sup> The story itself, as the prophets and Jesus kept reminding the community, repudiated the idea that anyone could be excluded. ←

If the story, by its inclusive nature, does not allow itself to be appropriated by historical or social facts, is it not bizarre that its inclusivity should be threatened by a biological fact? To assume that kind of determinism undercuts the crucial basis for the whole story: that Jahweh is creator of and responsible for human and cosmic life. Time after time in the life of the community, when historical or social groups counted themselves as the One of the story and outsiders as the Other, the prophets would remind the community that the story did not allow such a telling. In our time, prophets—male and female—are again reminding the community

that the story does not allow exclusion on biological grounds any more than it allows exclusion on historical or social grounds.

Reminding the community of this fact involves more than de-emphasizing the masculine metaphors and language in speaking of God, more than explanations of historical reasons for the patriarchal culture in the community's life, even more than showing that both Jesus and the early Christian church treated females in radically different ways.<sup>8</sup> In order for the important truth of the story's inclusivity to be experienced by the community, and by its daughters and sons who are growing up to maturity in the faith, the story must be told in such a way that it raises the issue of reciprocity. It must allow no woman to see herself as only the Other and no man to see himself as only the One. The remainder of this paper attempts to show how the story can be told in a way which does not violate the tradition but which also makes explicit what has been implicit (hence more easily ignored or denied) in the tradition.

It is important not to confuse the purpose of the story; it is not merely to relate the history of the community, although the story is intimately tied to particular events in human history. The purpose of the story is rather to answer the questions: "Who are we?" and "what are we to do?"<sup>9</sup> Emphasizing the Scriptures as story means seeing them as more than the repository of moral precepts. Of course the story also carries implicit values which are to inform the community's individual and corporate behavior. To identify with the community, to become part of the story, is to accept certain values and expectations, as James Sanders points out: "It is a question of identity. . . . Whatever story completely captivates you is the way you are going to see life and perceive problems and look for solutions to them."<sup>10</sup> Thus, to answer the question "who are we?" is to eliminate certain answers to the question "what are we to do?" If we know who we are, we act like it. Obviously, the question of the community's identity has a direct bearing on the questions of women's status. If the story is one which answers the question "who are we?" by defining the "we" as an exclusively male group, if it is a story which talks about women as "our women," if in order to be included in the story women must see themselves as Other to the male norm, as aberrant human, then it cannot be women's story. Yet this is the story of a God who was in prison with Joseph, in the huts and hovels of slaves in Egypt, and in a cradle in Bethlehem. This surely must be a God who cares about the forsaken, the obscure, the unknown, the oppressed, the powerless: all those whom some more powerful group has characterized as Other.

To see how that understanding can speak to the condition of women in the community today requires thinking of the Scriptures as a story which is still being told as part of a living tradition; if the story is a means of helping one discover one's identity then the relationship between the story and the community which hears and tells it is dynamic—that is, each

affects the other. The story and the community carry on a kind of continuous dialogue, a dialogue necessary because of the situations in which the community finds itself. To answer the question "who are we?" is not a simple matter of genealogy, just as to answer the question "who am I?" involves more than saying I am the son or daughter of so and so. One's personal identity is discovered and acted out in different situations which require different roles.

Decisions about what parts of the community's tradition and history were to be retained or remembered as significant parts of the story arose out of historical exigencies; when Israel as a political entity became destroyed and its people were taken into captivity, the community had to ask the question: "Are we really people with a God who cares for us? How could such a disaster happen to us? What do we do in a situation like this?" The prophets answered such questions by pointing to God's identification with the powerless and reminded the community that it had itself become like the pharaohs in its aspirations to become a powerful kingdom. Israel had forgotten its own story, it had lost track of its identity, and this in turn had resulted in moral disaster. Eventually these words of the prophets became included as an integral part of the story, together with the parts of the story which showed Israel failing to remember its own identity.

The people who followed the Palestinian Jew of the first century named Jesus saw this story of Israel as their own but they also saw that Jesus' life and death and resurrection was the climax of the story—that aspect of the story which served as the focus for all other parts. The letters to the churches in the New Testament reveal the community in dialogue with the story. They are attempts to discover the community's identity in the light of the new addition to the story and thus to discover what to do.

Because the community's situations continue to change, that dialogue with the story must go on and on. Just as an individual's identity is fluid and changes as the individual grows and develops new relationships, and just as identity for a person is discovering who one is not only in terms of the past but also in terms of the present, even so the community must continue its dialogue with the story in order to discover what it is to do in its present situation. (The way of telling one's personal story changes as the individual changes; different aspects of the story receive different emphases, are forgotten and recovered.)

A model for the dialogue between community and story can be found in the way the prophets interpreted the story for the community. It is a model which does not violate the integrity of the story, yet avoids the problems of determining between contradictory interpretations (a problem which plagues feminist and anti-feminist readings of the Scriptures). The prophets' mode was to challenge the community to identify with certain events and people in the story in terms of the situation in which the community found itself. There were times when the community needed to be reminded that their present state of crisis was similar to the oppres-



sion which the slaves in Egypt had experienced; in such times they took comfort from the story which reminded them that theirs was a God who cared about the powerless. But there were also times when they needed to be reminded that their actions and situation were much closer to the actions and situation of the Egyptians. They had forgotten who they were and had adopted the values of the powerful; they had confused God's power with their own. Then the story judged their actions in order to bring them back to a recognition of who they were. Jesus, for example, in the parable of Dives and Lazarus, reminds his hearers that it is the beggar (not the rich inheritor of the promises made to Abraham's descendants) who will lie in the bosom of their ancestor, Father Abraham. In this instance Jesus used the story to judge the community.

Looking at the story in this way does not attempt to change the meaning of the story to fit each situation, but as situations and contexts of the community change, the community's identification with certain parts of the story changes. The story becomes relevant in different ways. Thus the story itself contains in it the possibilities for application to every human situation.

In the human situation which allows woman to be only the Other, the story applies in this way: insofar as the story shows God to be on the side of the oppressed and the powerless and insofar as women are oppressed, Jahweh is on their side. According to the criteria for interpretation set up by the Scriptures themselves, it is not required that all members of the community agree with or understand this interpretation in order for it to be true. It is, in fact, precisely in those times when the community does not see that its story is about God's concern for the powerless that it needs to be reminded by a prophet how the community first came to be.

Because so much space in this article has been devoted to stating the problem and to establishing a base for finding solutions to the problem, what follows is only the barest beginning of what must be a long series of dialogues between the story and community. That dialogue begins with the assumption that this is an inclusive, not an exclusive, story.

Both versions of the creation story which appear in the first three chapters of Genesis have been included as part of the community's story for a reason. Obviously, they tell us about the beginning of the cosmos and of humankind. But the two versions of the story represent slightly variant views of the creation from different segments of the community. In some respects the two stories seem to be flatly contradictory. In the story in the first chapter, man and woman are created simultaneously, the last of God's creation. In the second story man is created first: the other creatures appear but they do not assuage his essential loneliness. So woman is taken from his side while he sleeps. But if we look at these two creation accounts as a dialogue, they can be seen as speaking to each other in a way which directly illuminates the male-female relationship. The story in Genesis I flatly affirms that God created human beings as male and



female, affirms that to image Jahweh's personhood requires both male and female. The norm for humanness is to be made in the image of God, this account claims. That norm includes both male and female. The account explicitly denies, contra Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, the setting up of male humanness as the norm. In this account all of humankind, not just one sex, is commanded to subdue and replenish and have dominion. All humankind is assumed to possess the characteristics which are required for that kind of power over the rest of creation.

But if it is true that both males and females constitute the norm for humanness, how is it that our human perception of one another as males and females is of one another as the Other? How is it that, to quote de Beauvoir again, "male and female stand opposed within a primordial *Mitsein*, . . . a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another"?<sup>11</sup> It is the recognition of that profound truth of human perception which is apparent in the version in chapter two. Adam by himself is not complete; his fundamental incompleteness cannot be fulfilled either by creatures or by all of creation itself. Thus Jahweh creates a partner for him, one who is human as he is because she comes from his ribs but one who is not he. The writer of this version obviously saw it as an explanation of marriage: the man leaves his parents and is united to his wife so that the two become one flesh.

It is true that the *reciprocity* of the relationship between male and female is not stressed in this version because the story is told from the man's point of view; that woman too leaves her father and mother and is united to her husband is left unsaid. Nevertheless, the story suggests that even when Adam is exercising the human power which sets him off from all other creatures and creation, the power to name or symbolize, even while he is exercising the characteristic which seems to be normatively human, he is incomplete. He cannot assume that humanness exists with him alone; his consciousness is not the sole source of human consciousness. The fundamental uniqueness of humanness thus is more than being set apart from other creatures as symbolizer. The fundamental uniqueness of humanness is in being part of a relationship with another human being, one who too has a consciousness which symbolizes and names, but who is not the self. This is true for women too, but because the story is told from the man's point of view it becomes a vivid judgment on *his* tendency to establish himself as the norm, a tendency which is amply verified in the patriarchal society out of which this very story comes.

My reading of the version of the creation story in chapter two, then, asks the community to see the story as a judgment on its actions, to remind itself of who it is in the light of the story. The reminder that humanness consists of maleness and femaleness is explicit in one version, implicit in the other.

The version in chapter two ends with a line which foreshadows the disaster that takes place in the account of humankind's fall: "Now they

were both naked, the man and his wife, but they had no feeling of shame towards one another." That Eve rather than Adam was tempted does not suggest the woman's inferiority. Rather it assumes that she possesses the human characteristic of the desire for knowledge, knowledge which can become power by naming and symbolizing, which Adam is shown exercising before Eve is created. The story of the fall, then, in making Eve the primary character, is a counterpart of the creation which immediately precedes it insofar as it demonstrates that women too participate in the normatively human. Just as we are asked by analogy to say that woman leaves her family to join man in marriage, so we are asked by analogy to say that man would respond to the serpent's temptation as woman did. In the creation account, relationship is counted more important than the power to name; in the story of the fall, relationship is destroyed by the desire to extend that power into control. The result is to destroy the sense of oneness which the two had experienced: "Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they discovered that they were naked. . . ." Their oneness becomes otherness; in seeing each other as "naked" they see each other as different—as Other.

The shattering outcome is described in the curse in chapter three. For Eve in this fallen world anatomy does seem to be destiny; physically weaker than Adam, tied to the labor of child-bearing and child-rearing, she will become the powerless over against the more powerful, yet still long for the reciprocity of relationship which is the human norm. The phrase "You shall be eager for your husband, and he shall be your master" beautifully illustrates what de Beauvoir describes as the inability of women to break out of perpetual otherness. As de Beauvoir and others have pointed out, women as an oppressed class stand in a relationship to their oppressors different from any other relationship between powerful and powerless. Master and slaves, capitalist and laborers do not live together, they do not sleep together by mutual desire and consent, they do not have children for whose welfare they are both equally concerned. For women this situation has resulted in the near impossibility of a revolution against those who hold power over their lives without destroying their own lives. So complicated is the whole relationship that women are caught in a dilemma: the personal bond does not influence the larger social structures which determine the relationship of men as a class to women as a class. Yet to attempt to alter that larger social structure often threatens the personal relationship. "You shall be eager for your husband, and he shall be your master." As many have noted, this passage, belonging to the genre of curse, is not intended as a prescription for behavior but rather a description of why things are as they are.

The account of humankind's fall in Genesis is so rich with meaning that it can bear much retelling from myriad perspectives. For our purposes here, the accounts show that the awareness of self as opposed to another self which results from the fall profoundly affects and taints all human

relationships. If it is possible for even the most intimate of human relationships to be tainted by opposing selves, how much more likely that nation will oppose nation, tribe will oppose tribe, brother will oppose brother, Cain will kill Abel. If it is possible even in this most intimate of human relationships for one to take advantage of the other's weakness, how much more likely that human beings will make slaves of other human beings who come from another place or race. Told this way, the story of the fall is a poetic statement of the theory that the oppression of women is the root of all human oppression. As someone has said, you could liberate all the oppressed peoples in the third world, free all political prisoners in the first world, eliminate all economic oppression in the second world and still nearly half of the human race would be in a form of bondage which limits their capability to be all that they can be.

Human oppression is based on the misuse of power. The overreaching for power in the fall results in a distortion of the Creator's directive to humans to exercise power on behalf of creation. Thus the first three chapters of Genesis explain more than the origins of the created world. They show that Jahweh's rescue of a group of slaves from Egypt occurred *because* they were powerless, not because they were intrinsically morally attractive. Human history began with a distortion rising out of the twisting of human potentialities for mutuality and reciprocity. Jahweh's actions in history have always been directed toward persuading human beings to act in terms of the way things were meant to be. Thus it is not Jahweh who condones the nonpersonhood of women. It is, to use the biblical phrase, "hardness of heart," the hardness that continually led Israel to forget who it was and, like Adam and Eve, to exchange legitimate human capabilities of growth in relationship for illegitimate attempts to exercise control over other humans.

The prophets who preceded Jesus reminded the community that its responsibility was to alleviate the burdens of the powerless, the widowed and the fatherless. Yet it was not until Jesus that a Jewish prophet shook the foundations of the patriarchal structure which denigrated women. He related to women as he related to men: as persons. The potential effects of this action were much more revolutionary than any prophetic judgment had been because it challenged the exclusion of women from patriarchal definitions of normal human personhood, definitions which were the source of women's continuing powerlessness. The effect of his example became visible in the earliest history of the Christian community. The proportion of women who were active participants in early churches, as reported in the Book of Acts, vastly exceeded the active participation in Hebrew society or the societies of other ancient cultures. Even the Apostle Paul, who often struggled to free himself of his rabbinical training in those areas where that training conflicted with Christian principles, seems to have dimly anticipated the eventual full participation of women as he dimly anticipated the abolition of slavery.

If we apply the principles of Paul's teaching to our actions, it becomes impossible to carry on human relationships in the same business-as-usual way. When Paul reminds the Galatians (3:28) that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, male nor female, he is calling them to abolish all of their cherished categories of otherness, whether construed on religious, racial, economic, political or sexual grounds.

This profound revolution in human perception comes from more than the community's perception of Jesus as prophet. What seized their imagination was the meaning of the Christ-event: that Jahweh had made the ultimate identification with the human community by becoming human himself. He had committed the ultimate act of identification with the powerless by becoming powerless himself, submitting himself to that which divests *all* human beings of their potential to control—death. And in the crucifixion God experienced the alienation of self from self that is also part of the human condition. Jesus' cry, "My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me," is the cry of Job, of Hagar, of Hannah, of Jeremiah, and of every man and woman who experiences the primordial aloneness of being relegated to the category of Other. The resurrection, however, affirms that this otherness without reciprocity is not part of the cosmic design for human life. To realize this truth is to undergo a profound shift in our sense of identity. As a community of the risen Lord, as participants in the restoration of the created order, the early Christians were (and are) new creatures, no longer bound by the effects of the fall and thus no longer forced to aggrandize self by diminishing other selves.

Alas, like the Old Testament community, the Christian church has often forgotten that its identity prescribes its action. Sometimes this forgetting has been accompanied by a distortion of the story which reduces its potency. The attempt to deny the humanity of Jesus is an example of one such distortion. If Jesus was not human but merely a god who assumed human form, his life and actions become much less persuasive as models. If he was not a real flesh-and-blood Jewish male, his extraordinarily different treatment of women has little power to challenge the status quo. But if he was genuinely human, then his example compels a recognition of new human possibilities.

In the same way, the divinization of the mother of Jesus has often obscured the radical meaning she carries as a woman. Crowned with gold and revered for her special role in the birth of Jesus, a role impossible for any other woman to play, she has little effect on our moral imagination as it concerns male-female relationships. But what if the case is stated boldly? God arrived on earth through the journey we all take—nine warm months in the dark womb and the harrowing trauma of squeezing through the birth canal; he became part of the process of nature which made women ritually unclean. Yet Jesus was neither awed nor disgusted by that natural process, as his refusal to abide by the laws which forbade him to touch a

woman who had been "unclean" for over twenty years illustrates. For him, the lunar rhythms of a woman's life are not mysterious dark forces which threaten to inundate the rational or moral order.

Looked at this way, it was almost necessary that Jesus be a male: as a male child he experienced the psychic trauma which anthropologists point to as the source of male fear of the mysterious female and hence the source of societal structures which repress the female in order to weaken the supposed power of woman and her sexuality. Jesus broke the seemingly inextricable bonds of being trapped in one's own experience and perception. His life and his resurrection destroy perpetual otherness. How poignant then that it was a woman who first recognized him as he emerged from the tomb.

Telling the story this way may be more significant for the community than the more common explanation that Jesus is important to feminism because he is androgynous, i.e., because he encompasses within himself both male and female polarities. That insight does bear truth and it is an insight which would help make the lives of women and men much less painful if they recognized Jesus as normative human being having both male and female characteristics. Yet the biblical view of human nature stresses the inseparability of spirit and body, and to stress androgyny may lead to the diminishing of the theological insight that our having male and female bodies is part of the goodness of creation, that experiencing our world through our own embodiment is part of the order of creation.

The difference in male and female bodies reminds us that to be Other is reciprocal—a given of the human condition. That given can be celebrated because perpetual Otherness is transcended in relationship with the One who is the beginning and the end of the story.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>John Barth, *The End of the Road* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), p. 88.

<sup>2</sup>Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Bantam Books, 1961), p. xvii.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. xix.

<sup>4</sup>Cited in the keynote address by Estelle Ramey at "Beyond Sexism—Educating Women for the Future" Conference at Mills College, Oakland, California, November 9–11, 1973.

<sup>5</sup>De Beauvoir discusses the historical and social reasons for this condition which need not be summarized here, especially since her book has been crucial for the women's liberation movement's attempts to force the recognition of reciprocity.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, articles in the special section on women and religion in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, II (Winter, 1976), especially the review essay by Anne Barstow Driver, pp. 434–449, which cites numerous recent studies. See also Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

<sup>7</sup>My colleague, Professor Frank Spina, points out that within the story are "little" stories, even a nationalist story of Israel as political state and/or ethnic group; but it is in the tensions of the "little" stories that the story emerges.

(Continued on p. 253)

