

Radical Feminism as a New Religious Movement

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Abstract

Radical feminism is recognized as a distinct movement within history. The self-stated goal of this movement is the empowerment of women so that they might share some semblance of equality with men. Alan Branch argues that this goal is wedded with distinct philosophical and religious ideas. He traces this marriage through three stages of development in radical feminism and demonstrates how radical feminism has become a unique religious system in its own right. The article concludes with a critique of this new religious feministic worldview.

Popular singer Helen Reddy achieved worldwide fame in 1972 when her feminist anthem *I Am Woman* became a chart-topping hit in the United States. Close on the heels of sexual revolution of the 1960's, the song's chorus echoed a triumphant note for the emerging Feminist movement and said,

I am strong (strong)
I am invincible (invincible)
I am woman!

Reddy received even more notoriety when *I Am Woman* received a Grammy Award for Best Female Pop Vocal Performance. When she accepted the award, Reddy thanked God, and then added, "Because *She* (God) makes everything possible." Reddy's song and her reference to God in the feminine signaled to the broader public the initial phase of what I contend is a New Religious Movement: Radical Feminist Theology (RFT).

The feminist movement of the 1960's quickly influenced theological discussions. Beginning as a protest movement within mainline Christian denominations, feminist theology has expanded into a broad and expansive set of ideas that are counter-Christian. My thesis for this paper is that RFT exhibits characteristics of other new religious movements

and should be treated as a new religious movement in its own right. In order to prove this thesis, I will begin by a brief outline of the three phases of feminism over the last two hundred years, then I will delimit the term Radical Feminism to distinguish it from other worldviews within Feminism. I will identify significant Radical Feminist Theologians, summarize the core myth of the movement, then summarize their theology and ethics, and conclude with a brief critique and some prospects for the future of Radical Feminist Theology.

I. The Three Phases of Feminism

In my discussion of Radical Feminist Theology, I will assume that Feminism can be divided into three distinct stages. A brief summary of these three stages will show a trajectory away from historic Christian orthodoxy towards the emergence of a new religious movement.¹ These three phases are: Phase 1 – Slavery, Alcohol, and the Right to Vote; Phase 2 – Secular Feminism; Phase 3 – Radical Feminism.

A. Phase One: 1850 – 1920 -- Slavery, Alcohol, and the Right to Vote

The significant issues in Phase One Feminism were opposition to slavery, alcohol and the corresponding struggle for suffrage. The basic worldview of most women involved was Christian and Evangelical. Frances Willard (1839-1898) represents the majority of women involved in Phase One Feminism. Willard was a woman of Evangelical convictions who worked with D.L. Moody on occasion. In 1879 she became the leader of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the first major organization for women in the United States. Willard and the WCTU based their moral opposition to alcohol on Scripture and a deep concern for women born from evangelical passion. The WCTU was a trans-denominational organization with a presuppositional commitment to orthodoxy. While Willard and the WCTU represented the doctrinal orthodoxy of most Nineteenth Century American women, a small and vocal minority of women advocated divergent theologies. For example, Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815 – 1902) became convinced in her latter years that the next great struggle

¹ Margaret Elizabeth Köstenberger offers a similar description of three waves of feminism: The First Wave (1830's) – Racial and social justice; The Second Wave (1960's) – Gender equality; The Third Wave (1990's) – Radical Pursuit of Feminine Realization. *Jesus and the Feminists: Who Do They Say that He Is?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 18.

for women would not be with the state, but with the churches.² Phase One came to a conclusion with the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1919 (Prohibition) and the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 (Women's Suffrage). In this era, women of largely evangelical conviction served as the moral conscience to the nation. After they achieved the right to vote, most Evangelical women moved in other directions and directed their energies elsewhere.

B. Phase Two: 1920 – 1963 -- Secular Feminism

While Phase One Feminism had a distinctively Evangelical tone, the leading thinkers of Phase Two Feminism were basically secular in their worldview. Simone De Beauvoir (1908-1986) is representative of feminist thought for Stage Two. The long-time companion of existentialist Jean-Paul Sarte, Beauvoir's most well known work is *Le Deuxieme Sexe (The Second Sex)*, published in 1949. In this work, she distinguished between biological femaleness (sex) and socialized femininity (gender). She argued that women can become free by "transcending" biological sexual identity and the imposed identity of motherhood.³ In this work Beauvoir made the now famous statement, "One is not born but becomes a woman."⁴ In this way, her thought helped lay the groundwork for the current idea that gender is a social construction, not an innate characteristic.⁵

C. Phase Three: 1963 – Present -- Radical Feminism

I mark the beginning of Phase Three Feminism at 1963 because this is the year Betty Friedan (1921 – 2006) published her landmark work, *The Feminine Mystique*. In many ways, Friedan serves as a bridge between the non-religious worldview of Simone de Beauvoir and the pantheistic ideas common in modern feminism. Utilizing components of Marxist

² Ann D. Gordon, "Elizabeth Cady Stanton," in *American National Biography*, John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes, eds. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 565.

³ Susan Neiburg Terkel and R. Shannon Duval, eds., *Facts on File Encyclopedia of Ethics*, s.v., "Beauvoir, Simone De" (New York: Facts on File, 1999), 19.

⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, H. M. Parshley, trans. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Press, 1985; 1953) 267.

⁵ Susan Brison says, "[Beauvoir's] analysis of what has become known as the sex/gender distinction set the stage for all subsequent discussion." Susan J. Brison, s.v., "Beauvoir, Simone De," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2006), 515.

critiques of industrial society, Friedan contended the concept of a “housewife” was a post-WWII / Cold War construction. In particular, she heaped disdain on the idea that it is noble for a woman to work at home as a mom and raise a family (be a housewife). Friedan’s work, coming at the leading edge of the sexual revolution, fueled the burgeoning feminist movement.

It was during the era following publication of *The Feminine Mystique* that many women who were raised within Christian faith traditions began to explore non-orthodox theological ideas which had been latent within feminism. While some feminists maintained a non-religious worldview, others have moved in the opposite direction by embracing a pagan worldview. In fact, a distinctive mark of Phase Three Feminism is a move from a secular to a pagan and pantheistic approach. “Goddess” religion and spirituality are celebrated as central to further liberation of women. Phase Three Feminism is characterized by widely divergent but complementary strands of thought. While these different strands often adhere to widely different worldviews, they consider each other to be friendly co-combatants against the oppression of women by the forces of patriarchy. The result is a highly complex movement which expresses itself in a multitude of worldview expressions.

At the risk of oversimplification, I would like to suggest that there are at least four worldview strands within modern feminism in the United States. First, many feminists are secular in their worldview. By this, I mean that they accept some form of atheism or agnosticism as the true and correct way to view the world. A second worldview expression within modern feminism is purely pagan. These are feminists who, while not atheists, have completely rejected any notion of a Christian worldview and instead self-identify with a pagan religion, most commonly Wicca. I identify a third group as “neo-Gnostics.” These are academics who have a strong interest in feminist issues and who advocate a return to ancient Gnosticism as central to the liberation of women. Finally, a fourth group can be identified as radical feminist theologians. Typically, these are theologians with some historic tie to Christian theology, but who have moved progressively farther and farther away from historic Christian orthodoxy. While these theologians still utilize the Bible, they do so in a way more akin to literary deconstruction as opposed to traditional hermeneutical approaches based on grammatical study and historical backgrounds. As a general rule, these groups do not see themselves in competition with each other and there is extensive cross-pollenization of ideas between the groups. All four groups share a general unwillingness to condemn each other along with a common loathing for “patriarchy.” The cross-pollenization among the four groups results in a broad movement I call Radical Feminist

Theology. It is this broad group which I believe should be addressed as a New Religious Movement in and of itself. I admit that my four categories are not exhaustive of all feminist worldviews. In the broadest sense, feminism is an almost infinitely diverse movement with multiple subsets such as lesbian feminists, African-American feminists, Latino feminists and so on. My four suggested worldview categories within feminism reflect the paradox that there is both one feminism and many feminisms.⁶

My analysis will be limited by four factors. First, I will focus on Radical Feminist Theology in the United States. Second, I will not address the egalitarian / complementarian debate within modern evangelicalism. It is beyond my purposes here to explore the degree to which Evangelical egalitarians have or have not been influenced by Radical Feminist Theologians. My third limitation is that I will attempt to focus most of my discussion on the fourth group I identified within modern feminism: radical feminist theologians. However, since there is so much fluidity within modern feminism, at points I will reference secular feminists, neo-Pagan feminists, or neo-Gnostic feminists. My final limitation is simply the acknowledgement that the neo-pagan religion Wicca should be studied as a New Religious Movement in its own right. Furthermore, some feminists insist that women should embrace Dianic Wicca, a particularly feminized expression of neo-Paganism. The interplay and exchange of ideas between Wicca and Radical Feminist Theology is so extensive, it is very difficult at times to maintain the distinction.

III. Major Contributors to Radical Feminist Theology and Key Events

For most new religious movements, a prophet or prophetess speaks with an authority that replaces Biblical authority. While Radical Feminist Theology does not have “one” prophet/prophetess who functions in the way Muhammad does for Islam or Joseph Smith does for Mormonism, there are several voices which are considered somewhat authoritative. These voices attempt to demonstrate the way in which historic Christian orthodoxy has been wrong and to offer the supposed correction needed. I will summarize six significant voices within radical feminist theology: Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Letty Russell, Eleanor Leacock, Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, and Carol Christ.

⁶ My language here is borrowed from John Hoffman, “Blind Alley: Defining Feminism,” *Politics* 21.3 (September 2001): 193.

A. Mary Daly (b. 1926)

Mary Daly was raised a Roman Catholic and spent most of her professional life teaching at a Boston College, a Roman Catholic (Jesuit) School, and initially she seemed to be a liberal reform voice within Roman Catholicism. Of her many works, *Beyond God as Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* is her most influential work and considered a seminal source for Radical Feminist Theology. In one of the most frequently quoted statements within feminism, Daly claims patriarchy perpetuates male dominance: "I have already suggested that if God is male, then the male is God."⁷ In the decades since *Beyond God as Father*, Daly has left any connection to historic orthodoxy and now self-identifies as a "positively revolting hag."⁸ Her most recent work reflects her disdain for any vestige of orthodox belief and is titled, *Amazon Grace: Recalling the Courage to Sin Big* (2006).

B. Rosemary Radford Ruether (b. 1936)

Rosemary Radford Ruether was the Georgia Harkness Professor of Theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary (a United Methodist School) in Evanston, IL from 1976 to 2000. She is currently the visiting professor of Theology at Claremont School of Theology and Claremont Graduate University. Unlike Daly, Ruether still self-identifies as Roman Catholic and is an advocate of Liberation Theology. Her works reflect several major ideas associated with Liberation Theology: People in authority are always oppressors, special rights must be created to compensate for the oppressed, and traditional categories of theological or moral reflection within the Christian tradition must be uprooted since historic orthodoxy contributes to oppression.

Radford-Ruether's *Women-Church* (1985) is a good example of her theology. *Women-Church* is actually a book of feminist liturgies intended for use in a church. Common themes in the liturgies are the oppression of women and a celebration pantheism. These two themes are clearly seen in a "Birthing Preparation Liturgy," of which Radford-Ruether devised for pregnant women. This particular liturgy begins with the father reading a long section in which he apologizes for all evil brought into the world by men. Then, the pregnant woman is supposed to "squat in the birthing position, while all the others gather round her and uphold her on

⁷Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward of Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978; new reintroduction, 1985), 19.

⁸ See Daly's webpage at www.marydaly.net. Electronic resource accessed June 16, 2009.

all sides” while they chant: “Let the primal Mother-Spirit empower you. Let her great birthing energy flow through you. Bring forth with victory and joy the promised child.”⁹

C. Letty Russell (1929-2007)

Letty Russell was ordained in the United Presbyterian Church and pastored the Presbyterian Church of the Ascension in New York for ten years. She eventually joined the faculty of Yale Divinity School in 1974. Russell was married for several years to Hans Hoekendijk, also a professor and who preceded her in death in 1975. In 2005, Russell was joined to her lesbian partner in a civil commitment ceremony.

Much like Radford Ruether, Russell was strongly devoted to liberation theology. Russell’s most significant work was *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective* (1974). Her Christology reflects the influence of liberation theology and she complains that it is difficult for some women to follow Jesus since he was male. Russell looks favorably upon several proposals to solve this “problem” and said:

For women the scandal is seen not just in Jesus’ Jewishness or his obscurity in the world of the first century, but most importantly in his *maleness*. . . . How is it possible for this male to be the bearer of God’s togetherness with women and men when he represents only one half of the human race in this respect? One possibility in approaching this question is to get rid of the scandal by looking for a further incarnation in the form of a woman. Another is to say that Jesus was just a “good person” and not uniquely the “representative of the new humanity.” As such his particularity is of no great importance to the question of salvation, and women are free to look farther for more meaningful, feminine role models such as those of the Mother Goddess in ancient religions.¹⁰

Russell rejects traditional Christology and says women should replace traditional Christological formulations with worship of a mother goddess.

D. Eleanor Leacock (1922 – 1987)

⁹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 202.

¹⁰ Letty Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective – A Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 137 – 138. Emphasis in the original.

Eleanor Leacock was not a theologian but an anthropologist and a Marxist- Feminist. Though she operated from a non-religious perspective, her ideas about gender roles have been widely influential within in broader feminism. In 1972 she became chair of the Department of Anthropology at the City University of New York, a position she maintained until her death in 1987.

During 1950-51 Leacock did anthropological field work with the Montagnais-Naskapi people, a sub-arctic group of Native Americans in Canada. She claimed that the Montagnais-Naskapi people had a non-status structured society.¹¹ In the years following her research, Leacock began to make inferences about gender roles in general based on her interpretation of the Montagnais-Naskapi culture. Specifically, she claimed the Montagnais-Naskapi people had a non-patriarchal society prior to their interaction with European culture via the fur trade and Christian missionaries. Based on this research and her Marxist understanding of class conflicts, Leacock concluded that the subordination of women was/is linked to the hierarchical nature of Western society. Leacock's position can be differentiated from other Marxist influenced feminists, such as Freidan, who believed that structures rooted in the family were the main cause for the subordination of women. For Leacock, the struggle between genders was seen through the Marxist grid of class conflict, and in this way she argued that capitalism contributed to female subordination.

E. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott

While Daly and Radford-Ruether represent radical feminist theologians with roots in Roman Catholicism, Virginia Ramey Mollenkott (b. 1932) represents someone from a fundamentalist background who has embraced radical feminism. Mollenkott was raised in the Plymouth Brethren Church and earned her undergraduate degree at Bob Jones University in 1953. She then earned a masters degree from Temple University and a doctorate from New York University. Though married for seventeen years, she now self-identifies as a lesbian and lives with her partner in New Jersey.

In the 1970's Mollenkott maintained that she was still an evangelical, but stated in 1976 that "there are flat contradictions between some of

¹¹ See Eleanor Leacock, "Status Among the Montagnais-Naskapi of Labrador," *Ethnohistory* 5.3 (Summer 1958): 200 – 209.

[Paul's] theological arguments and his own doctrines and behavior."¹² She moved to a progressively more feminist position throughout her career and has been on a trajectory away from theological orthodoxy to a Christian-pagan synthesis. In *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (1994), Mollenkott argues for goddess worship and says, "The pursuit of holy peace within and the pursuit of peace on earth are perhaps the best of all reasons for lifting up the biblical image of God as the One Mother of us all."¹³

F. Carol Christ

Carol Christ (b. 1945) holds a Ph.D. from Yale University and is director of the Adriadne Institute for the Study of Myth and Ritual located in Greece where she lives on the Island of Lesbos. Some of her more important works include *Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess* (1987), *Odyssey With the Goddess* (1995), *Rebirth of the Goddess* (1998), and *She Who Changes* (2003). Christ is particularly devoted to the idea that a peaceful and kind matriarchal religion of the goddess flowered in antiquity, only later to be replaced by hierarchical and patriarchal religions.

As with many other New Religious Movements, there are several landmark events in the development of Radical Feminist Theology. One significant early event was a 1974 consultation sponsored by the World Council of Churches in West Berlin. The consultation was called "Sexism in the 1970's" and its purpose was to consider the role of Christian women in the struggle for women's liberation around the world. But perhaps no single event did more to bring Radical Feminist Theology into public view than the "Re-Imagining '93 Conference" in Minneapolis, MN in 1993. The conference was designed to coincide with The Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women, a movement advocated by the World Council of Churches beginning in 1988. Attended by nearly 2,000 delegates, the attendees prayed to the goddess Sophia, celebrated lesbianism, and worshipped their own inner divinity. This conference was particularly noteworthy because it was funded by Methodist, Presbyterian, and Lutheran denominations. Subsequent conferences have been held in the years since.

¹² Virginia Mollenkott, "A Conversation with Virginia Mollenkott," *The Other Side* (May-June, 1976): 22; cited in Ronald Nash, *Great Divides* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1992), 43, n. 3.

¹³ Virginia Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (New York: Crossroads, 1994), 19.

IV. The Myth of a Primal Goddess

A common characteristic of New Religious Movements is the introduction of a new myth which provides a meta-narrative for understanding the world. For example, Latter Day Saint theology posits a myth of a Judeo-Christian culture in pre-Columbian Central America. Radical Feminist Theology too has a core myth which provides a meta-narrative: the myth of a primal and peace-loving goddess religion. The myth of the primal goddess religion possibly has reached its widest audience in the work of the neo-pagan witch Starhawk in her book, *The Spiral Dance*. The myth says that an ancient and peaceful goddess religion dominated primitive humanity, only to be replaced by hierarchical warrior “gods.”

Though Starhawk has popularized the myth, its origins actually should be traced to Marija Gimbutas (1921 – 1994), a Lithuanian-born archeologist who taught at the University of Southern California. After excavating Neolithic sites in Bosnia during 1967 and 1968, Gimbutas published her ideas in *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe* (1974). Gimbutas said that prior to interaction with warlike tribes from the east, “Old Europe” was “matrifocal” and “probably matrilinear.” According to Gimbutas:

[Old Europe was] agricultural and sedentary, egalitarian and peaceful . . . [and was] characterized by a dominance of women in society and worship of a Goddess incarnating the creative principle as Source and Giver of All. In this culture the male element . . . represented spontaneous and life-stimulating, but not life generating, powers.¹⁴

According to the myth, this peaceful and goddess-worshipping society was dismembered sometime between 4500 and 2500 BC by male dominated and war-like invading cultures from the east.¹⁵

Constance Eichenlaub critiques Gimbutas’ methodology and says, “Gimbutas’s capacity to envision an Old European Great Goddess came

¹⁴ Marija Gimbutas, *Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1974), 9. When she released a revised edition of this work in 1983, Gimbutas renamed it *Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* in order to put more emphasis on the goddess.

¹⁵ The primal-goddess myth is reinforced by the controversial claims of archaeologist James Mellaart who excavated a Neolithic village in Turkey between 1961 and 1965, claiming that the village was a center for a type of goddess worship similar to that suggested by Gimbutas.

with a tendency to interpret all Neolithic symbols as religious and gynocentric. . . Rather than present the views of her detractors, or defend her methodology, Gimbutas's style was to reiterate and amplify the evidence as she saw it (with an occasional attack on those who offended her).¹⁶ To put it another way, Gimbutas tended to read archaeological finds through the grid of her "myth" as opposed to allowing the archaeological evidence to shape the way she viewed ancient myths. Nonetheless, the myth of an ancient, pristine goddess religion replaced by a warlike male religion is appealing to many people involved in Radical Feminist Theology.

V. Theological Summary of Radical Feminism

As stated earlier, my thesis for this paper is that Radical Feminist Theology exhibits characteristics of other new religious movements and should be treated as a new religious movement in its own right. I will now attempt to demonstrate that it is a New Religious Movement by identifying its hermeneutics, worldview, doctrine of God, Christology, and soteriology.

A. *The Hermeneutics of Radical Feminist Theology*

While one usually begins a description of a religious movement by discussing its doctrine of God or source of authority, I believe the correct place to begin describing Radical Feminist Theology is by discussing its hermeneutics. This is because so much of the movement is actually a protest against the general Christian consensus concerning the main meaning of Scripture. Most Evangelicals adhere to some form of Grammatical-Historical Interpretation. We understand the meanings of words and sentences in the Bible according to the way they were normally used by the speakers of the language in their historical context. In contrast, Radical Feminist Theology is strongly influenced by literary deconstruction, a hopelessly flawed approach to reading a text which denies the existence or importance of authorial intent. Furthermore, and more dangerously, the existence of objective and universal truth that can be known is denied.¹⁷ Deconstruction is a literary-philosophical movement which is an attempt to open the text to a wide range of

¹⁶ Constance Eichenlaub, "Marija Gimbutas and the Future of a Legacy," *The European Legacy* 5.5 (2000): 733.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida (1930 – 2004), an Algerian-born / French philosopher, is widely considered the father of literary "deconstruction."

meanings. The result is authorial intent is no longer important. Deconstruction is also known as “reader-centered” interpretation.

Mary Daly represents the type of deconstruction common in Radical Feminist Theology when she says, “We do not use words; we Muse words. . . . Thus liberation is the work of Wicked Grammar, which is our basic elemental instrument, our witches’ Hammer.”¹⁸ Radical Feminist Theologians often state that we need to “re-read” texts, a way of saying that ancient religious texts need to be deconstructed. For example, Mary Wakeman laments the fact that the biblical tradition has too often had the effect of limiting diversity. However, she gleefully states, “An affirmation of diversity is rooted in biblical tradition, if that tradition is read as an account of cultural transformation—from kingship to peoplehood to personhood.”¹⁹

Radical Feminist Theologians feel free to play with the text of Scripture because they believe the Bible is a culturally conditioned product of pre-modern societies based on male patriarchy. In a blend of literary deconstruction and liberation theology, Radical Feminists insist that the language of Scripture becomes a source of oppression because it reflects the experience of men and not of women. Therefore, the only way to liberate women is to destroy the traditional language of Scripture. Some Radical Feminist Theologians go even further and simply reject the Bible as hopelessly patriarchal and unredeemable. Pamela J. Milne of the University of Windsor states,

We can either accept the patriarchal biblical text as sacred and content ourselves with exposing its patriarchy . . . or we can expose its patriarchy and reject it as sacred and authoritative. But if we are looking for a sacred scripture that is not patriarchal, that does not construct woman as “other” and that does not support patriarchal interpretations based on this otherness, we are not likely to find it or recover it in texts such as Genesis 2-3. If we want an authoritative sacred scripture that does not make it possible to believe that women are secondary and inferior humans, it appears that we need to make new wine to fill our wineskins.²⁰

¹⁸ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, xxv. Note that this statement comes from the 1985 reintroduction.

¹⁹ Mary K. Wakeman, “Affirming Diversity and Biblical Tradition,” *Women’s Spirit Bonding*, Janet Kalven and Mary I. Buckley, eds. (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1984), 267.

²⁰ Pamela J. Milne, “The Patriarchal Stamp of Scripture: The Implications of Structuralist Analyses for Feminist Hermeneutics,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5.2 (Fall 1989): 34.

We see here the advocacy of a form of literary deconstruction along with a corresponding rejection of biblical authority. By overturning biblical language, Radical Feminist Theology posits a defective worldview and doctrine of God.

B. The Worldview of Radical Feminist Theology and Their Doctrine of God

I will address the worldview of Radical Feminist Theology and their doctrine of God as one topic because their revisionist theology is the foundation of a non-Christian worldview. Mary Daly reflects the disdain for traditional doctrinal statements concerning God and states in *Beyond God the Father*, “The biblical and popular image of God as a great patriarch in heaven, rewarding and punishing according to his mysterious and seemingly arbitrary will, has dominated the imagination of millions over thousands of years.”²¹ Furthermore Daly claims patriarchal religion perpetuates male dominance and fosters the exploitation of women and, as noted earlier, says, “I have already suggested that if God is male, then the male is God.”²² Less one miss her point, Daly compares the God of Scripture with Vito Corleone and says, “The character of Vito Corleone in *The Godfather* is a vivid illustration of the marriage of tenderness and violence so intricately blended in the patriarchal ideal.”²³ Daly argues that women should abandon the masculine noun “God” when referring to the ultimate spiritual reality and should instead refer to the Deity as “Being,” a verb.

In fact, many committed devotees of Radical Feminist Theology would be offended that I am using the noun “God” in my discussion here. Instead, Radical Feminist Theology asserts that we should worship the “Goddess,” sometimes using the term “Thealogy” to distinguish goddess studies from the patriarchal study of “theology.” The ideas that language becomes a tool of the oppressor and that texts need to be “re-read” intersect in the thought of Carol Christ, who says, “Religions centered on the worship of a male God create “moods” and “motivations” that keep women in a state of psychological dependency on men and male authority, while at the same legitimizing the *political* and *social* authority of fathers and sons in the institutions of society.”²⁴

²¹ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 13.

²² *Ibid.*, 19.

²³ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁴ Carol Christ, “Why Women Need the Goddess,” in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 275.

Carol Christ then strongly argues that women should embrace the “goddess.” By this she means far more than merely referring to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as mother. Instead, she argues for a goddess of female power: “The simplest and most basic meaning of the symbol of the Goddess is the acknowledgement of the legitimacy of female power as a beneficent and independent power.”²⁵ Starhawk insists on the same point and says, “The symbolism of the Goddess is not a parallel structure to the symbolism of God the Father. The Goddess does not rule the world; She is the world.”²⁶ Virginia Ramey Mollenkott also echoes the same idea in her book, *Goddess: Human Responsibility and the Bible* and says, “I am a manifestation of God. God Herself! God Himself! God Itself! Above all. Through all. And in us all.”²⁷

Radical Feminist Theology shares with Wicca and other neo-pagan religions a common commitment to a pantheistic worldview. In fact, many feminists argue forcefully that certain feminine experiences lead to a pantheistic worldview. Specifically, feminist theologians suggest that women are more in tune with a pantheistic deity because of their menstrual cycle. I will quote Carol Christ at length on this point:

In the ancient world and among modern women, the Goddess symbol represents the birth, death, and rebirth processes of the natural and human worlds. The female body is viewed as the direct incarnation of waxing and waning, life and death, cycles in the universe. This is sometimes expressed through the symbolic connection between the twenty-eight day cycles of menstruation and the twenty-eight-day cycles of the moon. Moreover, the Goddess is celebrated in the triple aspect of youth, maturity, and age, or maiden, mother, and crone.²⁸

Rosemary Radford Ruether suggests a similar idea in her book of Feminist liturgy titled *Women-Church*. In a “Reclaiming Menstruation” ritual, Radford-Ruether suggests that women in the service tie themselves together with red yarn while the leader says, “We are the circle of mothers, the life-bearers. This yarn is the stream of power that unites us with each other, with all women, and with all the powers of life

²⁵ Ibid., 277.

²⁶ Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Goddess* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 33.

²⁷ Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Goddess: Human Responsibility and the Bible* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1988), 6.

²⁸ Carol Christ, “Why Women Need the Goddess,” 281.

in the universe. This is our power, and yet it is more than our power.”²⁹ For RFT, the creature-creator distinction advocated by Scripture is blurred if not obliterated. Instead, women find a life-force within themselves, a force they can sense and feel, at least partly, via their regular menstrual cycle.

Radical Feminist Theologians often refer to the goddess as “Sophia.” For example, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (b. 1938) teaches at Harvard Divinity School and published *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (1984). Based on her Feminist reading of Luke 7:35, Fiorenza claims that *Sophia* was actually the God of Israel and “the Palestinian Jesus movement understood the mission of Jesus as that of the prophet and child of Sophia.”³⁰ In fact, it was the goddess Sophia who was celebrated at the “Re-Imagining ‘93 Conference.” As each speaker approached the podium, the crowd greeted them with the chant: “Bless Sophia, dream the vision, share the wisdom dwelling deep within.” They also used an incantation which included these words, “Our maker, Sophia, we are women in your image, with the hot blood of our wombs we give form to new life.”³¹

C. The Christology of Radical Feminist Theology

As a rule, Radical Feminist Theology accepts the conclusions of liberal New Testament scholarship concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ, making a distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of Faith. Doctrinal battles within Christianity lead to the deification of the man Jesus during a period long after Jesus’ own lifetime. RFT claims the image of a “male” savior (Jesus) was used as a tool of patriarchy to keep women subjugated. The specific Christologies of various Radical Feminist Theologians can be quite varied. For example, in *Beyond God the Father*, Mary Daly says the idea of Jesus as a unique and divine savior is a myth, a myth she calls “Christolatry.”³² Virginia Mollenkott, writing in 1983, at that time still affirmed the deity of Christ at some level, but then adds that Jesus becomes feminine, “The risen Christ, Jesus of Nazareth in a resurrection body that transcends human limitations, is no longer limited by human maleness. Instead, the risen Christ becomes

²⁹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 220.

³⁰ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 135.

³¹ Susan, Cyre, “Fallout Escalates Over ‘Goddess’ Sophia Worship,” *Christianity Today* 38 (April 4, 1994): 74.

³² See Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 69 – 81.

One Body with us all. Christ the Bridegroom is also Christ the Bride, in a flesh-and-bones identification.”³³

Some components of Radical Feminism borrow from the resurgent Gnosticism popular in the last half of the Twentieth-Century. For example, Elaine Pagels of Princeton University is a noted devotee of the Gospel of Thomas. Pagels’ devotion to Thomas is closely related to her affinity to the worldview of saying 70 of Thomas:

Jesus said: “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”

Pagels adds her own commentary on this passage and says, “The strength of this saying is that it does not tell us what to believe but challenges us to discover what lies hidden within ourselves; and, with a shock of recognition, I realized that this perspective seemed to me self-evidently true.”³⁴ Pagels comments here suggest why at least some Radical Feminist Theologians find Gnosticism attractive: Gnosticism emphasizes individual spirituality as opposed to faith in the historical Jesus. In fact, The Gospel Thomas is *not* essentially a book about Jesus. Instead, the focus is on *spirituality*. Jesus is simply a vehicle for the Gnostic worldview. The spirituality of the gospel of Thomas is self-centered and focuses on one’s own self-development and self-identification with the holy. Pagels reiterates her point and says, “Yet what Christians have disparagingly called Gnostic and heretical sometimes turn out to be forms of Christian teaching that are merely unfamiliar to us – unfamiliar precisely because of the active and successful opposition of Christians such as John [the Apostle].”³⁵ Pagels’ emphasis on the “do-it-yourself”

³³ Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 70 – 71.

³⁴ Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 32. Considering the strong Gnostic tone of these statements, I am perplexed to read Stevan Davies say, “The Gospel of Thomas is quite frequently said to be a Gnostic document. But the Gospel of Thomas is *not* a Gnostic document.” Stevan Davies, “Thomas: The Fourth Synoptic Gospel,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 46:1 (Winter 1983): 6. I am aware that some claim the influence in Thomas is more Platonic than Gnostic, yet it is also the case that Gnosticism borrowed heavily from Platonism. Also, the only complete copy of Thomas ever found was found in what is indisputably a Gnostic library. It seems to me that those who do not want to admit Thomas is a Gnostic document engage in special pleading: they want us to treat Thomas differently than other pseudepigrapha.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

Christology of Gnosticism fits nicely with the rejection of historic orthodoxy by RFT.³⁶

D. The Soteriology of Radical Feminist Theology

What does the idea of salvation mean within Radical Feminist Theology? First of all, it most certainly does not mean that humans are sinners who need to be rescued from a rebellious condition by God. For RFT, such a hierarchical view of redemption is viewed as part of the warp and woof of patriarchy that must be overthrown. Sin is not the problem; oppression is the problem. In fact, Radical Feminist Theologians almost universally cast aspersion on Genesis 3. For example, Mary Daly describes Genesis 3 as an exclusively male effort to justify the subjugation of women in a male-dominated society which succeeded primarily “in reflecting the defective social arrangements of the time.”³⁷ Daly claims Genesis 3 makes subjection of women justified because Eve had her origin in man and “was also the cause of his downfall and all of his miseries.”³⁸ With Genesis 3 relegated to the patriarchal ash heap, then the idea of substitutionary atonement becomes needless as well. At the Re-Imagining '93 Conference, Delores Williams of Union Theological Seminary said, “I don’t think we need a theory of atonement at all. I think Jesus came for life and to show us something about life. . . . I don’t think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff.”³⁹

For Radical Feminist Theology, salvation is essentially freedom from the oppressive structures of patriarchy. RFT has a doctrine of soteriology built almost exclusively on the hermeneutics of Liberation Theology. For example, Letty Russell asserts the goal of salvation is to achieve *shalom*, which she defines as “complete social and physical wholeness and harmony”⁴⁰ with the goal of “full human personhood in community with others.”⁴¹ With this goal in mind, she suggests evangelism is an “attitude that looks at what is going on in situations of oppression, trying

³⁶ C. Everett Ferguson rightly says, “Each Gnostic teacher supplied his own constructions and variations with the result that *Gnosticism* is now a general term that covers an almost bewildering variety of individual constructions.” C. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 247.

³⁷ Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 46.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

³⁹ Cited in *Presbyterian Layman* (Jan/Feb 1994) 10.

⁴⁰ Letty Russell, *Human Liberation*, 110.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

constantly to see the problems and to work out the way in which God's will of liberation can be done."⁴² The idea of salvation in Radical Feminist Theology is a good segue into the ethical implications of the movement. Since salvation is about liberation from oppression, how does that "liberation" actually look?

VI. Ethical Implications of Radical Feminist Theology

For Radical Feminist Theology, salvation occurs when women are free to enjoy life in a manner defined by Radical Feminist Theologians. The liberty envisioned by Radical Feminists encompasses several aspects of life, but I will focus on only five: The idea that gender is a social construction; Sexual liberty; Abortion Rights; Ecology; and finally, the role of government.

A. Gender as a Social Construction and the Corresponding Implications

A central tenet of Radical Feminist Theology is the idea that gender is a social construction and that one's gender need not be identified with one's biological sex. Thus, RFT differentiates between one's sex and one's gender. One's "genetic" sex is determined by chromosomes and is seen as a matter of biology. This is reflected in obvious anatomical differences between the two sexes. In contrast, gender is seen as a complex mix of psychological and socio-cultural characteristics associated with our sex. Since gender is an arbitrary social construction, traditional gender roles for men and women are merely tools of oppression used by the structures of patriarchy to oppress women. Specifically, the gender assumptions and gender roles advocated by historic Christianity are seen as a form of systemic evil which must be opposed.

Radical Feminist Theology often places the traditional family in a very negative light. This is a trend common in broader feminism as well. For example, Nancy Chodorow is a feminist sociologist and psychoanalyst who spent most of her professional career teaching at Cal-Berkeley. One of Chodorow's presuppositions is that Freud was correct when he argued that each person is born bisexual and that the child's mother is the first sexual object. She claims that gender inequalitarian beliefs are absorbed during early childhood. In her very influential book

⁴² Ibid., 125.

The Reproduction of Mothering (1978), Chodorow suggests that acceptance of the domestic ideal is central to women's oppression.⁴³

Women who do not agree with the idea of gender as a social construction are seen as people to be pitied because they are blinded by the oppressive structures of patriarchy. For example, in *Gyn/Ecology* (1978), Mary Daly excoriates men as "lethal organs" of a "rapist society." Furthermore, men feed parasitically on female energy and invent evil technologies to compensate for their inability to bear children. Women who don't share her views are mocked as "honorary white males."⁴⁴ In particular, women who cling to traditional models of motherhood and family are suspect. Simone de Beauvoir stated her disdain for the traditional family and said, "No woman should be authorized to stay at home and raise her children. Society should be totally different. Women should not have that choice, precisely because if there is such a choice, too many women will make that one."⁴⁵ Thus, in the name of liberation, she suggests the *coercion* of women who disagree with her. It is this type of language that led Methodist author Thomas Oden to say in regards to feminists, "The liberal elites do not simply want women as representatives; they want ideologically consciousness-raised hyperfeminists, who are considered by insiders to be the only women capable of properly representing women."⁴⁶

B. Radical Feminism and Sexual Liberty

Just as Radical Feminist Theology argues that gender is a social construction, it also contends that traditional sexual morality is a socially constructed tool of patriarchy used to oppress women. Furthermore, RFT rejects the notion that homosexuality is a sin or that sex should be confined to marriage. In many ways, the sexual ethics of RFT have been influenced by homosexual thinkers and activists. Based on pro-homosexual arguments, RFT has challenged normative, static categories

⁴³ For Chodorow's own summary of her life work, see Nancy J. Chodorow, "Psychoanalysis and Women: A Personal Thirty-Five Year Retrospect," *Annual of Psychoanalysis* 32 (2004): 101 – 129.

⁴⁴ Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978).

⁴⁵ Betty Friedan, "Sex, Society, and the Female Dilemma: An Interview with Simone de Beauvoir," *Saturday Review*, June 14, 1975, 18. The *Saturday Review* existed as a magazine from 1924 – 1986.

⁴⁶ Thomas Oden, *Requiem: A Lament in Three Movements* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 90. One should note that Oden is more egalitarian than complementarian.

of sexuality and sometimes questions the preferred status of heterosexuality. In so doing, RFT claims to bring to light suppressed homoeroticism within religious traditions.⁴⁷ Radical Feminist Theology is tangent with Wicca at this point. Devoted Wiccan Amber Laine Fisher proclaims a view of sex without moral boundaries, a view that is directly related to her paganism: “Goddess religion and goddess spirituality endeavor to release us from the taboos of sex and sexuality, to untie our hands, freeing us from certain paradigms or ideals that we are taught to accept as normal.”⁴⁸

C. Radical Feminism and Abortion Rights

Radical Feminist Theology sees free access to abortion on demand as central to the liberation of women. For example, in “A Community Prayer for Choice,” Ruether expresses her conviction that abortion is a right women should have and they should make the choice whether or not to abort based on their own convictions. In this prayer, Ruether posits that abortion is a case of rights in conflict: the mother’s, society’s and the pre-born child. These conflicts make Ruether “sad” and “angry that we are faced with such choices.”⁴⁹ Echoing common abortion rights rhetoric, Ruether goes on to say:

We are surrounded by many children who came into the world without the most minimal opportunities for love and development. We do not want to create life in that way. We want to create life that is chosen, life that is cherished and can be sustained and nourished.⁵⁰

In summary, Ruether believes children without certain unstated “minimal opportunities” should be aborted. In fact, the right to abortion is closely tied to the next ethical emphasis of Radical Feminist Theology: Ecological Concerns.

⁴⁷ Drorah O’Donnell Setael, s.v. “Feminist Theology,” in *Contemporary American Religion*, vol. 1 (New York: MacMillan Reference, 2000), 258.

⁴⁸ Amber Laine Fisher, *The Philosophy of Wicca* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2002), 185.

⁴⁹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “A Community Prayer for Choice,” Electronic Resource available at www.syrf.org/syrf/sacredresource.htm. Accessed 9/26/03. This prayer has been endorsed by the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

D. Radical Feminism and Ecology

A major term in Radical Feminist Theology is Ecofeminism, a word used to describe the combination of feminist concerns and ecological issues. For many feminist theologians, worshipping a goddess is seen as the first step towards saving the earth from environmental disaster. Radford Ruether's *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, (1992) makes this very point. This work is very important for understanding Radical Feminist Theology because it demonstrates the way in which radical feminists unite the issues of women's liberation and ecology. According to Radford Ruether, Patriarchy is committed to relationships characterized by domination. As a result, the reign of patriarchal religions has resulted in the exploitation and domination of the earth. Reversing this trend "will demand a fundamental restructuring of all these relations from systems of domination/exploitation to ones of biophilic mutuality."⁵¹ Abortion can become an environmental issue for ecofeminists since an expanding population is viewed as a primary threat to the earth itself.

E. Radical Feminism and Government

As has been noted, certain thinkers within Radical Feminist Theology have distinct Marxist leanings while the movement itself utilizes the hermeneutics of Liberation Theology. This should not be surprising since, in many ways, Liberation Theology is merely a blend of Marxist and Christian Eschatology. With such a background, it is also not surprising that Radical Feminist Theology advocates a more intrusive and socialistic approach to government. In *Sexism and God Talk*, Ruether advocates socialism as means to achieve women's liberation: "But more, we seek a democratic socialist society that dismantles sexist and class hierarchies that restores ownership and management of work to the base communities of workers themselves, who then create networks of economic and political relationships."⁵² Rebecca Whisnant rightly connects the relationship between the political and ethical philosophy of feminism and says, "This focus on power relationships and their effects on moral life means that the boundaries between feminist ethics and

⁵¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 238.

⁵² Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 231.

feminist social and political philosophy is often a fluid one.”⁵³ The result of this focus on “power relationships” is that RFT wants to marshal the power of government to destroy the structures of patriarchy. Involvement in feminist theology almost presupposes corresponding political involvement.

VII. Conclusion, Critique and Prospects for the Future

A. Conclusion

As I stated in my introduction, my thesis for this paper is that Radical Feminist Theology exhibits characteristics of other new religious movements and should be treated as a new religious movement in its own right. After surveying the movement I will now delineate seven ways that Radical Feminist Theology meets the criterion for consideration as a new religious movement, and not just an off-shoot of Christianity:

1. Radical Feminist Theology advocates a myth shared by the adherents, the myth of a primal goddess religion which was overthrown by patriarchal religion.⁵⁴ In some ways, this myth functions for Radical Feminist Theology in the same way that the myth of a Pre-Columbian Judeo-Christian culture in the Western Hemisphere functions for Latter Day Saint Theology.
2. Adherents of Radical Feminist Theology emphasize a shared experience of being ostracized. Much like an old time revival meeting, the theological meetings and inter-denominational gatherings of Radical Feminist Theology adherents encourage them to keep going in the faith even though they face much opposition.
3. Radical Feminist Theology gives its followers a sense of being inducted into a special group with a unique set of doctrinal ideas. These ideas have been hidden from the average Christian for

⁵³ Rebecca Whisnant, s.v. “Feminist Ethics,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2nd ed, vol. 3 (Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2006), 579.

⁵⁴ One should note that even the most radical theologians, in their more sober moments, recognize problems with this myth. For example, see Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 149 -175. Ruether is still adamant that matriarchal religion is needed to save the world.

centuries, but have now been revealed through the enlightened theologians who are the leaders.

4. Radical Feminist Theology advocates ideas about God, Jesus, and Salvation which diverge from every major faith tradition. In this way, it is especially new.

5. Adherents of Radical Feminist Theology have an evangelistic zeal that rivals that of any Fundamentalist Baptist preacher. Those in the darkness of patriarchy must be compelled to come into the light.

6. Adherents of Radical Feminist Theology have a utopian goal which they hope to achieve: the overturning of all the oppressive structures of patriarchy. The goal of overturning patriarchy serves as the millennial ideal for which everyone strives.

7. Radical Feminist Theology insists that other Christians are wrong. They alone have the truth. Doctrines such as the Trinity, the Deity of Christ, and salvation via the cross are all tools of patriarchy. At this point, there is a striking bit of irony in Radical Feminist Theology: in the name of openness, the movement becomes as exclusive as any conservative denomination. To prove my point, try to imagine the leaders of the Re-Imagining Movement inviting a conservative theologian to give a “different voice” at their meeting by offering and exegesis of 2 Corinthians 5:17–21. As is obvious, this would never happen.

As a new religious movement, Radical Feminist Theology is also different from other new religious movements or cults. It does not have a specific prophet or prophetess who claims to have a direct word from God. It does not have a new sacred text which it claims to have received from God. However, for some within the movement ancient Gnostic texts may in fact function as rediscovered revelation, so in that way they are “new.” It has no headquarters nor does it have a definite doctrinal statement of belief. Radical Feminist Theology is generally a pan-denominational movement from within churches that self-identify as Christian. In many ways, Radical Feminist Theology is a protest movement in the sense that most of the ideas they advocate have been developed in response to real or perceived inequities towards women within mainline denominations.

B. Critique

Radical Feminist Theology is seriously flawed and irreconcilable with orthodox Christianity. I suggest that it appropriates a defective hermeneutic, an historically unverifiable core myth, a basic theology that is idolatrous and an ethic that actually leads to a devaluation of women, not their liberation.

Radical Feminist Theology's hermeneutic of deconstruction is in itself destructive to the movement. By this, I mean that if one takes seriously the idea that authorial intent is not important, then why should anyone care to discover the intended meaning of Rosemary Radford Ruether's or Mary Daly's books? I assume that Radical Feminist Theologians want Christians to take them seriously and accept their ideas as true. Yet, based on their hermeneutical approach, what is to keep a patriarchal male from reading them in a "different" light? Perhaps one could deconstruct Daly, for example, and arrive at the conclusion that *she* was suffering under the oppressive structures of patriarchy which prohibited her from embracing her true desire to live at peace in a patriarchal society! The goal of the interpreter would then be to peel away the layers of patriarchal belief and discover the true Daly. This is, of course, an absurd suggestion, but it points out the way in which a deep commitment to deconstruction inhibits serious attempts to arrive at consensus. The hermeneutical approach of Radical Feminist Theology is only successful at destroying ideas, but is wholly unable to offer sustainable and constructive conclusions.

Radical Feminist Theology is flawed because the core myth of the movement – the myth of a primal goddess religion characterized by peace—is not true. Closely related to this flaw, the movement is truncated because of a tendency to accept the core holdings of liberal New Testament scholarship in a rather uncritical way. In fact, there is more evidence that the canonical gospels fit the historical milieu of First Century Judaism than evidence for a primal goddess religion. This is important because the biblical record about Jesus Christ is grounded in historical reality, not wishful thinking such as Gimbutas's primal goddess theory. In fact, the canonical Gospels do not reflect the type of embellishment and fictionalized account of the life of Christ claimed by radical feminism. If one wants an embellished and fictionalized Christ-story, then one should examine the Gnostic Gospels.

Radical Feminist Theology is flatly wrong in its oft-repeated premise that Christianity deifies men. When Christians call God "Father," we are not making an anthropological claim that men are better than women: we are making a theological assertion based on Scripture and closely related to the distinction between creature and Creator.

By blurring the distinction between creature and Creator, Radical Feminist Theology encourages generational conflict, sexual chaos and violence. Paul makes clear the dangers of worshipping creation in Romans 1:18-32. Romans 1:25 in particular stresses the tragedy of nature worship: “For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.” As a result, sexual chaos followed (Romans 1:26-27) as well as intergenerational conflict (Romans 1:30) and violence (Romans 1:29). The thrust of Romans 1:18-32 is that pagan worldviews weaken people so they become less and not more capable of directing their own lives.⁵⁵ Radical Feminist Theology is flawed because it deifies the fallen human nature which Paul describes in Romans 1. In this way, RFT is idolatrous.

Closely related to Radical Feminist Theology’s worship of creation is its concomitant advocacy of goddess worship. As noted earlier, such goddess worship entails a pantheistic worldview. Yet, cultures built on a pantheistic worldview are less egalitarian and more prone to the exploitation of the weak and defenseless. For example, in the Hebrew prophets, departure from monotheistic devotion to Yahweh in favor of various forms of Canaanite religion was closely tied to the exploitation of others. This religious syncretism resulted in God’s judgment, as Zephaniah 1:4 says, “I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the residents of Jerusalem. I will cut off from this place every vestige of Baal, the names of the pagan priests along with the priests.” The religious syncretism present in pre-exilic Israel is very similar to the religious syncretism advocated by RFT, which therefore falls under the same condemnation. Ultimately, paganism devalues humans and leads to the exploitation of weak people. Thus, in a striking piece of irony, the worldview advocated by feminism actually perpetuates some of the evils that RFT purportedly wants to end.

Radical Feminist Theology also has a defective view of gender. RFT is partly right in the sense that when certain stereotypical messages about women are advocated, women do in fact become dehumanized. For example, pornography and music with sexually salacious lyrics both reinforce sinful messages to young men and lead to a shallow view of women as objects who exist for the sexual gratification of men. Radical Feminism is wrong when it says traditional gender roles are merely a social construction. Gender differentiation is a fundamental part of God’s creation. Our gender is a gift from God to be celebrated and affirmed. Genesis 1:27 states: “So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them.” By

⁵⁵ James D.G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 38a, *Romans* 1-8 (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 72.

emphasizing that God made a male and a female, this passage affirms that sexuality is not an accident of nature, nor is it simply a biological phenomenon. Instead, sexual identity and function are part of God's will for his image bearers.⁵⁶

There are numerous other flaws associated with Radical Feminist Theology. One of the more annoying is their consistent unwillingness to acknowledge the countless millions of women from within orthodox traditions who have found their faith in Christ to be fulfilling and meaningful. If they mention such women at all, it is usually so they can be quickly dismissed as the uninitiated who are still under the bondage of patriarchy. In this way, Radical Feminist Theology offers a severely truncated view of the spiritual life of women.

C. Prospects for the Future

As we have seen, some advocates of Radical Feminist Theology no longer claim to operate within a Christian worldview at any level and have become pagans (ex: Carol Christ). Others have such defective Christologies, it is impossible to identify them as Christian in any meaningful way. Since it was started as a protest movement, the anger which was the initial impetus to the movement has waned as the second generation moves into leadership. In many mainline denominations, references to the "goddess" are now common in liturgies and hymnals. Yet, the very mainline denominations in which Radical Feminist Theology has flourished have experienced significant loss in membership. The ideas advocated by Radical Feminist Theology will continue to be attractive to some women within Christianity.

The emphasis on ecological concerns is probably the area where Radical Feminist Theology will find a most receptive audience in the future. Wicca itself has positioned itself as a "girl-friendly" alternative to Christianity. The interaction between Wicca and RFT will continue, most likely resulting in new variations of a pagan-Christian synthesis.

The rise of the Metropolitan Community Church within the homosexual community in America may indicate in some way the future of Radical Feminist Theology. It may in fact be the case that a denomination or fellowship appears in the future which is based on the tenets of RFT. Such a denomination would likely be different from Wicca and use a remnant of Christian language. It may be that the autonomous individualism advocated by Radical Feminist Theology will appeal to some women who desire to be religious, but do not want to be

⁵⁶ Victor Hamilton, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: Genesis 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1990), 139.

identified as neo-pagans. Since Radical Feminist Theology destroys the idea of the Bible as authoritative, it is likely that future generations of adherents will become either very secular or very pagan.