

Fleeing “Father God”:

Beginning to deconstruct sexist and racist, patriarchal hermeneutics of God the Father
as a way of moving towards a new liberating theology of God

Introduction

The inspiration for this research project came from reading Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. The book is about Celie, an abused black female, and her experience with rape, domestic violence, surrogacy and much more as she struggles to affirm herself and her humanity within a racist patriarchal society. Celie, at the pinnacle of frustration and anger, asserts: “the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown. ...Let ‘im hear me, I say. If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you.” This poignantly bold statement made by Walker through Celie not only critiques the “God Man,” but also shifts the paradigm of how one approaches humanity’s relation to God. In Walker’s theodicy no longer is the emphasis placed solely on the individual being held accountable to the commonly accepted notions of God. Instead, commonly accepted notions of God are now being held accountable to the individual. Hence, in *The Color Purple*, Walker holds God accountable to the experiences of an oppressed black woman. Through life’s events and struggles, Celie is forced to come up with new ways of seeing, talking about, and relating to God that affirm all of who she is.

Celie’s spiritual development led me to assert the following: if one’s notions of who and what God is do not affirm who one is, then one must break with those notions of God on the

basis that they are harmful and thus maliciously detrimental. Using feminist and womanist critiques, this essay will be a beginning act in deconstructing the sexism and racism endemic in the patriarchal “Father God” hermeneutic as a way of moving towards a new liberating theology of God. Ultimately, this project will call for a complete de-canonization of the bible as authority on who/what God is.

The Color Purple

The Color Purple, a true work of literary genius, explores and grapples with the complexity of relationships within the black experience, providing a biting critique of a racist patriarchal society in which black women are devalued because they are neither male nor of the privileged race. Written in epistollic form, Walker’s incorporation and exploration of God shows true acumen into understanding the richness of the black religious experience, in particular, the black female’s experience.

One striking feature that distinguishes the book *The Color Purple* from the movie is its in-depth inclusion of God as a major aspect of the story’s plot. The book opens with the line: “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (Walker 1). These are the words told to Celie by her rapist stepfather. The first words Celie says are subsequently: “Dear God.” From the beginning Walker sets up a paradigm in which Celie is forced into a relationship with a God who is either too removed or too powerless to protect her from her violator, or a God who actually condones her violation. As Celie’s stepfather continues to rape her, more and more of her sense of self-awareness and agency are taken away. Not even aware or in control of her own body and sexuality, Celie bears her stepfather’s baby. When questioned by her mother

about who the father is, Celie responds by saying that the father is God, for she “don’t know no other man or what else to say” (3). The previous line can be interpreted the following two ways: 1) one can look at Celie’s confession as her stating that she has not known any other man physically besides her stepfather, or 2) her confession could be interpreted metaphorically to mean that she has not known any other man but God. Interpreting Celie from the vantage point of God being the only man she has known sets up the interchangeability of man and God. Celie is thus bonded by a divine patriarchy that rapes, uses, and abuses her with impunity; she is truly stuck in what James Brown would term “a man’s world.” Celie is then married off by her father to a man named Albert whom she only refers to as Mr., for she does not know his name. At Albert’s house, Celie functions as a surrogate mother and wife for Albert’s departed wife, and is subjected to more abuse and degradation.

In one of Celie’s notes to her estranged sister Nettie, Celie writes: “Dear Nettie, I don’t write to God no more, I write to you” (Walker 199). Shug, Albert’s mistress whom he brought home and with whom Celie develops a close relationship, asks Celie what happened to God. Celie then asks Shug what God has ever done for her when Shug responds by telling her: “He gave you life, good health, and a good woman that love you to death” (199). Celie responds: “and he gave me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won’t ever see again. Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgitful, and lowdown” (199). After being told to hush by Shug, Celie goes on: “Let ‘im hear me, I say. If he ever listened to poor colored women the word would be a different place, I can tell you” (200). Celie and Shug continue their dialogue, and Celie confesses: “All my life I never care what people thought bout nothin I did, I say. But deep in my heart I care about God. What he going to think. And come

to find out, he don't think. Just sit up there glorying in being deaf, I reckon. But it aint easy, trying to do without God. Even if I know he aint there, trying to do without him is a strain" (200).

After more conversation, Shug asks Celie to describe what her God looks like. After a bit of hesitation and shame, Celie describes her God as being a big, old, tall white man with a gray beard and big blue eyes. Shug tells Celie that the God she described is the same God she used to see when she prayed. She then tells Celie that if she waits to find God in church, that is the God that is bound to show up because that is where *he* lives, "cause that's the one that's in the white folk's bible." Astonished by Shug's assertion, Celie admonishes that God wrote the bible and that white folks had nothing to do with it. Shug then poses the following questions: "How come he look just like them, then? Only bigger? And a heap more hair. How come the bible just like everything else they make, all about them doing one thing and another, and all the colored folks doing is getting cursed?" (Walker 201-2). Celie tells Shug that she once heard that Jesus's hair was like lamb's wool. Shug then tells her if Jesus came to any of the churches they know he would have to have it conked before anybody paid him any attention. Shug then says: "Ain't no way to read the bible and not think God white. When I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest. You mad cause he don't seem to listen to anything colored say? Humph! Do the mayor listen to anything colored say?" (202). "I know white people never listen to colored, period. If they do, they only listen long enough to be able to tell you what to do," responds Celie (202).

The above are snippets taken from the powerful conversation between Celie and Shug. In the beginning of the conversation, Celie again brings up the interchangeability between

God and man in that God is man and man is God. She charges God with being just like all the other men she knows: trifling, forgetful and lowdown in addition to deaf. Celie also confesses that although the God she believes in is malignant, it is hard for her to do without “him.” “His” thoughts of her are the only one she ever cared about. Hence, Celie feels bound to a God who is deaf to her pain, a “divine male” that affirms the abuse she receives by earthly males. This dialogue between Celie and Shug illuminates and exposes the very danger in interlocking God’s essence with that of maleness. The inherent maleness of God is best seen in the dominating, if not exclusive, metaphor of “Father God.” This essay will now turn toward feminist thought on the subject of “God the Father.”

Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk*

Rosemary Radford Ruether, author of *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, opens her chapter on “Sexism and God-language: Male and Female Images of the Divine” with the following assertion: “Few topics are as likely to arouse such passionate feelings in contemporary Christianity as the question of the exclusively male image of God” (42). She asserts that the hostility shown towards accepting the notion of God as a “She” has “deep roots in the Judeo-Christian formation of the normative image of transcendent ego in the male God image” (42).

While some feminists have tried to approach the task of breaking with the male exclusive transcendence of God by reclaiming the feminine side of God, Ruether argues that this indeed only intensifies on the divine level the patriarchal split of the masculine and the feminine. She posits, “In such a concept, the feminine side of God, as a secondary or mediating principle, would act in the same subordinate and limited roles in which females are allowed to act in the patriarchal social order. The feminine can be mediator or recipient of divine power in relation to creaturely reality. [...] But she can never represent divine transcendence in all fullness.” Hence, “For feminist to appropriate the ‘feminine’ side of God within this patriarchal gender hierarchy is

simply to reinforce the problem of gender stereotyping on the level of God-language” (61). In all, Ruether proclaims that feminists need to go beyond simply lifting up the feminine side of God and instead “question the assumption that the highest symbol of divine sovereignty still remains exclusively male” (61).

Ruether defines patriarchy as “not only the subordination of females to males, but the whole structure of Father-ruled society: aristocracy over serfs, masters over slaves, kin over subjects, racial overlords over colonized people” (61). In Ruether’s definition, patriarchy is broadened to incorporate any over-and-against type relationship between people or groups of people. At the apex of religious stratifications and hierarchical systems of privilege and control is the Divine. When it comes down to the God of the biblical tradition, Ruether asserts that “Although the predominantly male images and roles of God make Yahwism an agent in the sacralization of patriarchy, there are critical elements in Biblical theology that contradict this view of God” (61). Although Yahweh was still portrayed as being merciful, a mighty king, a warrior, and a vindicator of justice, Yahweh is also, based on the Exodus, a liberator. Norman Gottwald asserts: “the identification of Yahweh with liberation from bondage allowed this diverse group [Israel in conjunction with nomadic groups from the desert and hill peoples in Canaan] to unite in a new egalitarian society and to revolt against the stratified feudal society of the city-states that oppressed the peasant peoples of the hills with taxes and forced labor” (qtd. in Ruether 62). For Ruether, this established at the heart of Biblical religion a motif of protest against the status quo of ruling-class privilege and the deprivation of the poor.

While Ruether highlights the Yahwist tradition’s dissention with class hierarchy, she asserts that it did not do the same for gender discrimination. She posits that gender

discrimination was not broken because the male prophets were not as conscious of their own oppression of dependents, i.e., women and slaves, as they were of their oppression by others. Hence, one can infer that the prophets were blinded by their own male and class patriarchal privilege. In addition, Ruether also asserts that the presence of females, queens and priestesses who were integrated into powerful roles within the primary social stratification made it difficult to recognize women as an oppressed gender group.

Ruether also highlights that “a second antipatriarchal use of God-language occurs in the Old and New Testaments when divine sovereignty and fatherhood are used to break ties of bondage under human kings and fathers” (64). Ruether asserts that in the New Testament prophetic consciousness is applied to marginalized groups in the universal; hence, by redemption in Jesus, class, ethnicity, and gender divisions are singled out to be overcome. Gender is recognized as an additional oppression within oppressed classes and ethnic groups, thus women are doubly oppressed. Ruether points out that in the New Testament Jesus refers to God as “Abba,” which she believes affirms a primary relationship to God that is based on love and trust. The term Abba, according to Ruether, liberates the community from human dominance-dependence relationships and instead welcomes them in joining the new community of brothers and sisters as equals. Ruether claims that the gospel traditions reverse the symbolic relation between divine fatherhood and sovereignty and the sacralization of patriarchy. “Because God is our king, we need obey no human kings. Because God is our parent, we are liberated from dependence on patriarchal authority” (65). “Abba” as a name for God thus challenged patriarchal notions of hierarchies and stratifications; over-and-against relationships are instead replaced by relationships of mutuality under Christ. Women and those on the underside have

used this rationale to claim agency against human domination in that their lord is now God and not earthly man.

While Ruether affirms the positive aspects of the Abba tradition, she ultimately says that the problem with the tradition was that once it became a part of the dominant society, God as father and king can be assimilated back into the traditional patriarchal relationships and used to sacralize the authority of human lordship and patriarchy. She asserts: “The radical meaning of *Abba* for God is lost in translation and interpretation. Instead, a host of new ecclesiastical and imperial ‘holy fathers’ arises, claiming the fatherhood and kingship of God as the basis of their power over others” (66). In response to this, Ruether claims that there is a need for a new language that cannot be as easily co-opted by the systems of domination.

Another area that Ruether looks at in her creation of a feminist critique of patriarchy in God-talk is the proscription of idolatry. She revisits the biblical tradition’s proscription of idolatry in which Israel was to make no picture or graven image of God. No pictorial or verbal representation of God could be taken literally. She charges Christian sculpture and painting which represents God as a powerful old man with a white beard (which is reminiscent of Celie’s mental picture of God) sometimes crowned and robed in the insignia of human kings or the triple tiara of the Pope as being idolatrous. It “set[s] up . . . certain human figures as the privileged image and representation of God” (66). She asserts: “To the extent that such political and ecclesiastical patriarchy incarnates unjust and oppressive relationships, such images of God become sanctions of evil” (66). She extends this proscription of idolatry to include verbal pictures as well. “When the word *Father*,” claims Ruether, “is taken literally to mean that God is

male and not female, represented by males and not females, then this word becomes idolatrous” (66).

Ruether highlights that God revealed God’s self to Moses in the burning bush as “I am what I shall be,” affirming, as she believes, that “God is person without being imaged by existing social roles. God’s being is open-ended, pointing both to what is and to what can be” (67). For Ruether, God is both male and female and neither male nor female; therefore, she calls for a more inclusive language for God that draws on the images and experiences of both genders in a way that does not become more abstract because “abstractions often conceal androcentric assumptions and prevent the shattering of the male monopoly on God-language, as in ‘God is not male. He is spirit’” (67). Therefore, in Ruether’s rationale, “inclusiveness can happen only by naming God/ess in female as well as male metaphors” (67).

Ruether ultimately wants to move toward a feminist understanding of God/ess. To do this, Ruether admonishes that male language for the divine must lose its privileged place. She asserts: “If God/ess is not the creator and validator of the existing hierarchical social order, but rather the one who liberates us from it, who opens up a new community of equals, then language about God/ess drawn from kingship and hierarchical power must lose its privileged place” (69). According to Ruether, images of this new God/ess must: 1) include female roles and experiences; 2) be drawn from the activities of peasants and working people, people at the bottom of society; 3) be transformative, pointing us back to our authentic potential and forward to new redeemed possibilities; and 4) not validate roles of men or women in stereotypic ways that justify male dominance and female subordination (69).

Ruether poses that a new view of God/ess as redeemer/liberator emerge as a solution to patriarchal God-talk. To do this first calls for a split with male theology’s dualisms of nature and transcendence, matter and spirit, and female and male. Ruether claims that feminist theology needs to affirm the God of the Exodus, of liberation and new being, but as rooted in the foundation of being rather than its antithesis, for “The God/ess who is the foundation (at one and the same time) of our being and our new being embraces both the roots of the material substratum of our existence (matter) and also the endlessly new creative potential (spirit)” (71). Hence, “God/ess” embraces both matter and spirit. Ruether ultimately states:

The God/ess who is the foundation of our being-new does not lead us back to a stifled, dependent self or uproot us in a spirit-trip outside the earth. Rather it leads us to the

converted center, the harmonization of self and body, self and other, self and world. It is the *Shalom* of our being. [...] [Hence,] The Liberating encounter with God/ess is always an encounter with our authentic selves resurrected from underneath the alienated self. It is not experience against, but in and through relationships, healing our broken relations with our bodies, with other people, with nature. (71)

Ruether has posited a God/ess figure who embraces matter and spirit and calls individuals into harmony with themselves and the world around them. An encounter with God/ess is an encounter with one's self in relationship to others. While Ruether offers no adequate name for this God, she does assert, however, that there is a need to emerge from the false naming of God/ess modeled on patriarchal alienation.

Daly: After the Death of God the Father

To shine further light on the quandary of the Father God metaphor, this essay will now turn its focus towards the work of feminist Mary Daly. In her book, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, Daly sums up the problem of patriarchal God-talk with the following: "If God in 'his' heaven is a father ruling 'his' people, then it is in the 'nature' of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male-dominated" (13). She asserts: The symbol of the Father God, spawned by human imagination and sustained as plausible by patriarchy, has in turn rendered service to this type of society by making its mechanisms for the oppression of women appear right and fitting" (13).

Daly is interested in providing alternate models that will break with patriarchy and instead lead to the emergence of whole human beings. For Daly, it is not enough to simply have females in male dominated positions. This phenomenon, described by Daly as tokenism, does not change stereotypes or social systems but works to preserve them, since it dulls the revolutionary impulse. She claims that the minute proportion of women in the United States who occupy generally male roles have been trained by men in institutions defined and designed by men, and they have been pressured subtly to operate according to male rules. Daly calls for an emergence of woman-consciousness, a consciousness that will challenge the system of patriarchy from without. The need for a force to work outside of the system was made evident by Piaget who argued: "Structure is maintained by an interplay of transformation laws that never yield results beyond the system and never tend to employ elements external to the system" (qtd. in Daly 14). Therefore, according to Daly, "women who reject patriarchy have this power and indeed *are* this power of transformation that is ultimately threatening to things as they are."

Daly believes that the roles and structures of patriarchy have been developed and sustained in accordance with an artificial polarization of human qualities into the traditional sexual stereotypes. She states:

The image of the person in authority and the accepted understanding of 'his' role has corresponded to the eternal masculine stereotype, which implies hyper-rationality (in reality, frequently reducible to pseudo-rationality), 'objectivity,' aggressivity, the possession of dominating and manipulative attitudes toward persons and the

environment, and the tendency to construct boundaries between the self (and those identified with the self) and 'the other.' (15)

The opposite of this caricature, the "eternal feminine" implies, on the other hand, "hyper-emotionalism, passivity, self-abnegation, etc." Daly opines that in "becoming whole persons, women can generate a counterforce to the stereotype of the leader, challenging the artificial polarization of human characteristics into sex-role identification" (15). Daly believes that by challenging the stereotypes of sex-roles through developing a wide range of qualities and skills, women are beginning to encourage and demand a comparably liberating process in men: the becoming of androgynous human persons. Daly asserts that it is the radical becoming of androgynous human beings that has already begun to threaten the credibility of religious symbols.

According to Daly, "religious symbols fade and die when the cultural situation that gave rise to them and supported them ceases to give them plausibility. Such an event," she states, "generates anxiety, but is part of the risk involved in a faith which accepts the relativity of all symbols and recognizes that clinging to these as fixed and ultimate is self-destructive and idolatrous" (15). Daly, like Ruether, is calling for a movement away from exclusively male idolatrous representations of Divine. She believes that the becoming of women must be known through an active participation in overcoming servitude; the development of women's consciousness includes a flow of activism and creative thought that cumulates in an awareness beyond the symbols and doctrines of patriarchal religion.

In a section titled "The Inadequate God of Popular Preaching," Daly argues that the image of the divine Father in heaven has not always been conducive to humane behavior. She backs this statement with the prevalence of "cruel" behavior of Christians towards non-believers and dissenters among themselves. She asserts: "There has been a basic ambivalence in the image of the heavenly patriarch – a split between the God of love and the jealous God who presents the collective power of 'his' chosen people" (16). This paradigm facilitates a climate in which "The worshippers of the loving Father may in a sense love their neighbors, but in fact the term applies only to those within a restricted and unstable circumference, and these worshippers can 'justifiably' be intolerant and fanatic persecutors of those outside the sacred circle" (Daly 16). Therefore, one can justify, under God, persecution of others if they fall outside of God's elect or chosen people.

Mary Daly argues that if God is male, then the male is God. She believes that this divine patriarch, as long as it is allowed to live on in the human imagination, castrates women by depriving them power, potency, creativity, and the ability to communicate. In response to this castration of women, Daly asserts that one must castrate God, i.e., the process of cutting away the Supreme Phallus within the collective imagination. She asserts that those theologies that hypostatize transcendence, those that objectify "God" as a *being*, attempt in a self-contradictory way to envisage transcendent reality as finite. "God" then functions to legitimate the existing social, economic, and political status quo, in which women and other victimized groups are subordinate (Daly 19). She posits that God-language has been oppressive in the following three ways: 1) overtly when theologians claim female subordination is God's will; 2) when one-sex symbolism for God and for the human relationship to God is used (exclusive male dialogue

leaves women feeling like the stranger, and outsider, an alienated person); and 3) when it encourages detachment from the reality of the human struggle against oppression in its concrete manifestations (19-20). Daly ultimately elevates the following pragmatic yardstick for approaching God-talk: Does this language hinder human becoming by reinforcing sex-role socialization? Does it encourage human becoming toward psychological and social fulfillment, toward an androgynous mode of living, toward transcendence? (21).

Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *God The Father*

Robert Hamerton-Kelly's *God the Father: Theology and Patriarchy in the Teaching of Jesus* is somewhat a response to feminist critiques about Father God's patriarchal overtone. Hamerton-Kelly specifically labels Daly's critique of patriarchy as a form of demonology. He critiques:

One may be excused a certain skepticism, because of the sweeping nature of her [Daly's] claims. It is not clear that everything wrong with the human race can be attributed to the way in which society is organized, nor that women are bearers of such goodness as Daly believes. To make 'patriarchy' the root of all evil is comparable to the way the Marxists use 'capitalism' in their analysis of the world's ills, and is a form of demonology. (6)

Although Hamerton-Kelly does affirm some of Daly's work, he ultimately states that one must not focus solely on societal contribution (patriarchy), but also on individual contributions. Hamerton-Kelly thus, before venturing "beyond God the Father," decides to reflect again on the role of the father image in the Bible's theology in the new light that comes from a changed culture.

Hamerton-Kelly proclaims that "with reference to the father symbol, the Bible envisages two modes of relationship between it and this 'surplus meaning,' an indirect and a direct one. The former mode," he writes, "is symbolization by association while the latter is direct

symbolization by metaphor or simile” (21). According to Hamerton-Kelly, “In the indirect mode God is spoken of in connection with the human fathers; he is the ‘God of the fathers’ and his association with the fathers is his chief identifying feature; when we want to think or speak of God we think and speak of the fathers,” whereas in the direct mode: “the Bible uses either simile or metaphor: God is like a father, God is our father” (21).

Hamerton-Kelly believes that at the level of indirect symbolization, “father as applied to the divine revelation means liberation” (100). He posits that father describes the role that God played in the lives of the Israelites in liberating them from bondage in Egypt. Hamerton-Kelly turns towards the book of Exodus as proof text for this assertion. He claims that in the Mosaic tradition, the Exodus story shows God as liberator. In freeing the people from bondage, God “adopted” them as his people and made them his “first born son,” therefore, “by means of the idea of adoption any hint of a natural relationship between God and Israel, father and son, is expunged, and replaced by the idea of a free and gracious choice; election shows that the bonds of fate are broken and a new relationship based on free reciprocity established” (100). Based on this assertion, Hamerton-Kelly proposes that “father” thus means freedom in two senses: 1) freedom from human bondage, and 2) the freedom for a loving relationship with God based on faith rather than fate (100). Hamerton-Kelly also proposes that during prophetic times, the possibility of God’s grace in the present was celebrated by identifying with the fathers who had experienced the liberation of the Exodus and had received the promise of the land; thus “fathers” became the symbol of God’s liberating activity in history (101).

As far as direct symbolism is involved, Hamerton-Kelly writes: “The prophets used the father symbol – now a less firm male image than before, and apt to take on the characteristics of

‘mother’ from time to time – as a foil for their indictments of Israel’s sin and as a basis for the people’s plea for forgiveness” (101). He goes on to say that “it invokes the whole experience of God’s saving activity on behalf of his people, a record for which they should be grateful, and which, therefore, proclaims the perversity of their unfaithfulness (101).

When it comes down to Jesus, Hamerton-Kelly suggests that Jesus neutralizes the absolute power of the earthly father by means of the claims of the heavenly father, again reverting back to indirect symbolism, Jesus recovers the presentation of God’s sovereignty as the sovereignty of liberating love which desires free reciprocity (102). Hamerton-Kelly explains that the “impact of this proclamation was to relativize natural family relations and to constitute a new ‘family,’ the community of those who acknowledge God as Father” (102). He asserts that sexism was not Jesus’ intent in referring to God as Father; instead, “the effect of Jesus’ using it was to deprive the patriarchy, along with everything else which is compared with the sovereignty of God, of its absolute power. All in all, Hamerton-Kelly poses the idea that Jesus experienced a peculiarly intimate relationship with God that made “father” the appropriate symbol of his existence. Through this, “He invited his followers to share in it by giving them the privilege of invoking God as ‘Abba,’ and that privilege became the creative center of Christian worship” (103). It is thus, according to Hamerton-Kelly, that fatherhood and son-hood symbolize the new relationship of adult freedom in union with Christ,” it constitutes “the new family of God which was united by bonds of faith” (103).

Ultimately, Hamerton-Kelly upholds the notion of Father God as symbolizing grace and freedom, maturity and faith, intimacy with the divine source of life, a confidence in the final goodness of existence, the possibility of growth and creativity (104). Hamerton-Kelly posits that

the biblical symbol “Father” means the opposite of what radical feminist like Daly suggest it to mean; it is not bondage, dependence, or infantilism. Hamerton-Kelly concludes that it remains the church’s responsibility to make the newly understood “fatherhood” central to its understanding of God, and of human fatherhood, as to take a giant step away from patriarchy and towards mutuality.

While Hamerton-Kelly provides a somewhat convincing case about the positive aspects of “Father God” within the biblical narrative, he would have done much better if he had taken more seriously the critique of the feminist. As we saw earlier in the work of Ruether, there are some liberating aspects to God as Father, as Abba. However, as Ruether points out, those liberatory aspects got lost in patriarchal translation. While no one is claiming that Jesus’ intent was to be sexist, one cannot divorce the biblical witness from the patriarchal and sexist climate in which it was written. Hamerton-Kelly seems to make no connection between patriarchal influence and the usage of “father” as the “appropriate” symbol of God’s existence. Why was fatherhood and son-hood chosen to symbolize the new relationship of adult freedom in union with Christ? What about motherhood and daughter-hood? Hamerton-Kelly admitted himself that in the indirect mode God is spoken of in connection with the human fathers; he is the ‘God of the fathers,’ his association with the fathers is his chief identifying feature. This is highly problematic because God is so connected with the fathers, and vice versa, that one cannot think or speak of God without thinking or speaking about the fathers. Women only get to God through the fathers, and when they do get to God, God’s “chief identifying feature” is God’s association with the fathers. This is the problem that feminist are rebelling against, the problem of man being God and God being man. Hamerton-Kelly also ignores the solely male-dominated language he uses to describe humanity’s relationship to God. Are women simply to include

themselves in this dialogue between males? The problem with Hamerton-Kelly is that in entering into the dialogue from the privileged male perspective, he failed to see the hurt and exclusion of women under a sexist patriarchal system that affords them connection to God only through a patriarchal system that leaves women with very little redress against the aggression of males.

While Hamerton-Kelly fails to see the hurt of women under patriarchal systems of oppression, the feminists tend to do the same in failing to critique racism in addition to sexism. While they strip God of sexist depictions, they leave intact white depictions of God.

Delores Williams

When looking at the oppression of Celie's God, we find that it is not only male, but also white. To reiterate, in the conversation between Celie and Shug, Shug tells Celie that there is no way to read the bible and not think that God is white. She says, "When I found out that God was white, and a man, I lost interest. You mad cause he don't seem to listen to your prayers. Humph! Do the [white male] mayor listen to anything colored say?" (Walker 202). I would like to suggest that it is this uneasiness and inability to see God as something other than white and male that evinces the sexist and racist patriarchal hermeneutic of white America's understanding of God. In the exclusivity of God's maleness and whiteness, other ways of knowing God outside of maleness and whiteness are cut off. Whereas Ruether claims that the male God has to lose its privileged place if women are to truly be liberated, I claim that in addition, the white God has to lose its privileged place if black people are to be truly liberated.

Delores Williams, womanist theologian, states in her book *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*: "True enough, most Anglo-American women live only with the illusion of authority and power, which is mostly derived from powerful males. Nevertheless, white males and white females together often administer the mainline social system in America that oppress black women and the black family" (185). She claims that although many white feminists speak of multilayered oppression, they do not give serious attention to the ways they participate in and help perpetuate the terrible social and cultural value systems that oppress all black people. Williams further asserts that the term "patriarchy" is even lacking in that it leaves out much discussion about classism and social relations that go on beyond white women and white men. While Williams does not advocate white feminist to stop using the concept of patriarchy to describe *their* relation to their fathers, brothers, and other white males governing *their* world, she does advocate that for patriarchy to be inclusive of black women's experience in white society, there needs to be discussion between womanist and feminist about revision of the

term; black and white women need to become conscious of the negative effect of their historic relations (186).

Williams calls for the coming together of feminist and womanist. Renita Weems states: “None of us [women] is safe from the ravages of a society which makes room for only a chosen few and keeps at bay the vast majority” (qtd. in Williams 187). Given this reality, Williams proposes that if women “come together in compassion and concern for each other, womanist and feminist can build bridges over which future generations of women can cross from bondage to freedom” (187).

Williams affirms the great deed that feminists have done in the world of theology. She writes: “The feminist identification of what they describe as the patriarchal character of the Bible has done a great service in showing the world that many portions of this book support the oppression of women” (187). She also notes that both feminists and womanists agree that the Bible cannot be scrapped because of the liberating word that is also in the Bible and the hope that it brings some women. Therefore, what Williams suggests needs to happen is a dialogue between womanist, theologians and scholars in religion about biblical interpretation (hermeneutics). She asserts that womanist hermeneutics must take seriously the assumption that the Bible is “a male story populated by human males, divine males, divine male emissaries and human women mostly servicing male goals, whether social, political, cultural, or religious” (187). Hence, one must approach the Bible with a hermeneutic of suspicion that recognizes and takes seriously this tint.

Williams ultimately claims that the womanist survival/quality-of-life hermeneutic means to communicate the following to black Christians: “Liberation is an ultimate, but in the meantime survival and prosperity must be the experience of our people. And God has had and continues to have a word to say about the survival and quality of life of the descendents of African female slaves” (196).

Although the bible is male centered and oppressive to women at times, Williams believes that it cannot be completely scrapped. To deal with this problem of the biblical witness’s patriarchal influence, Williams suggests that one approach the bible through a dialogical hermeneutic of suspicion that has as its goal liberation/survival/quality-of-life. Another individual who calls for a hermeneutic of suspicion approach to rereading biblical text is biblical scholar Renita Weems.

Renita Weems’ *Battered Love*

In *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets*, Renita Weems talks about biblical metaphors, in particular the marriage metaphor, and the weight that they have. She brilliantly, yet simplistically, asserts that metaphors matter because they are sometimes our first lessons in prejudice, bigotry, stereotyping, and in marginalizing others –

even if in our minds. She admonishes that “Before we know it, in the innocent act of singing favorite tunes, recounting jokes, and praying prayers, we can be advocating our demise and the demise of everything and everyone dear to us – and not even know it” (107).

Weems posits that with the help of newer methodological approaches, those in biblical studies are able to press beyond mere interpretation to criticism as a way of trying to step outside the sublime ideology of the text, to understand where the text gets its power and to find ways to challenge as much as possible the power it has over us. She makes known, however, that this critique is not intended to destroy the bible. Instead, it is to help those of us interested in reading and interpreting the bible to find ethical ways to read intelligently and responsibly (111). Weems asserts: “despite its dubious origin, despite its attempts to hide the strategies that produced it, despite our dissatisfaction with the language and perspective it uses to describe itself, we still find gripping the glimpses of peace, justice, and love it offers readers, however flawed and fleeting they might be” (111). Hence, Weems holds on to the bible because she believes that there is some good to be gleaned despite its horrendous flaws.

Although Weems upholds gleaning the good message from the bible, she makes clear that one understands that he or she is reading a text that rationalizes and eroticizes violence, and that takes for granted one group’s power to destroy another, something that should never be taken lightly. She also urges against metaphors or biblical language that “cease[s] to be metaphorical speech, a finger pointing beyond itself, and become[s] the finger itself,” when “the thing signified *becomes* the signification itself” (112). The risk of metaphorical language is thus the risk of “oversimplification and rigid correspondence,” a risk that Weems suggest we must always be on guard against. In her conclusion, Weems states that reinterpreting metaphors does very

little to change the fact that the bible's culture takes for granted women's limited roles and goes out of its way at times to reinforce the notion that women's sexuality poses a dangerous threat to the social order.

The Color Purple Revisited

In the second part of the dialogue between Celie and Shug, Shug begins to tell Celie about her revised notions of who/what God is. Shug says, "God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it" (Walker 202). Shug confirms that God is not a he or a she, but an it. When asked by Celie what it looks like, she responds: "It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found it" (203). Celie states that she and Shug spoke more about God, but that she was still "trying to chase that old white man out of my head." She goes on to say, "I been so busy thinking bout him I never truly notice nothing God make. Not a blade of corn (how it do that?) not the color purple (where it come from?). Not the little wildflowers. Nothing" (204). Shug then advises Celie that she has to get man out of her focus. She says, "man corrupt everything. He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to get lost. Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock" (204). Celie then says to herself, "But this hard work, let me tell you. He been there so long he don't want to budge. He threaten lightening, floods and earthquakes. Us fight. I hardly pray at all. Every time I conjure up a rock, I throw it" (204).

In a letter Celie writes to Nettie, she says that she knows Nettie is not dead. She says, “How can you be dead if I still feel you? Maybe like God, you changed into something different that I’ll have to speak to in a different way, but you not dead to me Nettie” (Walker 267). Celie subsequently begins the last letter of the book with: “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (292).

Conclusion

In the beginning of this essay, I asserted that if one’s notions of who God is/what God is do not affirm who one is, then one must break with those notions of God on the basis that they are harmful and thus maliciously detrimental. We have seen the dangers of the “Father God” metaphor through both *The Color Purple* and feminist and womanist thought. When God is imaged solely in male form, it is easier for men to claim divinity as God’s elect sex. I would agree with both Ruether and Daly that male language to describe God must lose its privileged place. As Daly says, to not castrate this phallogocentric morality is to condone the castration of women. If we are truly to be a liberated people on the side of survival, then harmful notions of God that condone violence and oppression must lose their hold. As Weems shows us, metaphors hurt, even if only in words.

Looking at *The Color Purple*, one can see that Walker has set up a paradigm in which God is within and without. Like Ruether’s notion of the God/ess that leads one back to his or her converted center of harmonization of body and self and self and the world, the God as presented by Shug and Celie also leads one on an inward journey that results in the rebuilding of right relations between self and others, self and nature, and self and God. Shug says that God is everything that is or ever will be – the I am who I shall be God. It is only by breaking with

sexist, racist, and over-and-against patriarchal hermeneutics of God that we can truly begin to experience the fullness of who/what God is. Like Celie, I believe the widespread hurt and hopelessness of our society beckons us to reevaluate how we talk about and relate to God; we are being called to talk about God differently. However, I believe that to get to a better understanding of who/what God is, we must first be open to experiencing God in new ways.

Another important task that I believe must be done is the de-canonization of the bible. All of the scholars whose works are explored above say that one could not completely scrap the bible because there are some glimpses of a liberating message, as well as material that has supported and sustained many individuals through hope. While I agree that the bible should not be scraped, I also believe that to leave the bible in its elevated, canonized space is to ultimately elevate and canonize patriarchy. As long as this patriarchal text is canonized, then patriarchy will be affirmed under the sacred canopy of biblical witness. In canonizing and absolutizing the biblical witness, we miss out on ways in which God is working and incarnate in history today.

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