

# DUALISM AND THE NATURE OF EVIL IN FEMINIST THEOLOGY

Rosemary Radford Ruether

Western religious and philosophical thought, with its various syntheses of Hebrew, Greek and Christian themes, exhibits a tendency to identify ontological dualism, spirit and matter, mind and body, with a good/evil dichotomy. This, in turn, becomes identified with gender and class hierarchy. Ruling class males come to be seen as closer to mind and reason, women and lower class people as closer to the bodily. They are more 'carnal', both in the sense of irrational, prone to sensual impulses, and in the sense of more prone to evil.

This pattern of thought is particularly developed in Plato and Aristotle. Christianity took over these patterns but also exhibited countervailing theories of evil. Augustine rejected Manichean dualism for a view of evil centered on spiritual arrogance; i.e. pride, although he also thought this was expressed in the sensual body out of control of reason.<sup>1</sup> Romantic, post-Christian thought, which has influenced some trends of feminism, comes close to reversing this dualism. The body, women and the 'natural' world become identified together as spontaneous goodness, while evil becomes a particularly masculine human trait, one that sets the sovereign mind over the bodily world and makes it a tool of domination of all that is 'other'.<sup>2</sup>

In this essay I wish to explore this pattern of defining good and evil as an absolute dichotomy which is then connected with the mind-body dualism. This, in turn, is identified with the male/female dualism, either in its masculinist form, which sees 'female sensuality' as the problem, or in its feminist version that sees masculine intellectual pride as the problem. I will begin by analysing the Greek patriarchal version of this pattern of thought and its descendents.

<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 7.16.

<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of the historical roots and contemporary forms of romantic feminism, see Rosemary R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), pp. 104-109.

## DUALISM AND THE NATURE OF EVIL IN FEMINIST THEOLOGY

Logically, the classification of gender (as well as class or race) distinctions in terms of the dualisms of mind/body, active/passive, reason/passions seem to be a category mistake. Men and women, nobility and peasants, whites and blacks are all human beings. They share the same species nature. Differences of gender, class or race cannot be categorized as ontological or psychic opposites, for this would mean that these human groups would have no common human nature. They would have opposite, mutually exclusive characteristics.

But this dualizing pattern of thought, projected into gender, class and race distinctions, is not an 'innocent' intellectual error. It is fundamentally a social ideology. Thereby males of the ruling class and racial/cultural group define subjugated groups, women, slaves and serfs and conquered races in relation to themselves. These 'others' are defined as inherently different and inferior to themselves, thereby justifying their 'natural' right to rule over them. Social domination of men over women, whites over blacks, masters over slaves is defined as a reflection of the natural hierarchy of being in which mind must rule over body, the rational over the irrational.

If this is a false construction of human relations, does it also rest on a false construction of ontology as well? Have we come to see reality itself in a falsely dualistic way, dichotomized into separate kinds of being that can exist apart from each other; i.e. mind or soul and 'dead matter'. On one side stands Pure Spirit, Pure Goodness and Truth, which Christianity identified with God; on the other side, 'brute' matter that also comes to be seen as the principle of evil. Inter-human hierarchy, as well as the hierarchy of humans over animals, is then defined as graduations of mixtures of spirit and matter. This is also understood as a hierarchy of value and of power, a hierarchy of better over worse, and of the rule of the higher over the lower.

The above schematic description comes partly from Plato and partly from Aristotle. In his *Timaeus* Plato starts his creation story with the primal ontological dualism of mind and matter. These are then brought together in the intermediate reality of the cosmos, composed of its spherical, hierarchically-ordered body and the world soul that animates it and sets it in motion. The left over 'dregs' of the world soul are made into the souls of humans, originally shown in the stars to receive a pre-incarnational, contemplative infusion of truth from the world of Ideas.

The souls are then incarnate in human bodies, created by the lower planetary gods, and receive the task of governing these unruly vehicles. If the soul succeeds in this task, 'he . . . was to return and dwell in his native star, and there he would have a blessed and congenial existence. But if he failed in attaining this, at the second birth he would pass into a woman, and if, when in that state of being, he did not desist from evil, he would continually be changed into some brute who resembled him

## STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

in the evil nature which he had acquired'.<sup>3</sup> Only by working his way back to male (ruling class) form through reincarnation, can the soul finally achieve its destiny of escape from the cycle of reincarnation, returning to its original disembodied form in the stars.

In this passage one gets a clear sense that in Plato the hierarchy of (human) male over (human) female over animal is seen as reflecting a descending hierarchy of good over evil, the rational over the bodily. In Plato's myth of the fall of the soul in the *Phaedrus*, this idea is supplemented by the concept of a descending hierarchy of reincarnation that corresponds to class hierarchy and more or less noble states of life (all human males), ending in the fall into animal form.<sup>4</sup>

This conflation of ontological, moral and gender hierarchy seems contradicted in Plato's *Republic*. Here Plato defines justice as the right ordering of society. Right order in society reflects the right ordering of the three components of the soul, mind, will and appetites. These correspond to the three social classes of philosopher, Guardians and workers. When each is in its proper 'place', reason governing will and appetites, philosophers governing guardians and workers, both self and society are 'just' and healthy. When they are 'disordered', will and appetites out of control of reason, self and society become unjust.

However, in striking contrast to the segregation of women in Athenian society, Plato does not equate women with appetites, but claims that women are equally capable of all three states of life. They are to be philosophers, Guardians and workers. Here Plato's view of class hierarchy as reflecting ontological and moral hierarchy seems qualified when it is apparent that he also regards women as distinctly less capable than men of excellence in all three categories. Women will be inferior philosophers, inferior warriors and also inferior cooks compared to men.<sup>5</sup> Thus Plato's *Republic* reflects a gender hierarchy within each class. This too is seen as corresponding to ontological and moral hierarchy.

In Aristotle's *Politics* gender and class hierarchy is reduced to a simple dualism. Women and also slaves and barbarians reflect the bodily component which is naturally 'servile' *vis à vis* the Greek male ruling class who are the natural aristocrats of humanity. For Aristotle this gender and class hierarchy reflects the basic ontological and moral dualisms of mind over body, the active formative power over the passive material principle. The form/matter dualism for Aristotle defines the relationship of men to women, masters to slaves, Greeks

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, 42, from *The Dialogues of Plato*, B. Jowett, translator (New York: Random House, 1937), p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 248-9.

<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 5.455.

## DUALISM AND THE NATURE OF EVIL IN FEMINIST THEOLOGY

to Barbarians, (male) humans to animals and finally (male) humans to the use of tools.<sup>6</sup>

However, only in the case of women is the form/matter dualism constructed as an actual theory of biological generation. In Aristotle's *Generation of Animals* the reproductive relation is defined as the male seed shaping the female passive matter. Males are born when the male active power 'fully forms' the passive female matter. Women are born when this process is defective, and the passive female matter is not fully formed.<sup>7</sup> This gives Aristotle a biological argument for women's innate inferiority and subjugation. They are inherently defective, weaker in mind, will and body, and so are incapable of self-government. Hence they must be ruled by males, who alone possess human nature in its fullness.

Patristic and medieval Christianity made selective syntheses of these Platonic and Aristotelean views of gender hierarchy in relation to ontological dualism and moral values. Absolute equation of men with soul and women with body was prevented by the fundamental Christian tenet that women and men were both saved by Christ, both are equally baptizable and equivalent holiness is attainable by either sex. But this affirmation of ultimate spiritual equality is offset by various theories of women's bodily, mental and spiritual inferiority and their necessary social subjugation.<sup>8</sup>

In Augustine these two aspects of equivalence and subordination are reflected in an unresolved contradiction between his belief that women are equally capable of holiness in redemption and his dichotomizing of the external social relations of men and women. In this realm of social relations women are said to 'symbolize' the body in relation to its head.<sup>9</sup> Augustine sees female subordination, reflecting the subordination of the body to its ruling mind, as the original 'order of creation'.

This view affects Augustine's definition of the original 'imago dei' in 'man'. In his treatise on the Trinity Augustine argues that the man alone possesses the image of God 'in himself', while the woman possesses the image of God only in a secondary manner, under the male as her head.<sup>10</sup> How this symbolic and social relation relates to women's own nature remains unclear in Augustine.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254a-b.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, 729, 737-8, 775.

<sup>8</sup> Kari Borreson, *Subordination and Equivalence: The Nature and Role of Women in Augustine and Aquinas*. (French original, 1968) (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981).

<sup>9</sup> See the discussion of Augustine's view of woman as 'image of the body', in Rosemary Ruether, "Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church," in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, Rosemary Ruether, ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), pp. 156-166.

<sup>10</sup> *de trinitate*, 7.7.10.

## STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

In Aquinas there is no doubt that women are inferior in their nature as females. Aquinas takes over the Aristotelian biological definition of woman as 'defective males', lacking the fullness of human nature mentally, morally and physically. He uses this to argue that women are under male subjugation in nature. This leads to the further belief that, in the order of redemption, Christ had to be male in order to possess the fullness of human nature, and only the male can 'represent' Christ. This, in turn, limits priesthood to males.<sup>11</sup> (This argument against women's ordination continues in Roman Catholicism today, although oddly shorn of its anthropological underpinnings in the assumption of women's natural inferiority.)<sup>12</sup> Yet for Aquinas women are still included in redemption.

How did this interconnection of ontological, moral and gender dualisms get put together in Western thought? (There are parallels in Asian religious philosophies, but that is beyond the scope of this discussion.) It seems we have here a fusion or confusion of three very different distinctions, the Is/ought distinction, the self/other (us/ them) distinction and the subject/object distinction. These three have not only been conflated, but this takes place in the context of a power relationship where the male ruling class stands as the defining center, assuming its right to dominate and control all creaturely things which are 'other'.

In the Is/ought distinction we have what I take to be an essential aspect of the development of human consciousness and moral awareness. This takes place as humans stand out from their environment and imagine alternatives to what is. This itself involves a critique of what is, locating the elements of the present situation that are hurtful and imagining better alternatives. However, in reality these are relativities. If it is too cold, one imagines an improved situation of greater warmth, while if it is too hot, one imagines an improved situation of greater coolness.

In this situation the optimum is not one side of an absolute dualism, but the mean between opposite extremes. Is this the case with moral issues; i.e. is loving kindness between people a mean between extremes of self-negating altruism and other-negating egoism? We will come back to this question later in this essay, but, at least at this stage of the discussion, the translation of the Is/ought distinction into an absolutized dichotomy between 'good and evil' is problematic. It imagines that there exists an absolute, unchanging 'good' that can be established by eliminating its opposite.

A second basic aspect of human consciousness takes the form of defining the boundaries of the self over against the non-self, in the

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, p. 1, q. 92.

<sup>12</sup> *Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood* (Vatican City, 1976), 27.

## DUALISM AND THE NATURE OF EVIL IN FEMINIST THEOLOGY

sense of other beings, humans, animals, plants, rocks, etc. The boundary drawing between human and non-human is not so obvious in human consciousness as we Western people might assume. Many tribal people identify their group, or groups within their group, with particular animal and plant totems. These animals and plants thus are part of the circle of the 'we'.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, the distinction between an individualized 'I' and the collectives by which one is identified is slow to emerge in human culture, particularly for women and non-elites. It is still not clear-cut for us (Western intellectuals) today, however individualized we may think ourselves to be. When asked 'who are you?', most people would reply with their personal name and then go on to identify their group identities, starting with their employment. Gender, family, class, race, nation and religion are also integral to a person's collective 'I'. We have an I only by locating ourselves as members of collectives.

Finally, a third aspect of consciousness is the gradual differentiation between subject and object, rooted in the distinction between the internal awareness of oneself thinking and feeling and that which the senses, particularly that of sight, locates as external objects. These boundaries also have been blurred in much of human culture, as thinking and feeling has been externalized and attributed to beings other than humans.

A complete dualism of subject and object, in which only humans (male elites) are presumed to be properly thinking subjects, and all non-humans are defined as 'dead matter', objects without subjectivity, reaches its extreme form in Cartesian dualism. Only then in Western scientific and philosophical thought were animate spirits driven out of nature. The result was also to throw into question how mind and matter (and, finally, how God and nature) are related to all.<sup>14</sup>

The fusion of ontological, moral and sociological distinctions in Greek philosophy and classical Christianity represents a certain effort to define these distinctions and relate them together in a total system of both thought and cosmology. The distinction between consciousness and objects of sight is reified as the primary ontological dualism of 'spirit and matter'. This, in turn, is identified with an absolutized moral distinction between good and evil.

The defining social group (elite Greek males) identified their capacity to think with an abstracted spiritual realm of thought, which is 'the good'. They projected upon others, women, servants, barbarians and animals, the qualities of devalued 'body', which expresses the principle

<sup>13</sup> Thus, for example, my Zimbabwean doctoral student, Tumani Mutasa Nyajeka, in the Shona culture, belongs to the Zebra 'praise group'.

<sup>14</sup> For an analysis of Cartesian thought and its effect on Western scientific culture, see Morris Berman, *The Re-enchantment of the World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).

## STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

of evil. This takes place in the context of a claimed power relation, i.e., the defining males assume that they are also the privileged center with a right to rule over and define these others as subject to their power, and these others lack the capacity and right to define or govern themselves.

Since all the 'others' are defined through a similar lens in relation to the normative males, the ideological definitions of each of these others are analogous. All the others are perceived in some sense as versions of bad body, i.e. bodiliness which should be subordinate to its ruling head, but is actually insubordinate and therefore demands repression and punishment. We can compare these ideologies toward women, blacks, slaves or workers and people of other religions, such as Jews.

Toward women there is the idea that they are intrinsically more sensual and less capable of reason and moral self-control than men. They should be subordinate to men as their heads, but in fact they use their unstable thinking and fickle feelings to subvert male control. For Christianity, it was through this femaleness that sin came into the world in the beginning, causing the loss of original goodness or the primal paradise. Women's subordination is therefore to be re-enforced as punishment for this primal and continuing sin of Eve, characteristic of women.

Toward slaves and servants, particularly when this is re-enforced by differences of light and dark skin color, 'light and dark' becomes fused with 'good and evil'. Darker servant people are assumed by their very physiology to reveal their more sensuous and less intellectual natures than their light-skinned rulers. This stupid and sensuous nature fits them only for servile physical tasks. These 'brute' people are imagined to be dangerous as well, filled with a volatile physical energy that demands continual repression lest it break into revolt, in both physical and sexual violence.

The projection of the qualities of 'bad body in revolt' is more subtle when construed as the characteristics of people of other religions, such as Judaism (today Western religious hostility focuses more on Islam). Jews were historically seen by Christians as possessing a perverted 'intellectual sensuality'. Their religion was mere letter and externality, compared with Christian spirituality and grace. (Male) Jews were seen as conniving and filled with cunning avarice, ever plotting to subvert Christian civilization and replace it with a demonic caricature.

As soon as one begins to analyse these ideological projections toward the sensual 'others', over against the rational, controlling 'us', one becomes aware that such ideologies are confused mixtures. They typically contain elements of three different stances toward the 'others', which I will call 'exploitation', 'demonization' and 'idealization'.

The ideology of exploitation rationalizes the 'other' as docile servants, who by their very nature are simple-minded, incapable of complex

## DUALISM AND THE NATURE OF EVIL IN FEMINIST THEOLOGY

thought and fitted only to do the menial tasks for those who thereby become a leisure group. This ideology dominates when the ruling group feels securely in control. The basic model for this ideology is provided by the domestic animal; the others are like 'mules', 'cows', 'dogs', 'hens', 'pigs', etc.

Yet hiding in this ideology is an insecure fear of the dominated as plotting against their 'betters', about to explode in repressed energy to destroy their rule. When fear of the other dominates, the others become demonized. Women become witches, plotting in league with the devil to subvert male power. Jews become diabolic agents also plotting with the devil to subvert Christianity. Blacks become rapists, wielding the knife in the dark. The demonized 'other' becomes 'demonic matter', 'dirt' which 'pollutes' and contaminates, 'vermin' which spreads contagious disease. (This was also a favorite analogy in Christianity for heretics.) This is the rhetoric of extermination, for demonic matter is not useable. It has no right to exist and must be 'purged'.

But there also lurks in the ideology of the dominated other a counter-theme of idealization. The other is also seen as representing unfallen or innocent 'goodness', in harmony with 'nature', and uncomplicated by alienated intellectuality and power. The innocent, unfallen woman is the 'virgin-mother', combining sexual innocence and altruistic love for the male child. The innocent black or servant is the 'kindly darky', dancing and singing in spontaneous happiness, nurturing the master's child on his (or her) knee with songs and stories. The good Jew is to some extent the Old Testament heroes, prophets and saints, but finally good Jesus, our ideal human self shorn of sin.

What do we do with these patterns of dualism and ideological projection of the negative (or the ideal) upon the dominated other? I suggest that we need two kinds of revolution. We need to transform the social relations of domination and subjugation for a relation, personal and social, of shared power, expressed in liberal ideology too individualistically as 'equal rights'. But we also need a new culture that gives to all people their human complexity. We need to recognize in both men and women, in both blacks and whites, in both Christians and Jews their full human capacities for sensuality and spirituality, thought and feeling, activity and passivity, finally both good and evil.

While recognizing the complexity of humanness in every person and group, one does not slight either real differences in individual moral development, or differences of power and privilege that have made some groups much more able to oppress other than has been the case with those on the underside of such relationships. But this is not to be construed as a reversed dualistic ideology in which those regarded as the 'oppressed' and the 'victims' become paradigms of indefectable nobility and goodness, while those with historical power are capable only of vicious meanness.

## STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Much of our disappointment with 'failed revolutions' has come about because there is insufficient attention to structuring just relations which genuinely give to all their due as persons deserving respect, participation in power and the meeting of basic needs, while curbing the tendencies to exploitation that are also present in all people. Instead good and evil have been 'naturalized' as the 'natures' of women versus men, workers versus capitalists, blacks versus whites, Jews versus gentiles. It is assumed that if only the noble victims gain power, they will automatically do things better because they innately *are better*.

This means, I believe, that we have to reject all classifications of human groups along lines of differences of gender, class, race, religion or culture based on ontological and moral dualisms of mind/body, rational/irrational, active/passive, good/evil. This means one starts with a proposition of a common humanness possessed by all humans. This surely doesn't mean that all human beings are 'the same', but rather that what is specific to biological and cultural particularities and to individual gifts and development are complex syntheses within this whole range of human capacities and this is shaped historically in contexts of unequal privilege and opportunity.

Before facing the underlying question of the definition of good and evil and hence of feminist ethics, we need first to deconstruct ontological dualism and its false identification with gender and other sociological hierarchies. We need to ask why we have seen reality in terms of a split of spirit and matter, mind and body. This split is linked with how we have defined the 'soul' as a spiritual self, survivable in disembodied form. This, in turn, has defined 'God' as the ultimate disembodied, sovereign Mind.

Our minds or capacities for thinking and feeling are not some detachable spiritual substance separable from our bodies, which are merely the external vehicle of the 'soul'. Rather one might say that consciousness and feeling are our experience of the inferiority of our organism at a high level of centralized development in our brains and central nervous systems. The self-organizing animation of organisms, which moves toward increasing centralization and increasing capacity to feel and to be conscious of one's experience, is very mysterious. Both reduction of the organism to its chemistry and the notion of the detachable soul fail to do justice to psycho-somatic unity as the interiority and exteriority of a personal organism.

But personal consciousness, however wonderful, is not (in my view) separable from the organism which is its somatic expression. Death is the breaking of the connection that holds this organism together as a living whole. Consciousness, breathing, the circulation of chemical cease, and the organism itself begins to disintegrate into its chemical components. Every molecule of our bodies, even in living bodies, are continually changing, recycled endlessly through other

## DUALISM AND THE NATURE OF EVIL IN FEMINIST THEOLOGY

organic and inorganic forms. The discrete 'selves' at the heart of organisms, at different levels of sentience and consciousness, depending on organic centralization, are both precious centers of experience and yet ultimately insubstantial, disappearing when the living bonds that hold the organism together are broken.

Can the traditional Christian dualism of God and material creation survive this deconstruction of the soul-body dualism? Not, I think, in its traditional form, since it was based on a projection of the soul-body dualism. This does not mean that one thinks of the universe as soulless 'matter in motion', for this Darwinian view of nature is itself one side of the soul-matter dualism from which soul and then God have been eliminated.

Rather I think we need to think of the universe as a living, self-organizing whole in continual process. The cosmos itself continually evolves, spinning out stars, planets and galaxies from a centralized vortex of concentrated energy. The planet earth, a minor planet in a minor galaxy, but where alone (as far as we know) life and consciousness have evolved, is itself a living organism, continually adapting its interdependent relations of biota and environment.<sup>15</sup>

Within this process living organisms continually arise, develop as centers of experience, and then disintegrate back into matter/energy, to rise again in new formations. Where is God in this? Not, I think, as detached consciousness outside and ruling over this process, but rather its living matrix of matter/energy itself, from which this process continually arises and returns and which also holds the whole together in mutually interacting relationality.

Transcendence/immanence and spirit/matter dualisms need to be redefined as dynamic unities. The creative dance of energy that underlies the coming into being of molecular particles, atoms, molecules, inorganic and organic beings, and the interconnections of the whole that link the entire cosmic process together through all space and time, is finally one. God is at one and the same time beyond and within the whole cosmic process.<sup>16</sup>

The great 'mind' 'heart' or 'Thou' we encounter in each self and in our contemplative wonder at the 'all' is the self at the heart of the whole cosmic process of which our small selves are fleeting reflections and articulations. Each fleeting self is the great divine Self, manifesting itself, speaking its word. In each fleeting consciousness the Great cosmic self becomes conscious of itself.

<sup>15</sup> This understanding of the earth as a living organism, or the 'Gaia hypothesis', has been developed particularly by British biologist, James Lovelock. See his *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford University Press, 1979); also *The Ages of Gaia: A Biography of our Living Earth* (New York: Norton, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> This insight into the compatibility of the new physics and Asian spirituality was developed by Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics* (New York: Bantam, 1977).

## STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Is it possible to speak of 'good and evil', once ontological dualism has been deconstructed? Can there be any ethics in cosmic process? I believe that there is an ethics implicit in healthy biotic relationality. This develops into conscious, voluntary mandate in that part of life, humans, which have become self-conscious. This ethic is not based on setting one part of reality, body, over against another, mind, regarding the one as the principle of evil and the second as the principle of good. Rather, good and evil, and hence ethics, are rooted in relationality itself, life-sustaining and renewing relationality versus a distorted relationality that destroys both sides of the relationship.

In discussing distorted relationality as culpable evil or 'sin', it is essential to distinguish this from qualities in nature which cause us great pain, such as chaotic turbulences, and the limits of individual organic life, or finitude. The Christian doctrine of sin fuses together the Jewish ethical concept of culpable self-will against the will of God with the Greek metaphysical view of evil as mortality and becoming. The result is a view of sin in which humans are both totally culpable for all evil, including the 'fallenness' of nature, and even for their own mortality,<sup>17</sup> and yet incapable of authentic goodness by their own choice.

We need to distinguish between tragedy and sin, between the turbulence of nature beyond our control and the limits of life in the mortality of all organisms, and culpable evil. Culpable evil is that sphere of distorted relationality which lies within the sphere of human freedom, for which we bear some responsibility and have some capacity for change.

Mortality is not our fault, nor is escape from it within our capacities. Mature spirituality must free us from ego-clinging for an acceptance of the life processes of birth, growth, decline and death, and the renewal of life in the disintegration and reconstitution of the molecular components of beings, of which we are inescapably a part, along with all other organisms. Within the bounds of finitude and morality there is also missed plenitude that is outside our control and decisionmaking, that is tragic, but is not 'sin'.

What is appropriately called sin belongs to that specific sphere of human freedom where we have the possibility of enhancing life or stifling it. When distorted, it becomes the realm where competitive hate abounds and also where there is passive acquiescence to needless victimisation of ourselves or others. It is not easy to demarcate exactly this region of culpable evil, for the boundaries of freedom and fate are fluid and have changed with the acquisition of new types of power.

<sup>17</sup> The belief that humans originally were immortal and death came about through sin is an integral part of the classic Christian understanding of the Fall. See Augustine's *On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins*, 1, 3-5.

## DUALISM AND THE NATURE OF EVIL IN FEMINIST THEOLOGY

Humans have greatly expanded their control over things once thought unchangeable.

The central issue of sin as distinct from finitude is the misuse of freedom to exploit other humans and non-humans and thus to violate the basic relations that sustain life. Life is sustained by a biotic relationality in which the whole attains a certain optimum plenitude through mutually limiting interdependency. When one part of the relationship of a community exalts itself at the expense of the other members, life is diminished for the other members. Ultimately the exploiters also subvert the basis of their own life as well. An expanding cycle of poisonous hostility and violence is generated.

Sin as distorted relationality has three dimensions, an interpersonal dimension, a social-historical dimension, and an ideological-cultural dimension. One has to give due recognition to all three dimensions. On the interpersonal level, sin is the distortion of relationship in which one person or group absolutizes their rights to life and power over against the other members with whom they are interdependent.

Thus, for example, in male-female relations men have exalted themselves as those members of the family system with the superior right to leisure and to the privileges of power and cultural development. Women have been denied the rights of human development in order to become servants of male self-expansion. In a similar way the master-slave relationship made conquered people the bodily instruments of daily work, so a privileged group could enjoy the fruits of their labor.

Christianity has not been entirely wrong in seeing the heart of this sinful relationality as the sin of 'pride', an egoistic selfishness that reduces all about one to objectified instrumentality. But I believe that 'pride' is only part of the story of distorted relationship. Underlying aggressive egoism are the less named sins of passivity, insecure fearfulness and the lack of a grounded self which allow one to acquiesce to one's own victimization or the victimization of others. Aggressive pride can abound only when maintained and fed by acquiescence. One needs to see both sides of the pathological relationship to understand its nature.

This is not simply a question of men sinning through pride and women through passivity, as some of the early ventures of feminist ethics tended to suggest.<sup>18</sup> Naming passivity as well as pride as components of sin was a distinct advance in ethical understanding of pathological distortion of relationships, but dividing it neatly by gender is too simple. Although women have been directed to accept passivity as feminine 'virtue', they also exist within class and race

<sup>18</sup> For example, in Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington, D.C.: University of America Press, 1980).

## STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

hierarchies and evince exploitative hauteur toward those under their power.

While males have been directed to be the self-confident dominators in relation to women, at the heart of patriarchal masculinity lies a basic insecurity that sustains the cycle of dominating violence. Every male who grows to manhood in mother-centered child-raising is engaging in overcoming the male child dependent on a mother who was once larger and more powerful than he. Thus at the heart of every male effort to dominate woman as wife is the lingering fear of woman as 'great mother'.

The more insecure his 'manhood', the more the male in patriarchal society needs to aggressively put down his wife in order to emancipate himself from his mother. Thus the need for secure, dominating power at the heart of egoistic aggression is an unending cycle, feeding on the unsatiated void of the insecure, ungrounded self, with its unresolved fears of vulnerability and dependency.

Although the roots of domination in the insecure self is most obvious in gender relations, it lies at the heart of every dominating and exploitative relationship. White racists need continually to control and punish blacks, Christians need to repress and marginalize Jews, Israeli Jews need continually to punish and marginalize Palestinians, the militarist needs enemies and ever larger and more total systems of military might. All these violent, exploitative relationships are fed by deep insecurity and fears of vulnerability.

The cycle of violence is fed by the fantasy that if more and more power is gained over the subjugated 'other', the possibility that they might threaten one's power over them will finally be crushed, and the other can be reshaped as a totally docile instrument of benefit to oneself. This can never be done 'perfectly', and so the punitive, violent relation, which in turn feeds rebellious responses from the dominated, persists and grows.

But this pattern of domination and subjugation is also historical and social. We do not choose it consciously so much as we are born into it and are socialized to pattern ourselves within it as 'normal' and 'natural'. This is the collective, historical, inherited aspect of sin, which Christianity called 'original' sin, mistakenly seeing its inheritability as biological rather than social. It is also the aspect of sin which becomes unfreedom, a power that defines and controls us and which we feel powerless to change.

We are born into sexist, racist, classist, militarist systems of society. This shapes who we are from birth, and even before birth, for privilege and disprivilege mean that children are well or ill-nurtured even in the womb by availability or lack of good food and medical care for their mothers. Distorted relationship as sexism, racism, colonialism, etc. are legal, economic and political systems. They have shaped 'this world'.

## DUALISM AND THE NATURE OF EVIL IN FEMINIST THEOLOGY

Distorted relationship as evil systems of social exploitation are also maintained by ideological ideas which make themselves the hegemonic culture. This hegemonic culture makes such sinful relations appear, good, normal, natural and divinely given. To question or rebel against them is to rebel against nature and nature's God. Family, school, church, media all are enlisted to socialize both the disprivileged and the privileged to accept their 'place' and role in the systems of sin.

Yet we are not left without an 'imago dei', the intimations of healthy and life-giving relationality that persist in our intuitive sensibilities in spite of this ideological and social misshaping. Nor are we left without exemplars of good and life-giving relationality in friends, family, mentors in education, religion, even in work and politics. Culture and society are a struggle between these two 'tendencies', the tendency to just and loving relation and the tendency to hostile exploitation and negation of ourselves and others.

Good lies in enhancing our capacities, both personally and socially, for sustaining just and loving relationality, curbing and curing fear and contempt for others and for ourselves. Good does not lie in some part of our beings, our minds or our bodies, our erotic sensuality or our cool rationality. It lies in the transformative metanoia and slow maturation of a grounded self in community, able to be both self-affirming and other-affirming in life-enhancing mutuality. It is both a gift and a task, grace and work.

Moreover, good relationality cannot end with the individual, although it must relate to each person in community. It must become a new social order, a new system of economics, politics and law. It must be reflected in non-exploitative technologies that allow us to sustain our relation to nature, as well to each other, in a life-enhancing way. It also must become a new culture, religion, art, education and media of communication. It must shape both who we are and how we tell our children who they are to become.

It is a never completed or perfected process. There will be no millennium when it is established 'once-for-all'. Rather we must take up the task in each day, in each relationship, in each generation, to enhance loving, truthful and just relations, and curb and cure hate, fear and violence. In this way we receive and manifest the redemptive work of God.