

Reconstructing Women's Religious Agency: Critical Feminist Perspectives and the *Ekklesia* of Women¹

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[W]omen's religious-theological heritage ... is misrepresented when it is understood solely as the history of oppression. It also must be reconstituted as a history of liberation and of religious agency (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:36).

The central issues I wish to address in this essay concern the relationship between the sociological production of knowledge about religion and feminist critiques of this production. The arguments that follow are based on the notion that the production of all knowledges is socially constructed and, as such, knowledge therefore represents a site of struggle, a political terrain. The construction of women's religious agency and women's experience of religion is therefore highly contested. Yet the reconstitution of women's religious history as one of liberation and religious agency is a crucial task in decentring androcentric texts and ideologies. This paper examines the politics of constructing emancipatory forms of religious agency at the level of epistemology or theories of knowledge.

Feminist theory has dealt in depth with issues of knowledge and power and how oppressive gendered relations are epistemologically

valorised (Grosz 1988; Nicholson 1991; Alcoff and Potter 1992). This paper deals specifically with epistemic privilege in the social theory of religion and feminist critical responses to this. Feminist voices in this area cross several discipline boundaries. In particular, anthropological, sociological and theological voices have contributed to re-situating women's religious experiences within a framework that explores agency and participation and is not reliant on patriarchal assumptions. The central argument of this paper is that traditional sociological perspectives, such as those exemplified by Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, have obscured women's agency and are heavily prescriptive and functionalist in terms of women's religious participation. Therefore, feminist theory needs to build a framework for analysing women and religion which is able to locate women's agency as pro-emancipatory and anti-oppression. Feminist postmodernist perspectives provide such a framework from which to evaluate and refigure the politics of modernity: emancipation, participation, democratisation and agency are developed alongside pluralism, diversity and community as ways of creating a discursive space from which women's religious agency can be viewed.

The first framework of knowledge I will examine is Weber's rationality thesis. Notions of the value of a rational basis for the development of capitalist society were articulated by Max Weber and then developed by Jürgen Habermas in particular. The importance of the rationality thesis is that it has dominated epistemological discourses on contemporary social knowledge.

Weber's rationality thesis (1964[1922]; 1976[1958]), which examined the material and ideological forces that shaped religious practice and belief, has had a profound effect on the study of religion within Western scholarship, especially within the sociology of religion. Many of the epistemological and methodological assumptions that Weber established are still uncritically operative within Western discourses on religion. However, when feminist critical discourse (Erickson 1989; Jay 1991; McPhillips 1993a) is applied to theories of rationality, these assumptions are exposed to reveal a moral position in relation to gender relations which reinforces the subordination and/or the exclusion of women from culture-creating activity. That is, instrumental rationalist theories of agency and, in particular, women's religious agency rely on notions of goal-oriented, individualistic, public-based action as essential to the creation of the social subject. What are the consequences of using this model of agency to assess women's experience of religion? And how has such a model influenced feminist thought?

The second knowledge framework takes issue with these rationalist constructions of women's religious agency from feminist perspectives.

As argued above, these theoretical perspectives have emerged from anthropology, sociology and theology (Atkinson *et al.* 1985; Eck and Jain 1986; Erickson 1989; Falk and Gross 1980; Holden 1983; Schüssler Fiorenza 1983), and have utilised various epistemological and political tools from which to analyse patriarchal constructions of women's religious experiences. Generally, feminist theory has argued that contemporary knowledge of women and religion derives from androcentric world-views. In order to shift such a world-view from the primary place of analysis, feminist theory has placed women's religious experiences within a more complex framework. It is not simply that women are oppressed by religious institutions and that agency is tied to formalised, public expressions of faith (Eck and Jain 1986; Atkinson *et al.* 1985). Women experience religion as a contradiction where it is simultaneously a source of oppression and liberation. The locus of religious agency is then shifted from male-identified forms to a more complex base where women are seen as historical agents in their own right. However, such theory has remained tied to a binary framework which is characteristic of the rationality thesis. Hence, this position affirms that women's religious agency was based on the ability to create culture. But it also fortified the problem of dualism rather than challenging it.

Recent feminist arguments have begun to explore alternative discourses of religious agency that attempt to critically evaluate the impact of dualistic structures on the production of knowledges and to develop positive constructions of religious agency. In this framework there may well be a future for discourses of rationality but only where a reconstructed notion of the subject, and hence agency is operative. Such an epistemology is emerging, I will argue, from the recent critical feminist theological perspective of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1983; 1993a). Schüssler Fiorenza's (1983) notion of agency is based on the concept of the *ekklesia* of women.² This concept holds multiple meanings and dimensions: moral, political, historical, epistemological and religious arenas are layered through the idea of the *ekklesia*. Most importantly, the *ekklesia* represents a discursive space from which to explore the dimensions of positive emancipatory strategies for women's religious agency.

The sociology of religion has relied extensively on specific understandings of social life. Feminist critiques of these discourses have argued for specific epistemological refigurings of the gender assumptions underlying such social theory. But are they successful in resolving the deficiencies of androcentric theory? Can the *ekklesia* resolve the dilemmas of androcentric knowledge structures? The conclusion takes up this question and the implications for further feminist research.

The Construction of Agency in Discourses of Rationality

Max Weber and Emile Durkheim presented a tremendous challenge to early twentieth-century debates on religion when they argued that religion must be understood as a social process. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1976), Weber looked specifically at this process of the rationalisation of religious structures and he argued that the Calvinist ethic, embodied in Protestantism, provided the necessary "spirit" required to bring a particular form of rationality to religious practices. This spirit then encouraged capitalist forms of economic organisation. Weber argued that in salvationist style religions, belief and practice were mediated through the development of formal structures which were in the process of continual routinisation and rationalisation. This process of rationalisation not only affected belief patterns but underpinned the bureaucratic structures of capitalism. Thus ideas and material practices were intimately bound to each other in social life.

Although Weber was highly critical of the particular form of technological rationalisation (*Gemeinschaft*) which prioritised economic imperatives above a more humanitarian form of rationality (*Gesellschaft*), he argued that this rationalism of social life was inevitable. The problem which Weber identified and which contemporary feminism continues to struggle with is this: that the progressive rationalisation of social life was indeed a force of emancipation from traditional forms of authority, such as those that were embedded in patriarchy, but the cost of this process was the subsequent loss of meaning and the disenchantment of life. Women, therefore, can seek emancipation by moving away from the private sphere, which Weber identified as traditionalist, and into the public sphere – a rationalist domain. This rationalisation process entailed, however, the devaluation of all the "non-public" or "non-rationalist" processes such as those that occur within the home and include child-rearing, domesticity and love relations.

Weber argued (1964:46-60) that the alternative religious force to instrumental rationality was the charismatic personality, which is typically embodied in the personality of the prophet, and expressed through ecstatic religious practices: this force exemplified a value-based rationality. New religions are born from the influence of prophetic power and women in particular are drawn to them because they tend to offer equality to socially disprivileged groups as well as being highly expressive and ecstatic (1964:104-107). Weber argued that women have a "natural" receptivity to prophetic-style religion, but as the process of bureaucratic routinisation develops within the religious structure, so too does the marginalisation of women. Thus Weber sets up a dualism where women's status shifts according to the specific religious style.

Part of Weber's construction of gender relations is based on specific notions concerning religious agency. Either women are members of mainstream bureaucratised church structures where their participation is extremely limited or they belong to charismatic movements headed by (male) prophets where participation is more equal.³ Thus, women's agency is always determined for them by the structures they participate in. For Weber, there is no construction of agency within the private sphere: nurturing is considered to be a natural, non-social activity. Thus, the moral imperatives that are attached to Weber's ideals of what constitutes sociality and what does not is highly prescriptive in gender terms. Epistemologically, this means that social knowledge fails to incorporate all fields of human existence in an understanding of the world as a social entity (Yeatman 1986:159-160).

But such assumptions are themselves historically and socially produced. And because these assumptions are androcentric, information regarding women's lives will be consistently devalued and skewed. As Yeatman argues (1986:159), such androcentrism has been profoundly active in the history of social theory. For example, Durkheim had very similar presuppositions to those of Weber, and his arguments in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1976) are also androcentric, particularly with reference to the construction of the sacred-profane dichotomy. This dichotomy, which Durkheim argues is fundamental to religious structures, is presented as if it were gender neutral. Erickson (1989) argues strongly that such a presentation is highly deceptive in that it conceals the gendered component of the dichotomy. In fact, the sacred as masculinised incorporates agency and culture-creating activity. The profane is feminised and outside of culturally significant activity (1989:20).

I.M. Lewis (1971), the anthropologist, in a theoretical formulation typical of much cross-cultural work in this area, also presents the relationship between women and religion as a functionalist response to the social order. Lewis argues that women's status as victims of oppressive social structures explains their attraction to ecstatic cults. In his assessment, it is women's inferior status within established religions that draws them to less formalised, highly expressive forms of religious practice (1971:30-32). The underlying assumptions about gender relations are that women are highly emotional beings who are therefore drawn to expressive religious practices. The relationships between cause and effect are so simplistically and unilaterally bound to a binary structure that any analysis of the complexity of motivation is eliminated.

Analyses such as those of Weber, Durkheim and Lewis are typical of functionalist accounts of the role of women in religious structures. Women are seen as victims of oppressive social structures and their at-

traction to ecstatic cults is due to their inferior status in traditional religions. Although Weber and Lewis both argue that the religious setting provides a way in which women can redress social deprivation, their arguments are based on a view that prioritises women's attraction to "irrational" and highly emotional forms of religious expression, such as possession and shamanism. Whether these practices are irrational at all is highly debatable, and only a feminist analysis of gender relations within the societies concerned will reveal whether, firstly, these forms of religion are non-sexist, and secondly, if it is only women who are attracted to them.

The studies of women and religion by Lewis, Weber and Durkheim are examples of social theory interpreting the value of women's religious experiences from an androcentric perspective. This perspective also incorporates an assumed public stance which recognises agency in a particular form that does not incorporate the totality of social relations. I would suggest that it is not only inappropriate to assess women's religious agency, but *any* form of human agency in this theoretical framework. Challenging such androcentric constructions of women's religious experiences led feminist theory to develop critical epistemic perspectives that call into question the nature of knowledge as constructed in androcentric discourses, by creating a space from which women's experiences can be understood on their own terms. Elizabeth Grosz argues that feminist critique has created a discursive space which rejects the epistemic privilege of patriarchal texts:

An open avowal of the *masculinity of knowledges* is necessary for feminists to clear a space within the "universal" and to reclaim women's places within it (1988:97).

The next section takes up the ways in which critical feminist theory in religion has attempted to create this space.

Critical Feminist Perspectives

Feminist perspectives engaged in the historical and material conditions of women's lives (at a cross-cultural level) have clearly established that religion plays an ambiguous role in women's lives (Atkinson *et al.* 1985; Eck and Jain 1986; Holden 1983; Falk and Gross 1980). These theorists argue that the study of religion can provide the means of establishing a critical perspective on society, but it also needs to be recognised as part of women's cultural conditioning. The effect of such a position is two-fold. First, it provides the means by which feminist theory concerning religion can shift the focus of analysis from centralising women's "problematic" position in religious practices, to the androcentric construction

of those religious practices and texts themselves. Second, it broadens the limited notions of agency in such a way that women can be conceived as active historical agents rather than passive victims or objects of patriarchy. The debate about the social construction of religion is thus accorded the theoretical complexity that is required in order to appreciate the myriad social situations in which women participate. Atkinson argues that it was Elisabeth-Schüssler Fiorenza who first articulated this position:

[I]t is not sufficient simply to identify in any particular society the forms of oppression of women. An accurate sense of women's experience can come only from detecting *both* the ideologies and institutions that oppress and the struggle of women to create active and fulfilling lives for themselves and their daughters. If we look only for oppression we will miss the creativity with which women ... have foraged in their cultural environments for the tools with which to make their lives (Atkinson *et al.* 1985:3).

The positive focus on women's creative tasks and accomplishments enabled feminist theory to understand the processes through which women construct and create the patterns of living (Atkinson *et al.* 1985:3). The central questions in this framework consist of: how do women deal with oppression; and how do they develop creative responses within religious traditions? Is liberation possible within androcentric religious structures, or only outside of them? Have women developed religious practices that are not androcentric?

In addition, emphasising women's religious experiences changes the way it is possible to think about religion itself:

[T]he data on women's religious lives and, consequently, the interaction of women and men in religious systems as well are much richer and far more complex than anyone imagined when people were content to study "religious" man alone (Falk and Gross 1980:xvii-xviii).

Women as authors and participants in social change reveal a different impression of women and power from that provided by the traditional discourse as exemplified in the texts of Weber and Lewis.

In the early 1980s, feminist literature on the sociology of women and religion (Falk and Gross 1980; Holden 1983) focused on developing a critique of androcentric cultural practices. Women's religious experiences were examined from a cross-cultural perspective where patriarchy was presented as a universal, homogenous social reality. The details of women's lives varied but the broader picture remained unchanged: women were certainly oppressed by dominant religious practices, even if moments of liberation were possible. What was missing from this analysis was a critique of the epistemology on which such a sociology was based. That is,

women's religious experiences were explored within knowledge boundaries which remained largely uncritical of sociological methodology. For example, Pat Holden's anthology (1983) represents such a perspective, where the central issue is the exploration of various methods used for understanding religious experience. Because different methods stress different elements, she concludes that there is no common consensus on how to analyse religious experience across disciplines of knowledge. This approach effectively de-politicises the production of knowledge: issues of epistemology are seen as unrelated to the type of religious knowledge generated.

The consequence of this view is that constructions of religious life have been predicated on an uncritical acceptance of the public/private dualism. This acceptance of the social division of labour as a *description* of social life masks the *prescriptive* forces at play in inscribing gender relations across the public/private spheres. In this discourse, domesticity, unlike the classical rationality argument explored above, is incorporated into the social world but in such a way that it is devalued. That is, religion is defined normatively as a public action: institutional religious practices and what is "private" are hierarchalised. Holden's argument (1983:1) that the history of religious women is the history of saints and visionaries, is an example of an analysis which prioritises knowledge in the public arena where these women made such an impact. To explore the "private" sphere of religious activity from this position, however, devalues that sphere even before it has been textualised.

Later feminist theorists disagreed with this perspective and attempted to elevate the status of the private sphere by claiming it as a significant site of women's religious practices (Atkinson *et al.* 1985; Eck and Jain 1986). This allowed for the argument that, although women were devalued in the public arena, they were powerful within the private. However, the debate was still not addressing the central issue: that without a feminist critique of epistemological assumptions, a dualist framework (in this case the public/private dichotomy) acted to maintain androcentrism rather than to dismantle it.

This perspective clearly appreciates the fact that women are striving for autonomy and self-expression within the constraints of culturally prescribed values and practices. However, it is limited by its acceptance of dualism as an appropriate mode of social analysis. Thus the analysis of women and religion thus far is impoverished.

The oppressive dimensions of dualistic thinking, as static, absolute and ahistorical, have been well documented by feminist theory (Jay 1991; Ruether 1979). Yet, while feminist social theory has found it possible to develop complex understandings of the mechanisms of dualism, it has

found it difficult to re-figure it within the framework of modernity. While post-modernity has managed to move beyond dualist structures of knowledge, there has not been an adequate articulation of appropriate forms of political action. In terms of religious agency, these problems may well be related to the difficulty of "fleshing out" a positive theory and practice of emancipatory politics and appreciating what indeed *constitutes* oppression for different groups of women. Schüssler Fiorenza argues that, while we must recognise the difference and plurality of women's religious and social experiences, we are still strands of the same rope – an image which indicates multiplicity in unity (1993:326-328). That is, it is desirable to establish general normative understandings of what constitutes an ethics of emancipation which simultaneously recognise plurality, difference and inequality among women. Can such a position resolve the dilemmas of modernity and rationality, such as dualism? And does it present to us an alternative understanding of agency, indeed women's experience of religion?

The Re-Construction of Women's Religious Energy

The feminist project ... must search for ... a positive theoretical space because only a critical conceptual standpoint different from the binary gender system allows one to demystify it as cultural ideology (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:338).

Recent feminist thought has engaged with theories of modernity in order to explore particular notions of female subjectivity, agency and political action. This engagement has been possible through the development of postmodernist feminist perspectives, which have provided a space from which to re-work modernity issues and explore their potential for an emancipatory politics (Benhabib 1987; Johnson 1988; Jones 1990; Schüssler Fiorenza 1993b). In terms of women's religious agency, these theoretical perspectives have proven useful in understanding the political dimensions of the feminist religious movement and in expanding and re-evaluating feminist perspectives on modern religious life (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993a; McPhillips 1993b). It is these arguments that I wish to explore in this section. In particular, the theoretical position of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is important in her attempt to resolve some of the issues within the modernity debate and reconfigure our understanding of women's religious agency.

Schüssler Fiorenza's argument (1993a:307-372) contains two separate but related issues. It is in the discussion and attempted mediation of these variant positions that a feminist-inspired praxis, both as an epistemological discourse of knowledge and as a practice for emancipatory

religious forms, can be assessed for its usefulness in understanding women's religious experiences. I argue that Schüssler Fiorenza's "hermeneutics of suspicion" (1983) provides a methodological approach and that a material base or practice can be found in the notion of an *ekklesia* of women. The *ekklesia* of women is an attempt to construct an emancipatory politics. And because of this it presents us with an opportunity from which to explore the two relevant topics.

The first issue concerns the re-figuration and resolution of binary coding as an appropriate basis for methodology. The *ekklesia* creates a discursive space from which to critically evaluate dualist perspectives by challenging mainstream, patriarchal notions of religious experience which divide and colonise the social world into sacred and secular arenas according to class, gender, race and other social formations. In this context, Schüssler Fiorenza argues that patriarchal texts and a patriarchal church leadership must not be mistaken as *the* Church. According to Schüssler Fiorenza, women have been and are active agents of change within and without Church structures and, as a result, this fact needs to be highlighted. Dualism restricts the possibilities for social change by construing social relations as totalising:

In order to overcome these totalising either-or strategies, one needs to position and envision feminist movements and strategies for change differently: Beyond the romantic-liberal dualistic framework, different forms of the women's movement in society and religion must be critically analysed and assessed ... one needs to envision the different articulations of the feminist movement as the disparate strands of a rope (1993a:313).

This position allows us to see that the traditional focus on religion as an institution (cf. Holden 1983) narrows considerably the scope for an analysis of women's agency. It also represents a dramatic shift in perspective because it de-centres in praxis the cultural significance of the institutional church, something the earlier feminist theories of religion were unable to achieve. So, by transforming the privileged epistemological position that dualism occupied in earlier feminist theory, Schüssler Fiorenza replaces the totalising model of dualism without decentring notions of agency:

[T]he *ekklesia* of women must not constitute itself *either* in terms of formal equality based on continuing patriarchal divisions *or* on equality premised on continuing homogeneity. Instead, its signifying practices must create a feminist public that seeks equality and citizenship of women by articulating, confronting, and combatting patriarchal divisions. It does so not by declaring itself to be a liberated space of sisterhood, but by engaging feminist theoretical and practical differences as democratic discursive practices (1993a:346).

Patriarchy is understood as a multi-faceted system of interlocking oppressions of a variety of different groups rather than as a dualism between two genders. This multifaceted model, as a feminist strategy, can analyse the situation in a mode other than standard binary opposition, but does it then lead directly into a political pluralism that is unable to deal with the myriad of power relations that exist between women? Will emancipation mean different things to different groups of women if oppression is experienced in multiple ways – ways that sometimes conflict with the political agendas of different religious feminists?

This brings us directly to the second issue that the *ekklesia* raises: articulating the material conditions for emancipation. *In Memory of Her* (1983) gave hope to thousands of religious women by arguing that women have always had some form of *ekklesia*. That is, the early Christian communities provide a heritage of women's mutual validation of each other's religious agency. By presenting such an analysis, Schüssler Fiorenza is clearly suggesting that women's religious agency *already* has a strong basis in social life. The vision of *ekklesia* that Schüssler Fiorenza articulates for contemporary women, is one that is based on an act of remembrance (of the history of women's agency) that calls women to continue to struggle for emancipation within the social and political contexts of their lives. The *ekklesia* of women is not only a moral community, it is also a specific public, political constituency ordered to pursue and express emancipatory strategies. That is, the *ekklesia* claims a common community as necessary to its political existence.

But a problem ensues. Women's religious agency is already characterised by diversity and unequal power relations between women, so how could such a common constituency operate? Schüssler Fiorenza attempts to resolve this problem with her image of strands of a rope:

For positively articulating such a "common vision", I have coined the expression "*ekklesia* of women" as a hermeneutical, re/constructive, and political term. Thus my own work is positioned within the strands of the movement "rope" that seeks to articulate the women's movement as an "imagined community" which can foster solidarity and cooperation among diverse women in the liberation struggle (1993:327-328).

Thus the form of pluralism that the *ekklesia* supports is one that can operate as a common ground for diverse groups and political liberation strategies (1993a:330). How will the differences between women be resolved and/or addressed within this common framework? How can a common framework engender an emancipatory ethics rather than an oppressive one, where one position – be it that of colour, race or class – can predominate? Schüssler Fiorenza answers in this way:

The *ekklesia* of women can make available polyglot theological discourses through which individual women might shape their own stories in conversation with the stories of either contemporary, historical, or biblical women. Such discourses must render visible again those women who have remained invisible even in feminist discourses (1993a:349).

The *ekklesia* of women therefore represents both an epistemological position *and* a political strategy. It is a discursive space; an opportunity to construct religious agency that is not reliant on a binary dualism that automatically carves up power relations into two social spaces that are morally sanctioned, between two genders. Power relations in the *ekklesia* of women are extended to incorporate the multiple dimensions that occur in the lives of women. Such a position represents a significant challenge for feminism, particularly for academic feminism, which has been dominated by white, professional women whose agendas have often unwittingly defined and colonised the contours of "acceptable" feminist knowledge. Schüssler Fiorenza attempts to break open this process by centring the discourse of religious agency on pluralistic understandings of women's multiple oppressions, where a major condition for emancipation is diversity and difference that is *not* tied to a liberal feminist model of equality. What underlies this is a form of rationality based on communicative, interpretative frameworks which attempts to avoid the colonising impact that instrumental forms of rationality have had on social theory and social life.

In imagining the form of the *ekklesia* community, Schüssler Fiorenza suggests a "bounded open space" defined by its "struggles against multi-form oppression":

In contrast to a single, uniform, oppositional, discursive community, it is to be envisioned as a coalition of overlapping subcommunities or semiautonomous sites that share a common interest in combatting patriarchal relations of oppression ... feminist theology needs to conceptualize the *ekklesia* of women as such a political "open space" in which Divine Presence as mutual recognition and respect of self and others, of identity and difference, of oneness and separation can be experienced (1993a:348).

Are the constructions of religious agency outlined relevant to all women-seeking religious agency? How do we avoid the pitfall of replacing one set of normative expectations with another? Here, the *ekklesia* represents a moral basis from which to appreciate difference or allow for the expression of difference within an emancipatory framework. However, can we still have an ideal (*ekklesia*) based on a generalised understanding of what constitutes religious agency? Can democratic discursive practices operate as useful forums for identifying religious ex-

perience? Schüssler Fiorenza's argument here is that decisions regarding agency must be situation-specific where emancipatory ethics calls for:

... strategic choices and situation-specific deliberations that could do justice to the shifting grounds of feminist struggles for ending systemic patriarchal oppressions. Focus on the theory and practice of struggle for transforming patriarchal relations of domination and subordination provides a descriptive as well as a normative principle for a feminist ethics of liberation (1993a:336).

The major challenge that I see *ekklesia* grappling with is that its articulation of pluralism does not necessarily dissolve the power differentials between different groups of women. It is still unclear how such a space can operate as a material base without reconstituting colonising forces or identifying those colonising forces as patriarchal, and therefore beyond the realm of the *ekklesia*. What is this public space and how can all women be assured access to it? Who will construct such a space and what will the basic material requirements of this community be?

This paper has identified specific elements that can contribute to a positive construction of women's religious agency. In doing so, there are several issues that require further exploration.

First, feminist critical thinking at the level of epistemology is essential because it exposes the sexism or unarticulated gender assumptions found in mainstream theological and sociological theory concerning religion. It also exposes the moral underpinnings of such gender constructions and suggests alternative understandings of the social world.

Second, a grounded historical perspective is a necessary one which explores women's own experience of religion. And where textual evidence is unavailable or has been edited, a hermeneutical imaginative reconstruction as undertaken by Schüssler Fiorenza can provide a method of reclaiming an emancipatory heritage and ethics.

Third, relevant discourses of modernity need to be examined in a critical light because modernity constitutes our intellectual heritage and is one in which we are still very much engaged. Enlarging the contours of the construction of religious knowledge challenges not only our understanding of women and religion but also the power relations which operate in that construction.

Finally, feminist scholars need to continue to question their own epistemological assumptions and moral coding for oppressive formulations as well as flesh out the material and theoretical basis of emancipatory strategies.

The issue of pluralism in a feminist *ekklesia* faces similar problems to the practice and understanding of pluralism in other areas of feminist

thought. It seems that we are in a process of shifting the grounds of social praxis and that this in itself is a difficult and confusing task. The *ekklesia* is a sign of hope in that it generates ways of bringing women together that are based on principles of empowerment and liberation. There is still much to be worked out and difficult issues to face: the problems will be solved at a practical level by goodwill and openness to a negotiating process that is grounded in specific contexts. Theory needs to be generated at this level, recording the insights of those women who are the practioners and authors of liberatory forms of religious agency.

Schüssler Fiorenza leaves us with several challenges that are relevant to a feminist sociology of religion. In doing so, she has left feminist scholars with a foothold (1983:xxiv), a niche carved out of the rock, and it is this in which I have firmly planted my foot with gratitude.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Anne Vince, Morny Joy, Penny Magee, Linda Connor, John Boersig, Chris Everingham and Katharine Robinson for their support and assistance with this paper and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza for her inspiration and leadership.
- 2 A definition and extrapolation of the term *ekklesia* can be found in *In Memory of Her* (1983:343-351), *But She Said* (1993b), and *Discipleship of Equals* (1993a:307-372). The *ekklesia* of women, a term which Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza coined, has since been translated in practice into *Women-Church*, which is an international feminist religious movement. *Women-Church*, however, is only one expression of a feminist-inspired religious agency. Other practices are also active, for example, within the *Mujeristas* and *Womanist* movements in northern and central America (see *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 1992, 8(1):105-127 and *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 1992, 8(2): 91-122, 125-123).
- 3 It is unclear in *The Sociology of Religion* exactly why women are drawn to prophetic style religions. Equality appears to be a function of the expressive character of prophetic style religions (Weber 1976:106), which in turn is provided by women's participation and "natural" receptivity to expressive forms. Hence, Weber's argument is circular and unclear.

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