Chapter 3.4 Gender and theology

Should the Christian God be depicted in female terms?
Can Christianity be saved from sexist patriarchy?
Can a male Messiah save womankind?

Key Terms

Post-Christian theology: religious thinking that abandons traditional Christian thought
Reform feminist theology: religious thinking that seeks to change traditional Christian thought
Davidic Messiah: a Messiah figure based on the kingly military images of the Hebrew scriptures (the Old Testament)
Servant king: an understanding of the Messiah that focuses on service rather than overlordship
Sophia: Greek for ‘wisdom’, personified in female form in the ancient world
Thealogy: Studying God based around the goddess (‘thea’ is Greek for ‘goddess’)

Specification requirements

The reinterpretation of God by feminist theologians, including the teaching of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Mary Daly on gender and its implications for the Christian idea of God

Introduction

Feminism is a movement that challenges the view that men are superior and dominant and women are inferior and passiveness. Some feminists seek to reverse this and express female dominance, but many argue for an equality between men and women.
Feminist theology questions:

- the justification of male dominance and female subordination in theology
- the exclusive use of male language for God
- the view that men are more like God than women
- the view that only men can represent God as leaders in Church and society
- the view that women are created to be subordinate to men and if they reject this they are sinning.

Most of the theologians and philosophers named in this book and the AS and Year 1 book are men. However, in recent decades male domination of society and culture has been challenged. Twentieth-century female theologians have questioned the influence and impact of the cultural legacy of patriarchy, not just on practices such as exclusively male priesthods or a belief that the divinely ordained role of women is a subordinate one to men, but on the development of Christian thought from its origins in a patriarchal ancient world.

Daphne Hampson, a feminist theologian, wrote:

"Feminism represents a revolution. It is not in essence a demand that women should be allowed to join the male world on equal terms. It is a different view of the world. This must be of fundamental import for theology [...] As women come into their own, theology will take a different shape."  

Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism*, 1990, p. 1

Some feminist theologians suggest that the patriarchal understanding of Christianity is mistaken and that a better, truer, non-sexist interpretation can be found. Others believe Christianity needs to be reinterpreted without the patriarchal elements, cleansed of their distorting influences. Another group believes Christianity may be intrinsically sexist and so flawed that it should be discarded, along with all the sexist practices and beliefs associated with it.

This chapter considers two key feminist theological thinkers:

- Mary Daly (1928–2010) was an American radical post-Christian feminist theologian, who argues that the idea of a patriarchal fatherly God is the foundation of a sexist culture of denigration and violence towards women, and an unholy trinity of rape, genocide and war.

- Rosemary Radford Ruether (b. 1936) is an American feminist scholar, a Catholic theologian and an advocate of women’s ordination in the Catholic Church. She is a critic of aspects of traditional Christian theology but she continues to reform it, arguing that it has been distorted by patriarchal traditions.
Apply your knowledge

1. Christianity as a religion is patriarchal. Discuss with reference to these pictures.

Mary Daly and the unholy trinity of rape, genocide and war

Mary Daly (1928–2010)
Mary Daly was a radical feminist post-Christian theologian writing in the second half of the twentieth century who argued that men have, throughout history, sought to oppress women and that religion is used as a tool to enforce this oppression. She argued that women need to get beyond religion – a statement that is both provocative and controversial.

Daly was inspired by the following line from Nietzsche:

“Whenever man has thought it necessary to create a memory of himself, his effort has been attended with torture, blood, sacrifice.


Daly argued that female oppression is a product of the cultural and historical impact of Christianity’s unholy trinity of rape, genocide and war. One patriarchal divine person (God) combines sexism, racism and classism to create a three-headed monster that has to be fought.

The biblical and popular image of God as the great patriarch in heaven, who rewards and punishes, and dominates the imagination. In the human imagination the symbol of ‘God the Father’ has spawned the mechanisms for the oppression of women. God has his heaven, his people and his nature of things in which society and the universe is male dominated. The husband, dominating the wife, represents God himself. If God is male then male is God. This distorts the spirituality of nature, where the divine is not limited to maleness.

Patriarchal religion perpetuates these sexual role delusions, calls them natural and bestows supernatural blessings on them. Daly criticised so-called fathers or experts in the Christian tradition for their anti-feminism. She noted that Tertullian saw women as ‘the devil’s gateway’, responsible for the Fall and the reason God needed to send Jesus to die to save everyone. Augustine suggested women were not made in the image of God; Aquinas suggested women were misbegotten males; and Martin Luther suggested that God created Adam lord of all, but Eve spoiled this. Daly was highly critical of the idea that the role of the Christian woman is to be a mother, and the argument that women cannot be ordained because Jesus was male.

Daly believed that ‘God the Father’ is inadequate, and the maleness of God should be removed: God should be castrated. She argued that women need to use language in a new way because the old language is androcentric (man centred). She believed that women need a new spirituality.

Daly was critical of modern theologians, arguing that male superiority reinforces male superiority. She accused Bonhoeffer of insisting that women should be subject to their husband, and she accused Barth of
claiming that a woman is subordinate to a man who is her head (her senior authority). And she criticised Pope Pius XII for suggesting women’s true liberation does not come from formalistic or materialistic equality with men, but in the recognition of the vocation of a woman to become a mother, something specific to women.

Daly was also critical of the situation ethics of Fletcher. Situation ethics is a male-made theory and part of the thinking of patriarchy’s dominating elite. It takes a personalist, individualistic approach to ethics, denying the communal dimension required for the liberation of women. For Daly, the entire system of ethics and theology is the product of males, and they tend to serve the interest of the sexist patriarchal society overtly, explicitly oppressing women in the process.

Rape

According to Daly, a ‘rapism’ is a culture of rape. It is a symbol of all violent oppression which builds and ultimately connects together to create a society that encompasses, for example, the nuclear arms race, racism, man-made poverty and ecological disaster. The mentality of rape creates a pervasive culture of violence that is difficult to break out of. The leaders of society (Daly called them ‘sovereigns of sado-society’) use culture, religion, politics, the professions and the media to erase female power and imprison women in a state of the grateful dead. Patriarchally possessed sleeping women have forgotten the reality of the gross inequality that Daly called ‘gynocide’ and have become divided against each other. (See Daly, Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation, 1973.)

Daly did not view rape only in theoretical terms. She identified systematic acts of physical violence towards women: rape, genital mutilation, foot binding, widow burning and hysterectomy. Daly argued there is a connection between the mentality of rape and the phenomenon of war. She identified accounts of conflicts in which rape was a product of war, including, for example, the rape of hundreds of thousands of Bengali women by West Pakistani soldiers in 1971 and the dreadful stories of women raped to death by soldiers. Daly then pointed to the link between rape and war in the Bible, where Moses is enraged after a campaign against Midian because the commanders had spared the lives of all women:

"Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man, but save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man."

Numbers 31:17–18, New International Version
Daly also drew attention to the example from Judges, where scoundrels arrive at a house demanding to abuse a guest staying there and the host offers his daughter as a substitute for the guest:

> Look, here is my virgin daughter, and his concubine. I will bring them out to you now, and you can use them and do to them whatever you wish. But as for this man, don’t do such an outrageous thing.

Judges 19:24, New International Version

The scoundrels refuse this offer so the guest offers his concubine as a replacement and the visitors rape her to death through the night.

Daly did not limit rape to men who literally commit the act of rape. She described as ‘arm chair rapists’ those who vicariously enjoy stories of rape through pornography or metaphorically rape women by looking at pornography, using it to enhance their sense of power over women (Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*, 1973, p. 117). In this way, television reinforces the self-destructive mechanisms of patriarchy.

**Genocide**

Rape is the cultural manifestation of a sexual caste system. Daly argued that there is a worldwide phenomenon of a sexual caste, a hierarchy that gives males and females unequal power. This exploitative sexual caste system is perpetuated by the consent of the victims (females) as well as the dominant sex (males) through sex-role socialisation, as girls and boys learn how to be members of the society in which they live. This conditioning process begins at birth and continues throughout our lives. It is constantly reinforced through our experiences at home, at school and at work, through the information we learn, the entertainment we absorb, the adverts that we see and hear, and our interactions with public institutions.

Daly believed there is a deep link between rape and genocide (the deliberate killing of a large group of people). Male sexual violence forms the basis of military interests. Rape objectifies all those who can be cast into the role of victims of violence. Rape makes the raped person the objective victim of the rapist; the raped person stops being an individual and becomes part of a group of raped people. Rape is a primordial act of violation, but it is more than just an act on an individual. It is an act of one group against another, of male against female, and therefore an expression of the thinking of the dominant group that is perpetrating the rape.

Daly made a link between the kind of groupthink that the Nazis used against those they subjugated and the groupthink of the Catholic Church, where there is a collective focus on sameness in contrast to, and against, those who are ‘other’ or different. She then made a link to the Jewish
origins of Christianity, where the people of Israel are chosen to be apart from others. This is highly controversial, because it highlights aspects of Jewish identity as a causal factor in genocide at a time when the term ‘genocide’ was related almost exclusively with the Holocaust. For Daly, there is something wrong with the groupthink that is found in Christianity and the Church that is responsible for the patriarchal culture she opposes.

War
The third element of Daly’s unholy trinity is war. She argues that war was an inevitable result of the male-dominated politics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The horrors of war are associated with manly and adventurous virtues, with men doing courageous and powerful acts of violence in order to defeat the enemy. The language of violence is hidden by technical language; phrases like ‘collateral damage’ used to cover up the fact that the lives of innocent people are expendable. Daly believed that language has been corrupted when the killing of born humans in conflict is called ‘just’, and the killing of unborn humans during an abortion is called ‘unjust’. War is defended by what Daly called a ‘phallic morality’ and a ‘phallic mentality’ (Daly, Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation, 1973, p. 121). Women, she argued, need to seek liberation from this moral hypocrisy.

This liberation, according to Daly, requires women to be radically deviant in the face of patriarchal expectation. This means they must reject all moral standards because they have been constructed by men and used, by men, to subjugate women. The injustices and inequalities that oppress women are bound up in these male moral standards. A full-frontal assault on patriarchy requires complete demolition of the expectations placed on women.

“ The beginning of liberation comes when women refuse to be ‘good’ and/or ‘healthy’ by prevailing standards. To be female is to be deviant by definition in the prevailing culture. To be female and defiant is to be intolerably deviant. This means going beyond the imposed definitions of ‘bad woman’ and ‘good woman,’ beyond the categories of prostitute and wife. This is equivalent to assuming the role of witch and madwoman. ”

Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation, 1973, p. 65

Daly’s liberation is no less than a total revolution of the moral and social standards and order of the time. According to Daly, Christianity is a key element in sustaining and shaping these moral and social standards. The incarnation of Christ is the ‘symbolic legitimation of the rape of all women and all matter’ (Daly and Caputi, Webster’s First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language, 1987). The underlying culture of rape, genocide and war is, therefore, impregnated in Christianity itself and is so fundamental to it that to change the culture means leaving Christianity.
Spirituality experienced through nature

Daly argued that the maleness of God needs to be overturned. The special sacred men’s club of male mothers (priests) who control the spiritual moments of life through their positions of religious authority have locked women into an Eden, which must be shattered. Similarly, traditional holy places (buildings built and managed by men) are not suitable as centres of spirituality. Sacred space is a moving thing, part of a movement to freedom for both men and women. Daly uses the word ‘quintessence’ to describe the being in which we live, love and create (Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*, 1973, p. 118). Quintessence is the highest essence, the spirit that permeates all nature, giving life and vitality to the whole universe. Quintessence can be damaged or partly blocked by many things, including violence, pornography and poverty, but it can be rediscovered in nature. Daly argued that there should be a turning away from the maleness of God and the fixed nature of sacred places towards the spirit of quintessence, which is found in the whole universe in nature.

In the 1970s there was renewed interest in pagan spirituality and nature worship, and Daly’s theories reflect this. She called on women to ignore the oppressive taboos or patriarchy and connect with their wild side, embracing paganism and eco-feminist witchcraft.

Apply your knowledge

2. What might Daly say about the story of the rape of Tamar?

Then Amnon said to Tamar, ‘Bring the food here into my bedroom so I may eat from your hand.’ And Tamar took the bread she had prepared and brought it to her brother Amnon in his bedroom. But when she took it to him to eat, he grabbed her and said, ‘Come to bed with me, my sister.’ ‘No, my brother!’ she said to him. ‘Don’t force me! Such a thing should not be done in Israel! Don’t do this wicked thing. What about me? Where could I get rid of my disgrace? And what about you? You would be like one of the wicked fools in Israel. Please speak to the king; he will not keep me from being married to you.’ But he refused to listen to her, and since he was stronger than she, he raped her. Then Amnon hated her with intense hatred. In fact, he hated her more than he had loved her. Amnon said to her, ‘Get up and get out!’

2 Samuel 13: 10–14, New International Version

3. Explain what Daly might say about this hymn:

Majesty worship His Majesty
Unto Jesus, be all glory,
Power and praise
Majesty, Kingdom authority
Flow from His throne,
Unto his own, His anthem raise.

From the hymn *Majesty* by Jack Williams Hayford
Challenging Daly

There are those who challenge Daly’s interpretation. Simon Chan argues that the Christian idea of fatherhood, as it is embodied in the Trinity, is unique. The Apostles’ Creed says: ‘I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord’ (Paul Victor Marshall, Prayer Book Parallels, Volume 1, 2000, p. 171). This relational concept of God (God as God the Father, God the son and God the Holy Spirit) is quite different from a simple ‘God is a male’ idea. It has a dynamic element of multiple persons in a relationship.

A second aspect of the Christian idea of fatherhood, which Daly glosses over, is the way in which God is a heavenly father for all. The Christian God is in a relationship with all human beings and the concept of universal fatherhood expresses that relationship. This concept of fatherhood also includes a creative element: God as creator of all. Daly may be right about the cultures that have developed around this concept, but perhaps the concept offers more than she gives it credit for.

Chan also argues that using male language for God does not create masculine qualities for God. He notes that Isaiah 54:5–7 refers to God as the husband who acts with ‘deep compassion’, and deep compassion is not a stereotypical masculine characteristic.

“The term father, then, excludes not feminine qualities, but rather the idea of a distant and impersonal deity, which is precisely the picture of the supreme being still seen in many primal religions.”

Simon Chan, ‘Why We Call God “Father”: Christians have good reasons to resist gender-neutral alternatives.’ Christianity Today, 13 August 2013

Another feminist theologian, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (b. 1938), suggests an alternative reading of the biblical texts and the sexism present in them. She argues that the Bible supports women’s struggle against patriarchal biblical sexism because it contains examples that directly challenge patriarchal norms, such as the passages where Jesus breaks sexism customs (Matthew 26:6–13, Mark 5:25–34 and John 4:1–42). For Fiorenza, Daly’s approach to interpreting the Bible is mistakenly narrow.

Apply your knowledge

4. Does male language inevitably imply masculine stereotypes?

5. Is there alternative non-gendered language that could be used for God to capture the dynamic of the Trinity and its relationship with humanity? Suggest an alternative and explain its advantages and disadvantages.

6. Choose two examples of biblical passages that could be used to challenge established patriarchal norms of the time and explain why you have chosen them.
Rosemary Radford Ruether is a reform feminist theologian. She argues that Christianity has become distorted by patriarchal traditions and is in need of reform as a consequence.

**Jesus’ challenge to the male warrior-Messiah expectation**

The Hebrew scriptures (the Old Testament) views the Messiah as God’s chosen (anointed) one. He is a future king, a son of David, who will be restored to Israel and will deliver the people from bondage through battle, and restore Israel as an autonomous power. This **Davidsic Messiah** is a conquering warrior who liberates people from their enemies and reigns over them in a new kingdom. Because of his righteousness and his special relationship with God, God’s favour and the well-being of his people are assured. The Messiah is both chosen by God (Son of God) and is a representative of his people before God (Son of Man).

There is, therefore, a maleness associated with Christ: ‘the Messiah can only be imagined as a male’ (Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, 1983, p. 110).

However, Ruether argues that Jesus was not the traditional warrior Messiah that was expected. The traditional Messiah is in no way an incarnation of the divine or a redeemer, one who forgives sins through redemptive self-sacrifice. ‘He is expected to win, not to suffer and die’ (Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, 1983, p. 110).
The future that Jesus brings is not the military victory of the male Messiah. Jesus rejects the nationalist–revenge mythology of the Davidic Messiah, and envisions a time on earth when basic human needs are met, and all people dwell in harmony with one another and with God without the need for a strong, domineering leader to protect them.

Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom is neither nationalistic nor other-worldly. The coming Reign of God is expected to happen on earth, as the Lord’s Prayer makes evident (God’s Kingdom come, God’s will be done on earth). It is a time when structures of domination and subjugation have been overcome, when basic human needs are met (daily bread), when all dwell in harmony with God and each other (not led into temptation but delivered from evil).

Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, 1983, p. 120

Jesus is a **servant king**, focusing on serving his people rather than ruling over them, attaining to the poor and the dispossessed rather than the highest in the social order. He is critical of Jewish authorities and critical of reigning powers. He argues against those in positions of religious power at the time, including the Temple authorities (Matthew 21:12) and the local the religious lawyers and experts who are referred to as hypocrites (Matthew 6:5). He dismisses the power of the Roman ruler Pontius Pilate (John 19:11) and warns his disciples about lording power over others (Matthew 20:25). He washes the feet of his disciples (John 13:1–17) and says leaders must be servants of their people (Luke 22:24–30). Ultimately, Jesus gives up his life for others.

Jesus revises God-language by using the familiar Abba for God. He speaks of the Messiah as servant rather than king to visualize new relations between the divine and the human. Relation to God no longer becomes a model for dominant-subordinate relations between social groups, leaders, and the led. […] Relation to God liberates us from hierarchical relations and makes us brothers-sisters of each other. Those who would be leaders must become servants of all.


People are freed not through acts of military bravery, but by following the servant king and becoming servants of God:
By becoming a servant of God, one is freed from bondage to all human masters. Only then, as a liberated person, can one truly become ‘servant of all,’ giving one’s life to liberate others rather than to exercise power and rule over them.


Although Christianity has a male symbol for the idea of Messiah, Ruether argues that the Messiah concept should not contain the Davidic military Messiah idea, but should instead represent the self-sacrificing, redeeming, servant Messiah who is connected to the female notion of wisdom. Christianity should not bundle the maleness of the historical Jesus and the maleness of the Davidic military Messiah into the Christian concept of Messiah. To do so, she argues, displaces the female from the concept of God.

**God as the female wisdom principle and Jesus as the incarnation of wisdom**

According to Ruether, ‘Sophia’ is Greek for ‘wisdom’ and, in the ancient world, wisdom was personified in female form as a goddess. For early Christians, ‘Sophia’ continued to mean divine wisdom. Divine wisdom was still referred to in female terms (Proverbs 9:1); God is associated with wisdom, and wisdom is female (see ‘The Book of Wisdom’ in the New Jerusalem Bible, 1990). However, Christianity has merged the notion of a divine wisdom, that unites the cosmos with the divine, into the notion of a messianic king, who brings a new age of redemption. In the process, the idea of female wisdom has become obscured behind the patriarchal veil of the male Messiah, Jesus.
Does not wisdom call out?

Does not understanding raise her voice?

At the highest point along the way,

where the paths meet, she takes her stand;

beside the gate leading into the city,

at the entrance, she cries aloud

Proverbs 8:1–3, New International Version

‘Divine wisdom’ is the same, theologically speaking, as ‘the Son of God’, Ruether argues, pointing to Paul who links wisdom and Christ, ‘but we preach Christ crucified […] Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God’ (1 Corinthians 1:23–24). She continues:

Theologically, Logos [the Word before he was made man in Jesus] plays the same cosmological roles as Sophie as ground of creation, revealer of the mind of God, and reconciler of humanity to God

Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology, 1983, p. 154

For Ruether, divine wisdom is closely linked to Jesus Christ and wisdom is referred to in female terms. The Messiah (the Word of God, Jesus) is not, therefore, simply a male part of God but is also the incarnation of wisdom, which is female.

Challenging Ruether

Some, such as Simon Chan, argue that you cannot rewrite the Christian story to give more prominence to women because it is the story itself that shapes Christian identity. Belief in the concept of the Trinity (of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is central to Christianity, and key parts of the Christian liturgy rely on this identity language. The Anglican Alternative Service Book 1980 addresses God as, ‘Almighty God, our heavenly Father’, and its Eucharistic prayers invoke a ‘holy Father, heavenly King, almighty and eternal God’. The phrase ‘almighty Father’ is also part of the Catholic Church’s Eucharistic prayer: ‘Through him, with him and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honour and glory is yours, Almighty Father, forever and ever.’ Chan argues that to rewrite these central prayers to downplay ‘maleness’ would be wrong.

Christianity, according to Chan, should resist the temptation to abandon the male language for God. He accepts that feminine images are used to describe God’s love, such as the frequent images of God protecting and comforting his children (for example Isaiah 66:12–13

‘Divine wisdom’ is the same, theologically speaking, as ‘the Son of God’

See Chapter 3.4 of the AS and Year 1 book for a definition of logos.

Think question

God is neither male nor female, so should images of God reflect this androgynous nature?

Apply your knowledge

10. Create a diagram that shows the similarities between the biblical quotes that refer to wisdom and the attributes Christians apply to Jesus.
and Hosea 11:1–4), but he notes that God is never called ‘mother’ and that this was unique in ancient times. Most other ancient religions had a goddess at their centre or alongside a male god, including the goddess Asherah in Canaan, the goddess Isis in Egypt and the goddess Tiamat in Babylon. Many of these goddess-worshipping cultures were also patriarchal, and not equal or matriarchal. Chan argues, therefore, that using female language for God does not make a society less patriarchal, and using male language for God does not cause a society to become patriarchal. He comments that:

Even today, many societies devoted to goddess worship remain oppressive toward women. Devotion to the goddess Kali in Hinduism, for instance, has never resulted in better treatment of women, even among Kali devotees.

Simon Chan, ‘Why We Call God “Father”: Christians have good reasons to resist gender-neutral alternatives.’ *Christianity Today*, 13 August 2013

Discussing gender and theology

How do Daly’s and Ruether’s feminist theologies compare?

There are certainly plenty of examples of patriarchal authority dominating and belittling women in traditional Christianity. For example, the place of women in Christianity is, arguably, defined by three figures: the seducing temptress, Eve, the penitent prostitute, Mary Magdalene, and the Virgin Mother, Mary. Artists often give the face of Eve to the serpent responsible for the sinful temptation of Adam, implying not only that the serpent was female but that women are responsible for tempting men away from the true path and female sexuality is part of the source of the sin that came into the world at the Fall. In the New Testament, women are depicted as needing to turn away from their sexual desires and become penitent prostitutes, and the Virgin Mother is upheld as an impossible inspiration for earthly women.

Feminists argue that the ancient patriarchal tradition reaches the present. In some churches women are prohibited from entering the area around the alter (a prohibition that stems from the ancient belief that women are unclean when they bleed during their periods), and some Churches insist on an exclusively male priesthood. Ultimately, men seem to be closer to God than women because the male authority figures have encouraged the domination of the concepts of a male God and a male Messiah. Perhaps, therefore, Daly’s account that Christianity is irretrievably patriarchal and misogynistic and must be abandoned is correct.
In comparison, Ruether argues that Christianity is not intrinsically patriarchal and can be, and should be, changed. Christianity can be ‘saved’ from patriarchy. She identifies alternatives to the male-centric view of Christianity, both in the origins of traditional Christianity, where divine wisdom is female, and also in the practices of some mystical traditions that have maintained conceptions of God that include the female. Ruether also highlights that, by speaking with women and spending time with women, Jesus did not embody the patriarchal culture of the time in which he lived. Women were among his followers and the first people to see him risen were women. The gospel writers record that men did not believe the women who saw Jesus after the Resurrection, suggesting that the writers were conscious of the patriarchal culture of the time.

For Ruether there has been a ‘patriarchalization of Christology’ (Ruether, Sexism and God Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology, 1983, p. 125) which was due, in part, to the establishment of the Christian Church as the imperial religion of the Roman Empire, but it can be undone. The fact that some Churches are working to break away from the dominant patriarchal ideology (for example, the Church of England now ordains female priests and female bishops) indicates that Ruether may be right and change may be possible. What is needed, she argues, are theologies that link Christ and the Spirit (Ruether calls these ‘Spirit Christologies’), which see the prophetic spirit of Jesus as continually present in the community and
continuously revealed through the prophetic words of men and women of every age. This makes change more possible.

Post-Christian theologians like Daly are free of the authorities of Christianity. They create new symbols and traditions based on their new perceptions of ultimate reality. It remains to be seen whether what they offer will develop into long-lasting spiritual/religious traditions that are both sustainable and free from patriarchy.

Reformist feminist theologians, like Ruether, try to carry out a radical feminist transformation of Christianity. Their task is to change Christianity. Whilst there have been developments in some Churches, notably within Protestant Christianity in terms of women’s ministries, Roman Catholicism and conservative evangelical forms of Christianity continue to hold to male ministries and show reluctance towards using female language for God.

Apply your knowledge

12. To what extent might the following events be signs that reformist feminist theologians are succeeding?

a. In 2015, Libby Lane was consecrated as the first female Church of England bishop. The Right Reverend Libby Lane was made Bishop of Stockport after the Church formally adopted legislation to allow women bishops, following several decades of argument over women’s ordination. There remains opposition to women’s ordination in the Church of England.

b. In 2016 Pope Francis appointed a commission of six men and six women to study the issue of women deacons and their ministry in the early Church, at the request of the International Union of Superiors General, an organisation for the leaders of women’s religious orders around the world. The Pope said that while his understanding was that the women described as deacons in the New Testament were not ordained as male deacons are today, it would be useful for the Church to clarify this question.

Is Christianity essentially sexist?

Unlike other religions of the time, which depicted the divine as male and female, Christians in the time of the early Church emphasised patriarchy. For example, a letter by Paul to the Christian community in Corinth contains the following quote:

\[ \text{the head of the woman is man [...] For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.} \]

1 Corinthians 11:3–9, New International Version

Some thinkers have come to conclude, therefore, that Christianity is sexist and, as a result, not worthy. Daphne Hampson (b. 1944), a post-Christian theologian, argues that Christianity and feminism are essentially incompatible: you cannot be a Christian and a feminist. Hampson thinks God could not have been revealed at a particular time to a particular
culture or group of people and in the particular male form of Jesus Christ. God must reach out to all people at all times. Some myths are morally sexist and rather than trying to reinterpret them in light of feminism, it is simply better to discard them. It is better to interpret the love of God in ways that do not carry the sexism found in the Christian story, with its male Messiah, male apostles and male-dominated Church. Hampson thinks that patriarchal religion must be overcome. It is far better to ground religious belief in our experience than in tradition, and our experience points to an equality between the sexes that Christianity fails to deliver.

However, some feminist theologians do not think that Christianity is essentially sexist, arguing that your perspective on this issue depends on how you interpret the Bible. Fiorenza thinks Christians read the Bible through different lenses:

1. For some, the Bible is divine revelation of timeless truth (Scripture says… therefore…). If scripture is read in this way, then it seems to be sexist.
2. Others seek a historical framework to understand what the actual facts were and, thereby, read the sexism in a historical context.

Apply your knowledge

13. Discuss the following points of view:
   a. The Bible reveals an equality that the Churches have lost sight of.
   b. Christianity is full of sexist myths and these myths need to be set aside, even if that means setting aside Christianity.
   c. The Word of God inspires people to challenge the sexist attitudes that frame religion.

14. Parts of the New Testament suggest women may have played leading roles in the early Church.

When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

Luke 24:9–12

On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. ‘If you consider me a believer in the Lord,’ she said, ‘come and stay at my house.’ And she persuaded us.

Acts 16:13–15

John 4:4–26 and Mark 16:9–11 also suggest Jesus transgressed traditional rules on the treatment of women and identified specific women as people who brought others to believe in him. How might these texts be linked to the discussion about Christian sexism? What might they indicate?
3. Some view the Bible as both divine revelation and a historical framework, and seek interpretation through a dialogue between these factors and people. The Bible reflects aspects of the sexist culture of the time, but it also contains moral messages that challenge the sexism of the time.

4. Another approach is to liberate the process of interpreting the Bible from those who have power in society and give it to those that have traditionally been silenced. This means allowing different people with different voices to read and make sense of the Bible, not just male members of the clergy or male theologians.

Fiorenza notes that people like Daly and Hampson have developed a criticism of both the male-dominated interpretation of the Bible and of the Bible itself. However, Fiorenza suggests that women need to understand how the Bible supports women’s struggle against patriarchal biblical sexism. While sexist attitudes can shape the interpretation of the Bible, the Bible can also inspire anti-sexist attitudes with, for example, passages where Jesus breaks sexist customs such as those that involve not touching women (Matthew 26:6–13 and Mark 5:25–34) or speaking to them (John 4: 1–42). Fiorenza remains a Roman Catholic and believes that there is a continuity in the religious tradition; that a feminist theologian need not reject or break away from the Christian tradition, but can work to better understand the Christian message, free from sexism.

Can a male saviour save women?

Traditional Christian belief holds that the death of Christ and his descent into hell was to ensure that the divine experienced all aspects of death so that all could be saved. Jesus offers salvation to all, and this is not limited by gender. The debate about whether Jesus was fully human resulted in a decision that he was both fully human and fully divine. The Church Fathers eventually concluded that the doctrine of the salvation of humanity required that Jesus was really human, rather than only partly human, for human beings to be fully saved. In theological terms, then, female salvation is assured.

However, some early Church Fathers debated whether the ‘all’ included women, because many of them believed that women, as the descendants of Eve, were guilty of the sin of Eve and could not, therefore, be saved. And, to get around the problem that the sin of Eve was responsible for the problem that the Messiah had to come and save people from, some suggested that, at the resurrection, women would be half male and half angel.

Jesus was male, not female. He was a male form of the human being, not a female form. Does this mean salvation can only be offered to men? This is not the traditional Christian theological understanding. It is more important that God became human, than God became male.
Daly argued that the idea of a uniquely male saviour is one more legitimisation of male superiority. It is simply not imaginable that the divine would take on female flesh, so patriarchal is the culture that produced Christianity. As a consequence, far from Jesus being a figure of salvation for women, he is a figure of male domination and enslavement.

In contrast, feminist theologians like Fiorenza argue that women living in patriarchal societies can take strength from the depictions of Jesus engaging with women, enabling women to be at important events in his ministry and speaking with them as he speaks to men. Jesus can offer a vision of salvation for women enslaved by patriarchal societies today, and his voice against the patriarchy can be viewed as all the more potent because he is a man. Jesus Christ is a figure of prophecy, promoting change to make the world more just, and this includes more equal and less sexist.

Apply your knowledge

15. Read the following extracts and consider the extent to which each one offers a satisfactory response to Daly’s view that a uniquely male saviour legitimises male superiority.

Indeed, if one can say that Christ comes to the oppressed and the oppressed especially hear him then it is women within these marginal groups who are often seen both as the oppressed of the oppressed and also as those particularly receptive to the gospel. The dialogue at the well takes place not just with a Samaritan, but with a Samaritan woman […] Among the poor it is widows who are the exemplars of the most destitute; among the moral outcasts it is the prostitutes who represent the bottom of the list. This is not accidental. It means that, in the iconoclastic messianic vision, it is the women of the despised and outcast peoples who are seen as the bottom of the present hierarchy and hence, in a special way, the last who shall be first in the kingdom.


The women around Jesus, it is argued, actually understood his significance more easily than the male disciples and tended to his needs more than his male colleagues were able to. They remained faithful when others fled. Jesus reached out to women and they to him in a mutual embrace of recognition and respect. It is this image that Indian women theologians find most powerful. It is this Christ who they hope will stem the tide of dowry brides, temple prostitution and widow burning. It is perhaps only this Christ who can begin to balance the morality rate, which reflects the fact that far more female babies die from neglect than should be the case. […] It is the male Christ who acted against ‘male culture’ who gives hope to many women in India. The message of women’s dignity is more powerfully heard when spoken by a man within that culture.

Chapter 3.4

Can only women develop a genuine spirituality?

Spirituality is notoriously difficult to define and it is impossible to do so adequately here. However, there is a clear implication from the feminist critique of Christianity that the spiritual culture of Christianity and the image of the divine has been influenced by patriarchy, by maleness. This raises the question of whether there can be something of the divine, something spiritual, that is feminine or female. Is a female understanding of spirituality or a female expression of spirituality possible? Can females be spiritual beings?

If spirituality is understood in the way feminist writers treat it, then several possibilities emerge. Thinkers like Daly believe that the only authentic women’s spirituality is that which abandons all Christian trappings, is freed from patriarchal constraints and rejects traditional morality. Those who seek to remain within the traditional Christian tradition point to the strong tradition of great female contemplatives and the female notions of divine wisdom in the Bible as a model for female spirituality.

In the foreword to her book *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (1973), Daly writes about a flourishing new women’s spirituality, a resurgence of ‘gynergy’. This, she argues, is more than simply a replacement of ‘God’ by ‘Goddess’, more than a transsexual operation on the patriarchal God. It involves a profound psychic and social change. It requires a rediscovery of old words that have lost their power under the phallocentric rule of men: spinster, webster, weird, hag, witch, sibyl, muse and, of course, goddess. As the use of these words has waned, the spiritual power of females has also withered, but it is possible for women to rediscover these words and break out from their man-made mind-moulds. Goddess images inspire creative activity, in the work of weaving or the dragon-identified passions of rage and lust for nemesis. Goddess names call for action, movement, change.

There must be a transformation through self-realisation. Women must dare to realise their elemental woman-bonding powers, and break away from the propaganda of patriarchy found in fairy tales, popular songs and films, which replicate the godfather, son and holy ghost theology that represses women. Then, Daly argues, there is a possibility of an authentic female spirituality.

"The sources of authentic hope are to be found within Wild women – Self-proclaimed Witches/Hags who choose the creation of our own space/time as a primal expression of intellectual/emotional vitality, knowing that without this we will suffocate in the ranks of the living dead."

Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*, 1973, p. xxi
Daly’s radical perspective of women’s spirituality is sometimes referred as ‘thealogy’ (‘thea’ is Greek for ‘goddess’):

“Goddess theology, like feminist theology more generally, begins in women’s experience. Goddess theology often begins with an individual woman’s dissatisfaction with the male imagery of biblical religion. Her experience of the goddess, which may have come to her through reading, dreams, ritual or meditation, becomes authoritative for her.

Carol Christ, ‘Feminist theology as post-traditional theology’. In Feminist Theology, 2002, p. 83

Others offer a less-radical, but no less genuine, vision of female spirituality.

There have been many female contemplatives. Teresa of Avila (1515–82) is just one example:

“...It pleased our Lord that I should see the following vision a number of times. I saw an angel near me, on the left side, in bodily form. This I am not wont to see, save very rarely [...] In this vision it pleased the Lord that I should see it thus. He was not tall, but short, marvellously beautiful, with a face which shone as though he were one of the highest of the angels, who seem to be all of fire; they must be those whom we call Seraphim [...] I saw in his hands a long golden spear, and at the point of the iron there seemed to be a little fire. This I thought that he thrust several times into my heart, and that it penetrated to my entrails: When he drew out the spear he seemed to be drawing them with it, leaving me all on fire with a wondrous love for God. The pain was so great that it caused me to utter several moans; and yet so exceedingly sweet is this greatest of pains that it is impossible to desire to be rid of it, or for the soul to be content with less than God.

Teresa of Avila, quoted in E. Allison Peers, Studies of the Spanish Mystics, 1927, p. 197

Women are also depicted as spiritual beings in Christian art.
Some Christian movements became dissatisfied with what Ruether calls the ‘masculinist Christ and clerical Church’. She notes that these movements began to ‘dream of a new dispensation of the divine in which women will represent new, not yet imagined dimensions of human possibility and divine disclosure’ (Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology, 1983, p. 132). Ruether thinks that women bring a new perspective to spirituality that complements the spirituality than men can offer.

Daly would go further and argue that only women have the opportunity to develop a genuine spiritual identity. Christianity is so patriarchal that it is devoid of spirituality. Men, who are embodied by the ‘masculinist Christ and clerical Church’, are, therefore, unable to be spiritual beings, such is the patriarchal influence (Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology, 1983, p. 132). In this sense, only women, who have broken away from traditional Christianity, can be truly spiritual.
Can the Christian God be presented in female terms?

Catholic Christianity in the 20th century emphasises the traditional doctrine that God is neither male nor female:

“...In no way is God in man’s image. He is neither man nor woman. God is pure spirit in which there is no place for the difference between the sexes. But the respective ‘perfections’ of man and woman reflect something of the infinite perfection of God: those of a mother and those of a father and husband.

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para 370


Nevertheless, the vast majority of depictions of God (as God the father and as Jesus) are male, and Ruether comments that:

“...Male monotheism has been so taken for granted in Christian culture that the peculiarity of imaging God solely through one gender has not been recognised.

*Ruether, Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, 1993, p. 151

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**Apply your knowledge**

16. Consider the following viewpoints, choose one and make a case for it over the others.

- a. The only authentic women’s spirituality is that which abandons all Christian trappings, is freed from patriarchal constraints and rejects traditional morality.
- b. Christian spirituality for women can best find its expression in the great female Christian contemplatives.
- c. Women can find genuine spirituality by balancing goddess spirituality and the Christian tradition.

17. Is spirituality better served if inclusive language is used in scripture and liturgy?

18. Consider whether the language used during services seeks to express accurately the will of God, to make people feel included or something else.
However, it can be argued that people are too literal when they make sense of biblical language. God the father is often depicted as an old male, even though God is not ‘old’ in the sense that a human being grows old, and not a male father in the sense that a human father is the male parent of his son. Nevertheless, depictions of the crucified Jesus as a woman cause controversy.

Phyllis Trible (b. 1932), who comes from a Southern Baptist background, thinks we can ‘depatriarchalize’ readings of the Bible; that it is possible to remove the overly male interpretations. She argues that the Christian tradition uses the feminine to describe God in the Old Testament more often than is usually thought. God is said to provide for her children just as mothers feed their household (Proverbs 31:14–15; Genesis 18:6, 27:9 and 27:14). In Numbers 11:12 God is portrayed as mother and nurse of her wandering children. In Isaiah, God cries out like a woman in childbirth (Isaiah 42:14) and she (God) is a comforting mother (66:13). Trible thinks that the Bible has been misinterpreted in a patriarchal way, and a better understanding shows that God can be depicted in female terms because female qualities are referred to in the Bible, as well as, and alongside, male qualities.

**Think question**

a. Given that God is neither male nor female, should there even be a question about whether God can be depicted as a woman or as a man?

b. Are debates about male and female relevant today, when gender and identity is more fluid and less fixed?

**Apply your knowledge**

19. Which do you find most convincing and why?

a. The Bible mainly talks about God in male terms and Jesus described God as Abba Father. Christians should follow the example of Jesus. It would be confusing for people to depict God as a woman.

b. Depicting God as a woman is no more objectionable than depicting God as a white male. The fact that some Christians do not like female depictions of God shows they are sexist.

c. We should not depict God as either male or female because God is neither male nor female.
Points to remember

» Theologians writing about issues of feminism in Christianity can be broadly grouped into those that think Christianity is inextricably connected to sexism and must be abandoned, those who think Christianity can be reformed and the sexism removed, and those that think Christianity has been misunderstood. Mary Daly is part of the first group, Rosemary Radford Ruether is part of the second group.

» Debates in feminist theology centre on Biblical interpretation and an examination of the roles of men and women in the rituals of Christian life. Questions of salvation, the nature of the Messiah and the treatment of women in the Bible link to the way Churches are organised and how Christians worship.

» The question of the maleness and femaleness of God is closely linked to the language and imagery in the Bible and also the theological role of figures like the saviour, Jesus the male Messiah, and God the Father.

» The views of feminist theologians have not gone unchallenged and some argue that their critique of Christianity is based on misunderstandings and on misinterpretations of the Bible.

Enhance your learning

» In the introduction and Chapter 2 of Texts of Terror (1984), Phyllis Trible discusses the biblical texts that seem to reflect negative sexist attitudes and, in particular, the story of a royal rape.

» Mary Daly’s book, Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation (1973) is provocative, powerful and controversial reading. Chapter 4 explores the need to end the traditional patriarchal system of values and challenge them with something quite different.

» Chapter 9 of Rosemary Radford Ruether’s Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology (1983) focuses on the aspects of Ruether’s thinking explored in this chapter.

» Rosemary Radford Ruether’s article ‘The emergence of Christian feminist theology’ helpfully summarises feminism and feminist theology. It can be found in The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology (2002), which was edited by Susan Parsons.

» Luke 24:9–12 presents an interesting feature of the resurrection stories of the New Testament and the role of women as the first witnesses to the resurrection. At the time, women were not considered reliable witnesses in a court of law. The fact that the New Testament has women as the first messengers of the Gospel is interpreted by some as an indication that the events really happened (this is not how the story would have been told if it was made up) and also a pointed challenge to the idea that men are the authority on the Good News.

» Acts 16:13–15 is an account of a leading figure, who seems to have been an authority in the early Christian community acting as a minister in some way, and who is a woman. It is often used in debates about the role of women in the priesthood and about women in positions of authority in the Church.

Practice for exams

At A level, essay questions invite you to demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of factual material (AO1) and also your critical ability in putting forward a coherent, balanced argument (AO2). You should aim to write essays that are persuasive responses to the question throughout, rather than writing a lot of description and then tacking an opinion on at the end of each paragraph.

‘Christianity should be abandoned by feminists because it is essentially sexist.’ Discuss.

For this question, you need to think about whether Christianity is so sexist that it cannot be compatible with feminism, and if this means that feminists should abandon Christianity altogether.

For AO1 marks, you need to demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of the reasons why people might accuse Christianity of sexism, as well as the views of different writers on the subject, such as Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether. You could demonstrate your knowledge of key vocabulary by using terms such as ‘patriarchy’.
For AO2, you need to explore a range of different possible opinions in formulating your argument. For example, you could consider the view that Christianity is right to be male dominated and that people should abandon feminism rather than Christianity. You could take the view that it is unfair to call Christianity sexist. You might think that Christianity is male dominated but that this can be changed without abandoning Christianity altogether. Or you might have another opinion.

Try to make your essay balanced by giving a fair hearing to views that differ from your own, as well as explaining why you think your own opinions are more convincing.

**Discuss critically the view that only women can develop a genuine spirituality.**

This question invites discussion of what is meant by ‘genuine spirituality’, with a consideration of whether gender is a significant factor in spirituality.

For high marks in AO1 you could show knowledge and understanding of different thinkers, for example you could show knowledge of Mary Daly’s feminist approach to spirituality and of the writings of some Christian women such as Teresa of Avila.

For AO2, you need to consider whether the view that only women can develop a genuine spirituality is correct. For example, you might want to argue that the Christian ideal of putting selfish desires last and giving commitment to serving others is much more accessible for women if men have been used to thinking of themselves as leaders and authorities. You might want to argue that Christianity teaches that everyone, whatever their gender, is a recipient of the universal love of God and can respond to God. You might think that Christianity should be abandoned and that spirituality is not something that people should aim to develop.

Whatever your point of view, try to establish a consistent line of argument throughout your essay.