Black theology and feminist theology have emerged in the United States as indigenous expressions of contemporary theologies of liberation of oppressed peoples. Growing out of parallel liberation movements, their commitment is to radical political and social change. They do not attempt to present systematic theologies; their purpose is to offer critical reflection upon the Christian faith in the light of the particular experience of blacks and women respectively in their struggles to abolish the injustices which have kept these groups in subordination.

Both theologies address themselves to certain common themes, e.g., biblical promises of God's liberation of oppressed peoples and the corporate or social character of sin and of salvation. Both are strongly critical of the Christian church which they find deeply implicated in the perpetuation of both white racism and the oppression of women. Each group strives for self-definition and seeks to recover its own history and traditions as a means of countering negative self-images absorbed from the dominant culture and of developing dignity and self-esteem. Both theologies search for alternatives to culture-bound theological images which have functioned to support oppressive attitudes and institutions. Some black theologians insist that the concept of a "Black Messiah" is more meaningful to the experience of black people than a "white Americanized Christ." Women question the language and symbolism which evoke the image of an exclusively male, patriarchal God.

Although certain historical similarities in the subjugation of blacks and women and common motifs suggest a basis for solidarity and fruitful dialogue, considerable tension exists between the two groups. Black theology is rooted in the strongly male-oriented Black Power movement which began in the late 1960's and which regarded the emerging women's movement as a competitive diversion. Its exponents have ignored feminist theology and have not addressed themselves to the special problems of black women. On the other hand, the revived women's movement led predominantly by white middle- or upper-class women has not successfully incorporated the aspirations of poor and minority women in its struggle. Both groups have tended to concentrate upon a single factor of oppression without adequate consideration of the "interstructuring" of racism, sexism, and economic exploitation.

While both theologies are potential forces for renewal of Christian dynamism in a world of revolutionary change, limiting factors which threaten their effectiveness are apparent. One great danger is that preoccupation with particularization can obscure the goal of universal liberation and reconciliation which lies at the

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* Pauli Murray, former Professor of Law and Politics at Brandeis University, holds a J.S.D. degree from Yale Law School and a Master of Divinity from General Theological Seminary. In January, 1977 she was ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church.
heart of the Christian gospel. Related to this is a tendency to identify one's own group exclusively with ultimate righteousness and divine election as an instrument of judgment. This tendency can lead to isolation and further alienation and can ultimately destroy the power to become a liberating force.

Aware of these dangers, some feminist theologians have stressed the necessity for an inclusive approach, broad social analysis, and self-criticism which recognizes and opposes the oppressive practices within one's own group. This feminist analysis also points to the fact that women constitute half of every social class and their common concerns as women necessarily embrace the whole spectrum of the human condition. This offers possibilities for intercommunication and joint action which can begin to transcend barriers of race, sex, and economic class. Thus, black theology can profit from recognizing feminist theology as a potential resource and, through cooperative interchange, can both strengthen the black struggle and stimulate broadened perspectives.

Since the 1960's, contemporary theologians within the Christian tradition have responded to movements around the globe toward liberation of oppressed peoples with a growing body of literature variously called theology of liberation, political theology, theology of hope, or theology of revolution. Their common theme is the relation between Christian theology and social action. While much of this writing has come from Europe and Latin America, black theology and feminist theology are native to the United States and have emerged out of parallel movements for black liberation and women's liberation in this country. The purpose of this essay is to examine briefly the relationship between these two theologies, their common perspectives, their points of tension, and their potential to act as effective forces for liberation within the context of the Christian message.

Theologies of liberation are specific; they are usually written out of the concrete situations and experiences of particular groups. Black theology focuses upon the black experience under white racism; feminist theology is concerned with the revolt of women against male-chauvinist structures of society; Third World theologies develop out of the struggle for national liberation. Their common purpose is to commit Christians to radical political and social change, and to transform society in order to create a new and more humane world. This task is seen as the heart of the Gospel message. Gustavo Gutiérrez, a leading Latin American theologian, defines the purpose and method of this theological undertaking as follows:

The theology of liberation attempts to reflect on the experience and meaning of the faith based on the commitment to abolish injustice and to build a new society; this theology must be verified by the practice of that commitment, by active, effective participation in the struggle which the exploited classes have undertaken against their oppressors. Liberation from every form of exploitation,
the possibility of a more human and more dignified life, the creation of a new man—all pass through this struggle.¹

These theologies are also strategic and contextual. They do not attempt to construct an overarching systematic theology. Their method is inductive, based upon praxis, which Letty M. Russell describes as “action that is concurrent with reflection or analysis and leads to new questions, actions and reflections.... The direction of thought flows, not ‘downward’ from ‘theological experts’ but also upward and outward from the collective experience of action and ministry.”²

Gutiérrez, writing out of the Latin American experience, frankly acknowledges the influence of Marxist thought, “focusing upon praxis and geared to the transformation of the world.” Pointing to the confrontation between contemporary theology and Marxism, he says “it is to a large extent due to Marxism’s influence that theological thought, searching for its own sources, has begun to reflect on the meaning of the transformation of this world and the action of man in history.”³ John C. Bennett sees Gutiérrez as a Marxist in his acceptance of the class struggle as a present reality and the source of revolutionary dynamism. He also notes that Gutiérrez sees the need for revolutionary violence in Latin America if the institutionalized violence of the established order is to be overcome.⁴

While these points of contact with Marxism appear in a Third World context, Marxist liberationist principles cannot be said to be a dominant influence in theologies of liberation. Bennett observes that Gutiérrez’ basic theological method is a critical reflection on experience, always in the light of the normative sources of the Christian faith, and believes that he uses Marxism quite freely to illumine his situation in much the same way as Reinhold Niebuhr did in his Moral Man and Immoral Society in 1932.⁵

⁵ Bennett, Radical Imperative, p. 134. Gutiérrez writes, “Our purpose is not to elaborate an ideology to justify postures already taken.... It is rather to let ourselves be judged by the Word of the Lord, to think through our faith, to strengthen our love, and to give reason for our hope from within a commitment which seeks to become more radical, total and efficacious. It is to recon-
Among writers on black theology, James H. Cone has found Marxist analysis useful in his argument that theological ideas arise out of the social context of existence. However, he thinks that while Marxism may be helpful in providing a theoretical framework with respect to economic oppression any analysis which fails to deal with racism is inadequate. Among feminists, Letty M. Russell acknowledges that groups involved in the struggle for liberation may use various ideologies as "conceptual tools for change," but holds that for Christians, "all ideologies must be subject to constant critique in the light of the gospel." 

It is apparent, however, that the theology of liberation goes beyond a particular theological tradition and draws upon many fields of knowledge to illuminate the human situation. Rosemary Ruether argues forcefully for a multidisciplinary integration of human sciences as the necessary foundation for a theology of liberation adequate to the present human condition. She contends that "in order to rise to the task of sketching the horizon of human liberation in its fully redemptive context," the theologian today must be willing to become "the generalist par excellence seeing as his context and data the whole range of human science and the whole history of human cultures of self-symbolization." 

Liberation theologies, according to Russell, share at least three common perspectives: biblical promises of God's liberation in the Old and New Testaments; viewing the world as history and therefore as a process of change; and strong emphasis upon salvation as a social or communal event which has its beginnings in the here and now. The image of "Christ the Liberator" is part of the ideology of liberation theology and is intended express the notion that salvation in Christ includes political and social as well as individual spiritual salvation. Christ the Savior liberates man from sin, which is the ultimate root of all injustice and oppression; the struggle for a just society is seen as a significant part of salvation history. In Gutiérrez' analysis, liberation and salvation are inseparably connected. He asserts that the term liberation has three distinct levels of meaning: (1) socio-political liberation; (2) a historical perspective on the great themes of Christian life within this radically changed perspective and with regard to the new questions posed by the commitment." Theology of Liberation, p. ix.


Russell, Human Liberation, p. 60.


Russell, Human Liberation, pp. 56-62. God is portrayed in both the Old Testament and New Testament as the Liberator, the one who sets people free. God is not the liberator of one small nation or group, but of all humankind." Pp. 56-57.
process of humanization and self-realization; and (3) liberation from sin and admission to communion with God. The work of Christ as the Liberator embraces all three levels of meaning which are part of an all-embracing process of salvation.  

Similarly, liberation theology points to the corporate nature of sin. Sin is not regarded as merely a private and individual transgression which can be cured by individual repentance, leaving unchallenged the social order in which we live. Rather, it is seen as a social, historical fact and is evident in oppressive institutional structures, in human exploitation, and in the domination of peoples, races, and classes. Rosemary Ruether equates corporate evil with St. Paul’s reference to “Powers and Principalities.” She declares:

The individualistic concept of sin ignores this social-cosmic dimension of evil. A concentration on individualistic repentance has led, in Christianity, to a petty and privatistic concept of sin which involves the person in obsessive compunction about individual (mostly sexual) immorality, while having no ethical handle at all on the great structures of evil which we raise up corporately to blot out the face of God’s creation.

Sin builds up corporate structures of alienation and oppression which man, individually, cannot overcome; salvation from corporate evil, therefore, requires participation in those political processes which seek to destroy injustice and misery. Conversion to Christ, whose saving work is seen as radical liberation from all forms of enslavement and alienation, implies conversion to the neighbor, or as Gutiérrez puts it “the oppressed person, the exploited class, the despised race, the dominated country.” “To place oneself in the perspective of the Kingdom means to participate in the struggle for the liberation of those oppressed by others.”

Theology of liberation also calls for a redefinition of the task of the Church in the world. Gutiérrez asserts that salvation is not limited to the action of the Church but is a reality which occurs in history and, therefore, the Church must cease looking upon itself as the exclusive place of salvation and orient itself to a new and radical service to the people. As a sacramental community and a sign of the liberation of humanity and history, the Church in its concrete existence should be a place of liberation and should signify in its own internal structure the salvation whose fulfillment it announces. True renewal of the Church must be on the basis of an effective awareness of the world and a com-

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11 Gutiérrez, Theology of Liberation, ch. 9.
12 Ruether, Liberation Theology, p. 8.
mitment to it; "the Church must be the visible sign of the presence of the Lord within the aspiration for liberation and the struggle for a more human and just society. Only in this way will the message of love which the Church bears be made credible and efficacious." 14

This method of doing theology is avowedly experimental, but Russell contends that this experiment in liberation is not done only on man's initiative. "It is a way of participating in the humanity of God; joining God's experiment in being together with us, so that we might be together with one another." She points out that while liberation theology looks toward the eschatological future, "the expectation of the full restoration of the groaning universe," it offers hope in the present. "It is now that liberation and new humanity have begun." It is now that we must risk the praxis of freedom so that God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven!" 15

As we examine black theology and feminist theology in the light of these general perspectives, we will discover considerable variations in approach and emphasis. We will also find that perhaps the greatest danger to the effectiveness of specific theologies is a tendency to compete with one another in defining a particular form of oppression as the "source of all evil," and thus losing sight of the goal of universal liberation and salvation. 16

I. Background of Racism and Sexism in the United States

Racism and sexism illustrate corporate evils which are built into the structures of the United States. There are striking similarities in their origins, ideologies, and practices. Race and sex are comparable to the extent that they form large permanent classes identifiable by indelible physical characteristics which fix one's status at birth. Blanche Crozier, a lawyer writing in 1935, pointed out that no other kind of class is as susceptible to implications of innate inferiority. "Only permanent and natural classes are open to those deep, traditional implications which

16 "In order to qualify as true liberation movements, black liberation from the oppressors and women's liberation from the traditionally fixed set of feminine roles should regard themselves as steps on the road toward a human liberation of all people, becoming free in conformity with the authentic humanity of the Son of Man.... The time may have come to divest ourselves of the ideological fixations of our own peculiar concerns and to seek concrete cooperation with other liberation movements. It is impossible to eliminate racism without putting an end to economic exploitation by one part of the human family of their brothers and sisters. True human rights for women is a utopia as long as we refuse to eliminate racism and a competitive society." Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel and Jürgen Moltmann, Foreword to Human Liberation, by Russell, pp. 13-14, 15.
become attached to classes regardless of the actual qualities of the members of the class.” 17

Feminist writers increasingly call attention to the oppression of women as the oldest form of subjugation in human history and suggest that it has served as a model for other kinds of oppression. Gunnar Myrdal’s study of the racial problem in the United States, published in 1944, supports this view. He observed that the Negro problem and the women’s problem in this country revealed parallels which were not accidental but were rooted in the paternalistic order of preindustrial society.

In the earlier common law, women and children were placed under the jurisdiction of the paternal power. When a legal status had to be found for the imported Negro servants in the seventeenth century, the nearest and most natural analogy was the status of women and children. The ninth commandment—linking together women, servants, mules and other property—could be invoked as well as a great number of other passages of Holy Scripture. 18

Thus, although tremendous differences existed between white women and black slaves in actual status and in their relations with the dominant class, the paternalistic idea placed the slave “beside women and children in the power of the paterfamilias.” 19

In the American South during the period before the Civil War, “woman was elevated as an ornament and looked upon with pride, while the Negro slave became increasingly a chattel and a ward.” Nevertheless, defenders of slavery exploited paternalistic ideology and the inferior status of women in their arguments. George Fitzhugh asserted in Sociology of the South, published in 1854, “Wives and apprentices are slaves, not in theory only, but often in fact.” He found moral support for slavery in the “instance of the Patriarch Abraham. His wives and his children, his men servants and his maid servants, his camels and his cattle, were all equally his property.” 20 Another typical defense called attention to the fact that “the general good requires us to deprive the whole female sex of the right to self-government. They have no voice in the formation of the laws which dispose of their persons and properties.” 21

Women, like Negro slaves, were deprived of the right to vote, legal rights over their property and custody of their children, educational opportunities, and were virtually excluded from participation in govern-

19 Myrdal, American Dilemma, p. 1073.
20 Cited and quoted in Myrdal, American Dilemma, pp. 1073-1074.
ment, business, and the professions. After emancipation and well into the Twentieth century, similar ideologies were used to rationalize continued subordination of blacks and women — smaller brains, less intellectual capacity, weaker moral fibre, "the woman's place," the "Negro's place," the "contented woman," the "contented Negro," and so on.

These historical similarities have persisted into the present. Both groups continue to experience in varying degrees economic and social exploitation, limited access to educational and professional opportunities, and underrepresentation at the higher policy levels of the major institutions which shape and control society, all of which contribute to dependency and powerlessness. Members of both groups have internalized negative images projected upon them by the dominant class and absorbed attitudes of inadequacy and self-contempt. Historically, the Christian Church has been deeply implicated in perpetuating the alienation of both groups, and the strong patriarchal tradition in the Church has been especially damaging with respect to women. The context out of which black theology and feminist theology arise, then, is what Ruether characterizes as "the overarching system of racist elite patriarchalism."  

II. Black Theology and Feminist Theology Compared

For purposes of comparison, we will rely primarily upon the work of three academic theologians in each of the two fields. Attempts to generalize are hazardous; significant differences in perspective and formulation appear among the writers within each field as well as between the two groups. Strong differences occur in how they perceive God in relation to their struggle and in how they relate to other movements for liberation.

Mary Daly and James H. Cone are ultraradical in their respective analyses and probably stand farthest apart in their theological perspectives. Michael Berenbaum has referred to them as "theologians of survival." He says their suffering has become for them a root experience which now alters their conception of God. Cone places himself within

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23 The writers selected for black theology are: James H. Cone (Union Theological Seminary); J. Deotis Roberts (Howard University School of Religion); and Major J. Jones (Gammon Theological Seminary in Atlanta). The writers on feminist theology are: Mary Daly (Boston College); Letty M. Russell (Yale Divinity School); and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Garrett Theological Seminary). The three black theologians are Protestant. Daly and Ruether are products of the Roman Catholic tradition; Letty Russell is an ordained Presbyterian minister.
the Gospel tradition, but uses language at times which is so sweeping as to seem foreign to Christian doctrine. A typical example: "Black theology refuses to accept a God who is not identified totally with the goals of the black community. If God is not for us and against white people, then he is a murderer, and we had better kill him." Daly's analysis of sexism has led her, in her own words, to "a dramatic/traumatic change of consciousness from 'radical Catholic' to postChristian feminist" and to reject entirely patriarchal symbols of God.

Black theologians have not successfully resolved the dilemma of specific theologies, that of maintaining a universal perspective within the context of particularization. In their understandable preoccupation with the phenomenon of white racism, they tend to forego a sharpened analysis which would reveal its interrelatedness with other structures of oppression and human exploitation. When Cone defines black theology as a theology of liberation because it believes that "the liberation of black people is God's liberation," he gives the impression that black people only are the instrument of salvation. J. Deotis Roberts disavows any duty of the black theologian to speak on behalf of other minorities although he has great empathy for them and would encourage them to speak for themselves. He argues: "The white oppressor must be confronted by the scandal of particularity. He must not be allowed the escape hatch of universality." The weakness of Roberts' approach is not that he sees his primary task as an analysis of racism but that he appears to overlook the fact that an effective understanding of the black experience in the United States requires knowledge of what Ruether calls the "interstructuring" of racism with sexism and class exploitation. His general tone, however, is more restrained than that of Cone. He defines black theology as liberation theology in more traditional terms.

Liberation is revolutionary—for blacks it points to what ought to be. Black Christians desire radical and rapid social change. . . . We believe that the Christian faith is avowedly revolutionary and, therefore, it may speak to this need with great force.

27 Cone, Black Theology of Liberation, p. 23.
28 Roberts, Black Political Theology, p. 16.
The point of departure for Ruether and Russell, on the other hand, is the universal human condition to which they speak from a feminist perspective. Ruether keeps in mind the need "to bring together the full picture" of the "history of aberrant spirituality, expressed in self-alienation, world-alienation, and various kinds of social alienations in sexism, anti-Semitism, racism, alienation between classes, and finally colonialist imperialism." Ruether defines feminist theology as liberation theology "because it is concerned with the liberation of all people to become full participants in human society."

Daly is closer to Roberts in her suspicion that "universalism" is used as a device to deflect attention from sexual caste. "One frequently hears 'But isn't the real problem human liberation?' The difficulty with this approach is that the words may be 'true,' but when used to avoid the specific problems of sexism they are radically untruthful." While Daly gives priority to feminist liberation, she also claims for it a universal goal. The purpose of her work *Beyond God the Father*

is to show that the women's revolution, insofar as it is true to its own essential dynamics, is an ontological, spiritual revolution, pointing beyond the idolatries of a sexist society and sparking creative action in and toward transcendence. The becoming of women implies universal becoming. It has everything to do with the search for ultimate meaning and reality, which some would call God.

On the crucial questions of violence and reconciliation in the context of black-white confrontation in America, Cone's position is radically different from that of his colleagues in black theology. Cone appears to embrace revolutionary violence and argues that no one can be nonviolent in an unjust society. Roberts rejects violence not only because he believes it is inconsistent with the Christian ethic but also because he thinks it is pragmatically and psychologically bad for blacks.

The workability of violence as a means to a better position for blacks is in question. As one who has seen the stark face of racial violence in several major cities and observed up close the tragic aftermath for blacks (even at the hands of their own soul brothers), I have yet to be convinced of the pragmatic test of violence.

Major J. Jones, whose work *Christian Ethics for Black Theology* examines the ethical implications of strategies for liberation, raises a

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32 Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, pp. 4-5.
33 Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, p. 6.
number of questions about violence as a means of self-defense in the struggle for liberation. He poses the alternative of nonviolence as both a theology and a method of social action, and points to the thought of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

For him [King], nonviolence was not a capitulation to weakness and fear; rather nonviolence demanded that difficult kind of steadfastness which can endure indignation with dignity. For King, nonviolence always attempted to reconcile and establish a relationship rather than humiliate the opponent. For him nonviolence was always directed against the evil rather than against the person responsible for the evil. 36

Roberts’ perspective includes an abiding concern for reconciliation. He asserts that “liberation and reconciliation are the two main poles of black theology,” and that “authentic existence for blacks and whites can only be realized finally in reconciliation as equals in the body of Christ.” He believes there can be no liberation without reconciliation and no reconciliation without liberation, and says that the only Christian way in race relations is a liberating experience for white oppressor as well as black oppressed. 37 Jones also holds this view and believes that the black man “cannot find the way to liberation and a larger freedom for himself without also finding the way to liberation and freedom for his white brother.” 38

Cone is sharply critical of Roberts’ view that black theology must work at the task of intercommunication between blacks and whites so that white Christians may be led to understand and work with blacks for liberation and reconciliation on an interracial basis. For Cone, “All talk about reconciliation with white oppressors, with mutual dialogue about its meaning, has no place in black power or Black Theology.” He thinks such talk opens the door “not only for white people to be oppressors and Christians at the same time, but also for them to participate in black liberation and to set the terms of our reconciliation with them.” He projects the black struggle as a closed circle to which white people may be admitted only by repentance and conversion on terms defined by black people. 39

Both black theology and feminist theology express the goal of wholeness of the human being, of authentic selfhood, self-esteem, and dignity. They deal with questions of identity, the retrieval of lost history, the destruction of self-depreciation, and liberating self-affirmation. Letty

37 Roberts, Liberation and Reconciliation, pp. 25, 26; and Black Political Theology, p. 222.
38 Jones, Christian Ethics, p. 195.
39 Cone, God of the Oppressed, pp. 239, 241, 242. See footnote 75 infra.
Russell refers to this process as conscientization, a term borrowed from Latin American theology, through which people come to a self-awareness that helps them to shape their own personal and social history and learn their own potential for action in shaping the world.  

A crucial task for both theologies is what Russell calls "the search for a usable past." Black theology sees its task as one of reclaiming a people from humiliation and achieving black consciousness, black pride, and black self-determination. Cone relates black theology to an identity crisis.

There is more at stake in the struggle for survival than mere physical existence. You have to be black with a knowledge of the history of this country to know what America means to black people. You also have to know what it means to be a nonperson, a nothing, a person with no past to know what Black Power is all about. Survival as a person means not only food and shelter, but also belonging to a community that remembers and understands the meaning of its past. Black consciousness is an attempt to recover a past deliberately destroyed by slave masters, an attempt to revive old survival symbols and create new ones.

For Roberts the task of black theology is to provide an understanding of black self-awareness and black pride and "at the same time, to give a helpful interpretation of the Christian faith to those who honestly seek to be their true black selves and Christians at the same time." In seeking continuity of tradition with the African past, he finds linkages between the African world view and black religious tradition in the United States which he thinks are worthy of further exploration. He also argues that American blacks, being neither fully African nor fully American, but in a real sense participating in both worlds, "may yet be the most important bridge to humanize relations between the West and the Third World."

From the feminist perspective, Ruether sees the first stage of women's liberation as the process of raising consciousness, of exorcizing debasing self-images which women have internalized. This "involves the exploration of the history of sexism and the reconstruction of its ideology in order to loosen its hold on the self and to permit the gradual growth of self-definition over against a world defined in male terms." Russell observes that almost all existing historical records have been preserved...

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41 Russell, Human Liberation, ch. 3.
42 Cone, Black Theology of Liberation, p. 37.
44 Roberts, Black Political Theology, pp. 53; 55-56, 74ff.
45 Ruether, New Woman/New Earth, p. 29.
by men who defined women’s roles and functions for them and that for women as a group awareness of their own history and struggles is frequently nonexistent. She notes that the attempt on the part of women “to recreate a usable past as *her-story* and not just *his-story* is part of a widespread development in the modern world,” and sees it as a necessary effort in order for women to shape their future as partners in society.*

Both groups are also engaged in a critical reexamination of biblical tradition as well as Christian theology and anthropology. Roberts and Ruether call attention to the dualistic strain in Christianity absorbed from the Platonic view of the split in human existence between body and soul, which they find antagonistic to the principle of wholeness in human relations. Ruether relates it explicitly to the subjugation of women. She finds that this dualistic view which Christianity inherited from classical civilization repressed the possibility of the liberation of women—a possibility clearly revealed in the teaching and action of Jesus and in the early Christian community—by “equating soul-body dualism with male-female dualism, and thus reestablishing the subordination of women in a new form.” She also shows how religious tradition has facilitated this subjugation.

Traditional theological images of God as father have been the sanctification of sexism and hierarchalism precisely by defining this relationship of God as father to humanity in a domination-subordination model and by allowing ruling class males to identify themselves with this divine fatherhood in such a way as to establish themselves in the same kind of hierarchical relationship to women and lower classes.

This analysis has implications for both blacks and women in their attempts to express images of God which will be meaningful to them in their struggle. Black theologians, however, seem to have no difficulty with patriarchal symbolism. For Cone and Roberts, at least, the concern is racial. Both reject a “white Americanized Christ” and have substituted the symbol of a Black Christ. According to Cone

To say that Christ is black means that black people are God’s poor people whom Christ has come to liberate.... To say that Christ is black means that God, in his infinite wisdom and mercy, not only takes color seriously, he takes it upon himself and discloses his will to make us whole—new creatures born in the divine blackness and redeemed through the blood of the Black Christ.... The ‘blackness of Christ,’ therefore, is not simply a statement about skin color,

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but rather the transcendent affirmation that God has not ever, no not ever, left the oppressed alone in the struggle.  

Roberts wrestles with the implications of such particularism and offers the following explanation:

In one sense Christ must be said to be universal and therefore colorless. Only in a symbolic or mythical sense, then, must we understand the black Messiah in the context of the black religious experience. In other words the universal Christ is particularized for the black Christian in the black experience of the black Messiah, but the black Messiah is at the same time universalized in the Christ of the Gospels who meets all men in their situation. The black Messiah liberates the black man. The universal Christ reconciles the black man with the rest of mankind.

Ruether's comment on this symbolism is that since God is the God of all men, each in his own particular culture, "the Gospel rightfully comes to the black man in the form of a Black Messiah... in the sense of that historical contextualism, which gives to each people a salvation that encounters their situation."

Jones, however, seems less certain about the usefulness of such imagery in the long run. He concedes that "when the oppressed is no longer willing to accept or adopt the God of his oppressor, especially his explicit or implicit color as it is expressed in art and literature, then the process of liberation has already begun." He also suggests that it is a sign of maturity when an oppressed people are no longer willing to adopt without question a religion or God who accepts the idea of inequality for any part of the human family. But he wonders "what this altering of God's color will do for the black man. Will it make him, as a mature religious person, any more responsible with the use of his newly acquired black power than the white man was with his white power? Will the black man, with his black God, be a better man than the white man was with his white God?" He observes that those who advocate black awareness and separation as a means to achieve the ultimate realization of black self-identity often ignore the fact that the humanity of man is much deeper than color.

The deeper question is whether it is possible for God to acquire color without becoming identified with that which is too narrow to be fully representative of the total human family, much less that which is Divine. This is the inherent danger in representing God in any human conception, either concrete or abstract.

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50 Cone, God of the Oppressed, pp. 136-137.
51 Roberts, Liberation and Reconciliation, pp. 139-140.
52 Ruether, Liberation Theology, p. 133.
53 Jones, Black Awareness, pp. 115, 116.
The question of theological symbolism arises in a more intensified form for women confronted with the weight of Judaeo-Christian tradition filled with imagery of an exclusively male, patriarchal God. Religion, as Ruether points out, "is undoubtedly the single most important shaper and enforcer of the image and role of women in society." 54 Joan Arnold Romero accurately describes how women are beginning to respond.

In much the same way as blacks have experienced the white Jesus in a white church preaching an alienating message, a number of women, too, are becoming conscious of the alienation from a masculine God, a masculine Church, and a masculine theology. For women the situation has in many ways been worse, for they form the bulk of the population of the Church, while in the structures of authority as represented both theologically and institutionally, it is men who have had the role of representing God to the people. 55

The negative impact upon women of the "maleness" of God-language cannot be regarded lightly. In her study of sexist ideologies, Ruether points to language as the prime reflection of the power of the ruling group to define reality in its own terms and demote oppressed groups into invisibility. "Women, more than any other group, are overwhelmed by a linguistic form that excludes them from visible existence." 56 Nelle Morton has dramatized this issue by using reversed terminology. She asks what image is invoked in the reader when one enrolls in a seminar on 'The Doctrine of woman' [and] the professor intends at least to deal with men also. When one sings of the Motherhood of God and the Sisterhood of Woman, one breathes a prayer that all men as well as women will come to experience true sisterhood. 57

Daly speaks of liberation as retrieving the power to name.

To exist humanly is to name the self, the world, and God. The 'method' of the evolving spiritual consciousness of women is nothing less than this beginning to speak humanly—a reclaiming of the right to name. The liberation of language is rooted in the liberation of ourselves. 58

She introduces the phrase "sisterhood of man," explaining

56 Ruether, New Woman/New Earth, p. xiii.
58 Daly, Beyond God the Father, p. 8.
What 'sisterhood of man' does is to give a generic weight to 'sisterhood' which the term has never before been called upon to bear. At the same time it emasculates the pseudo-generic 'man.' The expression, then, raises the problem of a sexually oppressive world and it signals other possibilities.  

Similarly, she speaks of "the death of God the Father in the rising woman-consciousness and the consequent breakthrough to conscious, communal participation in God the Verb."  

Thus, while a black theologian may find the Old Testament symbolism of the Chosen People "important for the unity of purpose among black people and the feeling that their group life has lasting salvific significance," a feminist theologian may look upon the Old Testament as "a man's 'book,' where women appear for the most part simply as adjuncts of men, significant only in the context of men's activities." While Roberts finds the symbol of the black Christ "related to the affirmation of blackness and the antidote of self-hatred," Daly finds the patriarchal implications of Christology so overwhelming and "the functioning of the Christ image in Christianity to legitimate sexual hierarchy" so blatant that she would move beyond what she terms "Christolatry" to the "Second Coming of Women," the "new arrival of the female presence, once strong and powerful, but enchained since the dawn of patriarchy."  

The images "Black Messiah" and the "Second Coming of Women" are irreconcilable symbols to one who shares both the black experience and the experience of being a woman. Ruether thinks it impossible for the black movement to respond to Daly's sort of feminist theology because of her heavy stress on mariological symbols as symbols of feminine superiority and her judgmental symbol of castration. Ruether believes these symbols "are totally encapsulated in white racism through which black women and black men have been victimized" and, instead of being liberating, "such symbols seem simply expressions of white sexual pathology conducting business as usual." Both the racial and the sexual symbols point to the danger of exclusivism. 

Russell seeks to avoid both extremes. She believes that Christian women can see in Jesus one who helped both men and women to understand their total personhood, and that to think of Christ first in terms of his racial origin or his male sex "is to revert again to biological de-

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59 Daly, Beyond God the Father, p. 9.
60 Daly, Beyond God the Father, p. 12.
61 Roberts, Liberation and Reconciliation, p. 58.
63 Roberts, Black Political Theology, p. 137.
64 Daly, Beyond God the Father, pp. 79, 96.
65 Ruether, New Woman/ New Earth, p. 121.
terminism which affirms that the most important thing about a person is her or his race or sex. The most important affirmation of ourselves and of Jesus is that we want to be accepted as subjects and persons, within whom biological differentiation is a secondary aspect." 66

III. Areas of Tension

Although certain historical similarities and common motifs would suggest a basis for fruitful dialogue between black theology and feminist theology, so far this has not happened. Ruether has been deeply concerned about the tensions between the two groups. In a thoughtful analysis she has observed that although these are the two most important theologies of liberation to emerge in the United States, "an undeclared war is brewing between them." She notes that both groups are potential victims of typical efforts on the part of a ruling class to divide and rule. She points to the historical parallel in the Nineteenth century when women leaders who supported abolition of slavery became alienated after the Civil War as they saw their own concerns shunted aside by white male legislators who extended suffrage to black males only, and warns this can happen again in this century unless women and blacks can find ways to avoid the trap. The symptoms are already evident.

Black caucuses, appearing a year or two earlier than women's caucuses, have generally denied reciprocal solidarity with the women's movement. In the black power and black nationalist movements that arose in the latter half of the 1960's, the negative reactions toward women's liberation have come from many black males themselves. Far from being open to the question of female oppression, the model of black liberation has appeared to be modeled after the super-male chauvinist traditions. 68

Analyzing the roots of this clash, Ruether focuses upon the results of plantation slavery in the American South which depended not only upon a debasing racist anthropology but also upon the destruction of black family life, sexual exploitation of the black woman, and suppression of the rights of the black male as husband, father, and householder. Postbellum white racism was a system which combined social and economic deprivation of the black group with direct terrorization of the black family, especially directed against the black male. Today, Ruether says, "the memory of that terrorization still forms the ultimate point of reference for black liberation." She notes that the movement for

66 Russell, Human Liberation, pp. 138-139.
67 Ruether, New Woman/New Earth, p. 115.
68 Ruether, New Woman/New Earth, p. 116.
black liberation “has been overwhelmingly male-oriented in style and leadership.”  

Differences in status and outlook contribute to misunderstandings and tensions. Blacks have been set apart through rigidly enforced segregation buttressed by institutionalized violence. Their apartness and the pervasiveness of their humiliation gave rise to a high degree of solidarity against racial oppression, the development of parallel institutions, notably the black Church, and to recurring periods of intense cultural nationalism. Thus, black theologians speak of a quest for a distinctive “peoplehood.” 

Women’s status is more ambiguous. Ruether notes that sociologically, women are a caste within every class and race. As women, they share a common condition of dependency, secondary existence, domestic labor, sexual exploitation, and the projection of their role in procreation into a total definition of their existence. But this common condition is expressed in profoundly different forms, she says, as women are divided against each other by class and race. 

In sum, women are distributed throughout every segment of the population and share the particular advantages or disadvantages of the race or class to which they belong. It is difficult for a black person to see a white upper-class woman as “oppressed.” Her concerns seem trivial beside the stark struggle of existence. For many blacks, she represents the white “oppressor.” Black males, especially, express the fear that the women’s movement is a diversionary tactic to deflect attention from the more urgent struggle for black liberation.

Ruether suggests that racism and sexism should not be looked upon as exactly parallel but as “interstructural elements within the overarching system of white male domination.” As she sees it,

this interstructuring of oppression by sex, race, and also class creates intermediate tensions and alienations—between white women and black women, between black men and white women, and even between black men and black women. Each group tends to suppress the experience of its racial and sexual counterparts. The black movement talks as though ‘blacks’ mean black males. In doing so it conceals the tensions between black males and black females. The women’s movement fails to integrate the experience of black and poor women, and so fails to see that much of what it means by female experience is confined to those women within the dominant class and race.

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69 Ruether, *New Woman/New Earth*, pp. 117-121.
70 Ruether, *New Woman/New Earth*, p. 125.
She is critical of a tendency among radical feminists to make a monolithic analysis of sexism as the ultimate evil and believes it essential that the women's movement reach out and include in its struggle the inter-structuring of sexism with all other kinds of oppression as well as recognize the pluralism of women's movements in the context of different groupings. Otherwise, she thinks, the women's movement will tend to remain a women's movement of the white upper class that can be misused to consolidate the power of that class against the poor and non-white of both sexes. She also believes that only as autonomous women's movements develop in the context of various kinds of race, ethnic, and class oppression will the missing links in the structure of oppression become visible.

Black theology presently suffers from a similar tendency toward monolithic analysis. It reveals little understanding of the problems of black women as women and almost totally ignores feminist theology. Black women are torn between their loyalty to their racial community and growing consciousness of the need to struggle against sexism. Although they are now beginning to form their own feminist networks, there is a dearth of black women theologians — due in large part to the strong patriarchal tradition of the black Church — who can bring to bear their influence upon the development of black theology. The interlocking factors of racism and sexism within the black experience await analysis.

IV. Possibilities and Limitations

One can make only tentative assessments of theologies still in their embryonic stages, but it would seem that black theology and feminist theology have the potential to develop as strong forces for the renewal of Christian dynamism in the United States. They speak prophetically to the Church, confronting it with its own contradictions. Ruether says bluntly that the Church has allowed itself to become the cultural guardian of the symbols of domination and subjugation and this role is apostasy to the mission of the Church. The Church must exorcise these demonic symbols within its structure and must recover its own revolutionary heritage as a liberating force in the world.

The gospel of the Church must again come to be the recognized social mandate of human history, not the means of setting up a new regime of domination or, on the other hand, of withdrawing into a private world of individual ‘salvation.’

For those who, by birth or circumstance, are necessarily involved in the struggle against racism, sexism, or both, these theologies present many

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73 Ruether, *New Woman/New Earth*, p. 82.
liberating ideas, offer hope and a vision of new humanity. In doing so they help to give deeper meanings to the Christian faith and its relevance to their struggle.

On the other hand, as we have seen, there are certain limiting factors which seem to arise out of efforts to particularize the theology of liberation within different contexts. Carried to the extreme, particularization can stifle self-criticism, lead to isolation and ultimately frustration. It can develop into a myopia and obscure the vision of the wholeness of humanity which liberation theologians seek. We have already made reference to this danger in discussing the tensions between the black movement and the feminist movement. Here we call attention to the tendency to identify without qualification the suffering of a particular group with righteous and redemption. This tendency appears in Third World theology and is particularly strong in Cone's writings. He uses language which identifies "whiteness" with all that is evil and "blackness" with authentic personhood. His identification of blacks with ultimate righteousness is central to his theological perspective. A striking example is his assertion that "[t]he divine election of the oppressed means that black people are given the power of judgment over the high and mighty whites." 75

Cone has drawn sharp criticism from his black colleagues for his extreme views. Jones wonders "whether Cone's God is big enough for the liberation struggle," and says "the black Christian can never dismiss the fact that the white oppressor is also God's child in need of a redemption of another kind." 76 Roberts is also concerned that blacks not fall into the danger of exchanging physical oppression for the bondage of race hate on the part of black themselves. Blacks should "be aware that their own togetherness is shot through with the possibility of exploitation of one another." Roberts warns that sin as self-centeredness is a disease which infects the black community as well as the white

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74 "The future of history belongs to the poor and exploited. True liberation will be the work of the oppressed themselves; in them, the Lord saves history." Gutiérrez, Theology of Liberation, p. 208.

75 Cone, God of the Oppressed, p. 225. "When the whites undergo the true experience of conversion wherein they die to whiteness and are reborn anew in order to struggle against white oppression and for the liberation of the oppressed, there is a place for them in the black struggle of freedom. Here reconciliation becomes God's gift of blackness through the oppressed of the land. But it must be made absolutely clear that the black community decides both the authenticity of white conversion and also the place these converts will play in the black struggle of freedom. The converts can have nothing to say about the validity of their conversion experience or what is best for the community or their place in it, except as permitted by the oppressed community itself." Ibid., p. 242.

76 Jones, Christian Ethics, pp. 69-74.
community. "Even the black church has not escaped the blight of self-centeredness." 77

Ruether finds that liberation theologies which stress "the role of the 'oppressed community' as the primary locus of the power for repentance and judgment" have adopted this model from the literature of apocalypticism. This model has inherent limitations, she believes. The initial effort of self-affirmation on the part of an oppressed group becomes distorted at the point where all evil is projected upon an alien group, "so that judgment is merely a rejection of that 'other' group of persons, and salvation simply self-affirmation per se" without regard for the humanity of the oppressors. She is convinced that all theologies of liberation will abort both their power to liberate themselves and their possibilities as a liberating force for their oppressors "unless they finally go beyond the apocalyptic sectarian model of the oppressor and the oppressed" and "rise to a perspective that affirms a universal humanity as the ground of their own self-identity, and also to a power of self-criticism." 78

To a great extent, the writings of Ruether and Russell, who stand within the Christian tradition, reveal an awareness of the need for broad social analysis, a sensitivity to other forms of oppression, a willingness to engage in dialogue with black theology, and to overcome the tensions. Despite the limitations of feminist analysis to which Ruether has referred, feminist theology indicates an inclusive approach and a capacity for self-critical reflection which, if taken seriously, can be a powerful force for humanizing the entire spectrum of liberation movements. As Ruether points out, no other definable group has such a broad range of historical tasks. "The woman's story must encompass the entire scope of the human condition. Moreover the issue of sexism crosses and includes every field of specialization." 79 Women, through coalitions on issues of common concern, can begin to transcend barriers of race, class, and nationality. They can provide a basis for intercommunication and interpenetration of all social structures and act as leaven within all groups.

77 Roberts, Liberation and Reconciliation, pp. 112-113.
78 Ruether, Liberation Theology, pp. 10-16. Elsewhere Ruether speaks of "the tendency of both the black movement and the women's movement to ignore the structures of oppression within their own groups and to attempt to reduce 'oppression' to a single-factored analysis.... To recognize structures of oppression within our own group would break up this model of ultimate righteousness and projection of guilt upon the 'others.' It would force us to deal with ourselves, not as simply oppressed or oppressors, but as people who are sometimes one and sometimes the other in different contexts. A more mature and chastened analysis of the capacities of human beings for good and evil would flow from this perception. The flood gates of righteous anger must then be tempered by critical self-knowledge." New Woman/New Earth, p. 132.
79 Ruether, New Woman/New Earth, p. 12.
Black theology has much to gain by recognizing this dynamic potential as a resource which can be tapped to strengthen rather than compete with the black liberation movement. It offers a vital link to broader insights and larger perspectives. It also offers the possibility of effective cooperation, especially at points where race, sex, and class intersect. Such interchange and cooperation within the Christian context make it possible to experience moments of liberation and reconciliation, however fleeting and fragmentary, in the course of the struggle. These glimpses of the "new creation" and the "new human being" provide the hope which is the wellspring of any meaningful theology of liberation in our time.
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