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Christina Rossetti’s Feminist Theology

Lynda Palazzo
To My Parents
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Preface

Christina Rossetti published six volumes of devotional prose during her lifetime, beginning with a prayer book, *Annus Domini*, and ending, during the last years of her life, with a substantial volume, *The Face of the Deep*, devoted to commentary on the Book of Revelation. Although these were very popular in her day and widely used even by the clergy, they have been neglected in the study of nineteenth-century theology. They have long been out of print and are practically inaccessible today. Her devotional poetry has fared better, featuring in literary histories of the Oxford Movement such as R. Chapman’s *Faith and Revolt: Studies in the Literary Influence of the Oxford Movement* (1970) and G.B. Tennyson’s *Victorian Devotional Poetry* (1981). More recently, interest in her theology has grown steadily and includes her devotional texts, with the contextual approach of A.H. Harrison’s *Christina Rossetti in Context* (1988) and, importantly, the publication of the *Selected Prose of Christina Rossetti*, edited by David A. Kent and P.G. Stanwood (1998). Diane D’Amico’s recent study *Faith, Gender and Time* (1999), although using Rossetti’s devotional works mainly to support discussions of her poems, accords them an important place in Rossetti scholarship and makes the important connection between faith and gender.

What has not yet been done, however, is to study Rossetti’s devotional texts as volumes, each with a specific structure and argument, and each with a theological message to convey. Furthermore, Rossetti’s work needs to be revalued as theology, not used simply as a gloss to her poetry, and it needs to be added to the rich and varied history of religion in nineteenth-century England. Rossetti should take her place with other Victorian women who struggled to make their voices heard in a society that considered them unfit to study theology or preach in church.

The revaluation of women’s theology by today’s feminist theologians seemed a useful place to start in the choice of supportive theoretical material, and its use has uncovered in Rossetti’s devotional writings not only a valid and consistent theological orientation, but one that is startlingly modern. Rossetti’s literary and creative skill has
added to her reading an awareness of the scriptures as text and as the production of the limited consciousness of a (male) writer. Her own volumes function as extensions of this text, restating to her own generation and in particular to her own gender the lessons she discovers there.

My approach does not assume to be the only access to Rossetti’s devotional prose. Her writing is so rich and varied that there is scope for a great diversity of studies, and it is hoped that this volume will promote greater interest in her works. I have simply chosen a few aspects of her theology which I have found meaningful, and followed them through to her last volume, The Face of the Deep.
Introduction

On 14 November 1971 the feminist theologian Mary Daly staged a walk-out from Memorial Church, Harvard after preaching there, thus publicly demonstrating her exodus from ‘androcentric’ Christianity. Her consequent publication of *Beyond God the Father*,\(^1\) which advocates a post-Christian feminist position, has had implications which few feminist theologians have been able to ignore.\(^2\) Daly’s challenge exposed in a radical way the potency of the dominant patriarchal symbolism of Christianity, itself a product of patriarchy, in determining the social and cultural fabric of Western society:

The symbol of father god, spawned in the human imagination and sustained as plausible by patriarchy, has in turn rendered service to this type of society by making its mechanisms for the oppression of women appear right and fitting. If God in ‘his’ heaven is a father ruling ‘his’ people, then it is in the ‘nature’ of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male dominated.\(^3\)

Because she considers Christianity fundamentally flawed by its male symbolism, Daly formulates a post-Christian religious position which builds on a specifically female spirituality, ‘a communal phenomenon of sisterhood’ which ‘even without conscious attention to the church … is in conflict with it’. Patriarchal religions, she claims, ‘have stolen daughters from their mothers and mothers from their daughters’, rendering them ‘spiritual exiles’. She speaks about an experience of ‘sacred space’ alternative to the Church, a ritual source of life and healing, which ‘moves on the tide of ever-increasing participation of being’. Her form of radical feminism even ‘comes close to suggesting that male sexism is the original sin and that woman – or a particular kind of unreconstructed elemental woman – is the new, redeemed creation’.\(^4\)

Consideration of the causal connection between established religion and social structures is especially valuable in the study of the Victorian period, where two widespread religious revivals, the
Evangelical Movement and the Tractarians, coincided with a phase of social and scientific consolidation. In this period of upheaval and realignment, women in particular were the victims of a moral and social ethic which exalted their spirituality and domestic virtues, only to trap them inexorably within pre-existing, stereotyped patriarchal roles and moral categories. Daly’s work, however, and that of other feminist theologians, reminds us that there is another dimension to the damage inflicted on women by a patriarchal religious system, and that is a condition of profound spiritual suffering and alienation from traditional conceptions of God and customary practices of worship. Daly’s work strikes at the central symbolism of Christianity, evaluating its relevance in terms of herself and her identity as a woman. She exposes the salvific impotence of these symbols and eventually formulates what she considers important factors in the definition of woman’s spirituality.

Of particular relevance to our study is her recognition that the historical roots of modern feminist approaches to the problem of gender in Christianity, and in particular of feminist christological inquiry, lie in the nineteenth century. She quotes the American, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, author and editor of *The Woman's Bible*, in *Beyond God the Father*:

Take the snake, the fruit tree and the woman from the tableau, and we have no fall, no frowning Judge, no Inferno, no everlasting punishment – hence no need of a saviour. Thus the bottom falls out of the whole Christian theology. Here is the reason why in all the biblical researches and higher criticisms, the scholars never touch on the position of women.

In England, the Tractarian Movement brought with it a renewed emphasis on woman’s sinfulness, moral weakness and role in the Fall, which required the advent of a male saviour to redeem humanity. Studies of the Oxford Movement tend to omit the gender implications of Tractarian doctrine, and even Pusey himself, who in his impassioned defence of his Tracts on Holy Baptism in the face of accusations of doom and gloom admits: ‘my statement was imperfect, as making no mention of the healing and comforting power and the pardoning grace in the Holy Eucharist’, sees no gender bias in his preaching on sin. Yet his teaching was possibly the most powerful
single influence of his time on public attitudes towards the morality of women. He focuses time and again on the role of Eve in the Fall and her consequent legacy of corruption. Eve, he claims, took on the threefold corruption ‘of which the Apostle speaks’ and then infected her husband:

‘When the woman saw that the tree was good for food’ (this is the lust of the flesh) ‘and that it was pleasant to the eyes’, (this was the lust of the eye,) ‘and a tree to be desired to make one wise’, (here is the ‘pride of life’,) she took of the fruit and ‘did eat’, and, ‘as the first fruit of her sin, she spread her sin to whom she could …’

He echoes the teaching of the early Church Fathers, renewing their distorted claims of the innate sinfulness of womankind:

And do you know that you are [each] an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil’s gateway: you are the unsealer of that [forbidden] tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant to attack. You destroyed so easily God’s image, man. On account of your desert – that is, death – even the Son of God had to die. And do you think about adorning yourself…?

Eve’s sin is balanced by the salvific potential of a male redeemer, locking the female into an ontologically predetermined position of revealed moral inferiority. Because Christ was a male, woman cannot truly become Christ-like, but can only imitate the receptiveness and docility of the Virgin. In the words of Elizabeth Johnson, ‘Women’s physical embodiment becomes a prison that shuts them off from God, except as mediated through the christic male’. Back into parish sermons come the scripture-based limitations on women’s authority and the doctrine of subordination. In the words of Bishop Wordsworth:

St Paul has taught Woman where her strength lies. He has taught her what is the true source of her beauty and her dignity. Not by usurping what does not belong to her, not by casting off the mark
of her derivative being and subordinate authority, can she hope to retain the place which God has given her in creation.... Her true strength is in loyal submission; her true power is in tender love and dutiful obedience.\textsuperscript{13}

In Reclaiming Myths of Power: Women Writers and the Victorian Spiritual Crisis, Ruth Jenkins describes how the denial of sacred authority to women led to a movement ‘that attempted to resurrect the female aspects of God’, and prophesied even ‘a female messiah, tapping the historic privilege Christianity had given the oppressed to challenge the world’.\textsuperscript{14} Florence Nightingale, for example, borrowing from the Old Testament prophetic tradition, revised the incarnation to include female oppression and called on potential female prophets to herald the coming of a new Christ, ‘perhaps a female Christ’.\textsuperscript{15} She turned away from organised religion, accusing the Church of England of distorting the character of God, and ultimately found her own ‘liberation theology’\textsuperscript{16} in the sacred call to nursing. Another ‘foremother of contemporary Christian feminism’,\textsuperscript{17} J. Ellice Hopkins, also finding spiritual relief in re-enacting the redeeming role of Christ, reclaimed female sacrality through the bond of sisterhood in her work among London’s prostitutes. Although excluded by the Church from priestly activity, she was able to ‘undermine the male monopoly on the administration of the sacred’ by identifying personally with Christ in her mission to rescue desecrated womanhood. As our understanding grows of the problems facing women in the acceptance of male-dominated Christianity more ‘foremothers’ will be discovered, living out their faith in alternative spiritual epicentres, working out patterns of female redemption which the patriarchal Church has obscured, and which their daughters have ever painfully to reinvent.