INTRODUCTION

Carol L. Winkelmann

> In [theology], the equal dignity of both women and men created in the image of God, redeemed by Christ, and graced by the Spirit is now basic doctrine, with the result that, as the Second Vatican Council teaches, "every type of discrimination" on the basis of sex "is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent." But such discrimination is precisely part of the heritage of the church both in theory and practice, continuing to the present moment.[1]
>
> Elizabeth A. Johnson

Violence against women is one of the most critical problems confronting the world community in the late twentieth century. In its many manifestations, such as battery, rape, and incest or other means of control or punishment, such as verbal threats, harassment, property destruction, or the withholding of material resources, violence against women is a serious and widespread threat to the individual and collective well-being of women and their girl children. It injuries their bodies and spirits and diminishes their sense of autonomy and self-esteem. Rape and domestic violence literally make women sick by accounting for about 5% of the total disease burden of women who are 15-44 years old in developing countries and about 19% in developed countries.[2]

Although reliable data is not available for all countries worldwide, the data we do have suggests that the problem of the abuse of women and girls is one of staggering dimensions. Domestic

violence, for example, is one of the leading causes of injury to women in nearly every country in the world.[3] In the first world, where women make claim to equal opportunity in civil society, domestic violence rates are nearly inconceivable. In the United States, battering is the major cause of injury to women: it results in more injuries to women than car accidents, rapes, and muggings combined. Nearly one quarter of American women will be abused by a current or former partner during their lives. An act of domestic violence occurs every fifteen seconds, more often than any other crime in the United States. Indeed, domestic violence has been recognized as the number one health threat to American women. These statistics concern violence between partners, that is, between spouses or intimate partners, not the arbitrary violence perpetrated by strangers on dark streets that women are raised to fear. Yet, violence between men and women who are married, intimate, or acquainted remains nearly unremarked.

In many second and third world countries, the problem is perhaps even more trenchant.[4] Despite a supposed adherence to international laws and norms which seek to guarantee equal protection and non-discrimination for women, in practice states frequently allow men to control women, especially wives, in whatever ways they find effective.[5] Since the judicial and police systems in many developing countries are unconcerned or biased against female victims, the state institutions charged with the responsibility to end violence against women in actuality contribute to traditional cultural views of women's subordination, inferiority, and sexual objectification. Brazil, Russia, and South Africa have recently been cited by Human Rights Watch[6] as violators of international human rights agreements because of their inefficacy in dealing with violence against women. They are unable to meet the basic human rights standards for women and girls. The consequent human suffering in these and other countries is widespread and grievous. Studies of domestic violence in Africa, Latin America, and Asia have reported that sixty percent or more of women have been assaulted by spouses or other family members. In studies of middle and upper class students in India, twenty-six percent of the students reported that they had been sexually abused by the time they were twelve years old.[7]

In actuality, these statistics are considered low estimates by the international agencies or organizations that collect such information. Some districts, cities, regions, or states do not collect data on violence against women because they view domestic vio-

lence, for example, as a private family matter or as relatively unimportant. At the same time, many women do not report incidences of domestic violence, rape, or incest due to many factors, such as: the shame and stigma attending the public admission of family strife; the fear of retaliation by abusers; an awareness of the lack or inefficacy of sanctions against abusers; economic dependency or the lack of long-term resources; concerns about their children's well-being; disapproval of the victim's religious community; or the internalization of low self-esteem by women leading to their disempowerment and an inability to act.

Clearly, in the interest of basic human rights for all its citizens, states should do more for women and girl children. Civil authorities, however, are not alone in responsibility. In addition to the state, another powerful institution and agent of socialization, the church, is responsible too. As painful as it may be for the Christian community to reckon with its own participation in violence against women, it is timely and necessary to do so.

Though violence against women is a complex, multi-faceted cultural phenomenon, the profound influence of religious traditions, doctrines, and practices on the belief systems and behaviors of human beings and their cultures is undisputed by scholars. Linguists, cultural anthropologists, and sociologists of religion, among other scholars, have traced the ways in which traditional religious beliefs accrue immense authority in popular culture and lend it to other types of social or secular discourses with which they affiliate or align.[8]

The patriarchal nature of this discourse, of course, is a central concern of feminist scholarship. Over the past several decades, feminist scholars have been involved in a thorough investigation of traditional Christian theology and practice, particularly the harmful aspects of the patriarchal worldview of Christianity as it is manifested in scripture, church teachings, images of God, and the allocation of power, roles, and status among the body of the faithful. A very basic feminist view is that a patriarchal worldview (that is, a male-centered, androcentric, belief system that takes male experience as normative and, thus, female experience as deviant or other) leads to the differential, unjust treatment of women and girl children and, inevitably, to violence against them.

Many faithful women and men believe that the church—with its male-dominated infrastructure, its male-normative traditional teachings, and its enforced assertion of the complementarity of females and males—is a patriarchal system which violates the dignity and autonomy of women and girl children and leads to phys-

ical, emotional, sexual, and economic violence against their beings. The results harm everyone in the human community. From its incontrovertible, overt forms such as domestic violence, rape, and incest to its more subtle manifestations such as the undue restrictions of their roles and status in civil and church culture, violence against women diminishes or seeks to diminish the full realization of the human potential of women and girl children. Surely, it is incumbent on us to interrogate the ways in which traditional religious views are complicit.

The authors of the present articles wish to contribute to this ongoing investigation. They invite *Listening* readers to attend to some of the ways in which Christianity, our common and beloved heritage, has contributed to the problem of violence against women. They ask readers to assume a standpoint of compassion and care as they attend to complicated relationships between scripture and Catholic teachings, women's memories, language, and stories, and violence against those women perpetrated by the men who sit with them in pews and share their common, even Eucharistic, meals.

In her article "Catholic Church Teaching and Domestic Violence," Marie J. Giblin reviews Vatican and United States bishops' teachings appearing in the past eighteen years in *Origins*, the United States bishops' documentation service. She notes the complete lack of attention by the Vatican and the general lack of attention by United States bishops to the problem of domestic violence. When the male hierarchy does offer commentary there is failure, Giblin argues, to acknowledge the harmful presumptions of its own teachings on marriage and the family. This is true of the much acclaimed 1992 pastoral document on domestic violence, "When I Call For Help." Giblin, a Christian ethicist and theologian from the United States, is especially concerned about the use of scripture (for example Ephesians 5:21-33) simultaneously, yet contradictorily, to protect the well-being of women and to limit their leadership roles in the church. Giblin gently challenges readers to attend more critically to Church interpretations of scripture that ignore women's experience.

In "The Impact of Religious Education on Incest Survivors," Annie Imbens-Fransen discloses some of the harmful implications of church teachings on sex/gender roles. She writes about the role and relationship of aspects of traditional Christian religious ideologies in the sexual abuse of girls within families. Imbens-Fransen, a pastoral care center director in the Netherlands, counsels incest survivors. In the course of her ministry and research, she has identified certain factors, such as the influence of

patriarchal images of God and traditional Christian attitudes about forgiveness, that work to justify incest in the minds of abusers and complicate the painful recovery of survivors. She argues that Christianity should offer a vision of hope and justice for all human beings rather than subordinate women and conceal violence against them. Hence, Imbens-Fransen invites readers to begin to initiate new kinds of enabling relationships with survivors of incest and to replace patriarchal stories and mythologies about women with new stories and mythologies that would empower all women to become wise, strong, and creative.

Agnieszka Pawlak, a professor of Polish literature in Warsaw, is also concerned about gender mythologies in her essay, "Women Submit Yourselves Unto Your Own Husbands: Women, Church, and Culture in Poland." However, she moves our attention away from official church teachings and documents to more general cultural influences on sex/gender roles. In particular, Pawlak explores some of the mechanisms in Polish popular piety and culture that work to sustain women's lower status and the consequent violence against them. For example, Radio Mary—a tool of conservative Polish Catholicism—is used to propagate traditional views about women's natures and roles by sentimentalizing Mary as the humble, suffering mother of Jesus. Such ideologies work in tandem with other cultural interests and institutions—such as literary, political, judicial, and economic ones—to manipulate Polish national consciousness and limit possibilities for women's well-being, equality, and safety. Pawlak cautions Polish feminists and politicians not to narrow their agendas to controversial single issues or to waste time theorizing about gender issues without also undertaking concrete actions for social change. Tacitly, Pawlak's essay also reminds readers to take a nuanced, contextualized approach to understanding the global struggle for women's human rights. Clearly, the turbulent political atmosphere in Poland, its conservative church influences, and its complex relations with Western culture create special challenges for those who are concerned about violence against Polish women.

In her article, "Resisting Disappearance, Constructing A World: The Spirituality of a Salvadoran Women's Collective," Molly Graver writes about her recent experience as a lay pastoral worker in El Salvador. Graver describes the spirituality of Salvadoran peasant women who formed a radical faith community, the Committee for the Defense of Women, in Suchitoto, El Salvador. The Committee nurtures a lived spirituality, one that entails a struggle for human liberation. By refusing to be silent, the wom-

en challenge dominant societal narratives that will not acknowledge the particular oppression of Salvadoran women—oppression through domestic violence, for example, and the death and disappearance of those who fight for the poor and marginalized in El Salvador. Graver shares the passionate and spirit-filled songs, poems, and stories of the peasant women. Their words are a reminder to us that, as women gain their voices and share their realities, they free themselves and others to imagine and create new worlds. Graver believes that, as women struggle together to subvert the effects of violence, they create new space for more and more women to awaken, question, and resist.

Theologian Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza has challenged us to rethink the widespread notion that theologians should simplify theology in order to address their popular audience; rather, feminist theologians might listen to women in our communities in order to do better theology.[9] Thus, contrary to academic business as usual—that is, knowledge produced at the top moves down—in Fiorenza's ideal research and epistemological model, knowledge also moves from the bottom up. In addition, Fiorenza invites women's studies scholars to take feminist theology more seriously because, rather than viewing it as "false consciousness," most women worldwide view religion as a mainstay support and sustenance in their lives.

Many scholars, including Graver, Pawlak, and Imbens-Fransen, have already begun to address these epistemological issues. In "The Language of Suffering: How Battered Women Talk Through Abuse," I attempt likewise. First of all, I share findings from my seven-year ethnographic study of a United States midwest shelter for battered women in order to contribute to feminist theology from "the bottom up." In my essay, I rehearse traditional Christian and feminist views of suffering; then, as a linguist and literacy researcher, I delineate three phrases of suffering as revealed in the actual words of battered women. So, secondly, the women's language supports and suggests new challenges for the current feminist theological revision of traditional views of suffering. Like Imbens-Fransen, I invite readers to walk with women who have experienced violence, listening to their stories, in order to be of service to them as they heal and more fully to understand the complicity of the church in their suffering. We must listen deeply, web together our stories of violence against women, as we work in solidarity for change in church and culture.

The diverse writers in this issue do represent a circle of women who are working together across borders of nation and ethnicity,

of differing disciplinary and feminist stances, of a range of ages, experience, education, and roles in church and culture. Yet, in her own way, each writer in this issue of *Listening* invites readers to look hopefully toward Christian faith and spirituality as we seek solutions to the problem of violence against women. The faith of the writers, and of the many women whose lives, work, voices, and struggles have contributed in some way to these essays,[10] is the faith of the community of believers throughout salvation history—that is, a wellspring of hope and strength as we work for the alternative world of peace and justice envisioned and embodied by Jesus of Nazareth. In this spirit of faith and solidarity, we offer to *Listening* readers our sometimes provocative, always hopeful, words.

NOTES

[1]Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 25.

[2]Cited in Lesley Doyle, *What Makes Women Sick: Gender and the Political Economy of Health* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995). See also *The 1993 World Development Report* (New York: World Bank, 1993), 50.

[3]*The Human Rights Watch Global Report on Women's Human Rights* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1995), 341. Violence against women includes physical, sexual, and psychological abuse; domestic violence is generally understood to be violence against women within family or intimate relationships.

[4]See, for example, M. Davis's *Women and Violence: Responses and Realities Worldwide* (London: Zed Press, 1994). See also Lori Heise, "Violence Against Women: The Missing Agenda," in *The Health of Women: A Global Perspective* ed. M. Koblinsky, J. Timyan and J. Gay (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 171-196.

[5]These international agreements are discussed in *The Human Rights Watch Global Report,* op. cit., 343-348. One of the most recent instruments is the *UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women* (adopted in December 1993) which elaborates international standards.

[6]Human Rights Watch is an independent, nongovernmental organization which conducts systematic investigations of human rights abuses in approximately 70 countries. They can be contacted at <hrwnyc@hrw.org> and <gopher.humanrights.org:5000>.

[7]See the United Nation's document *Violence Against Women in the Family* (Vienna: Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, 1989) for a full discussion. This statistic was cited by Karen L. Kinnear in *Women In The Third World: A Reference Handbook* (Denver, CO: ABC-CLIO, 1997), 116.

[8]For a discussion in the context of third world women and the Roman Catholic church, see Lynne Brydon and Sylvia Chant, *Women in the Third World: Gender Issues in Rural and Urban Areas* (New Brunswick, NJ: 1989), 18.

[9]Lecture delivered on 24 April 1998 at Wright State University, Ohio, USA.

[10]I would like to acknowledge in particular the efforts of Sister Inga Bordo, a Felician sister from Warsaw, Poland, who contributed in inestimable ways to my own efforts.