

EVOLVING AN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN FEMINIST ETHICS: A Study of Nigerian Women

Introduction

This study focuses on Christian ethics and feminist framework of moralizing in the Nigerian context. It examines the various theories supporting the subordination of women in society. According to Ivone Gebara (2002:140), tracing the origin of women's oppression is difficult if not impossible but at the same time, "evils are not without historical causes." In Nigerian societies for instance, the theories of women's oppression appear so normal and natural that women themselves actively partake in socializing the young members of the society within the family to believe that women are inferior to men. Like Joan Daugherty Chittister explains (2001:9), "I believe in questioning the unquestionable so that the answers we [give] ourselves would look more like the answers that lived in a Jesus whose questions were also not acceptable." This is a challenging spiritual task for women in this century. If spirituality is a response to the powerful presence of God, how are women to respond to a God who allows such evil to triumph over them for long? Aggravating the situation, the church as the primordial sacrament of God's presence uses exclusively male language and images, an act that has negative social effects on women. As Elizabeth Johnson (2007:99) observes, this "impl[ies] that women are somehow less like unto God." Johnson further cites Mary Daly: "if God is male, then the male is God" (Johnson 2007:99).

The significance of this study lies in the fact that Africa has a population of 1.1 billion and 46.5% are Christians. Of this figure, Nigeria as the ninth most populous country on earth and the most populous country in Africa, has an estimated population of about 150 million people with more than 40 percent Christian.¹ According to the 2006 Nigerian Census, the female population stands at 68,293,683 and the male population is 71,709,859 (National Population Commission of Nigeria 2006). A good percentage

¹UNPD, "World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision Population Data Base," retrieved on November 20, 2009 from: <http://www.esa.un.org/unpd>.

of this population is becoming Christian. Women are in the majority of this population that is tending to Christianity. Thus, the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar concludes that women and children are the greatest assets of Christianity in Africa.² In the light of this, this study draws strength from gender studies to reconstruct a Christian feminist ethics in an attempt to examine the gender inequality question in the African context. It specifically focuses on the experiences of Nigerian women. The study examines how actions directed towards women could be considered right or wrong. The decade for women (1975-1985) declared by the United Nations and celebrated in Nairobi (in 1985) has raised the global awareness for women's emancipation. By the time the 1995 United Nations International Conference on Women in Beijing was held, Nigerian women had come to grips with the socio-cultural factors that had held them in bondage for a long time. Given the level of awareness, education, and social mobility, Nigerian women are recognizing that social and political contexts, as well as social institutions, are important in creating virtue and morality. Given the strength of Christianity in Nigeria, this faith has the capacity to reconstruct the image of women in the society. In fact, the amount of energy and resources spent by adherents of the Christian faith raises the possibility for a renewed Christian understanding of the image of women. This study makes proposals for a renewed understanding of Nigerian women and their experiences. Based on the foregoing discussions in this study, I argue for ways of moving forward with a Nigerian feminist ethics.

Experiences of Gender Inequality in Nigeria

In all known human formations, women are said to have had a low social status. Social status is the 'standing,' honor or prestige attached to one's position in society. Gender as a social role differential plays a great part in this. According to Mary C. Boys (1989:159), "[g]ender does matter - not simply as a natural consequence of sex difference, but as an analytic category within which humans think about

² According to a 1992 survey research by Ityavyar Denis A., Tiv women have preference for Christianity in general because it allows them privileges that are not found in their traditional roles. See Ityavyar Denis A., *The Changing Socio-Economic Role of TIV WOMEN* (Jos: Jos University Press, 1992) 57- 8.

and organize their social reality.” In this light, Nigerian women, because of patriarchy, suffer male domination in three forms: as daughters, as housewives, and as subordinates at work. In each of these forms, Nigerian cultures have gender specific words, phrases, and proverbs which are used in perpetuating and legitimizing patriarchal ideas, values and principles.

Culture (the way of life of a people) helps internalize and legitimize the normative order in individual members of society through the process of socialization. For example, in the traditional Tiv society of central Nigeria, mothers compelled their teenage girls at puberty to wear *akoo* (snail shells) around their waists to preserve their virginity. There was nothing like that for the boys. A girl who was found to have had premarital sex brought great shame to her mother who was ridiculed for the rest of her life for failing to bring up her daughter properly. Nothing similar happened to a father whose son had premarital sex. Rather the son was deemed a “man.” This patriarchal practice was only intended to check promiscuity among Tiv women, but not the men. Similarly, in the Akwa Ibom society of eastern Nigeria, housewives are made to wear a charm believed to have magical powers to kill a man who has intercourse with married women. The women are at times threatened with *Ekpo-nka-owo*, a traditional magic believed to kill unfaithful wives at childbirth (WIN 1993). Again, nothing is in place to check the men. The Yorubas afflict women with the *magun* charm which could lead to their death. When a husband suspects his wife of having an extra-marital relationship, he is at liberty to place the *magun* on the floor so she can walk across it. The Idoma people believe that if a woman commits adultery and refuses to confess to her husband, *Alekwu* causes the death of her children and husband, and she too dies in the end.³ Adultery is a wrong that is detested by every society and religion and should not be tolerated. But why is the *Alekwu* harsh only to women but lenient to men? In the few instances that the

³ *Alekwu* is the ancestral spirit of the Idoma people. Derived from ancestral worship, *Alekwu* is regarded as the highest deity in Idoma land. The spirit which is venerated, a Living Dead, is an accuser, judge and executioner of its own cause. It binds all Idoma from harming each other with charms, regulates family norms, and crushes offenders. Its worship is predominately in the hamlets.

Alekwu punishes the man for committing the same crime there is a vast difference in the consequences, since it “may be with a slap.”⁴ Still in the same direction, in all Nigerian cultures where female circumcision is practiced, it is usually done to check promiscuity among women. But when men are circumcised, it is to enhance their sexual pleasure. This is quite a patriarchal practice.

In almost all Nigerian cultures, men initiate mate selection and during marriage ceremonies it is the men who pay the bride price, which gives them the authority over their wives. In most of these cultures, housewives are considered the property of their husbands. In fact, among the Yorubas of western Nigeria, there is a saying *Eni nigi lo lo bi ori ne*, meaning whoever owns a tree owns the fruits thereon (Okunola 2002). This saying is used by husbands in Yoruba land and other parts of Nigeria to legitimize their claims over the sole ownership of the children. O’Brien (1981), observes that men have created this patriarchal social edifice to facilitate and justify their authority over women and have sole appropriation of children.

It appears the whole socialization process is meant to make women subservient to men. For instance, among the Calabar people of eastern Nigeria, girls at puberty undergo a rite of passage known as “fattening house,”⁵ in which the older women teach the girls how to please their future husbands. However, there is no such rite of passage in which older men teach boys how to please their future wives.

Those religions dominant in Nigeria, namely Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion have not helped the plight of women either. Among the Hausa people of northern Nigeria, polygamy is

⁴This information was collaborated by Sandra Agada, an Idoma woman from Otukpa, in Ogbadibo local government area of Benue State, Nigeria. See more explanations on this in the Nigerian weekly magazine, Anthony Akaeze, “My Mission is to Erase Ignorance,” in *Newswatch*, March 21, 2010.

⁵This is a female initiation into adulthood. The young woman is well fed and prepared for marriage.

allowed for men by the Islamic religion. A man can have as many as four wives (Quran 4:3), but women are forbidden from having more than one husband at a time. The following idea from the Quran is practiced, “And women (wives) shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable; but men have a degree (of advantage) over them. And Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise” (Quran 2:28). Islam, like Christianity, is patriarchal. The Islamic Sharia law prescribes flogging (Quran 24:2) and death by stoning for a woman who commits adultery.⁶ However, in Nigeria the man is often excused. In fact, the woman is treated as half of a man in matters of testimony and inheritance (Quran 2:82; 4:11; 4:34; 4:129). Christianity on the other hand gives the man authority to rule over the woman.⁷ The paternalistic nature of the African Traditional Religion makes it even permissive for the woman to be only used and dumped by a man at will. Granted, in African Traditional Religion women were involved in ritual and cultic ceremonies and given the privilege of looking after shrines in some places, in the majority of ceremonies the female presence is mere tokenism in the midst of male dominance. For instance, among the Tiv people, the only participatory role of women was as witches in the night ordeals and rituals. Thus, Nwachukwu (1992:65) underscores women debasement in African Traditional Religion succinctly:

...in the Nigerian societies, the woman prepares food and drinks for the ritual ceremonies, the man takes it to the shrine where only the male folk would enjoy them. She is prohibited from cooking for the king or her husband when she is under her period of menses; or she is prohibited from sitting in the male section during her menses as anti-pollution intended to avoid the ritual contamination of that which is holy.

As a matter of fact, the smallest boy is considered far more important than the matured woman in African Traditional Religion. Among the Igbo people of eastern Nigeria, a small boy can officiate at the ceremony of “splitting kola” but a matured woman cannot. Additionally, women are forbidden to

⁶This is found in the various hadiths of Islam. Hadiths are narratives that come down from the Islamic Prophet Muhammad.

⁷People are apt at citing Genesis 3:16 to support a man’s superiority over a woman. This verse of the scripture is so misinterpreted by all Christian denominations in Nigeria. It could be that the culture has provided a background for such an understanding.

handle instruments of divination among the Yoruba people. Among the Mumuye people of north eastern Nigeria, the girl is expected to produce a pot of local drink and other items for the boy her age during the latter's initiation. But the girl gets nothing from him when she is initiated.

On the whole, preference is given to male children especially among the uneducated and rural people. Many parents prefer having a male child to a female (even the female parents themselves), because it is the male who bears the family name. This accounts for the main reason why it is only the male children who are usually sent to school, while the female children are withdrawn from school and given into early marriages as soon as a man comes with the bride price. Consequently, there is higher illiteracy among the womenfolk in the rural areas (Gberikon 2003). Related to this is female disinheritance. Only male children can inherit their father's property, female children cannot. The female has no right as far as property is concerned. Among the Tiv for instance, the wife is considered the property of the husband and so could be inherited by the husband's brothers. Women at most have access to all the property in their husbands' houses but remain without ownership rights even if they labor for the property.

At the work place, Nigerian women are not deemed fit to lead men even if they are qualified to do so. According to Okpeh (1999): "in Nigeria patriarchy justifies the subordinate status of women compared to their male counterparts: it is an important element in the received notion that women are necessarily the appendages of men; and that they should always be followers and not leaders." Observing this pitiable situation of women, Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2002:12-13), a Ghanaian from a matrilineal society married into the Nigerian patriarchal Yoruba society laments that women's oppression is a vicious cycle which makes it difficult for women to break from the yoke. It is in such a way that, "by the time a woman has spent her energies struggling to be heard, she has barely the energy left to say what she wanted to say" (Oduyoye 2002:13).

Theories of Gender Inequality

In this section, this study regards the perceptions that have in part, constructed the various outlooks people have on women which influence actions and attitudes. This study acknowledges that the debate on gender inequality was simply divided into two camps: those who believe gender inequality is biologically determined and those who believe it is socially determined (Haralambos 1980; Giddens 1996). This is known as the “nature versus nurture”⁸ debate. Recently, some feminists have introduced a middle course arguing for the combination of biology and society contributing to gender inequality. Those who believe in biology or nature as the primary cause of gender inequality are referred to as sociobiologists, while those who believe that society is the primary cause of gender inequality are called socioculturalists. And those who believe that both nature and society should be blamed for gender inequality are known as bioculturalists. However, this study groups them into four categories based on how they operate in the Nigerian society: creationists (sociobiologists), naturalists (sociobiologists), structuralists (socioculturalists), and survivalists (bioculturalists)

The *creationist theory* strongly utilizes religious factors in understanding the world. The theory traces the position of women to creation. The three dominant Nigerian religions of Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion have all traditionally held a low image of women. Right from the beginning of the Bible, the woman is presented as a subordinate to the man and has a negative image of a tempter (Gen. 1-3). Similarly, the creation story in the Quran (7:19-23) follows the trajectory typified in the Judeo-Christian understanding. African Traditional Religion simply believes that a woman is a man’s property. This is reflected in the Nigerian constitution whereby a woman seldom exists independent of her marital life. For instance, “[i]n section 24 (3) of the Income Tax Management Act, a married man is entitled to claim relief on his wife. There is no corresponding provision for the wife

⁸This is a division widely considered by gender and feminist scholars.

even when there is evidence that the husband is not employed and that she is responsible for the upkeep of the family” (Bamgbose 2005:65).

The creationist theory is criticized especially by radical feminists as having begrudged history. As de Gay explains, “Archaeological evidence from Europe and the Near East suggests that Paleolithic civilizations practiced goddess worship and were organized as matriarchies.”⁹ Therefore, historically speaking, invoking the creation paradigm to support women’s subjugation becomes untenable. One must understand that the first eleven chapters of the Bible on which these insinuations are based are mythology; and that these sections of the Bible are not recounting mere history. The history of the Bible is salvation history. We should be aiming at the lessons to be learned from these complex texts on women (Genesis 1:18, 1:26-27, 3:16) rather than factual accounts of creation. “To understand God’s intent for woman, we must carefully consider two major areas of Christian theology: the nature of God and humankind as created by God” (Grenz and Kjesbo 1995:144).

The *naturalist theory* is of the opinion that “women’s position is as a result of the natural division of labor based on biology. Hence women are neither oppressed nor exploited” (Imam 1985:16). Sociobiologists such as Desmond Morris, Robin Fox and E.O Wilson contend that human social organization corresponds on a parallel path with innate human needs and drives which are biological in nature. They hold that women, as a result of their biological make up, are the weaker sex. Nature has made them that way. To demonstrate this, Tiger and Fox (1972) introduced the concept of “biogrammar” which is a genetically based construct that predisposes human beings to behave in certain ways. They, however, pointed out that biogrammarians should not be confused with instincts, which are immutable. While biogrammarians can be considerably modified by culture they remain a basic influence on human behavior. This is in line with George Murdock’s (1949) earlier assertion that the

⁹Jay de Gay, a Microsoft publication on the software on patriarchy from Encarta Encyclopedia, 2003.

biological differences between men and women, such as the greater physical strength of men and the fact that women bear children, lead to gender roles out of sheer practicality.

The naturalists are criticized for simplifying a complex process. Thus Imam (1985:18), citing Molyneux, is of the opinion that “the sexual division of labor is linked to biology, but it is not founded on it; instead it must be conceived as a relation mediated through complex social processes and subject to sometimes contradictory determinants.” This study tends to hold that social stratification based on societal relations is both real and significant and so too is stratification on the basis of sex. Sexual division of labor is a social mediated product which is linked to biology but not determined by it.

The *structuralist theory* accepts that the structures of a society have evolved over time and have tended to produce a patriarchy which is oppressive to women. Oakley (1971) observed that human cultures are diverse and endlessly variable and the sexual division of labor is not universal. Richard Lewontin (1982) furthers this notion by rejecting that not even genes and biological hormones are major determinants of human behavior. For Lewontin, it is the socialization process that counts the most. Social power is held by a combination of factors: ideology and culture coupled with institutions (legal, economical, political) and social structures (family, religious, and media) which exert tremendous influence on power sharing and maintenance in the society. These institutions are created by human persons. Women have been gradually sidelined over time by these structures. According Christine Delphy as paraphrased by Ayesha Imam (1985:19), the main enemy of changing this system is patriarchy, ruling by the father or male authority. This position is also supported by the Marxists. Marxists, applying the method of historical materialism trace the subjugation of women as being caused by dialectical materialism. Delphy, holding similar positions with Firestone (Imam 1985:19), holds the productive process as that which arrogates subordinate roles to the women. This Marxist approach should be criticized here on the ground of hasty generalization. This approach has failed to

account for the variation in women's situations from one society to another.

The *survivalist theory* holds that women's oppression was the result of class struggle. This power struggle favors men because of their hormonal make up and strategic social positions. Rutter and Giller (1981) maintain that the male hormone, testosterone causes men to be aggressive. On the other hand, women are the weaker sex based on their nature ~~that~~ which makes it permissive for culture to define subversive roles for them. Recent studies have proven the opposite, and specific works by Friedl (1975), Ottner (1971), and Firestone (1972) have shown that this position is no longer tenable.

Studies by Oakley (1971) indicate that human cultures are diverse and endlessly variable. They owe their present realities to human inventiveness rather than invincible biological forces. She argued that the sexual division of labor is not universal as claimed by Murdock (1949), nor are certain tasks always performed by men and others by women. She was of the view that roles, such as those of cooking and caring for the children, are not an inevitable product of female biology, but it is the culture of a society that determines the behavior of the sexes within it. She pointed out that these tasks are a shared responsibility of both sexes in some cultures and are not exclusively reserved for women. Humans learn the behavior that is expected for males and females within their societies. This behavior is not produced by innate characteristics (1974). Even if there are biological tendencies for men and women to behave in different ways, these can be overridden by cultural factors. In furtherance of this argument, Lewontin (1982) disagreed with Tiger and Fox (1972), the major proponents of biogrammar, arguing that both sexes have all the biological hormones in them in differential quantities and that hormonal levels fluctuate in human beings based on culture. For example, if a female is socialized to behave aggressively, then her level of testosterone will rise and she will start to behave in a 'masculine' way and vice versa.

Recent research indicates that basic distinctions exist between the sexes (Spence and Helmreich 1978; Diamond and Karlen 1980; Gilligan 1982; Nelson 1988). While admitting to the essential differences between men and women, there can still be some mutuality, equality and equity. At the same time this study disagrees with the sharp distinction made between sex and gender by many feminists. Sex is said to be the biological and deals with the physical characteristics which make a person male or female at birth. Gender on the other hand, refers to the socially constructed roles ascribed to women and men, as opposed to biological and physical characteristics. Thus gender is not sex. Gender roles are socially determined while sex is biologically determined. This study finds this too neat of a distinction. Much of our biology is influenced by culture and society, e.g., women taking placebos are less likely to get pregnant. All cultures and societies have to deal with the fact that women get pregnant and men do not. Studies by the above mentioned scholars show that the distinct nature of the sexes constitutes part of women's and men's response to issues in their environments.

Christian Feminist Ethics and Gender Equality in Nigeria

As our discussion indicates, the power of culture in mediating meaning and defining the framework of how one understands and acts is strong. Religion which touches on the inner core of human existence is not excluded from culture but is rather tied to it. For Adasu, "Religion is the most stubborn of human activities, vital to life. Suppressed, repudiated, or rejected in one form, religion presents itself in another and goes on with its organic life" (1985:13). Agreeing with Paul Tillich (1957:1), it is a state of "ultimate concern" that gives meaning to our existence. For Nigerian,s like most Africans, "religion is part and parcel of life; an ontological phenomenon, dealing with existence or being. Thus, for the African and the community to which he belongs, to live is to be caught in a religious drama" (Mbiti 1970:19). Surmising that an African is "notoriously religious," John Mbiti contends that atheism is unknown in Africa and "to be without religion amounts to self- excommunication from the entire life of society, and African people do not know how to exist without religion" (Mbiti 1970:3-4). Lamin

Sanneh (2005:159) concludes that the “problem of Africa might be too much religion, not too little.” As noted earlier in the introduction, in Nigeria and Africa at large, the Christian religion has a very significant membership. This explains the importance of studying it in relation to any social issue. Christianity has the capacity to influence attitudes and behaviors with its message. Christianity is capable of creating a new culture of gender relationships in Nigeria.

In spite of the differing theories regarding the origin of gender inequality by scholars, they have all agreed on the centrality of culture as a critical variable in cross gender relations (Dahl 1971; Oakley 1971,1974). Gender differentials and its impact on the organization of human formations take its roots largely from the norms, values, and age-long cultural practices and belief systems of peoples. Sociologically, we “define morality as a system of norms, mores, and values controlling behavior within a given culture in a way best suited to furthering the implicitly acknowledged aims of that culture” (O’Neil and Donovan 1968:66). In the light of this, Appelbaum and Chamblis (1995) consider gender as “the behavioral differences between males and females that are culturally based and socially learned.” So what happens *here* is not necessarily what happens *there* in male and female relationships.

It is important to note that the marginalization of women has been created, nurtured and perpetuated by culture and that culture itself is the totality of the ways of life of a people, the way of doing things. Culture thus can be seen as: “An ordered system of meaning and of symbols and values in terms of which individuals define their world, express their feelings and make their judgments...” (Geertz 1975:144). Thus Don S.Browning (1996:184) concludes that we are shaped by background beliefs provided by tradition and the narratives that carry it. In other words, our cultures influence our mindset determining the eyes with which we see things. He explains, “....we follow the logic of conventionality. We reason thusly: because everyone has done it this way, I should do it this way” (Browning *Ibid.*). This is in line with O’Neil and Donovan (1968:66) when they say,

In the process of socialization, the individual person, internalizes to a very large extent the value-judgments of his culture. He is pressured to conform, more or less adequately, to the “code morality” of the larger society. Primary emphasis on objective conformity to social norms is what can be conveniently called “code morality”—the corporate society, not the individual, is the primary subject of rights and obligations

A person’s response to a moral choice is influenced by the level of awareness and social factors surrounding him or her. In a situation where the socio-cultural factors demean women, they tend to be vulnerable. Thus the virtue of tenderness in women could be an attempt to adopt a survivalist approach to the overpowering and domineering male society. When and where women are offered adequate education, just living conditions, and the means to achieve these realities, they produce different virtues; those that are similar to the men. In this context, we can question the virtues produced by that kind of morality that make women vulnerable. In this regard, Christian feminist ethics as an ethics of care and justice has arisen to give women a voice over the rightness and wrongness of choices made regarding them based on biblical (mis)interpretations.

It is the thought of Christian feminist ethics that, even though the Bible was written in a very patriarchal society, God’s hand was at work. That accounts for the praise of women both in the Old and New Testaments and the portraying of God as sovereign over all, irrespective of gender. Though the social and historical context of ancient Judaism which gave birth to Christianity did not strongly respect womanhood, the few women identified in the Old Testament are very strategic to the Jewish national history: Miriam (Ex 15), Deborah (Jgs2) Prophetess Huldah (2Kg 22:11 -20).

Christian feminist ethics calls for female consciousness in the interpretation of scriptures. Margaret Farley (1985) sees this as a normal criterion of reading the Bible since making the Bible relevant to people involves interpretation and application. It means making the message alive in their hearing. In the case of women, “most fundamental, perhaps, is the conviction that women are fully human and are

to be valued as such” (Farley 1985:44). Reinforced by liberation theology, Catholic social ethics today has adopted practical reason which is the basis for feminist critiques of theology as well. Christian feminist ethics in strong social terms embraces the praxis approach that calls for the transformation of structures of oppression (Cahill 1996:51). Christian feminist ethics holds that an inclusive interpretation of the scriptures should acknowledge ~~that~~ the oppression that has been part of women experience. For Farley, “True discernment of the biblical witness yields feminist insights, which in turn become principles for the rest of scripture” (Farley 1985:48).

The creation narratives of Genesis 1 and 2 are often the mistaken basis for women’s subjugation. Modern “scholarship has shown that woman’s designation as ‘helper’ does not denote inferiority but rather man’s incompleteness without woman; the making of Eve from Adam’s rib symbolizes their essential unity” (Edwards 1988:1091). Arguing along the same line, Theresa Okure (1988:51) posits that, “the first creation account (Gen. 1:26-2:4b; 5:1-2) makes the theological statement that the human species is composed of male and female; a unity in nature and a diversity in sex, and that as an entity it was created in the image and likeness of God.” God bestowed on both man and woman the co-responsibility of creative stewardship. “God ... assigned to them, as equal partners, the task of ruling over and tending creation (Gen 1:28b). Therefore, partnership between the male and female applies in the whole of life, not only in marriage. It underlies the co-responsibility of the man and woman in and for creation. This is not something confined to one sex” (Okure 1995:63). However, the second creation account (Gen. 2:4-24) was used in later Judaism to support the principle of female subjection to male and to condemn the woman as the first sinner. Okure (1988:52) disagrees with this and observes that the point of the second account is to be found in verses 23-24. Central to this discussion is the fact that the first unit in human society is that of husband and wife, and it is from this unit that the family develops. Extrapolating on this to cover the story of the fall, Edwards (1988:1091) is of the view that the woman’s subjection as mentioned in Gen.3:16 describes rather than prescribes the role of the

woman after the fall.

Though in the highly patriarchal society of the Old Testament, women were legally subjected to men, (Edwards 1988) God's dealing with Israel was often cast in feminine images. "In the Hebrew Scriptures the kingship of Israel and Yahweh is described in terms of marriage. Israel (a man's name) becomes the spouse of Yahweh" (Oduyoye 1995:46). Most significantly, "the Wisdom traditions as a whole provide feminine image of the divine that functions as a corrective and balance to the male metaphors for God" (Sabin 2002:151). Building on the works of John Donahue, W.D. Davies and others, Marie N. Sabin (2002:161) suggests that Jesus is wisdom in parabolic form. Jesus gave women a sense of belonging. Jesus fully accepted women, regardless of their social or marital status. He was unfailingly courteous and compassionate towards them. "When a woman ritually unclean with hemorrhage, touched Him on the way to the house of a synagogue leader, He stopped to heal her and commended her faith, addressing her affectionately as Daughter" (Okure 1988: 51). In a society where women were not counted as full members of a congregation and were discouraged from studying the law, Jesus taught women alongside men. Jesus' attitude towards women was directly in contrast with the attitude of his time and culture. Jesus did not only accept the services of women but he also used them to spread the gospel. The Samaritan woman spread the Good News of Jesus in her village so that many Samaritans believed in Jesus (John 20:17ff).

The events surrounding Jesus' birth and his attitude to women become striking when seen against his social and religious background. At the annunciation story in Matthew's gospel, Mary carries a strange pregnancy and goes ahead to name the child. "Joseph's ancestry by the father line included Abraham, Zadok, David, Mattan, and his own father, Jacob. Mary is telling him the name of the child she is carrying. He does not participate in this choice" (Oduyoye 1995:48). In traditional society, it was the man's duty to name a child. Drastic measures were also in place to ensure the purity of the patriarchal

line. That is why in Genesis 38:11 for instance, Judah, hearing that his daughter-in-law Tamar played the whore and was pregnant, ordered: “Bring her out, and let her be burned” (Gen 38:24). Joseph’s response is different from Judah though Joseph plans to secretly call off his marriage with Mary but God directs him to stay on. “Joseph wants a middle way to conform to tradition only to the extent that the new would not be hurt. God proposes radical solidarity” (Oduyoye 1995:48).

Paul’s teaching is one that needs to be examined in the light of this radical solidarity. Every morning each Jewish male recited a prayer thanking God for not making him a gentile, a slave, or a woman (Bryne 1989:4). Before Paul’s conversion to Christianity he might have recited this prayer with holy pride. After his conversion, however, he reversed it. In Galatians 3:28 he writes: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Paul’s greatness lies in his willingness to change his old belief, even those that were so dear to him, when that conflicted with his Christian faith. He had practiced an exclusionary monotheism that kept all gentiles outside of God’s family. Additionally, within the same Jewish household, men had special privileges and advantages over women. In the temple worship men worshiped in an inner circle while women occupied the outer circle. When Paul became a Christian, he realized that the gender advantages which men had over women were not part of God’s will and design. Paul reversed to gender equality. Here we have the abolition not of sexual differences between women and men but of their religious inequality (Edwards 1988:1094).

Paul’s letter to the Galatians is the key to gender equality; but it is too early a biblical writing to draw conclusion on its strength alone. Paul appeared to have dropped it out in his later formula. We recognize that some passages in Paul, which are often quoted to support patriarchy and male dominance such as 1Cor. 11:2-16 (about women covering their heads); 1Cor . 14:33-35 (about women keeping silence); 1Tim. 2:8-15 (permit no woman to teach or to have authority over man), were written

by Paul to address specific issues in the various churches he founded. They are culturally conditioned and time bound as expressed by scholars (Okure 1988, Traina 1999, Reid 2008) and accepted by the magisterium as official interpretation of the Bible. Thus the Bible's patriarchal social system, far from being presented as an ideal, is seen as the result of a fall from grace. Thus, Paul's teaching on the equality of men and women and his rules for women do not have the same weight. His teaching on the equality of men and women before God belong to the area of faith or Christian principle. His rules to women belong to the area of custom or practical implementation. Customs change but faith does not. Church custom seeks always to reflect our faith, but never fully succeeds. Custom always needs to be updated from time to time. "We cannot expect ...[Paul] to think exactly as we do" (Reid 2008:20) given the level of our awareness today.

Christianity has to preach the equality of both sexes. One of the major criticisms of Christianity however, is that of adopting a double standard when it comes to the equality of men and women. There is some ambivalence in the Christian teachings that create male centered ideologies that bedevil women. When this happens, Christian feminist ethics serves as a corrective vision to it. "Christian feminist ethics in particular depends on creating a credible connection among Christianity's formal encompassing telos, salvation; concrete flourishing; and the moral life" (Traina 1999:316). Christ the author of Christianity transcended the Jewish laws on women and related with them freely, thereby giving them a place in society.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussions, several ideas can be advanced. First of all, culture determines the worldview of a people including the perspective of the biblical authors. This influenced their usage of cultural concepts and constructs. Secondly, gender roles are culturally rather than biologically determined. Third, patriarchy supplies the ideological basis for the subordination, marginalization, and

oppression of women. And finally, patriarchal culture needs to be dismantled to affect gender equality in the Nigerian and African society. The quest for women's equality is the assertion of their human rights and an objective struggle for social justice and equity.

It is the contention of this study that ethical and moral reasoning, as practical reasoning "operates first by the logic of conventionality. It tries to reason about the world in the way custom and tradition has taught" (Browning 1996:183). Social and religious institutions substantially determine the customs and traditions of a people. Christianity as a major religion in Nigeria has the capacity and capability to positively impact women with virtues of strength in society. However, as observed by Christian feminist ethicists, it has propagated female submission to men as virtues to Nigerian women. The church must consciously work toward implementing specific strategies aimed at women's equality in her ethical teachings. To this end, this study recognizes the fact that Christianity constitutes a strong institution in the formation of moral values in Nigeria. Christianity as an institution has strong roots with the masses by virtue of its work in the Nigerian villages.

Christian feminist ethics calls us to actively partake in the *disorientation* and *reorientation* of society on matters of gender equality. Reasoning with Tom Beaudoin (2008: xv) this study sees this as a call to "witness to dispossession." This denotes a radical openness that moves us to give considerable "attention to power essential for analyses of how our construals of truth, subjectivity, and knowledge function together to create a "world" for us" (Beaudoin *Ibid.*). This study recognizes that "humans have a responsibility to God for their neighbors, to remove or alter structures which make people experience a condition that is less than human and to strive in their own lives to model moral equality in their relationships" (Hicks 2000:165). We should uphold the principle of mutuality and reject even hyper-mutuality whereby one party appearing to be good, dominates the other. Christianity appears to be paternalistic and caring with the man having an advantage over the woman. Christian feminist ethics

demands social justice for women and invokes the logic of equal regard to guide its course.

What is the logic of equal regard? ...it has the structure of reversibility and universalizability. It has the logic of being able to reverse our claims; any claim we make on others they should be able to make on us. And it has the logic of universalizability; this reversibility should be in principle generalizable to all social actors ... In short, the principle of equal regard has the logic of the golden rule and neighbor love (Browning 1996:187-88).

Expatriating on this, I argue that the logic of equal regard combines two principles: the principle of equality and the principle of mutuality. These are “two closely related principles: (1) the principle of equality (women and men are equally fully human and are to be treated as such) and (2) the principle of mutuality (based on a view of human persons as embodied subjects, essentially relational as well as autonomous and free)” (Farley 1985:45).

One of the most perplexing problems in this study is that the traditional understanding of morality, which was developed before most of the current epistemological debates, generally assumes a basic definitiveness on some social issues. Given the level of awareness and critical biblical scholarship, these beliefs no longer stand up to scrutiny. With the growing understanding and awareness today, the principles of casuistry (Traina 1999:317) and *epikeia* are to be invoked in accordance with the times. Casuistry and *epikeia* mean applying the Christian message to be meaningful to the changing needs of the times. This does not mean that the nature of morality has changed but the conditions surrounding human existence have changed. In the context of feminist ethics, equality should be the watch word. We must recognize that the basis for all Christian teaching is love tending towards the salvation of the human person. “Salvation entails an existential commitment to the Absolute expressed in loving, careful pursuit of concrete goods for others (Traina 1999:316). This is the task before a Christian feminist ethics in Nigeria.

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