Feministic Theological Approach to Spiritual Direction
- Centered on Rosemary R. Ruether -

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I. Introduction

Spiritual direction is one of the most important spiritual practices employed in Christian ministry, and it plays a significant role in cultivating the spiritual formation of Christians.¹ It is defined as a spiritual conversation between two persons, a director and a directee, in which the directee gives expression to her experience of faith and discerns the movement of Spirit in her life.² Through spiritual

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companionship, the directee may attain an increasing sense of spiritual openness and responsiveness to God’s presence in her life.\(^3\) Not does only the practice assist the directee to enhance her sense of the leadings of the Holy Spirit, but it also cultivates the genuine sense of the self at a deep level of spiritual awareness in the directee’s relationship with God.

As a spiritual director, my experiences with female directees have implicitly but critically led me to be aware that the traditional theological frameworks, including male-oriented symbols and patriarchic concepts within the Christian Church, have significantly hindered female directees from being connected deeply with the holy and from cultivating their genuine selves in their relationship with God.\(^4\) Moreover, the values embedded within the biblical world have supported the view of females as inferior to males, which has created a barrier that keeps many Christian women from deepening their relationship with God. For this reason, women’s spiritual experiences and voices have easily been marginalized and dismissed in the Christian faith context.

Some Christian scholars and spiritual practitioners have explored the resources of feminist approaches to assist directees in seeking a deeper relationship with the divine feminine through spiritual direction.\(^5\) Fischer

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thoroughly explains why spiritual direction with female directees should be undertaken using a feminist approach, maintaining that women need someone who will hear their stories on their own terms and help them find their own horizons.5) Vest proposes the concept of Godde as an essential tool for feminist spiritual direction, helpful in overcoming the predominantly male images and belief systems in Christianity that can be disruptive of the prayer life and spiritual experience of feminists.7) Ruffing also notes it is significant to pay attention to the experiences and needs of women and its theological sensitivities in that the female spiritual directors are majority in the society of the spiritual director.8) Little work has been done, however, on developing theological themes for the construction of a feminist theological frame of reference for spiritual direction. This study is based on the awareness that a feminist theological approach could enhance the core nature and features of spiritual direction. The primary goal of feminist theology—constructing a new Christian theological structure based on relations of equality and mutuality—should also be a critical foundation for spiritual direction.

5) Even if the practical context would be different, the feminist approaches to pastoral counseling would somewhat be applicable to this research's interest. Hee-Sung Chung, “A Re-construction of Developmental Theories from the Perspective of Feminist Pastoral Counseling,” Theology and Praxis 48 (Feb. 2016), 195-219; Hee-Sung Chung, “An Exploration of Womanist Pastoral Theology in the Korean Context,” Theology and Praxis 29 (Nov. 2011), 157-179.


This paper will demonstrate that the feminist theological framework can be a formative tool for the authentic practice of spiritual direction.

This study affirms that a basic tenet of spiritual direction is that the director should not forcefully impose any particular theological agenda upon the directee's spiritual journey. In order to avoid this possibility, this paper will endeavor to construct a theological framework that takes into account this basic nature of spiritual direction. Thus, this paper is built upon the rudimentary assumption that the feminist theological framework is formative of spiritual direction at a deep level. Meanwhile, it is important to acknowledge that spiritual direction sometimes requires the director to play the role of a guide to ensure that the directee is open to learning of the feminist theological approach as a renewing or transformative perspective in the individual dimension of spiritual direction.

This paper starts with the primary assumption that reorienting or reestablishing the right relations of equality and mutuality is necessary in the pursuit of spiritual direction. First, spiritual direction that is engaged in from a feminist theological perspective strongly affirms the female identity of the directee, so that the directee is more able to honor her own femininity in her spiritual experiences. Second, the honoring of her feminine identity could lead the female directee to undergo both liberation from oppressive systems and restoration of her female identity at the center of her spiritual journey. Third, this perspective entails deepening the directee's spiritual relationship with God, based on her genuine identity. In addition, the feminist theological framework helps prevent male directors from being blinded by hierarchical or patriarchal points of view, which end up distorting their role as spiritual director.

9) Ibid., 57-65.
The first section of this paper will discuss the limitations of the traditional theological frameworks in relation to the concept of sexism, based upon the theological arguments of Rosemary Ruether. Why Ruether? It is undeniable fact that she is one of the most influential and “quoted” feminist theologians in the academic fields as well as activists in the Christian contemporary society. Her theological terms and frames will help articulate why the prevalence of male language in Christianity can be a barrier in the context of spiritual direction with Christian women. Second, this paper will explore deconstructed and reconstructed concepts in feminist theological understanding of topics ranging from the images of God, Christ, and human nature to salvation; these concepts are essential for reformulating the feminist paradigm in spiritual direction. Next, the most appropriate components of feminist theological understanding will be employed in establishing a feminist approach to spiritual direction, so that certain critical features of feminist approaches to spiritual direction will be addressed as constitutive components.

I. Beyond Sexism in Spiritual Direction

Julie Han, a thirty-year-old Korean American woman, has felt discomfort and unease about attending worship service, since she recognized that the new senior pastor of her church strongly emphasizes obedience to God as a necessary response to divine grace. The pastor has often described ways in which obedience should be embodied and practiced in congregants’ relationships with the ministers in church and

within marital relationships in families. Besides forceful requests for larger offerings as a desirable way to express obedience to God, the senior pastor has forced the laypeople to submit to and obey God’s commands and the pastor’s teachings. Most of all, on her spiritual journey Julie has realized that obedience is not necessarily the best choice in her relationship with pastors or with her husband. Rather, her past experiences in the church have led her to understand that overemphasizing obedience distorts the pastor–layperson relationship, as well as her marital relationship. She has agonized over this struggle in her spiritual direction sessions, questioning whether she should stay or leave the church where she has attended and built relationships over the last decade.

Jee-Yeon, who is a Korean female minister, was educated in seminary to follow her divine call to be a minister. Training in CPE and pastoral counseling has also helped her to discern her life vocation in the ministry. Since she is aware of the necessity to be ordained as a pastor for a more effective engagement in the ministerial context, she has felt frustrated that her denomination does not allow the ordination of women. She acknowledges that the ordination door has not yet been opened to females, but she feels frustrated or angry by the disrespectful and indiscreet attitude of the denomination office: any further consideration of her being ordained could not be made within that circle. Denominational representatives have told her that if she wants to be ordained, she will have to transfer her membership to a different denomination.

Most contemporary women in Christian churches are not convinced that God has had a different theological and relational agenda or salvation plan for men and women from the beginning of Christian history. Current Christian spiritual practices and traditions have fallen
into crisis because the contradiction between traditional theological interpretation and individual experience is growing. The perceptions and experiences of today’s Christians lead to questions: Have the experiences of inferiority and discrimination within female circles been consistently observed throughout the history of Christianity? Or, has the inferior status of women systematically developed in the Christian community based upon contextualized historical circumstances? Rosemary Ruether, the prominent feminist theologian, answered the question well by drawing on the countercultural movement discovered in early Christianity. Under the influence of Jesus’ movement within the prophetic tradition, the writers of the New Testament recognized that Jesus’ new vision enabled the new community to envision social transformation in regards to racism, slavery, and sexism. Ruether considers the baptismal formula in the Pauline letter to the Galatians as representative of an egalitarian view of the world, through which a new equality between all social groups could be established in Christian community.\(^{11}\) This is vivid evidence that the early Christian community worked to treat females as equal members of the community, even in religious and social relations.

Then, if the inferiority of females was not established as the inherent social order of the early Christian community, when and why did it become embedded in the structure of the religious community? Ruether points to the canonization process as a critical pivotal procedure through which the concept of women’s social inferiority came into the religious institution.\(^{12}\) As the early church community realized the necessity of

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having a canon, the authorities in control set the criteria for determining or selecting the most authoritative sources among all the possibilities, turning down heretical or less authenticated scripture. This procedure led to the dominant (earlier) perspectives permeating the interpretation of the sources so that some branches of the community were marginalized and suppressed.\(^{13}\) The dominant authority or controlling value system adopted a hierarchic and patriarchic worldview as the normative rule, and the social idea of the inferiority of women pervaded the canon of Scripture.\(^{14}\) The first council of Nicaea, called by the emperor Constantine of the Roman Empire, is recognized as the initial place where the original faith of the primitive Christian community was censored and codified according to the controlling authority and where the inferiority of females was initially systematized, dismissing the egalitarian views of Jesus' original message.\(^{15}\)

Ruether clarifies that restoring the egalitarian framework that had originated in and overcome female inferiority in the Christian community is the primary goal of feminist theology. She maintains that the critical principle of feminist theology is the "promotion of the full humanity of women" and that the full humanity of women should be reflected upon the divine and in authentic relation to the divine, and in the authentic nature of things, and in the message of an authentic redeemer, and in a community of redemption.\(^{16}\) She identified the essence of the distortion

\(^{13}\) Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk*, 14.

\(^{14}\) The females in Korean church also claim the canonization as main obstacle hampering their identity and experiences to be contextually authenticated. Young Sil Choi, “Korean Feminist Theology and the Bible,” *Korean Journal of Christian Studies* 90 (2013), 319-342.


\(^{16}\) Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk*, 18-19.
and oppression experienced within Christian churches as sexism, writing that the “naming of males as norms of authentic humanity has caused women to be scapegoated for sin and marginalized in both original and redeemed humanity.” Feminists set the primary goal that women’s identity, experiences, and full humanity should be included in the definition of inclusive humanity as well as of the divine-human relationship.

Serene Jones also argues that feminist theology is not just interested in women’s flourishing and in liberating women from their multilayered experiences of oppression. But she additionally implies that embracing women’s lives and stories and their hope in the theological enterprise can function as constitutive in nourishing and renewing Christian experiences and faith as a whole. This has since become a core feature of feminist theology—it ranges from liberating, prophetic, and inclusive to communal, self-critical, and truth-seeking. Feminist theology can play more than a complementary role; it can play an essential role in reshaping and reconstructing all sections of the theological enterprise and, furthermore, in building up a healthy and authentic community embracing the next generation of Christians.

As a tactic of deconstruction, how should feminist theology facilitate its insights and wisdom in creating alternative ways? Ruether suggests a midrashic reading of the scripture as the most relevant method for drawing upon women’s experiences within the Christian community. This is because midrashic interpretation sheds light upon redrawing and rediscovering the symbols, metaphors, language, and images that have

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been denied or rejected in the Christian tradition. On the other hand, as a way to de/reconstruct the Christian theological enterprise, Jones is convinced that the doctrines are still effective in playing a normative role since they provide the basic outline of the theological drama within which the Christian story unfolds. As theological drama, the doctrines could construct an imagistic and conceptual terrain within which people of faith locate and interpret their lives and the world around them. This paper will attempt to explore feminist theological frameworks centering on the writings of Ruether and other feminist theologians, thus laying a foundation for understanding women’s lived experiences and for developing an interpretive framework within spiritual direction.

II. Feminist Theological Themes

1. Renaming God/ess

Julie Han has identified that her struggle with the pastor’s exclusive emphasis on obedience is grounded in his hierarchic and patriarchic understanding based on his theological formation. The male-oriented worldview is built upon the vertical, dynamic, hierarchic orderings of God-male-female and God-pastor-laypersons. This traditional theological frame has even distanced her from her sense of belonging with her faith community and from her connection with God. Her identity as a female has not been appreciated in the church, so she has felt marginalized and isolated.

Norvène Vest argues strongly that introducing the concept of the Goddess or female God is necessary for female directees so that they may embrace constructively their female identity as well as appropriate
it for their spiritual lives in their lived experiences. It is evident that the predominance of male images and language has critically prevented many female directees not only from being intimately connected with the male God, but also from cultivating intrinsic self-identification with God. So, for Vest it is essential for female directees and for Christians in general to reshape the working image of Goddess for overcoming the oppressive aspects of the prevalence of male images of God.

Exploring the historical prevalence of the female divine in the Ancient Near East, Ruether pays attention to the fact that the female divine was replaced by male monotheism when nomadic herding societies were established. This shift in social structure gave rise to strengthened masculine functions and entailed focusing on the image of God as the Sky-Father. Male monotheism reinforced the social hierarchy—patriarchal rule—through its religious system, which caused a weakening of the feminine in the divine image so as to solidify the dualistic or subordinated orderings: the masculine god ruled over the feminine, and the latter was more dependent on the former. The reverse of the divine image between the two genders became the critical basis of male monotheism and of distortion in images of God and social relations: female was subordinated to male. This historical distortion permeated the Christian community so that hierarchic and patriarchic frameworks affected the shape of the value system and worldview. In the end, female inferiority in the divine image and in social relations was solidified and accelerated in Christendom under canonization and other Constantinian initiatives.

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20) Norvone Vest, op. cit., 187.
22) Ruether, Sexism and God-talk, 53.
Ruether suggests four theological concepts as alternative ways to illuminate God/ess beyond its patriarchic image. First, the prophetic tradition in Christian scripture demonstrates that God was identified as justice-loving by protesting on behalf of the rural peasantry against the hierarchical, urban, and landowning society in the Old Testament. Jesus in the New Testament was also portrayed as a redeemer of those who were marginalized, deprived, and oppressed, such as slaves, women, and gentiles. Here, salvation is defined as deliverance from social oppression and as restoration of an egalitarian society. Despite the absence of explicit description, it is evident that the prophetic consciousness shed light on women as oppressed and deprived. And this liberates God from the patriarchic image.

Divine sovereignty is identified as the second God-language necessary for overcoming the patriarchic image. Ruether explains that divine sovereignty was claimed in order to liberate people from the bondage of human kings and kinships (in the Old Testament). The divine sovereignty also seeks liberation from “human dominance-dependence relationships based on kinship ties or master–servant relationship” and replacement with a new community of brother and sisters in the New Testament. Since this community was characterized by mutual equality without any class, race, or gender divisions, God-language can employ neutral or non-patriarchic images. The proscription of idolatry is named as the third biblical tradition significant in this context. Ruether points out that Christian artistic and verbal representations specify a particular image of God, exemplifying an authoritative father or old wise man image, as a consequence dismissing all other images including the feminine God. Ruether therefore asserts that in order for the theological

24) Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk*, 64.
representation to be inclusiveness in language, which includes the images and experiences of both genders, naming the God/ess with both female and male metaphors is essential.\textsuperscript{25)}

Last, Ruether highlights the biblical examples of naming the God/ess as female and male through metaphors such as the parable of the mustard seed. The scripture illustrates the equality between female and male, and the images were not drawn from the dominant social groups but from marginalized Galilean peasants.\textsuperscript{26)} In addition, the parables portray the divine action in non-parental terms. This analysis supports that metaphor treating females and males as equals already existed in the biblical sources, and they can become the bedrock for renaming or characterizing God in more valid ways. Now I will discuss the ways in which renaming God/ess could affect the concept of female nature.

2. Female nature

Feminist theologians consider the historically and culturally constructed inferiority of the feminine nature to the masculine to be a prominent problem within patriarchal civilization and Western Christianity. Rosemary Ruether elucidates how the theoretical problem in this patriarchal anthropology is its uncritical and naive endeavor to "link woman only with the sin-prone part of the self," thus denying female redeemability in a theological construction.\textsuperscript{27)} This theological misconception of Western theologians has thus regarded the woman as an 'inferior mix,' assuming that she is incapable of holding the image of God as does the

\textsuperscript{25)} Ibid., 65-67.

\textsuperscript{26)} Ibid., 68.

\textsuperscript{27)} Ibid., 94.
man, who is seen as representing the rational and spiritual part of the self.

Questioning the essentialist perspective on women’s nature, Serene Jones agrees that the theological concept of feminine inferiority has been characterized as a fundamental and indispensable property of female persons. Hence, feminine nature is confined by expressions with negative connotations such as passivity, instability, emotionality, innate, native, and inborn. Both Ruether and Jones point out that a dualistic worldview, a prevalent condition in Western Christianity, has intensified the theological anthropology of feminine inferiority as following the form of culture/nature, reason/intuition, public/private, subject/object, civilized/primitive, etc.  

Despite their consensus on identifying dualism as a main problem, Ruether uniquely and relevantly conceives of three marginalized traditions as offering an egalitarian view. First, the eschatological feminism of early Christianity, found also in the theology of the Shakers and the Quakers, viewed the church as anticipating the final redemption of humanity and restoration to its original equality. Second, liberal feminism, which arose during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, argued for the equal rights of all human beings regardless of gender. Its focus was on transforming the social, political, and economic institutions of this world. Third, the many forms of romantic feminism see masculinity and femininity as equal yet complementary dimensions of the human personality. Ruether argues that we need to find a ‘creative synthesis’ between liberalism and romanticism. As one way to develop a synthesis, she questions the use of the term androgyny, which refers to possession of both male and female characteristics.

Ruether states that the primary question in feminist theological anthropology is how the theological dualism of the *imago dei/fallen Adam* connects with sexual duality, or humanity as male and female. As noted earlier, she first prohibits the use of the term *androgyny* since it indicates that males and females possess both a ‘masculine’ and a ‘feminine’ side to their psychic capacity. As a preliminary step, she calls for integrating the rational and relational capacities in both genders. She argues that that we should not be confused by the concept of *androgyny*, which affirms the commonality of the essential human nature of both men and women. Within Ruether’s frame, the differences between male and female are therefore centered on the issues of gender, not those of biological or physiological origin. She asserts, thus, that to restore redeemed humanity, reconnected with the *imago dei*, the recovery of psychic potentials that have been repressed by cultural stereotypes require integration with social engagement, which draws on an egalitarian understanding of human nature. The primary goal of feminist theological anthropology can be established by the recovery of holistic psychic capacities and egalitarian access to social roles, which can overturn the church’s patriarchal structures.

On the other hands, Jones begins with a different question drawn from the ‘nature and nurture’ debates. She devises “strategic essentialism” as a theoretical tactic through which the endeavor to integrate essentialism and constructivism takes a compromising stance. Then, the following questions come up: “How is strategic essentialism implicated in Christian theology?” “What kind of remapping can take place in the academic enterprise?” Reconsidering women’s nature leads Jones to propose theological mapping in a reverse way, so that sanctification must precede the justification. That is, women’s journey to redemption

should start with calling upon women to become the subject in their relationship with God. In the Western theological concept, women were only "guilty and saved by association (men)." Before being called into the divine court for justification, women need to be identified as agents responding to God’s love, which empowers them to move ‘in body’ toward perfection. This creates a new space for women to reorient themselves and to start a new beginning of faithful living in relation with God, resisting falsely gendered versions of the self. How might justification function then? Jones claims that justification implies forgiving the sins of constructions that bind us, so that the liberating or emancipatory work of the Holy Spirit may open the door for women. By justification, women may be released from restrictive conceptions of gender, and this may bring about new life.

3. Female Christ

In a spiritual direction session, Jee-Yeon shared the stunning information that the forbidding of women’s ordination in her Korean Protestant denomination is based on the fact that Jesus was male: thus, any female could not fully represent Christ in the priesthood or ministry. This hierarchic or patriarchic assumption that the man is the normative human being and the woman is defective physically, morally, and mentally has been deeply embedded in the theological concept of ordination. For Jee-Yeon, the Jesus portrayed by the denominational authority does not validate her spiritual experiences and conviction. It is

highly problematic that Jee-Yeon’s personal spiritual experience and her spiritual vocation on the basis of her relationship with God have been dismissed by the institutionalized concepts and dogma.

Ruether’s delineation of the history of patriarchy in Christianity questions whether the church policy against women’s ordination would be validated in the light of contemporary Christological understanding. In the Hebraic history and spiritual tradition, the idea of the Messiah was associated with the coming reign of God, the eschatological hope of regaining the Davidic kingdom. Jesus’ way of proclaiming the kingdom of God, however, was different from the hope of a Davidic messiah. His message and life instead presented the kingdom of God as radicalized in the prophetic lineage so that the coming reign of God would be among the poor, the oppressed, and other marginalized groups. “Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom is neither nationalistic nor other-worldly.” 34) Jesus’ reinterpretation of the messianic symbol shifted from a king to a servant so that he reversed the social reference of divine redemptive activity, identifying redemption with the lowest persons in society rather than the highest.

The other reformulation of Jesus’ messianic symbol, according to Ruether, is found in his emphasis on the ‘present’ reign of God. Jesus’ concept of Spirit facilitated the presence of divine prophecy, rather than canonizing past prophecy. Jesus attempted to verify that the kingdom of God will be present here and now, and the presence of Spirit will prove it. This liberated religious experiences from the “fossilization of past traditions” 35) and enabled people to access the divine presence in its “present” form. This representation of Jesus about the messianic vision or idea of Christ plays a critical role in emancipating people’s spiritual

34) Ruether, Sexism and God-talk, 120.
35) Ibid., 121.
experiences from institutionalized bondage, as well as in prompting the sense of God's prophetic and redemptive activity in the present time.

Then, in what ways can women discover a legitimate concept of Christology, one that validates female identity and experience? Ruether argues convincingly that it should start with Jesus' new prophetic vision that the kingdom of God is incompatible with the current social or religious hierarchy and patriarchy. Women could function as spiritual guides who are led by the radical calling of the Spirit into a new reality in which marginalized and oppressed people are invited to become initiates in the coming reign of God. The social relations in God's kingdom are overturned since in God's new order the lowly, marginalized, and oppressed are considered as the subjects.

Ruether further reminds us of the ways in which the synoptic Gospels portray women in relationship with Jesus. Even though females were considered as lowly in the historical context, the female disciples played an important role in witnessing Jesus' new vision of social relations. Socially lower-class women are represented as uncovering the intrinsic features of the messianic vision. For instance, Mary is portrayed as the first figure to encounter Jesus resurrected and the first witness of what turned out to be the foundation of the first Christian church. This means that even though the social order of the existing society could treat females as lowly and marginalized, the hierarchic and patriarchic social ordering could not prevent females from becoming genuine disciples and participating authentically in God's kingdom here and now. Rather, the female disciples were disclosed as main characters who recognized and were the first to join in the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus.

36) Ibid., 135.
As a liberator, Jesus proclaims that he "renounced the system of domination and seeks to embody in his person the new humanity of service and mutual empowerment."\(^{38}\) The messiahship of Jesus is verified by his embodying the new reality of God’s kingdom, by his liberating the oppressed from systematic social oppression, and by his rescuing the marginalized from social dismissal and disregard. "As the representative of liberated humanity and the liberating Word of God, Jesus manifests the kenosis of patriarchy, the announcement of the new humanity through a lifestyle that discards hierarchical caste privilege and speaks on behalf of the lowly."\(^{39}\) This enables us to say that the maleness of Jesus is not significant theologically. Instead, it tells Christian women that to become a disciple of Jesus or a minister is to become a witness against the religious or social idolatrous system of patriarchal privilege. It is thus a reasonable claim that the church policy against women’s ordination is not even Christological, since the institutional policy explicitly limits the messiahship of Jesus within the hierarchical and patriarchal privilege so that it disregards seriously the liberating and redemptive activity of God in women’s ordination and spiritual experiences.

Carter Heyward offers the insightful perspectives that the stance of institutionalized religion against women’s ordination is external evidence of moralism in Christianity. Moralism is the conviction that "we and we alone know what's right and, moreover, that we have a moral, or ethical, duty to make others see things our way irrespective of how actual human, divine, and other life may be affected."\(^{40}\) Moralists are secure in

\(^{38}\) Ruether, Sexism and God-talk, 137.

\(^{39}\) Ibid.

the assumption that there is only one right perspective and that those
who have it are right. Heyward is conscious that moralism could be
embodied as authoritarian power relations, which elicits oppression and
distortion in relationship since the morally superior side that sees only
one right perspective tends to rule over the inferior side.

Given this, Heyward maintains, Jesus’ way to overcome or overturn
moralism and its oppression and distortion is to go through the passion
led by Spirit. This was the inevitable journey of Jesus as he followed
the spontaneous leading of the Spirit out of the divine desire to establish
mutual right relationships. This is the reason Heyward states, that
Jesus’ passion comes out of “the fullness of his embodied life, the depth
and power of his embodied spirit, the openness of his body to risk and
struggle in the spirit of God.” 41) That is, the God that Jesus loved
passionately was and is a Spirit that compelled Jesus, as it compels us
all, to live in such a way that our lives are themselves protests against
structures of injustice and exploitation in our religious institutions and in
the larger society. 42) Jesus’ passion is the fruit of the mutual relations
among God, Jesus, and Spirit, and it challenges the moralism embedded
in religious authoritarian relations of power.

Heyward’s theological reconstruction extends into the concepts of
atonement and incarnation, which have misled us into relations steeped
in authoritarian, moralistic, and violent dynamics in the traditional
theological framework. She points out that this central doctrine of
Christianity has historically been constructed with a male-centered
frame. It was built upon the assumption that bodies are inferior to spirit,
so our bodies need to be liberated by our spirit. The traditional
treatments of incarnation and atonement have functioned primarily to

41) Carter Heyward, Saving Jesus from Those Who Are Right, 122.
42) Ibid., 136.
separate us from God, Jesus, and one another. She states that this is not the way Jesus bore his passion, in which the Spirit drew him into an intimate relation with God and the messianic vision. The incarnation is the Christological articulation of divine desire and the idea that "as our Sacred, Sensual Power, deeply infusing our flesh, root of our embodied yearning to reach out to one another, God was indeed in Jesus as God is in us."  

The atonement as the other side of divine desire, moreover, represents the way in which the incarnated God is redeeming or liberating us through our mutual relations.

Heyward spells out that God’s salvific invitation asks human beings to take part in mutual relations with God and Jesus. God’s call to participate in incarnation and in atonement is therefore considered as an act of solidarity and as the mutual embodiment of right relationship among God, Jesus, and humans. Not only is it a spiritual event, but also a “political, social, ecological, and pastoral movement of liberation from larger and smaller forces that are cruel, violent, apathetic or ignorant of what humans and other creatures need in order to live and thrive.”  

Jesus is standing in the central locus of the divine desire to establish mutual right relations between Creator and creatures, Liberator and the oppressed.

III. Feminist Theological Strategies for Spiritual Direction

There are several significant insights or benefits of the feminist theological approach relevant to spiritual direction in the Christian

43) Ibid., 126.
44) Ibid., 122.
context. The first is the liberation theme. The feminist theological frame contributes to liberating our image of God from humanly generated images that have elicited distortion or misrepresentation of the divine nature. God's image and the nature of God associated with that image have been misrepresented by the male-dominant language used by Christian religious institutions. Feminist theological insights assist us in restoring the original form of the divine image or of nature by demystifying a false conceptualization and by overcoming a dualistic worldview. It is helpful to learn that God does not want to be confined to manipulated images generated historically or culturally in hierarchic or patriarchic contexts. In addition, liberation from hierarchic and patriarchic images of God entails the liberation of human beings from subordinated or obedient relationships with God, family, and society. A new self-representation or self-image of Christian women could emancipate them from oppression or marginalization in subordinated or obedience-reinforced relations. They are not secondary or sin-elicited beings, but ones in whom the divine image is equally represented. Authoritative and oppressive images of God are no longer permissible or viable: the God who is longing to have an intimate relationship with humans and to accompany humans is more relevant and legitimate.

Next, the feminist theological frame leads us to realize two significant features of the Holy Spirit: spontaneity and simultaneity. Notice the spontaneous and simultaneous leadings of the Spirit is a critical tool for overcoming the fossilization of religious institutions and for living out the renewing power of the presence of God in given situations.

demands that we not be stuck with social systems that bring about oppression or subordination. But it also strongly asks us to participate in the liberating work of the Holy Spirit taking place spontaneously and simultaneously every moment and everywhere. Following the Spirit implies discerning the movement of the divine will and desire 'here and now,' so it requires that we cherish each moment and each place. A lively response to the spontaneous and simultaneous movement of the Holy Spirit is required of the spiritual pilgrim. This might give rise to a new spiritual awareness that the leadings of the Spirit invite female directees to embody their spiritual wisdom and insights in various aspects of lived experiences, engaging actively with community, society, and the world, since they are not subordinated, insufficient, or deformed beings but a divine being bearing the image of God.

Finally, feminist theological insights can equip the spiritual director with the essential theological concept of mutual interrelation and reciprocity. One of the primary characteristics of the divine nature as reformulated by feminist theology is the concept that God is seeking mutual interrelation and reciprocity in the relations with the human. God calls human beings not as servants or subordinates, but as companions, active partners on the divine journey in human history. Here, human beings are not the objects of the divine milieu; they are called as co-creators or co-agents in the world. Salvation is redefined as the right mutual relations between God and human beings and others. These concepts can guide spiritual direction, determining where its essence

47 The spiritual directees were guided with spiritual reading of the Scripture and the historical writings especially written by the female saints and theologians. The spiritual practices played implicitly significant role in facilitating female experiences and identity, and enhancing the dynamic in prayer so as to reshape spiritual formation.

should be grounded. The profound insights from feminist theology will formulate the core characteristic of Christian spiritual direction: mutually respectful and right relations with God and other beings and the environment. This enables us to state that one of the primary goals of spiritual direction is to bear witness that the soul should initially establish, seek for, enhance, or restore right mutual relationships among God, the self, and the world. It further leads us to embrace the egalitarian vision as our Christian vocation, since this is the original form of the right mutual relations that God wills.

The use of these feminist theological approaches as formative strategies in spiritual direction is illustrated by the following example. Since being introduced to the historical construction of the patriarchic image of God, Julie Han, the Korean-American Christian minister whose situation was discussed above, has been convinced of the theological irrelevancy of obedience as necessary for spiritual formation. She has decided that maintaining her membership in the church will not nurture her spiritual life and will even worsen her inner sense of oppression and marginalization in the church. In several subsequent spiritual direction sessions, she has named the sense of agony and frustration that she experiences due to the emphasis on obedience, and she has begun, for the sake of her spiritual life and for healthy marital relations in her family life, to make the tentative decision to leave the church. Even though this will be a hard decision, she and her family members have become convinced that engaging in a spiritual journey to seek the right mutual relations with God, themselves, and others will bear fruit in other aspects of their lives.

Jee-Yeon has taken advantage of spiritual direction as a discerning process for her ordination process and her current association with a

49) Elizabeth Liebert, op. cit., 130-135.
particular denomination. She was initially angry and frustrated by the fact that her religious denomination, the Korean Presbyterian Church Abroad (KPCA), has not opened and does not plan to open ordination to women. She has noticed, however, that her desire to be ordained as a Christian minister has not been extinguished by the lack of support by the religious institution, since she has discovered it is related to one of her life vocations. She mentioned in one of the direction sessions that this frustration has rather awakened her social consciousness of the need for the oppressive structure that has stemmed from patriarchic society to be changed or transformed as an authentic way to incarnate the message of Jesus Christ and to embody right mutual relations in her context. Her inner compassion toward the denomination and the church authorities has surprisingly become a new motivation that guides her actions for change. She has recently been engaged in communal solidarity with other female ministers to campaign for the ordination of women in her denomination.

IV. Conclusion

This study has endeavored to demonstrate that feminist theological approaches can be a formative strategy for spiritual direction in the Christian context. The paper began with the problematic discrimination against women that has been systematically constructed and is currently experienced by Christian women. The prevalence of male language in the traditional hierarchic and patriarchic theological structures was identified as a critical impediment for female directees to affirm not only their self-identities, but also their spiritual experiences within the Christian frame. Feminist theological themes, ranging from divine
images and Christology to human nature, shed light upon deconstructing and reconstructing the theological frameworks within Christian theology. So, this study attempted to demonstrate the ways in which the traditional Christian theological approaches reconstructed with feminist approaches could play a significant role in cultivating the spiritual experiences of female directees and enhancing their spiritual identity. The feminist theological approaches contain formative and constitutive components for renewing or authenticating spiritual direction for female directees.

In the next stage of this research, the theological and practical implications of the feminist theological approaches for male spiritual directors who are working with female directees will be relevant. The study will focus more on the ways in which the feminist theological frame could cultivate the self-representation of male spiritual directors and enhance their awareness of the cause and effects of patriarchic frameworks in direction sessions as well as religious institutions.

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Key Words
Spiritual Direction, Feminist Theology, Rosemary R. Ruether, Spiritual Formation and Practices, Christian Approaches