Chapter One

Reinterpretation of ‘Christology’

Maker of this earth our home
You sweep the heavens with your starry skirt of night
And polish the eastern sky to bring light to the new day.
Come to us in the birth of the infant Christ,
That we may discover the fullness of your redemption throughout
The universe;
Mother and child of peace bound by the spirit of love

(Mary Cathleen Schmitt, an Episcopal priest)

Many feminist theologians like Merlin Stone, Rosemary Ruether and Carol P. Christ have raised their subversive voices, and tried to override the androcentric bias in the scripture (here *The Bible*), which is perceived and interpreted from a skewed male perspective. Sugiyama Naoko writes, “. . . many women questioned the role of Christianity in terms of gender justice, and along with the development of feminist theology, some women have pursued ways to reinterpret or revise existing forms of Christianity to find a more egalitarian interpretation in terms of gender” (178), and also maintains that “the established church is often depicted as hypocritical, narrow-minded, and as leading to powerlessness and self-hatred (181).

There are some who believe that Christian religion is hopelessly patriarchal and irredeemable, and the only proposed solution is a complete denunciation of Christian faith. Many feminists have already concluded that the maleness of Christ is so fundamental to Christianity that women cannot see themselves as liberated or reformed through it. Thinkers
such as Mary Daly* or members of Women’s Spirituality Movement have already declared that women must reject Christ as redeemer for women and seek instead a female divinity and messianic symbol. However, there are a few feminist theologians who have faith in the liberating potential of the biblical texts and who want to bring about reforms by staying and working within the framework of Christianity. Between the reformist and revolutionary camp, Ruether belongs to the former which aims at reinterpreting scripture and degenderizing the language used to name the ‘Divine’. Ruether has confidence in the redeeming qualities of scripture and church since she strongly believes that there are certainly “recoverable elements for an ethic of eco-justice from our Christian heritage” (GG141). Though critical of Christianity as a religion of conquest and domination, and patriarchal interpretation of the biblical texts, Walker also does not altogether denounce her faith in Christian religion. Many scholars do find a ray of hope for the downtrodden people of the society in The Bible. With regard to the question of women’s faith in Jesus’s message, Bart D. Ehrman, a famous Biblical scholar, states:

Most scholars remain convinced that Jesus proclaimed the coming Kingdom of God, in which there would be no more injustice, suffering, or evil, in which all people, rich and poor, slave and free, men and women would be on equal footing. This obviously proved particularly as a message of hope to those who in the present age were underprivileged – the poor, the sick, the outcast. And the women. (179)

Various causes of activism bind Ruether and Walker together in a chain as both of them envision a radical transformation of the socio-economic patriarchal structure which is damaging to women and nature. Like Walker, Ruether extends the scope of her writings and activism by addressing not only the marginalized women but also people who are exploited along the racial-ethnic lines:

The negation of woman as the “mortal other,” which the male must negate in order to grasp his lost “immortality,” is also extended to other victimized groups. Religious, social, sexual, and racial-ethnic “aliens” have been viewed through the same dualistic

*Mary Daly (October 16, 1928 – January 3, 2010) was an American radical feminist philosopher, academic, and theologian. Her book Beyond God the Father is often regarded as a foundational work in feminist theology, and an attempt to explain and overcome androcentrism in the Western religion. See the link: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Daly
lens that separates the godly from the ungodly and the spiritual from the carnal. Either as conquest and subjugation or genocidal destruction has been justified as a way of dealing with such aliens who threaten the purity and power of the “men of God.” (GG 140)

However, there are points of convergence as well as divergence between Ruether’s and Walker’s ideas. The chapter examines Walker’s novels in the light of Ruether’s revised interpretation of Christology and Christian beliefs. Ruether is a prominent figure in the field of feminist theology and ecofeminist spirituality. She has written a number of books bodying forth her understanding of spirituality and building a constructive feminist critique. The Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Modern Western Theology describes Ruether in these words:

> With wide-ranging scholarship and a penchant for finding the hidden connections among seemingly disparate fields, Ruether has written and edited close to twenty books and hundreds of articles and reviews. She is at home in such diverse fields as patristics, the historical and theological roots of anti-Semitism, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the history of women in American religion, liberation theology, the mythology of the Ancient Near East, and ecology.

Ruether tries to reinterpret and revise the traditional Christian beliefs from an ecofeminist perspective, thus, attempts to resurrect their liberating potential. She believes that spirituality of all religions is same and no one religion can claim the exclusive truth. The same belief forms the core of Walker’s life and gets translated into her writings too. Ruether’s eclectic approach in religious matters is her greatest asset as she affirms the presence of different world religions and considers Christianity to be one of the many religions in this world. According to Ruether, feminist theology is no longer limited to Christianity since women from diverse religious faiths such as Buddhism, Islam and Judaism are “developing major communities of praxis and reflection” (SGT xvii). The dialogue with feminist theologies across diverse communities, cultures, religions, ethnic backgrounds, and sexual orientations seems very productive to Ruether. She is always open to incorporating perspectives of other faiths in order to widen the scope and transformational power of her body of work, though
she broadly works within the matrix of her religious roots to voice resistance against oppression. In her own words, she works from a “broad configuration of culture that has shaped me and my context” (GG 11). Talking about her ecofeminist theology, Ruether voices: “I believe that a plurality of ecofeminist perspectives must arise from many cultural backgrounds and enter into dialogue with each other” (GG 11). She does not negate the efficacy of adopting plurality of approaches in dealing with the logic of domination. Her eclecticism can be understood through her own words: “Rather it means that a world religion, while affirming its distinctive identity and tradition, may borrow useful aspects from another religion or rediscover these potentials in its own tradition through dialogue and mutual engagement with other faiths” (IEWR 80). Walker also seems to accept the liberational aspects of Christianity besides adopting useful teachings of other world religions.

Biblical feminists and theologians such as Ruether employ a variety of hermeneutical techniques to revise and reinterpret the traditional Christology including the Christian notions of sin and salvation, reincarnation and renewal. Walker, though not a theologian, seems to capture the essence and ideas of liberation theology in her novels as they are espoused by Ruether. The traditional notions of sin, salvation, and reincarnation in orthodox Christianity have been interpreted from the perspective of feminists like Ruether who believe that, “[t]he central issue of “sin” as distinct from finitude is the misuse of freedom to exploit other humans and the earth and thus to violate the basic relations that sustain life” (GG 141). Talking about the critical stance adopted by Ruether against the dominant androcentric powers, the Boston Encyclopedia affirms that:

The critical norm of this dialectic is the prophetic strand of biblical faith, exemplified by the Hebrew Prophets as well as by Jesus’ critique of the dominant systems of power, his vindication of the oppressed, and his vision of the coming reign of God. With respect to feminism, this critical norm functions in a very simple way: that which promotes women's full humanity is authentic, while that which does not promote it is inauthentic.

Using feminist theology as a tool to expose the male-centered bias of classical theology, Ruether articulates a faith that incorporates both genders in their totality and embraces full humanity. She questions the patriarchal interpretation of texts and looks at the possibilities of
rehabilitating the stereotyped images of women in the biblical texts as well as in church. Throughout her writings and activism, Ruether envisions and recreates a new context for theology which can respond to global ecological crisis as well as devaluation of women in the Christian tradition. Ruether maintains that “[s]eparatism reverses male hierarchicalism” but at the same time, she does not negate the possibility of women’s communes and collectives as “harbingers of an alternative culture of nonhierarchical relationships” (SGT 194). Ruether thinks that the only problem is that they should not confine themselves to separatist ideology by identifying femaleness with goodness and maleness with evil.

Until the rise of liberation theologies, theology seemed to be confined to gaining intellectual respectability in the academy rather than allying itself with the oppressed or marginalized classes, or promoting social and environmental ethics across the people all over the globe. Ruether feels the urgency to make “real connections between theory and practice” (IEWR xi). In accordance with many other leading female liberation theologians, Ruether has a strong conviction that androcentric thinking is pervasive throughout society and church. Virtually all of the influential male theologians in the tradition have excluded women from church affairs on the pretext of keeping the purity of church intact by demonizing women as ‘impure’, ‘polluted’, ‘sinful’, and by associating the maleness of Jesus as normative to any other possible imagery of God. In her article “Feminist Christology”, Elizabeth Johnson cites the example of Tertullian, who was famous (or infamous) for his view of woman as the temptress. She quotes Tertullian’s words:

Do you not realize that you are each an Eve? The curse of God on this sex of yours lives on even in our times. Guilty, you must bear its hardship; you are the devil's gateway; you desecrated the fatal tree; you first betrayed the law of God; you softened up with your cajoling words the one against whom the devil could not prevail by force. All too easily you destroyed the image of God, Adam. You are the one who deserved death, and yet it was the Son of God who had to die.

Elizabeth Johnson further expounds numerous other statements in Augustine's writings that make androcentrism to be the very nature of things. Albert, The Great (teacher and mentor of Thomas Aquinas) was of the opinion that “woman is a misbegotten man” (qtd. in Barbara G. Walker 252). Ruether also quotes Augustine’s misogynistic remarks in *Women-Church*:
Woman does not possess the image of God in herself but only when taken together with the male who is her head, so that the whole substance is one image. But when she is assigned the role as helpmate, a function that pertains to her alone, then she is not the image of God. But as far as the man is concerned, he is by himself alone the image of God just as fully and completely as when he and the woman are joined together into one. (138)

Ruether critiques the universal devaluation of women as well as nature based on a network of dualist hierarchical categories (such as culture over nature) created by the Western culture, which forms the socio-political landscape of much of the West. Many other ecofeminists have expounded and critiqued the way binaries are treated not as two facets of a complete whole, rather as polar opposites which create a divide between the dualist categories. Val Plumwood postulates that the logical structure of dualism forms a major basis for the connection between different forms of oppression. She maintains, “Reason in the western tradition has been constructed as the privileged domain of the master, who has conceived nature as a wife or subordinate other encompassing and representing the sphere of materiality, subsistence and the feminine which the master has split off and constructed as beneath him” (3). According to Plumwood, the women’s inclusion in the sphere of nature has been a major tool in their oppression which is clear from the traditional sources, and further states that, “[f]eminine “closeness to nature” has hardly been a compliment” (19). It is clear, hence, that connection between women and nature has been a social construct so that this association can be used as a tool for their subordination. Ruether espouses nature/culture dualism as the cause behind the inferior position of women. She says:

Women are symbolized as ‘closer to nature’ than men and thus fall in an intermediate position between culture as the male sphere and uncontrolled nature. . . . Female physiological processes are viewed as dangerous and polluting to higher (male) culture. Her social roles are regarded as inferior to those of males, falling lower on the nature- culture hierarchy. (SGT 62)
Similar views have been expounded by Sherry B. Ortner who posits that culture is created through control over nature. She argues that since culture automatically sees itself as “above” nature, therefore, women universally have an inferior status because of “biological determinism” (71) and their involvement in menstruation, child bearing, child rearing, which makes them seem closer to nature and this explains “the universal secondary status of women” (83), and it is “a pan-cultural fact” (68). However, she maintains that the whole scheme is a construct of culture rather than a fact of nature.

Ruether traces the traditional orthodox misogynistic tendencies in the church in many of her writings. She critiques the patriarchal tendency of church authorities to negate women’s bodies as sinful. Ruether says, “particularly in clerical misogyny, women’s body is described with violent disgust as the image of decay. Her physical presence drags down the souls of men to carnal lust and thus to eternal damnation” (SGT 69).

Besides the subordinate position of women in the church as well as public life, Ruether fathoms the status of nature from an ecofeminist perspective. She investigates the way nature was viewed by the medieval mind, and finds out that it was supposed to be dangerous to venture into the realms of nature outside of church control. She states:

Nature, to the patristic and medieval mind, lies under a curse. The airy realm between earth and moon is filled with demonic spirits. The devil, the prince of this realm, rules over the non-human and non-Christian world only through the church, mediating grace beyond nature, nature is restored to the sovereignty of God and becomes a vehicle of grace (sacrament). (SGT 150)

As women were to be under the control of men in the realm of hierarchical dualism, so was nature. According to Elizabeth Dodson Gray, Biblical creation myth produces a hierarchical order of being where those at the lower rung can be mistreated, desecrated, traded, sacrificed, or slaughtered at the convenience of higher states, especially males and God. Many female theologians, apart from their feminist convictions, believe that the crisis that threatens the destruction of earth is not only social, political, economic, and technological, but is at root spiritual. We have lost the sense that this earth is our true home and we fail to recognize our profound connection with all beings in the web of life. James Lovelock’s Gaia Hypothesis suggests that the earth is best understood as one organic body, a biosphere in which all
species of beings, animal, and non-animal contribute to the whole and “the entire surface of the earth including life is a self-regulating entity” (Lovelock ii). Like Walker, Ruether also believes in the unity and interconnectedness of all life forms, providing ground for a holistic view of life.

Ruether traces the roots of the domination over nature in the exclusivist and missionizing spirit of Christianity. She states that the proselytizing mission of Christianity was coupled with the idea of terra nullius and by papal decree, all land belonging to non-Christians and pagans could be appropriated by the invading Christians to convert people to Christianity. She raises her voice against all highly individualistic, otherworldly religions, which consider this world to be bondage for the soul, from which the soul should escape to eternal life. In GG, she voices the same concerns when she says:

The evaluation of mortal life as evil and the fruit of sin has lent itself to an earth-fleeing ethic and spirituality, which has undoubtedly contributed very centrally to the neglect of the earth, to the denial of our commonality with plants and animals, and to the despising of the work of sustaining the day-to-day processes of finite but renewable life. (139)

The view that this world has no intrinsic value may contribute more to the pattern of legitimization and sanctification of oppression, which leaves no scope for the dismantling of patriarchal institutions. Ruether seems to explore the potential of liberation in her own religious faith i.e. Christianity by moving to a deeper consideration of epistemology and linguistic deconstruction under the rubric of ecofeminism. Though primarily a feminist theologian, she realizes that socio-environmental ethics and theology cannot be separated from each other rather she seeks an integrated and mutual dialogue to generate a possibility of enriching the theoretical and practical base of ecofeminism.

Ruether’s reinterpretation of traditional Christology has an aspiring and motivational agenda. The veracity of the Christian tradition is indisputably grounded upon the persona and work of Jesus Christ. Ruether understands that orthodox Christology reflects predominantly androcentric ideology and therefore, has failed to communicate Jesus’s iconoclastic, subversive teachings and life which are against the hierarchical standards, especially within religious communities. Walker’s novels also resonate with Ruether’s radical ideas as many of
her characters voice revolutionary ideas regarding Jesus’s life and teachings and Christian values. Ruether’s reinterpretation and subversion of orthodox Christian beliefs and values can be important tools to challenge and deconstruct existing hierarchical pattern in church and society as a whole. Her approach and methodology in reinterpretting Christology is biblical and dialectical. The dialectic method is predicated on a logical argumentation where there is an exchange or dialogue between the contrasting methods, ideas, and philosophies but the aim is resolution of the disagreement through logical discussion and ultimately the search for truth. This method assumes that our understanding of reality at any given time is always contingent and in a flux, rather than being final and permanent. She examines The Bible with a consideration that the historical Jesus is not permanent, in contrast to the prevalent understanding of Christ as a final and fixed revelation. The prophetic mindset in any age begins with recognition that the past does not create permanency. God is not a fixed deity as Ruether postulates, “Christ, as redemptive person and Word of God is not to be encapsulated ‘once-for-all’ in the historical Jesus” (SGT 116).

Ruether’s vision of social justice transcends all forms of hierarchies, prevalent even in some forms of feminism. Her critical consciousness makes her weigh the tensions between past and present, theory and praxis, and transient and permanent. She tries to resolve these tensions with her rational thinking and judgment. The chapter also seeks to explore how a tryst between religion and spirituality can prove to be a fertile ground to promote social and environmental ethics in the current era of corporate globalization.

Ruether refutes the claim of classical theologies that they provide ‘objective’ sources of truth. In her words: “What have been called the objective sources of theology; Scripture and tradition, are themselves codified collective human experience” (SGT11). She talks about the uniqueness of feminist theology in terms of it being based on women’s experience; the criterion almost excluded in the past theological reflections. Rejecting the maleness as universal principle, Ruether espouses: “The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women. Whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore, appraised as not redemptive” (SGT 15). Hence, she prioritizes women’s autonomy and their experience, and sees these as the very foundation of feminist theology. Ruether deliberates that “[t]he maleness of Jesus has no ultimate significance. It has social symbolic significance in the framework of societies of patriarchal privilege” (SGT 115). The chapter explores Walker’s similar stance as she invokes the symbolic significance of image of Jesus rather than his referring to his biological existence.
According to Ruether, “It is idolatrous to make males more ‘like God’ than females. It is blasphemous to use the image and name of the Holy to justify patriarchal domination and law. Feminist readings of the Bible can discern a norm within Biblical faith by which the Biblical texts themselves can be criticized” (SGT 19). She relies heavily on the texts of the Prophets and The Synoptic Gospels for the conversion of the patriarchal roots of Christology to a ‘Feminist Christology’. The study seeks to understand how Walker’s spirituality rejects and transcends the patriarchal ideology rooted in traditional biblical teachings and the way she studies and adopts revised Christology from an ecofeminist perspective.

Ruether explains how the meaning of messianism and servanthood language changes radically in different contexts. Ruether says, “In its use by Jesus, appropriated from the prophetic tradition, and it means that God alone is father and king and we, therefore, owe no allegiance to human fathers and kings. As servants of God alone, we are freed from servitude to human hierarchies of power” (SGT 24). Hence, Jesus rebutted the hierarchical interpretation of the meaning of messianism and servanthood. However, as Christianity became a religion of imperialism, it twisted the servanthood language, to reinforce the servitude of the marginalized and oppressed people in the name of Christ. Ruether is critical of the deformations of messianic language when she states, “Jesus rejected kingly and chauvinistic understandings of the Messiah. He interpreted the Messiah as Suffering Servant [Italics mine], as one who comes to restore humanity through a ministry of service, even to the point of giving one’s own life” (SGT 24). Ruether says that all power and domination relations in society can be supplanted by overcoming the root metaphor of relationship to God modeled on king-servant relations. The scope of her vision is not myopic as she does not appropriate the past to remain confined to its limits rather seeks usable resources from the past to point to new future.

Jesus’s naming of God as ‘Abba’ has profound implications which Ruether explicates in her works. In “Feminist Christology”, Elizabeth Johnson states that though Jesus addressed God as ‘Abba’, it is the very opposite of the image of a dominating patriarch, instead he images God as compassionate and intimate. She laments that due to a literal and naïve idea of revelation, it is interpreted that God should be imaged exclusively as male. According to Johnson, in many Jewish scriptures, God is imaged in female form- as midwife, as nurse, as a mother bird spreading her wings over chicks, as Sophia (Greek female metaphor for ‘wisdom’). At various times in the Christian tradition, female metaphors for God were used, for example, the Syriac liturgy refers to Holy Spirit as our mother. Johnson reinforces her
disbelief at the patriarchal naming of God by saying that “[s]peech about God in the exclusive and literal terms of the patriarch is a tool of subtle conditioning which operates to debilitate women's sense of dignity, power and self-esteem” (“Naming God She” 13). Ruether understands well that language deconstruction can rupture the built-in hierarchies of power. Hence, Ruether uses the term God/ess to designate her understanding of the ‘Divine’. Some theologians have opposed to her using such an ambiguous term as it seeks to dismantle the male generic form of God found in the traditional Judeo-Christian tradition. She writes, “I use the term God/ess, a written symbol intended to combine both the masculine and feminine forms of the word for the divine while preserving the Judeo-Christian affirmation that divinity is one” (SGT 38). She maintains that the term is unpronounceable and inadequate, not intended as language for worship, rather “as an analytic sign to point toward the yet unnameable understanding of the divine that would transcend patriarchal limitations and signal redemptive experience for women as well as men” (SGT 39).

In GG, Rosemary Ruether maintains that The Bible has been made to appear to the Western Christians to be much more anti-nature than it is by a particular line of biblical interpretation. In her zeal to explore the legacy of ecological ethics in The Bible, Ruether clarifies that more recent explorations of The Bible, undertaken out of ecological concern, have shown that the Hebraic understanding of the God of Israel did not set history against nature but rather experienced God as Lord of heaven and earth, whose power filled all aspects of their lives. She feels the urgency to look for more inclusive perspectives in the understanding of God. She envisions “[a] God who relates lovingly to other people, a God who related directly to women without intermediaries, and a God who relates to nature apart from human mediation” (GG 207).

Ruether affirms the presence of Jesus’s divine grace as well as his power of deliverance. According to Ruether, the liberational aspects of ‘Christology’can be foregrounded through reinterpretation, but they are not absent as has been assumed by Western Christianity since the late medieval and Reformation periods. She purports it with an optimistic faith in all world religions including her own and says: “In the last decades of twentieth century, major world religions began to grapple with the possible harm that their traditions may have caused to environment and to search for positive elements in their religions for an ecologically affirming spirituality and practice (IEWR ix). Bas Wielenga points out the ecological relevance of Christian religion by trying to seek and understand the deeper meanings embedded in the ancient religious texts:
They are not addressing our problems of global eco-crisis, pollution and depletion of resources. While speaking of humans and nature they relate to earlier experiences, which differ from context to context. . . . Through careful interpretation we may find relevant insights and paradigms which speak to our situation. The flood can become a paradigm of eco-catastrophe and Noah’s ark a paradigm of the survival- and the need for survival technology- of humans in one boat with all other species”. (*Ecology and Religion* 127)

Wielenga maintains that Francis of Assisi drew on biblical resources (story of Noah and the Ark, and Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount”) for his eco-spirituality and solidarity with the poor. In Wielenga’s interpretation of Psalms 104 and 145, the metaphor of kingship does not evoke remote and despotic power, but powerful benevolence (134). He points out Jesus’s advocacy of an economy of sharing in which there is enough for everybody. The Gospels narrate repeatedly the paradigmatic story of the crowd sharing bread and fishes in the wilderness. He finds the liberational vision of an economy rooted in hope and trust within the Christian scripture and concludes thus: “. . . the biblical outlook strongly endorses concern and care for ecology and protection of life in its diversity, but that this concern has to be integrated with the concern for the poor, for the Dalits, for women, for all those who are denied access to resources, for their survival needs” (139).

Ruether has essentially been a revolutionary, fighting for theological, feminist, and environmental causes. She went to the extent of giving up on institutional church calling women to form ‘Women-Church’. She writes in *Women-Church*, “Christian feminists cannot wait for the institutional churches to reform themselves enough to provide the vehicles of faith and worship that women need at this time” (4). However, she remains upbeat about “her” Catholicism. She postulates: “To me Catholicism is a community of a billion people who represent a range of things, so I don’t identify with the pope. My Catholicism is the progressive, feminist liberation theology wing of Catholicism. That is the Catholicism that I belong to, that I am connected to around the globe” (Miller 4). It would be very interesting to locate the same tendency of critiquing orthodox Christianity in the novels of Alice Walker too. While positing her spiritual growth against mainstream traditional Christianity, she tries to locate and develop liberating theology within Christianity as this is her religious base. The activist and rebellious streak in Ruether can be correlated with that of Walker. Some questions
may arise considering their different ethnic backgrounds – Is it possible to apply Ruether’s methodology and reinterpretation of Christology to the works of Walker? Would it be possible to keep their intellectual and activist pursuits on a similar plane? Would it be justified to equate the experiences and theological approach of a white American woman with those of an African-American woman? Is it possible for a white woman to speak on behalf of a community or race which has been suffering the drudgery of slavery and subjugation for centuries? These questions need to be answered but care needs to be taken not to obfuscate the concrete issue of social commitment as an integral expression of religious faith. Ruether says, “I got involved in feminism though the Civil Rights critique of male dominance” and states further:

What you experienced in Mississippi was looking at the United States from the southern black side. You see the white dominance and the racism. That has always been very important to me in terms of social justice: that you put yourself on the other side and you see things from the context of the oppressed. The feminism that I got involved in was rooted in social justice and in terms of seeing sex, race and class hierarchies, not the Betty Friedan kind of feminism. (Miller 3)

Though teaching at the historically black Howard wouldn’t seem like a natural fit for a white woman schooled in the classics, yet like other young progressive activists in the early 1960s, Ruether had become involved in the Civil Rights movement. Ruether seems to be well-aligned with and committed to the liberation of black; a cause which runs like a purple thread throughout Alice Walker’s life and writings also.

In Walker’s spiritual vision, one may witness some ambivalence towards Christian religion as she abhors the oppressive hierarchical paradigms in orthodox Christianity. A noted African-American writer Marcus Garvey seems to understand the ambiguities and misinterpretations of the Christian religion when he says:

A form of religion practiced by the millions, but as misunderstood. ... We profess to live in the atmosphere of Christianity, yet our acts are as barbarous as if we never knew Christ. He taught us to love, yet we hate; to forgive, yet we revenge; to be merciful, yet we condemn and punish, and still we are Christians. . . . To be a true
Christian one must be like Christ and practice Christianity, not as the Bishop does, but as he says, for if our lives were to be patterned after the other fellow's all of us, Bishop, Priest and Layman would ultimately meet around the furnace of hell, and none of us, because of our sins, would see salvation. (20)

Nevertheless, Walker shows reverence towards Jesus Christ as an iconoclastic liberator whose teachings have been misinterpreted to justify the domination and hypocrisy of the orthodox Christianity. In AWLS, she recollects memories of her childhood days when her mother (besides carrying out her duties as a worker, wife and mother) would diligently refurbish the interiors of the church. Walker reminisces her own training in church duties by her mother and states: “We would sweep the carpeting around the pulpit and I would reverently dust off the Bible” (AWLS12). However, yearning for an equal status at religious congregations lingers on in Walker’s heart years after. She laments: “Sister Walker, my mother was thanked for making the church so beautiful, but this wise woman, who knew so many things about life and the mysteries of the heart, the spirit, and the soul, was never asked to speak to the congregation” (AWLS12). The attempt to justify silencing of women in the churches may be found in some passages in The Bible. Walker quotes ironically a passage from the New Testament that is attributed to Saint Paul: “Let women keep silence in the churches” (AWLS15). Ruether denigrates the patriarchal outlook of church authorities which robs women of their independent identity. She maintains: “Women are denied the attributes of speech, of self-articulation, of autonomous personhood” (Conscience 8).

The role and stature of women in the church has long been indubitably undermined. Bart D. Ehrman has been involved in the field of textual criticism, trying to recover the original words of The Bible through a sustained study of the manuscripts of the New Testament. He has also expounded on the role of women in the Early church, the attitude of the Church fathers, and some textual changes in the scriptures involving women. Ehrman describes that our earliest Gospels indicate that apart from men, Jesus was also accompanied by women on his travels (179). Jesus is said to have engaged in public dialogue with women and to have ministered to them in public. He also posits that the Gospels also give a description that women accompanied Jesus during his final trip to Jerusalem, where they were present at his crucifixion, and where they remained loyal to him when the male disciples had fled (Ehrman 179). Considering the role of women in the Church, Ehrman’s research findings maintain that women played a major role in early Christian Churches. A
few women such as Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis were even called by Paul as “co-workers” in the gospel. Nevertheless, Ehrman does not fail to understand the ambivalence in Paul’s attitude (noted by many modern interpreters too) towards the role of women as Paul required women to keep their heads covered to show their subservience (qtd. in Ehrman 181). Paul did not even urge the abolition of slavery, even though he maintained that in Christ there “is neither slave nor free” (qtd. in Ehrman 181) Ehrman states that this ambivalence on Paul’s part played a major role in suppressing the role of women in the churches altogether.

The above discussion shows that scholars are re-reading The Bible from an egalitarian perspective and critiquing the patriarchal mode of thinking. It is not surprising that as enlightened ecofeminists, Ruether and Walker share the critique of androcentric hi mode of thinking in the church. Walker does not believe in any other-worldly or transcendental heaven beyond this earth and points out that the church authorities had forbidden her mother to speak lest she might demand the men of the church to notice earth. Also, her mother knew that it was the result of unjust and inequitable distribution of resources on this earth that a majority of population could not enjoy paradise on this earth which had been usurped as a result of the money-grubbing nature of the Western rational mind. In ISMG, Walker recollects that the Southern blacks were treated as outcasts and humiliated on the slightest pretext. However, they maintained their dignity and used the (imposed) religion of the Whites as an “antidote against bitterness” (ISMG 16). She posits her own ambivalence in these words:

As a college student I came to reject Christianity of my parents, and it took me years to realize that though they had been force-fed a white man’s palliative, in the form of religion, they had made it into something at once noble and simple . . . but their lives testify to a greater comprehension of the teachings of Jesus than the lives of people who sincerely believe a God must have a color and that there can be such a hypoc phenomenon as a “white” church. (ISMG 17-18)

The above lines are a testimony to Walker’s skepticism about orthodox Christianity. It is Walker’s urge to speak on behalf of the marginalized and oppressed ones that propels her to create such characters in her fiction which seem to echo Walker’s own beliefs and ideals:

I create characters who sometimes speak in the language of immediate ancestors, characters who are not passive but active in the discovery of what is vital and real in
this world. Characters who explore what it would feel like not to be imprisoned by the hatred of women, the love of violence, and the destructiveness of greed taught to human beings as the “religion” by which they must guide their lives. (AWLS 4)

Taking into account Walker’s first hand experiences of subjugation faced for being a black during her childhood days, the critique of traditional Christian doctrines which sanctify such discrimination seems to be one of the major underpinnings of Walker’s vision. The chapter examines whether Walker’s religious views are in complete contradistinction with Christian values constructed in a heterosexist framework, or does she, like Rosemary Ruether, also believe in and search for positive and liberating potential in Christianity and the image of Christ himself? The extent to which Walker’s novels capture the essence and ideas of liberation theology as espoused by Ruether is discussed further. Walker tries to adopt an encompassing epistemological agenda to deconstruct and reconstruct the central beliefs and patriarchal values of Jewish and Christian tradition, keeping the liberation of the oppressed, including the earth and its creatures, in central focus. Walker seems to rebel not against Christ, rather she voices dissent against the distorted representations of life and teachings of Christ.

Like Ruether, Walker has no faith in any institutionalized religion, which she calls “a deadening sky-god religion” (TWC 226). In NTH, Kate Talkingtree shows critical attitude towards church and its traditional concepts of sin and salvation. Walker writes: “She kept looking out of the window of the Church of God and Christ, as a child, when she had been unable to believe human beings, simply by being born, had sinned” (NTH 4). These lines are exemplary of Walker’s radical revision of the concept of sin in the traditional Christian doctrine. In one of her essays, Walker says: “What a burden to think one is conceived in sin rather than in pleasure; that one is born into evil rather than into joy” (TWC 4). Celie in CP, when asked by Shug about the image of her God answers: “He big and old and tall and graybearded and white. He wear white robes and go barefooted” (175). The tone of Walker’s characters may seem to be blasphemous to orthodox Christians, but her intrepidity in making her characters the mouth-piece of her ideas is the hallmark of Walker’s writings. Rosemary Ruether also disregards the maleness of Christ as normative when she says:

Christianity has never said that God was literally male, but it has assumed that God represents preeminently the qualities of rationality and sovereign power. Since men
were assumed to be rational and women less so or not at all, and men exercised public power, normally denied to women, the male metaphor was seen as appropriate for God, while female metaphors for God came to be regarded as inappropriate and pagan.’ (Feminist theology: A Reader 138-39)

In *CP*, Celie becomes empowered by dissociating herself from the traditional image of God and severing its ties with patriarchy. Celie realizes that the God in the traditional Christian religion has been portrayed to be a God of white people: “Cause that’s the one that’s in the white folks’ white bible” (175). She rejects the traditional male-image of God to hold any promise for women and expresses her disbelief in these words:

Yeah, I say, and he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won’t ever see again. Anyhow, I say, the God I had been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown. (173)

While discussing her views about God and church, Shug asks Celie, “...have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God” (174). Here, Shug seems to echo Walker’s own views about visits to church and whether it is possible to find God by indulging in superficial rituals and customs. Although in her childhood years, Walker was a regular visitor to the church on Sundays and used to assist her mother in the upkeep of the church as a part of her weekly routine, yet she is thoroughly skeptical about gaining spiritual enlightenment by paying regular visits there.

Walker touches upon the futility of customary visits to the church every Sunday when Meridian Hill recalls her mother’s faith in the sanctity of church. Nevertheless, Meridian does not fail to mention many wrong things with the church including the incomprehensibility of preacher’s sermons. Walker says, “...she sat every Sunday convinced that this man – whoever was preaching at that time – was instilling in her the words and wisdom of god, when, in fact, every other sentence was incomprehensible” (Meridian 75). Meridian implicitly hints at the fact that though her mother devoted a good part of her life to the church
praying for her daughter’s soul, yet it is ironical that she never had real understanding of or concern about her daughter’s life. Meridian had never liked the long and boring sermons in the church. Walker writes, “Whenever she was in a church, she felt claustrophobic, as if the walls were closing in” (217). Meridian is not comfortable with the Christian idea of martyrdom. Talking about the character of Meridian, Walker says, “This impulse to flee represents her struggle to break with Christianity, because Christianity really insists on martyrdom. She can see that the life of Christ is exemplary. It truly is. It’s a fine life. But just before the crucifixion, according to Meridian, Jesus should have just left town” (TWC 62). Meridian undergoes a transformation when after leaving Saxon College, she attends a church memorial service for a man who had died in racial violence. His father comes to the church once a year to commemorate his son’s death anniversary and delivers a speech. Meridian is moved and wonders how she can express love for someone who is already dead. It is now that Meridian realizes the significance and true essence of church, as it does not mean religion, but a platform for “communal spirit, togetherness, righteous convergence” (219) and the congregation seems to be saying: “the music, the form of worship that has always sustained us, the kind of ritual you share with us, these are the ways to transformation that we know. We want to take this with us as far as we can”(219). Meridian is puzzled how the meaning and music of church has changed in present times. She muses:

Puzzled that young people in church nowadays did not fall asleep. Perhaps it was, after all, the only place left for black people to congregate, where the problems of life were not discussed fraudulently and the approach to the future was considered communally, and moral questions were taken seriously. (218)

It is through Meridian’s mother that Walker portrays the polarized thinking among the blacks too. Meridian’s mother shows little sympathy towards her daughter’s fight for equal rights for the blacks and tries to justify racial discrimination by resorting to complete complacency. She says, “God separated the sheeps from the goats and the black folks from the white. . . . It never bothered me to sit in the back of the bus, you get just as good a view and you don’t have all those nasty white asses passing you” (83). Rosemary Ruether in her article “Bridging the Gap” talks about subversive elements in Christianity which challenge the hierarchical patterns, allowing an equal status for both whites and blacks. She postulates:
But in the Bible and throughout Jewish and Christian history there has been a counter-cultural current of prophetic faith. . . . Prophetic faith locates God and the prophets on the side of the victims of society – the poor, the widows, and orphans. The Word of God, spoken by the prophets, calls on oppressive elites to repent and do justice or be overthrown by a revolutionary intervention of God in history. Prophetic faith also criticizes religion focused on rules and cult; such religion commonly neglects the call to justice and is easily used as a tool of social domination. (“Bridging the Gap”)

Walker’s vision seems to harmonize with Ruether’s progressive ideas when she critiques the schism created by the organized religion – religion which is supposedly the sole domain of elite white Christian authorities. She attempts to unmask the racial bias embedded in the psyche of the white class which is manifest in their religious symbols and metaphors. In TMF, while reading a letter written by Lissy, Suwe lo gains an understanding of the systematic obliteration of black women outside the mainstream Christian community of the West. The letter reads thus:

They said the mother of their white Christ (blonde, blue-eyed, even in black-headed Spain) could never have been a black woman because both the color black and the female sex were of the devil. We were evil witches to claim otherwise. We were witches; our word for healers. (TMF 198)

Walker spearheaded a revolution in the field of theology and other interdisciplinary studies when she introduced her concept of ‘womanism’ in her famous book In Search of My Mothers’ Gardens (ISMG). To Walker, a womanist is a black feminist or feminist of color; a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually; appreciates and prefers women’s culture and strength; committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. According to Walker, a womanist is also a woman who “Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless” (ISMG xii). The revolutionary spirit is clearly discernible in Walker’s definition of a ‘womanist’ which holds promise of a new
epistemology of truth, knowledge, and religion, and new consciousness of self through which black women shall gain self-actualization. Stacey M. Floyd Thomas postulates:

Though the term womanist was coined by Walker, womanism became a movement when Black women scholars of religion used their logos—marked by their intellectual reason and God-given sense—to reconcile theoretical/theological reflection to social transformation which would forever change the way they constructed knowledge and the way knowledge constructed them. Thus, when womanism debuted in 1985 to the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature, womanist approaches to religion and society were introduced as a means of addressing Black women’s concerns from their own intellectual, physical, and spiritual perspectives. (Intro 4)

Walker’s concept of ‘womanism’ gives new meaning to sexuality (as opposed to orthodox Christian belief) and also has the potential to empower women by granting them control over their bodies. In the article “Sex and the Body in the Catholic Tradition” in the Conscience: A Commemorative Issue, Rosemary Ruether shares her enlightened views about sexuality and women’s reproductive rights as a progressive Christian. She critiques a deep split in sexuality in Protestantism as well as Catholicism, which she calls “puritan-prurient syndrome” (Conscience 25). Drawing on Freudian psychoanalytical model of human mind, she writes that on the level of super-ego, sex is disdained, feared, and treated as an obscene subject. However, on the “id” level, covert sexuality takes place in all sorts of places outside of marriage, often in exploitative and violent ways that are implicitly, if not explicitly, misogynist. Women are seen both as creatures to be put on a pedestal as ‘beyond’ sexual feelings, and as sexual objects to be used and discarded. She continues with her critique of stigmas attached to sexuality as she says:

If women themselves become agents of their own sexual activity, making their own decisions about when and how to enjoy sex and how to limit its reproductive effects on their bodies, they are seen as disgraceful sinners who must be punished and forced to submit to male definitions of their sexual roles. (Conscience 25-26)
Ruether’s acumen in unmasking the facile trajectory of orthodox Catholic thought is discernible in her theological writings, wherein she traces the roots of traditional Christian understanding of sexuality to be exhibiting a parallel negativity towards women and reproduction. In her article “Women, Sexuality, Ecology, and the Church”, she describes Augustine’s view of sex, even in chaste marriage, as distinctly ambiguous. Although children born out of union were good and continued to be blessed by God, reproduction could not take place without sinful “lust”. Ruether mentions that Augustine’s teachings had maintained that all sexual relations were degrading to the spiritual self, but that this was forgiven or allowed if the couple despised sexual pleasure and only engaged in sex for procreation. A secondary purpose of sexual relations was the relief of (male) concupiscence, i.e., prevention of men from straying to other sexual partners outside of marriage (Conscience 9). Sex outside of marriage was totally sinful. The teachings which rejected contraception, abortion, and possibility of worthiness of sexual pleasure for its own sake, continued to characterize Catholic teachings into the 1950s. However, Ruether reports the recent transformation in the attitude of the Catholics regarding sexuality. The Second Vatican Council in the 1960s gave voice to the various movements seeking to revise Catholic teachings and practice in a number of areas, including the question of sinfulness of contraception within marriage. Ruether further explains that the effort to revise these teachings on the purposes of sex inevitably involved questioning the traditional Augustinian view that sexual pleasure is inherently disordered and sinful and allowable only within marriage for the purpose of procreation or at least without impeding procreation. She has been an active opponent of the conservative approach of Christians regarding matters of sexuality, reproduction, contraception, and abortion. She has participated in and directed many crusades in favor of women’s abortion and reproductive rights. She has been a board member of the association ‘Catholics for Choice’ founded in 1973, to bring about reforms in the abortion and reproductive policies of the church.

All these radical views find a clear voice in the writings of Walker also. She has raised her voice against the anti-abortion stance taken by the church. Walker’s own traumatic experience during her student days (when she found herself pregnant with little money or support from any quarter and when abortion was illegal) has provided her a critical lens with which she has been able to seek a common ground with all other women who are experiencing the same oppression in the name of religion and law. She had contemplated suicide during that time. It was her friend who arranged abortion for her and helped in
restoring her life back to normal. This was also a time when she started writing poems as a release for her pent-up emotions, which later on nurtured her activist spirit too. She had been brought up by a mother who clung to her old orthodox Christian views of abortion as a sin, and the thought of her mother’s feelings regarding her decision of abortion weighed heavily on her mind. Reflecting back on her dilemma, Walker writes, “I also began to understand how alone woman is, because of her body” (ISMG 248).

In BLFS, Walker directs her critique at the facile and delusory rhetoric of anti-abortion or anti-contraception policy adopted by most of the orthodox Christians. In the novel, Pauline suffers a disoriented childhood because of her parents’ decision against using any contraceptive measures, thereby, thrusting on her the task of taking care of her younger siblings. When Susannah asks Pauline about her parents having so many children, she answers: “They thought it was the Christian thing to do. They thought if they did anything to stop the births, God would judge them harshly” (127). Though her parents accepted this Christian teaching, Pauline recollects how tired and confused her father was. In this recollection, the burden which her father had to shoulder is implicit: “He had to pretend he wanted all ten of the children who kept him chained to a table in a meatpacking plant” (127). In her essay “Prochoice Is Prolife: Winning the Propaganda War for Reproductive Rights”, Ruether says, ““Life” in humans or any other species is not promoted by unregulated birth but by planned and chosen births that are in harmony with the social means to sustain the lives of those who are born” (Conscience 7). Walker highlights the issue by incorporating the story of Pauline into the narrative. She seems to believe in the popular slogan “Antichoice is antilife”, backed and supported by Ruether. Ruether contends in the same essay:

It needs to make clear that the ultimate goal of the antichoice movement is both to recriminalize abortion and to block access to sexual education and contraception, especially for poor women, teenagers, and poor nations, the very people whose lives are most devastated by unregulated reproduction. ... (Conscience 6)

Walker challenges the traditional Christian notions of sin and evil, and attempts to reinterpret them from a feminist perspective. The subjective ‘misogynistic’ Christian interpretation negates the individuality and wholeness of women, which is discernible in many of her novels. In BLFS, the character of Irene gives an insight into how women are made scapegoats and how patriarchy justifies the sins committed by men, transferred instead
to the women sufferers. Irene’s mother was raped and instead of believing her mother, her uncles resorted to beating her and later, ostracized her. Walker exhibits that patriarchy and church work in tandem to subdue women and demean their existence. She writes: “Irene was a dwarf. God’s punishment for her mother’s sin. She was given at a very young age, as a servant, to the church” (BLFS 52). However, Ruether rejects this idea of sin: “Women must reject a concept of the Fall that makes them scapegoats for the advent of evil and uses this to ‘punish’ them through historical subordination” (SGT 31). Ruether recasts the classical Biblical definition of sin as ‘transgression of the law of God’ and gives a feminist idea of sin as anything which detracts from one’s autonomy and self-realization (in particular patriarchy in all its manifestations). The call to sacrifice is seen, not as moral but as immoral which may seem to be a radical idea to many conservative Christians. In GG, she says, “What is appropriately called ‘sin’ belongs to a more specific sphere of human freedom where we have the possibility of enhancing life or stifling it” (141). Furthermore, in a recasting of the traditional Christian concept of sin, Ruether promotes the idea that negation of an ethic of justice (social as well as environmental) is ‘sin’. She says:

Sin, then, as that sort of evil for which we must hold ourselves accountable, lies in distortion of relationship, the absolutizing of the rights to life and power of one side of a relation against the other parts with which it is, in fact, interdependent. It lies further in the insistent perseverance in the resultant cycle of violence, the refusal to empathize with the victimized underside of such power, and the erection of systems of control and cultures of deceit to maintain and justify such unjust power. (GG142)

In similar vein, Ruether rebuts and challenges the traditional Christian notion of evil and reinterprets it from a critical feminist perspective. Ruether explains that it was from the Platonic tradition of Greek philosophy, and its exaggeration in Gnosticism, that Western culture derived the view that evil resides in the body and the material world, over against the conscious mind (GG122). She critiques the erroneous understanding of evil in orthodox Christianity and repudiates the perpetuation of evil in the name of overcoming ‘evil’ when she writes: “This false naming of evil as physical and social otherness, and the efforts of dominant males to secure themselves against evil by separating themselves from this otherness, creates ideologies that justify the doing of evil to others as a means of overcoming evil” (GG116). The same subversive ideas of critique of classical Christian notion of sin and
evil are inherent in Walker’s novels. In BLFS, Walker creates an indigenous tribe, the Mundo, which is neither African nor Indian, but a blend. It is through the rituals, traditions, and customs of this tribe, Walker makes explicit her disapproval of the conservative Christian ideas of sin and evil. She writes:

They had never understood how woman could be considered evil, either, since they considered her the mother of corn. When hearing of her original sin of eating the forbidden fruit, they scratched their chins again and said, even more gravely, Perhaps this is the one biggest lie that has unraveled your world. (BLFS 81)

Walker does not believe that body and materiality are the causes of evil. She also does not support the idea that human beings have to overcome sin and be only virtuous to seek divine grace. Walker strongly believes that all humans possess the capacity to do both good and evil. Hence, to deny either of the traits would be a conscious effort to suppress one side of their whole being. She says, “When you are taught God loves you, but only if you’re good, obedient, trusting, and so forth, and you know you are that way only some of the time, there’s a tendency to deny your shadow side” (AWLS9). She contends that it is fatal to love a God who does not love you. In other words, she wants a God who can accept humans with all their flaws, a thought which seems to be obliterating the very fundamentals of traditional Christian beliefs of redemption. She wants a religion which can “. . . accept life in its totality, not just the good parts” (AWLS 205).

Walker has never believed in the absolute categorization of good and evil as dichotomized concepts. In Meridian, she attacks the traditional Christian concept of virginity as absolute virtue: “It was assumed that Saxon young ladies were, by definition, virgins” (93). This shows an attempt by the college authorities and society in large to pre-define the roles of women of Saxon College and stereotype them as compulsive ‘virgins’. In the novel, Meridian is a girl struggling with Christian faith. She does not understand the conservative Christian categories of sin and evil. During her first year at Saxon college, she is required to attend a chapel service at which one girl is expected to deliver a short speech referring to some way in which she has resisted evil and come out on the right side of God. Walker writes: “Meridian could not recall any temptation that she had resisted, and whether she had resisted temptation or not, she did not believe she now even stood in the vicinity of God. In fact, Meridian was not sure there was a God, and when her turn came, she said so” (93).
Ruether’s self-avowed standpoint provides a critical, theoretical, and methodical framework through which to challenge the standard conformist way of Christian thinking. Walker deplores organized religion’s control over women’s bodies and flouts church’s norms and restrictions about sexuality quite candidly in her writings. One can easily notice the same activist and revolutionary spirit in Walker’s writings. In an interview by Evelyn C. White, Walker had maintained:

I was also thinking how organized religion has systematically undermined and destroyed the sexual and spiritual beliefs of millions of indigenous people. . . . It is very painful to think that the “missionary position”, which reinforces patriarchal, male dominance over women, was forced upon people who once loved having women freely express their sexuality, whether they were on the top or bottom. (TWC 196)

Her strong stand in favor of homosexuality may seem to be sacrilegious to conservative Christians, but finds favor with Walker. Walker’s unconventional views seem to be in solidarity with Ruether’s, who though a Christian denigrates the dogmas attached to the Catholic faith. In many of Walker’s novels, lesbianism and homosexuality seem to be a part of normal order of things. Arisika Razak in her essay “Her Blue Body” writes about the free-spiritedness of Walker:

Walker’s focus on the body- and her description of an autonomous, fluid, woman-centered healing and spiritualized sexuality which is based solely on the ethical dictates of the heart and not in social rules of monogamy, compulsory heterosexuality, heteronormativity, or traditional human boundaries may appear to be linked solely to the author’s utopian vision. However, one finds in it an echo of a time when women were sovereign owners of their bodies and their sexuality was fluid. (100)

Walker shows no inhibition in detailing either cross-gender or same-gender intimate relations in her writings. Walker believes that sexuality can lead one towards higher states of spirituality.

Lesbianism, in many of her novels, becomes an essential aspect of her ‘womanist’ theory as well as praxis, encoded through various characters forming deep emotional and
physical bonding that transcend all taboos created by society. In *BLFS*, Susannah, in conversation with her female lover, Lily Paul makes such a statement which may offend any traditional Christian: “What heights one might reach through such a physical act. No wonder the church has demonized it” (187). In *CP*, Shug, a blues singer, is an embodiment of liberated womanhood who refuses to settle down for a life of domesticity, and does not feel ashamed to enjoy and make Celie feel all the sexual pleasures, generally considered to be the sole privilege of men, thereby, defying established gender norms. She becomes an empowering agent for Celie whose life has been stifled due to sexual violence at the hands of her step-father and later on, she faces the same dehumanization in her married life where the conjugal act seems no less than rape, denying her any chance of experiencing wholeness. Shug makes Celie realize the importance and possibility of loving one’s own body without any feeling of guilt or shame. Encouraged by Shug in exploring her own body, Celie encounters a new awareness about her body as being beautiful and precious. Taking pride in her body, she asserts, “It mine, I say” (75). The sensual episode of tender love and caressing between the two women can be seen in direct opposition to the inhuman and insensitive sexual relation between Celie and Mr. –, and it can be seen as suggestive of a ‘womanist consciousness’ generating possibilities of women’s autonomous status as ‘complete’ human beings.

Self-love and acceptance is the key to true happiness, a theme much explored by Walker in her works, as she asserts: “Self-love is the first and hardest rule to stick by. Women need not to abandon themselves in their quest for bliss and love. You can love yourself spiritually, physically—in almost any way that anybody else can” (*TWC* 198). In *BLFS*, Walker explores the theme of sexuality more candidly and vividly. The relation between Susannah and Lily Paul is exemplary of Walker’s uninhibited views about homosexuality. bell hooks writes, “Understanding that females could never be liberated if we did not develop healthy self-esteem and self-love feminist thinkers went directly to the heart of the matter – critically examining how we feel and think about our bodies and offering constructive strategies for change” (*Feminism* 31). In an interview by Evelyn C. White, Walker boldly asserts:

Women must begin to write more truthfully about the profound mystery of sex. . . .

It is almost impossible not to learn something about yourself in the sexual act. So it’s
important for women to be alert to the spiritual growth and self-discovery they can attain by paying close attention to their sexuality. (TWC 196)

InBLFS, Señor Robinson comes to Mexico as a missionary which is, however, only a façade to cover up his real purpose of conducting an anthropological study on the Mundo way of life and becomes “an unwilling prisoner of a puritanical Christianity” (WOWF 41). Talking about the false pretext under which her parents had come to study the Mundo tribe, Magdalena says, “The church enslaved them, in a way. Forcing them to do its work in order to do their own” (91). As a missionary, he has to struggle against “the blasphemous unbidden thought that the appreciation of corn and melon is more universal than the appreciation of Christ” (22). His younger daughter, Magdalena, is a rebel who identifies herself with Mundo rituals and customs. Señor Robinson, being a church’s representative, disapproves of her connectedness with the indigenous people and sees her fascination with human body as a dissolute desire and a transgression of the law of God. The act invites severe thrashing at the hands of the father but completely alienates his daughter from him and she fails to maintain a loving and harmonious relationship with her father throughout life. For Señor Robinson, sexuality is an expression of malevolent desire which should be subdued at any cost.

Magdalena or June (the name she chooses for herself later on) expresses her love for indigenous way of life in the form of a pagan song which she hums as they leave the Mundo tribe for good: “Something about the oneness of the unclothed human body and the nakedness of the sky” (BLFS21). However, the song was not permitted inside the church because of “its carnal message of unity with creation and no credit to a Creator” (BLFS22), a thought that explicitly challenges the Christian understanding of a male God at the apex of hierarchical paradigm of the creation story. Agnieszka Lobodziec throws light on Walker’s use of ‘death’ as a literary trope, suggesting ultimate reconciliation and also as a space where people undergo transformation and engage themselves in a constructive dialogue which broadens the horizons of their mind and they gain spiritual enlightenment. Manuelito expresses his disbelief in the missionary teaching of Señor Robinson in their after-life conversation and tells him that the Mundo people failed to understand why the Sun was not worshipped on its name day by the Christians though they had a day named for it. He states that the Mundo people had always worshipped the Sun and for them, it is the God, next to nature and earth itself. Señor Robinson gains understanding of the reason of his incapability to understand the Mundo culture and way of life. He realizes he could never understand
anything about them because he did not believe wholeheartedly in what he was doing and also recognizes his own hypocrisy:

And yet, once I took the church’s money to come and study you, and once I agreed to “do what I could” toward your salvation in exchange for the church’s help, it was as if I had died to myself. I was “sponsored” by something I didn’t believe in. I thought I could live that way. What a fool! (BLFS 154)

In BLFS, Señor Robinson’s daughters, June and Susannah, also detect the same dissimulation in their parents’ work and behavior. Walker says: “The church enslaved them, in a way, said June. Forcing them to do its work in order to do their own” (91). Susannah recollects the hypocrisy of her parents which prevented them to fulfill their actual missionary work: “Daddy preaching about stuff he hardly knew, or cared, a thing about. Mama pretending to be pious” (91).

Walker’s non-conformist self and the rebellious streak in her temperament have always pushed her to transgress boundaries created by society and church. Her activist spirit has always motivated her to take a strong stand for the oppressed people of the society. In the words of Felipe Smith: “Walker secularizes such terms as redemption and salvation to encompass solutions to social problems such as racial and gender oppression” (437). Though she is critical of the androcentric and hierarchical mindset of the church authorities, she does not lose faith in Jesus Christ and his teachings. Like Ruether, Walker directs her attempt to reconstruct the image of Jesus as an all-inclusive divine figure that can serve as a liberating/redemptive symbol for all human kind, without any ideological distortion of women or nature as inferior categories. At many places in her novels, her reverence for Christ’s life and teachings is manifest implicitly which reinforces the belief that somewhere deep inside her heart, she cherishes a deep love for Him, though the proselytizing mission of orthodox Christian Church and its conservative beliefs do not hold any promise for her. In AWLS, she identifies Jesus to be like her as she finds Him to be “a rebel and revolutionary, consistently speaking up for the poor, the sick, and the discriminated against, and going up against the bossmen: the orthodox Jewish religious leaders and rich men of his day” (18). In CP, it is revealed through Nettie’s letters that the missionary position sanctifies and justifies oppression, and is a means to reinforce the domination of the whites, especially white males. Nettie writes to Celie:
It had never occurred to me, though when you read the Bible it is perfectly plain if you pay attention only to the words. It is the pictures in the Bible that fool you. The pictures that illustrate the words. All of the people are white and so you just think all the people from the Bible are white too. (*CP* 120)

Hence, religion serves the interests of the white supremacists who see dualist categories as oppositional, and legitimize domination through these tools. Jacquelyn Grant states in “Blood, Gender and Power”:

The constant battle daily in racial politics of the dominant Euro-American culture, and at the same time, between light and dark, good and evil (God and Devil), white and black, is played out theologically legitimated and institutionalized in the racial imageries of the divine. (qtd. in “Christ Iconography”)

Walker’s appreciation and love for Jesus as a liberator manifests itself at various points in the novels. In *TMF*, Olivia recollects: “My father, Samuel, was a missionary also, but by the time we returned to America he had long since lost his faith; not in the spiritual teachings of Jesus, the prophet and human being, but in Christianity as a religion of conquest and domination inflicted on other peoples” (146). One can notice a correspondence between the Mundo vision of Christ and Walker’s own perception of Him: “Jesus Christ was not a Christian, but a Christ, an enlightened being. The challenge for me is not to be a follower of something but to embody it; I am willing to try for that” (*WOWF* 94). In *BLFS*, Manuelito explains to Señor Robinson:

We understood maybe only one thing about your Jesus Christ: that he was what you call a ghost. . . . We were glad to hear he had returned from the dead; this made perfect sense to us. And also we liked him. He resembled a Mundo! Though we never believed he had a physical body that could actually be seen. (150)

The mention of Christ as not having a physical body seems to refute the traditional beliefs held by the male-dominant Christology according to which the ability of women to represent Christ “is sealed by the definition of Christ as founder and cosmic governor of the existing
social hierarchy and as the male disclosure of a male god whose normative representative can only be female. . . . Just as Christ has to be incarnated in a male, so only can the male represent Christ” (SGT 106). In TMF, Walker posits a similar understanding of transcending the gender barriers while imaging Jesus Christ, and considers the message and praxis of Jesus to be more important than his physical body. Fanny gives up everything including her respectable job after the revelation that Jesus Christ was a masseur and “. . . that’s what the original healing by touch that Jesus did in the Bible meant” (TMF 247). The idea of taking courses in massage and acupressure fascinates her. She does not take up massaging as a mere profession, rather she strongly believes in her capability of releasing the pain of her patients without worrying about going beyond the appointed hours. Walker writes: “Fanny was mentally in Jerusalem, at the Dead Sea, strolling in Galilee. She was, for about a year and a half, really into being Christ. Or, as she would put it, “a Christ,” which she said anyone could be” (TMF 247). Here, Walker takes up the case for environmental protection too when she describes Fanny’s renunciation of everything for a long time including books, which she once loved. Fanny muses: “I’d rather read the trees. It’s not book burning that people need to worry so much about; it’s the trees that are disappearing” (TMF 247-48). Fanny despises Suwelo for merely using Carlotta’s body and complaining that Carlotta had no substance, without his realization the least that her very substance was pain. Her feminist spirit also comes across while she is in a conversation with Suwelo: “Men must have mercy on women. They must feel women’s bodies as a masseuse feels them; not just caress them superficially; use them as if they’re calendar pinups . . . ” (TMF 324).

As a feminist theologian, Ruether genuinely thinks that Jesus’s humanity must be contemplated and presented in ways perceptible, engaging, and realistic to all people. In SGT, she sees Jesus of The Synoptic Gospels as a liberator when she mentions, “Jesus as liberator calls for a renunciation, a dissolution, of the web of status relationships by which societies have defined privilege and deprivation” (115). In Ruether’s opinion, a starting point for ‘Feminist Christology’ must be a re-encounter with the message and praxis of Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels (SGT 114). Like Rosemary Ruether, Walker, too, seems to be influenced by The Gnostic Gospels. In an interview with Marianne Schnall, Walker had said, “You know, like the teachings of Jesus I really love, and I love The Gnostic Gospels and the Nag Hammadi scrolls, sermons, or whatever you call them, parables I guess” (TWC 301).

Walker’s creative energies prompt her to interpret Jesus’s teachings from the perspective of a feminist and environmentalist – a trajectory which has been ruled out by the
male-dominated Christian Church. She interprets Jesus as one who does not want to rule over others; rather she presents him as a caring, loving and protecting figure. In *TMF*, Zedé in recollection of her love for Jesus draws resemblances between the person, Jesus, she loved and Christ himself and she says thus: “There is in me, deep, always somewhere, the love of the priest, but the *true* priest, the one who watches over, the one who protects” (74). Walker does not believe that there is some transcendental heaven where all human beings should ensure their place by neglecting life on this earth. Michael Toms in a conversation with Alice Walker mentions a saying in the Gospel of Thomas that when Jesus was asked by one of his disciples as to where the heaven was, he had replied, “Heaven is spread before you. You just don’t see it” (*TWC* 173). In *TMF*, Olivia muses how her father Samuel, a missionary, had mustered up courage to admit that as a minister, he was unnecessary to anyone else’s salvation. He also realized that “[a]fter all, since this world is a planet spinning about in the sky, we are all of us *in heaven* already” (147).

Though Walker professes that she is committed to the survival whole of black people, she does not overlook the wrongs or injustices committed by her own race. She also understands how the teachings of *the Bible* have been twisted and distorted to suit the interests of a particular community, race, or nation. In *Meridian*, she shows how black people can be so spiteful and revengeful, and can make use of lame excuses to inflict torture on the whole white race. In the novel, Tommy Odds is such a character who conjures up so much venom against the white people inside him that he does not even spare his friend’s wife, Lynne who, according to him, is guilty of whiteness. He accuses her of being responsible for the amputation of his arm though she has nothing to do with it and later on, he rapes her ruthlessly to satisfy his ego and uses his male power as an outlet against his feelings of hatred for the whites: “All white people are motherfuckers. I want to see them destroyed. I could watch their babies being torn limb from limb and I wouldn’t lift a finger. *The Bible says to dash out the brains of your enemy’s children on the rocks* (Italics mine).I understand that shit, now” (*Meridian* 140). Walker shows how revenge motive can turn a person into a brute and such a tendency may be present in all human beings including the blacks.

Walker criticizes any attempt on the part of people or institutions to distort the teachings of scriptures to suit their benefits. In *TMF*, Olivia recollects her father Samuel’s sayings about the sham of missionary teachings and his recognition of the same:
You might say the white man, in his dual role of spiritual guide and religious prostitute, spoiled even the most literary form of God experience for us. By making the Bible say whatever was necessary to keep his plantations going, and using it as a tool to degrade women and enslave blacks. (147)

Nevertheless, Walker does not gloss over the demeaning practices of African religions too in which the mutilation of women’s bodies is carried out with impunity. In *PSJ*, she protests against the brutal practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) still in practice in large parts of Africa as a hallmark of retaining their separate identity and culture from the Westerners. Walker continues the story with many characters from her earlier novel *CP*; the focus mainly on Tashi (Adam’s wife and Olivia’s sister-in-law). In an attempt to prove herself as a true and rooted African, Tashi decides to undergo FGM later in her life without realizing the traumatic effects it would have on her self-esteem, her marital life (including her reproductive abilities), and her psychological as well as physical health. Her son is born mentally retarded (a side-effect of female circumcision practice) and she is not able to enjoy her motherhood at all. Though accused of being malignant towards Africans, Walker does not give up her fight against such traditional rituals which do not acknowledge women as equal in comparison with men, and which try to trap her body under the garb of religion and culture. Walker’s sensitivity towards the oppressed beings extends itself to protecting environment – a theme which runs like an undercurrent beneath the discourse on feminism and spirituality.

Though Walker’s ambivalence towards Christian religion is manifest in almost all of her fictional as well as non-fictional works, it cannot be denied that there are certain facets of Christianity, or to be precise, of Christ which fascinate her. At the same time, she does not dismiss other religions or spiritualities. Here, Walker shows a drift and a step ahead of Ruether by accepting and assimilating indigenous spiritualities in her life as well as her writings.