Sexism and Sin-Talk

*Feminist Conversations
on the Human Condition*

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Contents

Introduction

She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.
—*Proverbs 31:26 NIV*

This book explores the language of theology and the power it has over human lives. Specifically, it treats the classical rhetoric of the church on the sinfulness of humans, and how this classical rhetoric often becomes deadly to women. As such, it is a book about the rhetoric of feminist theologians, relative latecomers to the language game known as theology, who, after centuries of negative and often deadly rhetoric about women, are creating narratives of critique and reimagination with an eye toward life and the flourishing of women. Moreover, this book shows how feminist critiques of classical sin-talk speak with the grammar of classical sin-talk, but also create a new narrative with it.

Delwin Brown talks about theology as the creative reconstruction of inherited symbols, the construction of a tradition's future from the resources of its past.[1] This definition of theology expresses the fact that a living religious tradition is both continuous with the past and open to change in new times and contexts. The temptation might be to want to make a choice between these two aspects: either you are for tradition and resist change, or you embrace change to the extent that the tradition is seen as irrelevant or wholly harmful. However, the first option gives rise to dead (and often deadly) traditionalism, and the second forgets that traditions exist because they have given people life. The art of constructive theology is that of discarding that which is dead and death-dealing and finding that which is alive and life-giving.

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1. Delwin Brown, *Boundaries of Our Habitations: Tradition and Theological Construction*, SUNY Series in Religious Studies, ed. Harold Coward (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1994), 148.

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This perspective shapes my approach to feminist conversations on sin. I develop here a rhetorical approach to this conversation, which leads me to use the terminology of "sin-talk" rather than "doctrine of sin," since the focus is on how we speak about sin, and what kind of praxis that speech encourages. Feminist theologians criticize those aspects of classical sin-talk that are death-dealing, especially for women. However, the very criticism of some classical forms of sin-talk is itself already a form of constructive sin-talk, as notable feminist theologians have remarked. This is, moreover, not new to the Christian tradition, which every now and then has engaged in sin-talk against its own sinful teachings—even against the sinfulness of some forms of sin-talk. Therefore, the thesis in this book is that the feminist rejection of some forms of classical sin-talk is not merely critical, but in fact itself already constitutes, and forms the foundation of, constructive sin-talk, and that this is in fact not entirely new, but is a classical Christian theological move, characterized by a prophetic rhetorical tone aimed at human flourishing, albeit now with a specific focus on women.

To be sure, the Christian concept of sin is one that is often seen as negative, moralistic, and increasingly irrelevant. One of my theological mentors once said to me that a theologian should not focus on the doctrine of sin too much, and should focus on God's love instead. He had a point, of course. Christian theology is faith seeking understanding of the good news as presented by the Gospel writers, which makes the "bad news" of sin a secondary theological concern. In fact, as theologians from Augustine to Luther taught, an obsessive focus on sin can indeed be sinful!

Nevertheless, the Christian gospel does not bypass sin, and the Christian theologian therefore needs to take the concept of sin very seriously, even if we are not to dwell on it. After all, the good news of the gospel logically correlates with the perception of something-that-is-not-as-it-ought-to-be, that is, sin.[2] The English word "sin" corresponds to the Greek term *hamartia*, which carries the connotation of "missing the mark."

Furthermore, there is an ethical responsibility to speak of sin, since sin is that which is harmful to human flourishing. We cannot reduce the gospel of grace to one of cheap grace, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer so famously remarked.[3] What Bonhoeffer meant was that costly grace calls us to discipleship, implying that faith is not only a matter of believing, but also of doing, including responding to things-that-are-not-as-they-ought-to-be. Therefore, I would argue that the love command that is central to Christian ethics requires us to take the question of sin seriously, since sin is that which harms human life.

2. See especially Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).
3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 43–56.

British theologian Alistair McFadyen points out that the trivialization of the concept of sin in modern Western culture reflects the fact that "sin" has ceased to function as a way of talking about the pathological in human affairs. The aim of sin-talk, he says, is to speak of *concrete* pathologies in relation to God.[4] Reflection on sin, when it transcends moralistic blame games, is reflection on the human condition, on human misery in all its concreteness. It is reflection on our alienation from our true selves, from each other, from the Source and Ground of Being and of our being. However, it is also reflection on the ills that are expressions of this alienation: violence, war, racism, oppression, sexism, heterosexism, greed, abuse, and much more. In short, although a sickly dwelling on sin has to be avoided, God-talk and grace-talk cannot bypass sin-talk, since God speaks the word of grace into the concrete pathologies we encounter in human existence and is heard from within those experiences. The theologian therefore cannot bypass reflection on the painful matters that go by the name of "sin."

What feminist theologians have been saying, however, is that if we are to speak of sin, we need to be mindful of possible distortions in our rhetoric on sin that become harmful in the lives of human beings. Stephen Ray speaks of this phenomenon as the "sins of sin-talk."[5] This book seeks to trace the continuing conversation among feminist theologians on sin-talk, its sins, and its potential, and to show what the contributions of feminist theology as a field have been and can be with regard to the Christian conversation on sin. The book is premised upon the recognition that words have power, and perhaps more so when those words have doctrinal status, that is, speaking with the authority of religious tradition. In the words of Serene Jones, "doctrines function like loose but nonetheless definitive scripts that persons of faith perform; doctrines are the dramas in which we live out our lives."[6] The feminist conversation on sin-talk is therefore centered on the question, how does sin-talk create a script that people perform?

In short, the guiding question in this book is: what are the dynamics of feminist theological conversations on sin-talk, particularly in light of its rhetorical function? This is a deceptively simple question, and many a student who has sat through an introductory class in theology will raise their hand and mention something about the feminist critique of the classical focus on the sin of pride. The slightly more clever ones will add that feminist theologians

4. Alistair McFadyen, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust, and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3–5.

5. Stephen G. Ray Jr., *Do No Harm: Social Sin and Christian Responsibility* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 1–35.

6. Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*, Guides to Theological Inquiry (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 17.

are critical of the ways in which women have been associated with sin. The more critical ones will complain that feminist theologians want to do away with the doctrine of sin and replace it with fuzzy concepts that take out the sharp edges of Christian theology. While all of these hypothetical students would have a point, I contend that the answer to this simple question might include all these responses, and yet also is more complex than that, and that feminist theologians do not in fact want to do away with sin-talk. Indeed, I even contend that when some feminist theologians reject sin-talk they do so because they deem it to be too sinful, which paradoxically affirms the very concept of sin.

A few general notes about my approach. I do not pretend to include every feminist theologian who has said something about sin, but focus for the most part on some "classical" feminist voices. While the term "classical" might be stretched here a bit, it is worth remembering that Christian feminist con-versations on sin and sin-talk have been going on for nearly sixty years at this point, and there are indeed "classical" voices and perspectives within that conversation. So the analytical part of this book aims to trace those voices and perspectives. Primary among these are Valerie Saiving, Judith Plaskow, and Susan Nelson Dunfee on the "pride critique," and Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether on the theme of women-blaming. I also include the voices of female (and sometimes male) scholars who may or may not self-identify as feminist theologians, but who add important insights to this conversation. I furthermore try to keep in mind that feminism is not the domain of white North American women, and that it is also not the only kind of female voice in the theological conversation. I am aware of the very valid critiques lodged against classical feminist theology by womanist and *muje-rista* scholars, and also of the multicultural expressions of feminism claimed by women around the globe. I do not pretend to be sufficiently aware of all voices and perspectives out there, and present this book as an invitation to further conversation, even as I trace the "classical" feminist conversation on sin while offering some constructive proposals of my own. In the construc-tive chapters at the end of the book I push toward two things: a deep retrieval of the tradition, on the one hand, and a global, intersectional feminism, on the other hand. These arise from two broad characteristics of my theological approach in general.

My approach to feminist theology is in part the result of the history of my native country of South Africa, and my opposition to apartheid, which I per-ceived to be incompatible with my Christian faith at the young age of thirteen (this was in the early 1980s, a time when South Africa was being torn apart by violence as a result of racial oppression). This religious-political awaken-ing shaped my life decisions in multiple ways. Awareness of the reality and

pain of racism continues to shape my feminist perspective, prompting me to remember that even when feminist scholarship demands analysis of gender oppression, such scholarship should keep in mind that gender alone is not sufficient as an analytical focus. From my experience of how white women, while themselves subjugated within a patriarchal culture, also "bossed about" women (and men) of color as a result of racial hierarchy, I know all too well that women are not only victims but often perpetrators in the oppression of others. I therefore also know that sisterhood is complex and fragile as a result of the intersection of gender with race (as well as other factors).

My intersectional, global approach to feminist theology is furthermore shaped by the fact that, as a white South African woman now living in the United States, I occupy a hybrid social space: I do not quite share the world of white North American feminists, but of course would not presume to share the world of black African feminists and womanists either. Instead I find myself in a strange intersection of whiteness, Africanness, "immigrant-ness," and Americanness. Postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha uses the phrase "interstitial perspective" to speak of this kind of complexity, while other post-colonial thinkers speak of hybridity or liminality, although, as Sang Hyun Lee notes, the latter also "includes the meaning of being located at the periphery or edge of society," and given the reality that my whiteness largely precludes such liminality I don't claim that term for myself. My experience is perhaps best expressed by Vietnamese American theologian Peter C. Phan, who speaks simply of being "betwixt and between," that is, being "neither here nor there, to be neither this thing nor that."[7] In this book, the interstitial perspectives of African, Asian, and other global scholars shape my perspectives on the issue of gender violence, which is so central to this book, and continue to inform my perspective on theology.

My feminist theology was furthermore shaped by earlier work I did on the thought of American Catholic feminist theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson, whose theology combines serious critique with deep retrieval of the Christian tradition. Her approach can be seen, for example, in her brilliant retrieval of Thomas Aquinas's insights on God in her book *She Who Is*. From her I learned that serious critique of the tradition does not preclude deep retrieval of the life-giving elements in it. In this book I primarily retrieve elements of the thought of John Calvin and Augustine of Hippo, albeit amid serious cri-tique of the androcentrism in their thought.

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7. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Sang Hyun Lee, *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), x; Peter C. Phan, "Betwixt and Between: Doing Theology with Memory and Imagination," in *Journeys at the Margin: Toward an Autobiographical Theology in American-Asian Perspective*, ed. Peter Phan and Jung Young Lee (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 113.

Elizabeth Johnson is not the only feminist theologian whose work has influenced me. Serene Jones's work on the rhetoric of John Calvin, but especially her use of feminist theory as conversation partner for theology, both play a role in my analysis here. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's insights on how texts both reflect and shape praxis influenced the development of my rhetorical model for doing theology. María Pilar Aquino's liberationist-feminist emphasis on the human cry for life and the affirmation of God as the God of life shaped the final conclusions of this book. But I need to especially honor the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether, whose analysis of dualism has deeply shaped my work in general and this book in particular. It should also be noted that the title of my book was partly inspired by the title of Ruether's famous *Sexism and God-Talk*. My title, *Sexism and Sin-Talk*, also of course expresses the book's focus on sin, and my use of the term "talk" instead of "doctrine" reflects the book's rhetorical perspective.

In this book I utilize both classical and modern rhetorical concepts. The first chapter, "Rhetoric," develops my critical-constructive model for doing rhetorical theology, in conversation with both rhetorical theory and other rhetorical theologians. It also introduces the classical and feminist rhetorical tools that I use to trace the feminist conversation on sin. Chapter 2, titled "*Kairos*," covers the crisis context within which feminist conversations on sin occur, with specific recognition that there is a dialectical relationship between context and theological rhetoric. This second chapter also recognizes the term "feminism" as an intersectional concept, in recognition of womanist, *mujerista*, and global feminist perspectives. These two introductory chapters are followed by chapters titled "Mary" and "Eve," which analyze the two major criticisms lodged by feminist theologians against classical sin-talk. In chapter 3, I trace the development of the so-called feminist pride critique from a mode of naming difference to a mode of naming oppression, and I show how the classical emphasis on pride ties in with an oppressive ethic that is ultimately life-denying for women as it participates in encouraging women to emulate the example of Mary, understood primarily in terms of humility and self-sacrifice. In chapter 4, I examine the feminist critiques of the classical theme of blaming women for sin and the ways in which this blaming of women for sin forms a patriarchal rhetoric of death centered on the symbol of Eve, which contributes to various forms of violence against women. In chapters 5 and 6, "Grammar" and "Life," I start to move toward the more constructive work done by feminist theologians in their discussion of sin-talk, and make some constructive proposals of my own. I do so in chapter 5 by first pointing to ways in which feminist theologians, even amid serious criticism of classical sin-talk, are already (sometimes only implicitly) retrieving the concept of sin, in particular the inner logic or "grammar" of the doctrine of original sin. In the final chapter, I make use of

classical Aristotelian rhetorical elements, which are first introduced in chapter 1, to outline the contours of constructive feminist sin-talk: the prophetic *ethos* that drives it, the complex *pathos* (broadly understood as situation) of women, and the death-denouncing and life-affirming *logos* (arguments) at the heart of it. So, in short, the book consists of three parts and six chapters: two introductory chapters ("Rhetoric" and "*Kairos*"), two chapters focused on criticism of classical sin-talk ("Mary" and "Eve"), and two chapters focusing on constructive sin-talk ("Grammar" and "Life").

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Rhetoric

The tongue has the power of life and death.
—Proverbs 18:21 NIV

The twentieth-century linguistic turn brought attention to the fact that language is not merely descriptive of reality but also helps to bring reality into being. This has led, among other things, to a revival in the field of rhetoric, that is, the study of the persuasive nature of language. This development has also influenced theology: many modern theologians are interested in the question of how theological language functions practically in the lives of people, that is, how it shapes their worldview and inspires their actions. Within such a perspective, theological symbols are seen not only as truth-expressions but also as language actions that shape the ideas and praxis of human beings. This emphasis on praxis is not new to theology, which has always been interested in persuading people to virtuous action. But the linguistic turn helps us see that theological language need not be deliberately persuasive (as in a sermon or ethical treatise) in order to be praxis-shaping. It also helps us to see that rhetoric is always embedded in social realities, and often, whether inadvertently or deliberately, serves to either undermine or support those social realities. As such, a rhetorical approach to theology is not primarily interested in asking about the purity of a doctrine or its coherence with other doctrines (although those are important emphases), but rather in the praxis and power with which it is intertwined. This would call for a rhetorical-theological approach that is focused not only on deliberate persuasion but also on critical examination of power and praxis. Rhetorical theology should therefore take both a constructive and a critical form, and these are often intertwined.

Rhetorical theology in *constructive* mode has variously been described as aimed at a "rhetoric of piety" (Serene Jones), "faithful persuasion" (David Cunningham), or "emancipatory discourse" (Rebecca Chopp), that is, expressions of doctrine that specifically aim at shaping praxis.[1] Rhetorical theology in *critical* mode, on the other hand, launches what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza calls a "critical rhetorical inquiry" aimed at exposing problematic practical implications of doctrinal symbols.[2] In combined mode, therefore, rhetorical theology is focused on both the power relations reflected in doctrinal symbols and the praxis to which doctrines lead—that is, it is both a critical rhetorical inquiry, and it aims at emancipatory discourse (faithful persuasion or rhetoric of piety). One can therefore define *rhetorical theology* as *a critical-constructive form of theology that focuses on the way the symbols of a faith reflect as well as reinforce power relations, and thereby shape human behavior*.

In this book I adopt such a critical-constructive approach to the feminist conversation on sin, both in my analysis of what other feminist theologians have said and in my own contributions. In this chapter, I develop this critical-constructive rhetorical approach to the analysis of doctrine by examining the shift in rhetorical theory in the twentieth century and then correlating that with methodological debates in the field of theology itself. In subsequent chapters, I then show that feminist theologians have subjected the doctrine of sin to critical rhetorical inquiry, and I add my own analysis of that critical rhetorical inquiry by linking it to the classical patriarchal-feminine symbols of Mary and Eve. I furthermore show that feminist theological conversations aim at constructing emancipatory discourses on sin (even though this constructive aim is sometimes hidden within critical denunciations of patriarchal forms of sin-talk). And I show that such a critical-constructive move is a classical theological move, before adding my own constructive proposal in this regard. Given the rhetorical rather than the "purely" doctrinal approach taken here, the language of "sin-talk," rather than "doctrine of sin," is more appropriate here and I therefore use it in most cases.

Sin-talk has been a matter of significant concern in modern feminist theology since the latter's inception in the 1960s, due to both the androcentric

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1. Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995); David S. Cunningham, *Faithful Persuasion: In Aid of a Rhetoric of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991); Rebecca S. Chopp, "Theological Persuasion: Rhetoric, Warrants, and Suffering," in *Worldview and Warrants: Plurality and Authority in Theology*, ed. William Schweiker (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 17–31; and *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

2. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 40–50; Schüssler Fiorenza, "Challenging the Rhetorical Half-Turn: Feminist and Rhetorical Biblical Criticism," in *Rhetoric, Scripture, and Theology: Essays from the 1994 Pretoria Conference*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series 131, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Thomas H. Olbricht (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 28–53.

assumptions classically at work in diagnosing human ills, and the sins of marginalization and violence that are part of the feminist rhetorical situation. Sin-talk is also, and perhaps somewhat paradoxically, a tool used by feminist theologians to name the oppression of women. To trace the contours of this rather complex and multifaceted conversation, and to push toward emancipatory sin-talk, rhetorical theory can be immensely helpful. Utilizing feminist rhetorical theory, we can see that feminist theologians employ a variety of different rhetorical strategies and expose several problematic rhetorical practices in classical sin-talk. I furthermore employ classical rhetorical categories to highlight the specifics of the problematic rhetoric that feminist theologians expose, and I use those same categories to present a constructive proposal for emancipatory sin-talk. This critical rhetorical inquiry is driven by the concern that classical sin-talk has often functioned as a rhetoric of death for women, and therefore any suggestions for emancipatory sin-talk would aim at developing sin-talk that denounces death and death-dealing rhetoric, prompting sin-talk that is life-giving rhetoric aimed at human flourishing.

In this chapter I introduce multiple concepts from classical, postmodern, and feminist rhetorical theory, which I use throughout the rest of the book. For the purposes of this book, two sections of this chapter are of paramount importance. The first of these is the discussion of Aristotle's rhetorical categories of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* in the next section, since it plays a role in both my feminist analysis of patriarchal classical sin-talk and in my constructive proposals toward the end of the book. The second crucial section of this chapter is the discussion of feminist rhetorical strategies, since it is central to my analysis of feminist critiques of classical sin-talk. The rest of this chapter, where I develop a critical-constructive model for doing rhetorical theology, is important for the sake of understanding my approach in general but is not directly necessary for understanding the argument in the book itself. I develop this critical-constructive approach to rhetorical theology by first tracing the shift in twentieth-century rhetorical theory from a classical constructive focus on "how to speak well" to a critical focus on how language masks power. I then argue that rhetorical theology ought to reflect both of these emphases, the classical and the modern, that is, the constructive and the critical, and how they are often intertwined in theological reflection.

RHETORICAL THEORY

Long considered the "dangerous Other" of philosophy, reduced to merely a question of literary style, or at the very least made subordinate to the rational mode of dialectical thinking, rhetorical theory experienced a revival in the

twentieth century. However, modern rhetorical theory, the so-called New Rhetoric, differs significantly from Classical Rhetoric, and these differences inform my understanding of rhetorical theology and of the inherent dynamics of feminist sin-talk.

In ancient Greece, the Sophists tended to see all language use as rhetorical—that is, as persuasive—and argued that what is called "truth" is a social arrangement, not a glimpse into ultimate reality. Socrates and Plato famously rejected this as dabbling with mere opinion dressed in discursive finery, instead of the real knowledge attained by reflection on that which transcends human sensory experience.[3] Aristotle, on the other hand, while privileging the quest for universal truth through dialectic (the art of logical reasoning), saw rhetoric (the art of public speaking) as its counterpart (*antistrophos*).[4] Aristotle's rhetorical theory, which played a central role in twentieth-century revivals of rhetoric, has been influential both in and of itself, and through appropriations of his thought by classical Roman orators. The Roman rhetorical tradition, represented most famously by Cicero and Quintilian, did not merely channel Aristotle, however, but built up a formidable rhetorical theory of its own, characterized by a holistic anthropology and a strong emphasis on praxis.[5] Overall, classical rhetorical theories emphasized the contextual over the universal, the practical over the philosophical. They also all emphasized the use of rhetoric for the good of the polis, seeing it as an instrument to educate and persuade the public to virtuous action.

The twentieth century's renewed emphasis on the idea that language does not merely describe reality but also helps to create it led to the birth of the New Rhetoric, which differs in emphasis from Classical Rhetoric.[6] Kenneth Burke, one of the key figures in this rhetorical revival, argues that while the key term for Classical Rhetoric was *persuasion*, and its stress was upon deliberate design, the key term for the New Rhetoric was *identification*, which can

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3. Plato, *Gorgias and Phaedrus*, trans. James H. Nichols Jr. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

4. Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse* 1.1.1, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

5. For a helpful introduction to, and selection from, Cicero's rhetorical theory, see Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Hertzberg, eds., *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present* (Boston: Bedford Book, 1990), 195–250. For further helpful discussions of Roman oratory and specifically its implications for rhetorical theology, see Don H. Compier, *What Is Rhetorical Theology? Textual Practice and Public Discourse* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1999), 3–9, and George A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), ch. 5.

6. Seminal texts include Chaim Perleman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyceta, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969); Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); and Raymie E. McKerrow's now-classic award-winning essay "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," *Communication Monographs* 56 (1989): 91–111.

include a partially unconscious factor in appeal.[7] Identification points more explicitly than persuasion to the effects of discourse in everyday language. Correspondingly, Burke's work is characterized by an emphasis on symbolic action, which shifts the focus from deliberate arguments aimed at persuasion to the question of how symbols evoke shared meaning—that is, create social worlds. The understanding of rhetoric as identification is foundational to Burke's theory of scapegoating, an issue that is of some concern to feminist theologians: by identifying some as members of the dominant group, language simultaneously creates the Other, who is not part of the group. This is often exacerbated by a more explicit "rhetoric of othering."[8] As we shall see, feminist critical rhetorical analysis shows how classical sin-talk has often functioned as a rhetoric of scapegoating and othering of women.

In Burke we see the union of hermeneutics and rhetoric: he holds that where there is meaning, there is persuasion, and where there is persuasion, there is rhetoric.[9] More particularly, the New Rhetoric, as a critical mode of inquiry into power relations, is the union of rhetoric and critical hermeneutics: thus, for example, the work of thinkers such as Michel Foucault on the intertwining of knowledge and power, or Antonio Gramsci on the ways in which hegemony operates with persuasion, are of some significance for the New Rhetoric. Critical rhetoric is not primarily interested in the "truth" or "falsity" of symbols, but in the way they "come to possess power—what they 'do' in society as contrasted to what they 'are.'"[10] The public functioning of symbols should not be understood in terms of direct causality, but rather in terms of the ways in which language shapes the concepts that organize much of our everyday existence by generating the conditions that shape our identities and agency. Critical rhetoric sets itself the task of exposing and undermining the discourses of power; as such, it shares the concern for the life of the polis found in Classical Rhetoric.

In short, the New Rhetoric shifts the focus away from Classical Rhetoric's constructive mode of "how to speak well in order to persuade" to a critical inquiry into the way everyday language constitutes character, community, and culture. Rhetoric is now reenvisioned as symbolic action rather than delivered speeches. Rhetorical theory is no longer primarily preoccupied with the inventions of the speaker and the conventions of speech, but with interpreting the audiences of discourse and the way language influences them. This

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7. Kenneth Burke, "Rhetoric—Old and New," *Journal of General Education* 5 (1951): 203–5.

8. Stephen Harold Riggins, "The Rhetoric of Othering," in *The Language and Politics of Exclusion: Others in Discourse*, ed. Stephen Harold Riggins (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997), 1–30.

9. See Walter Jost and Michael J. Hyde, eds., *Rhetoric and Hermeneutics in Our Time: A Reader* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

10. McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric," 104.

implies a shift from studies of single texts to critiques of bodies of discourse. Critical rhetorical inquiry is not uninterested in truth—it just does not reduce truth to transcendent ideas, but examines the realities of power and the practical effects of language as part of the overall question of truth.

The New Rhetoric does not leave Classical Rhetoric behind entirely, but instead translates it for the purposes of critical rhetorical inquiry. Among the translated classical categories are the concepts of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*, which refer to Aristotle's insight that the rhetor's spoken words (*logos*) will be interpreted in interaction with his perceived moral character (*ethos*) and the audience's frame of mind (*pathos*).[11] In the New Rhetoric, however, these heuristic categories are transformed into hermeneutical ones, as the focus shifts from persuasive speech to critical analysis of texts. Let us briefly look at each concept in a bit more detail, since they play a role in both tracing feminist critical rhetorical inquiry and shaping the contours of constructive feminist sin-talk.

First, Aristotle used *ethos*, or "character," to refer to the ways in which the perceived attributes of a speaker are persuasive. Aristotle limited *ethos* to the attributes of the speaker as manifested in the discourse, whereas the New Rhetoric broadens the scope of *ethos* by suggesting that attributes of the rhetor's character not present in the speech/text will have an impact on the ability to persuade an audience. The appropriation of this concept by critical rhetorical inquiry should not be seen as trying to find meaning in authorial intent, nor as a return to the Cartesian subject, but rather as serious consideration of the fact that audiences will perceive and judge a rhetor's interests.[12] More specifically, as Susan Jarratt and Nedra Reynolds point out, *ethos* (within the New Rhetoric) "theorizes the positionality inherent in rhetoric," that is, it points to "a constant awareness that one always speaks from a particular place in a social structure."[13] Within a critical rhetorical inquiry, then, the notion of *ethos* is rendered an aspect of the hermeneutic of suspicion that would ask about the power relations that lie behind certain discourses. We shall see in the next two chapters that feminist theologians lodge such a hermeneutic of suspicion against the interests of classical theologians who operated in a system of systemic religious and social domination of women, thereby implicitly questioning the *ethos* that drives classical sin-talk. In the final chapter I point to the specific *ethos* that drives feminist sin-talk in turn.

The second concept in Aristotle's triad, the speech utterance or *logos*, refers to appeals to reason and argument, as opposed to appeals either to the rhetor's

11. Aristotle, *On Rhetoric* 1.2.3.

12. Cunningham, *Faithful Persuasion*, 111.

13. Susan C. Jarratt and Nedra Reynolds, "The Splitting Image: Contemporary Feminisms and the Ethics of Êthos," in *Ethos: New Essays in Rhetorical and Critical Theory*, ed. James S. Baumlin and Tita French Baumlin (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1994), 47.

character or the audience's emotions. In the New Rhetoric this concept goes well beyond both "rational" argument in the Enlightenment sense, and the classical categories of deductive reasoning (*enthymemes*), inductive reasoning (examples), and topics. Instead, as Wayne Booth notes, the New Rhetoric operates with synthetic, contextual judgments about the issues at stake.[14] This judgment is also communal, thereby operating with the intersubjectivity that hermeneutical thinkers (e.g., David Tracy) argue for in their efforts to steer clear from both the hegemony of false universals and the chaos of sheer relativism. In the following chapters I examine what feminist critical rhetorical inquiry reveals about the *logos* (stories, argumentation, or values) of classical sin-talk, and outline the kind of *logos* that would be part of sin-talk as emancipatory discourse.

Aristotle's third element of persuasive argument, *pathos*, is an appeal to the emotions or passions of the audience. As is the case with *ethos* and *logos*, *pathos* has become a hermeneutical concept in the New Rhetoric, indicating ways in which states of mind that audiences and authors share determine the acceptance of texts.[15] The meaning of *pathos* has therefore become broader, referring "more generally to the audience's state or condition: *everything* that the audience brings to the rhetorical situation."[16] It is here that we note the importance of introducing women's experiences into the conversation on sin-talk: given the experiences that women bring to the rhetorical situation, how might they hear the rhetoric of sin? Is their specific *pathos* addressed? These are among the questions that this rhetorical category enables us to ask of classical sin-talk.

In summary, whereas *ethos* refers to the audience's judgment about the character and social positioning of the speaker, *logos* refers to the audience's judgment about the kinds of arguments forwarded in the texts they analyze, and *ethos* expresses the reality that such judgments cannot be separated from the audience itself, which is involved not as disembodied interpreters but as situated human beings. In other words, in the New Rhetoric, the *pathos* of the audience, the *ethos* of the rhetor, and the *logos* of the discourse are all firmly set within the broader social matrix. As a result, the concept of *pathos* now overlaps somewhat with the classical rhetorical emphasis on what is appropriate (*prepon* in Greek and *decorum* in Latin). *Decorum* refers to the idea of adjustment in the orator's speech in light of what is appropriate for a particular audience; it is, in other words, contextually

14. Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 70–73.

15. The major contribution on this theme was Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyceta's *The New Rhetoric*. Although their work was done separately from that of Gadamer, it occurred at the same time, and indeed shares many of the latter's emphases. See, in this regard, Richard E. Palmer, "What Hermeneutics Can Offer Rhetoric," in Jost and Hyde, *Rhetoric and Hermeneutics in Our Time*, 108–31.

16. Cunningham, *Faithful Persuasion*, 43.

sensitive speech.[17] In Classical Rhetoric *decorum* is quite distinct from the concept of *pathos*, which focuses more on putting the audience in a certain state of mind than in reading their existing state of mind. But in the New Rhetoric, where these concepts are translated into hermeneutical categories, *decorum* and *ethos* overlap significantly. Attention to *decorum* risks reducing rhetoric to something that says what the audience wants to hear, to mere flattery (Plato's main charge against rhetoric), and not what the audience needs to hear from an ethical or political standpoint. Yet in its emphasis on *kairos*, the sophistic concept denoting the relationship between truth and context, which points to the importance of seizing the right moment, the notion of *decorum* indicates an awareness that truth cannot be reduced to uniform and universal ideas. Instead, *decorum* is an integral part of a theory of language as strategic action, as opposed to merely "knowing" a transcendent "truth." In contrast to the somewhat amoral attitude of the Sophists, Aristotle interprets *prepon* (*decorum*) as having to do with a sense of tact, or as he states it, the *lexis* (i.e., the delivery of words) "will be appropriate if it expresses emotion and character and is proportionate to the subject matter."[18] In the Roman rhetorician Cicero's thought, *decorum* is a humanistic concept that is integral to the process (and duty) of human development. In this understanding of *decorum*, tact is elevated to the level of justice: "It is the function of justice not to do wrong to one's fellow-men; of considerateness, not to wound their feeling; and in this the essence of propriety is best seen."[19] Thus, in Cicero, *decorum* is the aesthetic sensibility that grounds moral life. After Cicero, already starting with Quintilian, the notion of *decorum* increasingly became a purely aesthetic, as opposed to political, concept, and its ethical implications did not really come to the fore again until its revival in the New Rhetoric. In the following chapters, the concept is used in conjunction with the concept of *pathos* to point to a problematic lack of awareness of women's gendered contexts in classical sin-talk, and to contrast that with the concrete and holistic focus on women's lives that we see in feminist sin-talk.

One of the reasons why the ethical aspects of *decorum* have resurfaced in the New Rhetoric is the emergence of a new emphasis on the concept of *kairos* in rhetorical theory, especially thanks to the work of James L. Kinneavy. According to Kinneavy, *kairos* is "the appropriateness of the discourse to the particular circumstances of the time, place, speaker, and audience involved."[20]

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17. See Compier, *What Is Rhetorical Theology?* 6.

18. Aristotle, *On Rhetoric* 3.7.1.

19. Cicero, *De Officiis*, trans. Walter Miller, Loeb Classical Library 21, ed. G. P. Goold (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 1.99.

20. James L. Kinneavy, "*Kairos*: A Neglected Concept in Classical Rhetoric," in *Rhetoric and Praxis: The Contribution of Classical Rhetoric to Practical Reasoning*, ed. J. D. Moss (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 84.

Kinneavy's definition of *kairos* goes beyond the usual definition of it as "the right time" to include a broader contextual perspective. As such, *kairos* is related to *decorum*. For our purposes, what he says about the ethical dimension of *kairos* is most significant. Among the Sophists (particularly Gorgias), justice was determined by circumstance, that is, justice was grounded in *kairos*.[21] Plato and Socrates were concerned by the relativism of such a position, yet Platonic ethics were also grounded in *kairos*—as can be see especially in the *Phaedrus*. Plato, says Kinneavy, used *kairos* in the double sense of proper measure and right time to construct the idea of virtue as the mean between two.[22] Kinneavy's main contribution has been his tracing of the *kairos* concept in the rhetorical theory of Aristotle, however. He notes that, as in Plato, in Aristotle the rhetorical act is situationally determined. The general rules of rhetoric therefore need careful adaptation within specific situations. One can see this principle at work in the legal aspects of the *kairos* concept: Kinneavy writes that "*kairic* law" is "law when it is applied in particular circumstances, at specific times, to specific situations not foreseen by the legislators."[23] As such, the *kairos* concept enables us to see that true justice is situation-specific (although one should nevertheless emphasize that this does not mean it is determined by the situation alone). Kinneavy notes that this insight is expressed in the Christian idea that the letter of the law is to be distinguished from the spirit of the law.

A related aspect of *kairos*, one that is often encountered in theological appropriations of the concept, most elaborately in the theology of Paul Tillich, is the epistemological perspective that *kairos* brings that which is timeless into historical time. Biblical references to *kairos* suggest that it has to do with the fulfillment of time (see Mark 1:14) but also with the discerning of the present time (see Luke 12:56). In general, therefore, the biblical and theological concept of *kairos* is related to the religious concept of revelation, both in the objective sense of the entering of eternity into the moment (fulfillment of time) and in the subjective discerning of the moment.

In the next chapter we revisit the *kairos* concept with specific reference to the revelatory and situational justice aspects of the concept as we ask the question: what is the rhetorical situation within which feminist critical-constructive rhetoric on sin occurs? I point to certain aspects of "women's experience" (and the complexities of that concept), and particularly to the widespread phenomenon of gender violence, which is of particular relevance

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21. James L. Kinneavy, "*Kairos* in Classical and Modern Rhetorical Theory," in *Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis*, ed. Phillip Sipiora and James S. Baumlin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 61.

22. Ibid., 62.

23. Ibid., 68.

within feminist discourses on sin. I also use the concept in developing the driving *ethos* of feminist sin-talk in chapter 6.

But first we turn to a brief overview of the historical relationship between rhetoric and theology, followed by an introduction to some relevant feminist rhetorical theory, which is integral to my analysis of feminist critical inquiry into sin-talk.

RHETORICAL THEOLOGY

Christian theology's traditional focus on truth that transcends sensory human experience has led it to generally view rhetoric with Platonic distrust. To the extent that theology appropriated Aristotle, it privileged his dialectical reasoning rather than his rhetorical theory. Yet rhetoric nonetheless retained a minor presence in classical theology. For example, Augustine, despite his postconversion disdain for his former field of study, saw a limited use for rhetoric in conveying religious truth and encouraging morality.[24] This attitude remained the status quo throughout the Middle Ages. There was a revival of interest in rhetoric in the Renaissance period, and the Protestant Reformers followed suit by making use of classical Roman rhetoricians like Quintilian and Cicero.[25]

But a serious appropriation of rhetoric for theology has had to wait until modern times. It is especially theologies of praxis and liberation that have shown an (implicit) interest in rhetorical perspectives on theological language. If one were to work with Gustavo Gutiérrez's threefold classification of theology as theologies of spirituality, reason, and liberation, it would appear that the concrete focus of rhetorical reasoning makes it as logical a companion for theologies of liberation, as Platonic philosophy has been for theologies of spirituality, or Aristotelian philosophy for theologies of reason.[26] Liberation theologies, including feminist theologies, often engage in critical rhetorical inquiry, that is, a mode of theology that is highly critical of

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24. Augustine, *Teaching Christianity* (*De Doctrina Christiana*), trans. Edmund Hill, O.P., *The Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (New York: New City Press, 1996), 4.2.3, 4.6.

25. Gregory Kneidel, "Rhetoric in the Age of Reformation and Counter-Reformation," in *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, ed. Thomas Sloane (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 690–94. The rhetorical nature of Calvin's theology has received much attention in recent years. See, for example, Don H. Compier, *John Calvin's Rhetorical Doctrine of Sin*, Texts and Studies in Religion 86 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), and Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

26. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 3–11.

the practical effects of many aspects of the classical theological heritage. It is also, of course, aimed at emancipatory praxis. It would therefore (implicitly) appropriate both the critical mode of the New Rhetoric and the persuasive mode of Classical Rhetoric.

Although most theologians of praxis do not engage in explicit rhetorical theorizing, one can describe all theologians who share an interest in praxis as rhetorical theologians. To this end, rhetorical/praxis theologians often refer to Clifford Geertz's definition of religion as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men," as a theoretical basis for their emphasis on the way religion shapes social reality.[27] For example, feminist theologian Carol P. Christ uses this definition of religion in her argument that women should embrace the Goddess since religious worship of a male God creates "moods" and "motivations" that keep women in a state of psychological dependence on male authority. She explains that a "'mood' for Geertz is a psychological attitude such as awe, trust, and respect, while a 'motivation' is the social and political trajectory created by a mood that transforms mythos into ethos, symbol system into social and political reality."[28] Although operating with a different feminist theological approach that aims to broaden God-talk rather than replace it with Goddess-talk, Catholic feminist theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson similarly refers to Geertz's definition of religion as an anthropological basis for her argument when she says that the classical male symbol of God functions to support a patriarchal culture.[29] From yet another place on the theological map, that of the "Yale school" of thought, we see the use of Geertz's definition of religion as a theoretical underpinning for understanding doctrines in terms of persuasion to pious action. In particular, George Lindbeck sees doctrines as operating like grammatical rules to shape the life of the religious community, as opposed to seeing doctrines as either informative propositions about objective realities or noninformative symbols of inner experiences or attitudes.[30] These three examples, representing quite different theological approaches, nevertheless show a very similar use of Geertz. Lindbeck's understanding of doctrine has been particularly influential in the work of theologians such as David Cunningham and Serene

27. Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, ed. Michael Lambek (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 63.

28. Carol P. Christ, "Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 274–75.

29. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 36.

30. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 16–18.

Jones, who explicitly identify their work as rhetorical theology. However, Cunningham and Jones both express some discomfort with a tendency to one-sidedness in Lindbeck's work, noting that he does not sufficiently take into account questions of context and commitment, or of power relations involved in doctrinal language.[31]

I agree with this assessment and want to argue for a form of rhetorical theology that does keep those kinds of questions in mind. Although Lindbeck uses cultural concepts to point to the rhetorical effects of doctrines, his fear that "the world" will absorb "the Christian narrative" prohibits him from taking into account that theology is itself a cultural product, rooted in the power structures and practices of the surrounding culture. Hence, while he ostensibly embraces the antifoundationalist linguistic turn of the twentieth century, he actually posits theological doctrine as a foundation—albeit a "foundation" that comes paradoxically from "above," following Karl Barth's understanding of revelation as something objective outside the human situation. This crypto-foundationalism, as Wentzel van Huyssteen calls it, leans toward an understanding of doctrine as something that may function rhetorically within a culture from its elevated vantage point, but is not subject to critical-rhetorical analysis.[32] Lindbeck's model thus neatly hijacks some of the insights of postmodern linguistic theories and their emphasis on the situatedness of subjects and texts, and tames those insights for the purposes of a protective strategy that isolates theology from their implications. This leads to a one-sided form of rhetorical theology that does not take seriously the critical rhetorical implications of these linguistic theories, because it does not leave room for suspicion about the power dynamics that led to the dominance of certain kinds of rhetoric in speaking of classical theological symbols in the first place. As such, this approach might lend itself to a "rhetoric of piety," but there is insufficient room for critical rhetorical inquiry.

In contrast to such a one-directional approach to religious rhetoric, there in fact seems to be a hint of a dialectic between symbol and concrete realities found in Geertz's thought, which is missed when rhetorical theology is built only on his "moods and motivations" language. Geertz remarks that "culture patterns have an intrinsic double aspect: they give meaning, that is, objective conceptual form, to social and psychological reality both by shaping

31. Cunningham, *Faithful Persuasion*, 208; Serene Jones, "Cultural Labor and Theological Critique," in *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*, ed. Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney, and Kathryn Tanner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 159.

32. J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *The Shaping of Rationality: Toward Interdisciplinarity in Theology and Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 69–109. Van Huyssteen uses the term *crypto-foundationalism* to describe appeals to the "Christian narrative" in an isolated sense as a norm unto itself, a move that could reduce theology to fideism.

themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves."[33] In this regard, David Tracy's insistence on a more dialectical approach to the relationship between the language of faith (symbols) and extralinguistic reality seems to be closer to Geertz's view on religion. In *The Nature of Doctrine*, Lindbeck famously and erroneously described Tracy as an "experiential-expressivist," whose theology operates with the notion that religious symbols are expressions of extralinguistic experience.[34] Such a view would, of course, be incompatible with the rhetorical emphasis on how language (including religious symbols) creates or shapes experience, and hence also praxis. However, Tracy equally famously refuted Lindbeck's reading of him and pointed out that the heirs of the liberal theological tradition have been following Gadamer, Ricoeur, and other hermeneutical thinkers in rethinking the dialectical (not unilateral) relationship between experience and language.[35] In other words, Tracy rejects an understanding of language as simply expressive of nonlinguistic realities and affirms the way in which symbols shape human praxis. In contrast to Lindbeck, though, Tracy would not thereby "abandon half the dialectic by simply placing all experience under the new guardianship of and production by the grammatical rule of the codes of language."[36] This dialectical approach, I contend, is closer to Geertz's full perspective than Lindbeck's, and could help to provide the building blocks for a less one-sided rhetorical theology, if only by suggesting that a one-directional approach to rhetorical theology is not sufficient. However, even this more dialectical approach to theological symbols may not produce an adequate rhetorical theology, insofar as it still does not sufficiently recognize the role of power in the acceptance of symbols.

Anthropologist of religion Talal Asad charges that Geertz's understanding of symbol as "any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for conception" confuses cognitive and communicative questions, which makes it impossible to trace the social conditions within which they come to be constructed—in particular, the reality of power.[37] Like the classical Sophists, Asad argues that power, that is, "the effect of an entire network of motivated practices," creates the conditions for experiencing "truth." He points out that

33. Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 65.
34. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 21, 37. Although Lindbeck later qualified his identification of Tracy as an "experiential-expressivist," in *Nature of Doctrine*, on 38 and 136n4, he clearly identifies Tracy as such.
35. David Tracy, "Lindbeck's New Program for Theology: A Reflection," *Thomist* 49 (1985): 463.
36. Ibid., 464.
37. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 27–54. The Geertz quote is from Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 63.

even Augustine realized the importance of laws and disciplinary practices of various kinds in experiencing the "truth" of doctrines.[38] In other words, rhetoric is intertwined with power, which could function in either a positive or negative manner. Asad's perspective goes beyond the kind of dialectic already noted in Geertz, instead pointing to a hermeneutic characterized by genealogical suspicions, since an appropriation of his critique would require an analysis of the social conditions within which doctrines were formulated and accepted as orthodoxy. This is an important insight for our purposes, since this insight enables rhetorical theology to push beyond a rhetoric of piety to also include critical rhetorical inquiry—and in fact to root its constructive rhetoric in critical inquiry.

In summary, I suggest that rhetorical theology should embrace a more explicitly dialectical approach that not only focuses on the culture created by religious symbols but also takes seriously the way in which symbols arise from culture, with specific attention paid to the issue of power. The dialectical understanding of doctrine as both rooted in and contributing to concrete realities and power relations enables us to launch a full-bodied critical-constructive rhetorical analysis of classical doctrinal symbols by allowing us to recognize the fact that doctrines are embedded in cultural realities even as they address those realities. Specifically, this dialectical approach to doctrine opens the door to a stronger hermeneutic of suspicion by asking not only how religion creates power but also how power creates religion.[39]

One feminist scholar whose method approximates such a critical-constructive rhetorical inquiry is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. She notes that "rhetorical interpretation and its theoethical interrogation of texts and symbolic worlds pays attention to the kinds of effects biblical discourses produce and how they produce them."[40] This refers to what I have earlier called the constructive or persuasive task of rhetorical theology—the task embraced by Lindbeck, that which pushes toward a rhetoric of piety, faithful persuasion, or emancipatory discourse. But Schüssler Fiorenza also recognizes that these texts not only shape social realities but reflect them, particularly their ideological interests: thus the foundational texts of Christianity are "neither reports of events nor transcripts of facts but rather rhetorical constructions that have shaped the information available to them in light of their religious or political interests."[41] This would refer to what Schüssler Fiorenza calls critical rhetorical inquiry, or what I have earlier called a hermeneutic characterized

38. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 35.
39. Ibid., 45.
40. Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 41.
41. Ibid., 32.

by genealogical suspicions. Schüssler Fiorenza therefore recognizes both that "language . . . creates and shapes the symbolic worlds it professes to evoke and describe," and that "language and texts are always dependent on their rhetorical situation and socio-political location."[42] In other words, in Schüssler Fiorenza's model, religious language is seen as both performative (it affects behavior) and ideological (it is rooted in existing power structures). She therefore rejects a purely intratextual analysis of texts, arguing that it must be complemented by "a critical systemic analysis of socio-political and religious structures of domination and exclusion."[43]

Schüssler Fiorenza also makes it clear that inherent in the belief that knowledge of the world is rhetorical (i.e., that texts and knowledge reflect the rhetoric of a particular group of people, for a particular audience, and with certain explicit goals or implicit interests) is also the hope that cultural mindsets and the meaning of sacred texts are changeable. Therefore, true to its contextual and practical nature, the goal of critical feminist rhetorical inquiry is not simply interpretation for interpretation's sake, but, as Rebecca Chopp puts it, "discourses of emancipatory transformation that proclaim the Word to and for the world."[44]

Echoing both the constructive mode of Classical Rhetoric and the critical mode of the New Rhetoric, a critical-constructive rhetorical theology will therefore be interested in critically examining the effective functioning of texts/symbols (including the interests served by particular rhetorical practices, the overall systemic matrix within which they function, and a particular audience's location within that matrix), and it will also make constructive proposals for how the texts/symbols might function with an eye toward human flourishing. These are the kinds of concerns that drive feminist critical rhetorical inquiry into Christian discourses on sin. How does the symbol of sin function in the lives of women and gendered Others (or, to put it in Foucault's terms, how does sin-talk regulate social life)? Whose interests are served by certain kinds of rhetoric? What is the systemic matrix within which sin-talk occurs? But also, in a more constructive mode, what kinds of vision do feminist theologians conjure up with their own sin-talk?

In order to examine these questions and concerns, I employ various rhetorical strategies over the course of the next few chapters. Below I briefly introduce these feminist rhetorical strategies, and then conclude with an outline of the overall argument.

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42. Schüssler Fiorenza, "Challenging the Rhetorical Half-Turn," 41.
43. Ibid.
44. Chopp, *The Power to Speak*, 3.

FEMINIST RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

It is common to distinguish among "radical" feminist theologians who leave the tradition behind to embrace a Goddess spirituality, more conservative/reformist feminist theologians who focus on including more women in the tradition, and reconstructionist/revisionist feminists, who are more critical of classical traditions but maintain a presence within it. Other classifications of feminist theologies point to the theoretical differences that separate liberal, radical, socialist, or psychoanalytical feminists. For our purposes, those kinds of distinctions are not particularly relevant, although my rhetorical approach obviously shares a basic perspective on the importance of critical-constructive retrieval of the tradition with reconstructionist/revisionist feminist theologies. Feminist theorist Mary Hawkesworth offers us a more helpful way to look at different emphases in feminist discourses by distinguishing among different feminist rhetorical strategies. Feminist theologies, when looked at through this lens, are therefore not distinguished by looking at their use of a particular theory or their degree of loyalty to classical theological traditions, but rather by the kind of rhetoric they use. Hawkesworth distinguishes four feminist rhetorical strategies: the rhetoric of oppression, the rhetoric of difference, the rhetoric of reason, and the rhetoric of vision.[45]

The tactic of the feminist *rhetoric of oppression* is that of supplanting civilization's self-description with the image of a (monolithic) patriarchy characterized by conquest, domination, hierarchy, and so forth. This strategy risks depicting women only as victims (and even disempowering women in the process), and of viewing men as completely irredeemable and the eternal enemies of women. However, its strength lies in its shock value: by reading history as a record of atrocities, it aims at breaking through denial by "providing a pitiless description that forces its own acceptance."[46] We see examples of the rhetoric of oppression when feminist scholars point to the history of Christianity as steeped in the blood of women. The feminist theologian most associated with this kind of rhetoric is Mary Daly, who speaks of patriarchy as the prevailing "religion" of the entire planet, and calls all religions "parts of the male's shelter against anomie," that is, women as the projected personifications of "The Enemy."[47] Daly also refers to violence against women as "the various manifestations of Goddess-Murder on this patriarchal planet," the "deep and universal intent to destroy the divine spark in women."[48]

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45. M. E. Hawkesworth, *Beyond Oppression: Feminist Theory and Political Strategy* (New York: Continuum, 1990), 111–29.

46. Ibid., 113.

47. Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon, 1978), 39.

48. Ibid., 315.

The feminist *rhetoric of difference*, on the other hand, is rooted in claims of women's specific moral endowments and the value of women's traditional activities. Those using this rhetorical strategy are sometimes wary of the notion of "equality," if that means women are to be measured by male standards. Instead, the rhetoric of difference tends to operate with the French feminist concept of *différence*, which states that "the sexed embodiedness of women repressed by the phallic order must be reclaimed by the creation of a place for the feminine in language."[49] Another version of this kind of rhetoric can be seen in the work of scholars such as Carol Gilligan, whose landmark book, *In a Different Voice*, argues that the relationality traditionally associated with women should form the basis of ethics.[50] The goal of the feminist rhetoric of difference is therefore to capitalize upon women's traditional strengths. This strategy risks an essentialist and romanticized view of womanhood, working with an almost metaphysical conception of "woman," ignoring the social construction of gender, and thereby understating the scope of possible social change. On the other hand, in its positive valuation of women's traditional activities and bodies, the rhetoric of difference promises wholeness through the recovery of the repressed. This strategy as presented so far is not central to the critical rhetorical inquiry in this book, but a reversed version of it comes into play. Such a reversed feminist rhetoric of difference can be seen when feminist theologians such as Valerie Saiving, Judith Plaskow, and Susan Nelson Dunfee emphasize the particular sins to which women are prone.[51] In short, the (reversed) rhetoric of difference employed here focuses not on women's traditional strengths but on the weaknesses to which women's traditional strengths may give rise.

Perhaps the most commonly used feminist rhetorical strategy is that of the *rhetoric of reason*, which focuses on exposing and correcting misinformation about women contained in classic texts, and often emphasizes the principle of equality.[52] Premised on the idea that reason will ultimately triumph, some versions of this strategy may not necessarily be able to go deeply enough into the causes of misogyny. However, the strength of this strategy lies in its intellectual rigor and its use of the tools of academic analysis, which has developed

49. Hawkesworth, *Beyond Oppression*, 116.

50. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [1982] 2016).

51. Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 25–42; Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (New York: University Press of America, 1980); Susan Nelson Dunfee, "The Sin of Hiding: A Feminist Critique of Reinhold Niebuhr's Account of the Sin of Pride," *Soundings* 65 (Fall 1982): 316–27.

52. Hawkesworth, *Beyond Oppression*, 121.

a body of evidence that counters unwarranted stereotypes about women. An example of this rhetorical strategy would be Rosemary Radford Ruether's focus on the underlying dualistic patterns in Western thought, which contribute to the devaluing of the body and as such to the oppression of women.[53]

Hawkesworth favors a fourth feminist rhetorical strategy, which she calls the *rhetoric of vision*. This strategy combines many aspects of the other feminist rhetorical strategies, such as the recognition of language as a powerful ideological weapon, and the simultaneous recognition of women's unique contributions and their equality to men in worth and human dignity. Although the idea of a "rhetoric of vision" can be accused of lacking concreteness, this strategy combines the more critical strategies with a constructive aim, which targets the imagination as the primary site of ideological struggle. In targeting the imagination as the site of struggle, the rhetoric of vision recognizes that misogyny is rooted in more than ignorance, and as such, it goes beyond the critiques and corrections of the other rhetorical strategies. Because it sees the recoding of dominant cultural symbols as the key to social transformation, the rhetoric of vision is consciously engaging in the literary production of reality. Specifically, it aims to create some space in our conceptual and perceptual worlds "within which women can expand their subversive activities."[54] Although I do not here employ this strategy in quite the way Hawkesworth defines it, the two final chapters indeed, in their delineation of constructive feminist sin-talk, develop a variant of the rhetoric of vision. Specifically, in chapter 5 we shall see that feminist theologians, precisely as a result of their critical rhetorical inquiry, already (sometimes implicitly) engage in the recoding of the symbol of sin. This recognition in turn forms the basis for my suggestions regarding a constructive feminist form of sin-talk in chapter 6. These constructive proposals can be seen as proposing a "vision" for sin-talk in light of feminist concerns, and as such would be similar to Hawkesworth's rhetoric of vision. The main difference lies in the more concrete, practical focus of sin-talk, compared to Hawkesworth's more aesthetic rhetoric of vision (even though the latter still is, as rhetoric always is, aimed at praxis).

In summary, Hawkesworth's analysis of different feminist rhetorical strategies is helpful insofar as it enables us to analyze the mechanisms and ends of seemingly opposing types of feminist discourse, and to see their shared goals despite their different rhetorical approaches. In short, Hawkesworth's analysis enables us to weave together the varying strands of feminist discourses on sin in order to see the feminist conversation on sin as a whole. More specifically

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53. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983).

54. Hawkesworth, *Beyond Oppression*, 125.

for our purposes here, in the following chapters, we shall see that these categories are useful in tracing the different rhetorical practices adopted by feminist theologians in their critiques of classical sin-talk. Using a rhetoric of difference that exposes the androcentric assumptions of classical sin-talk, feminist theologians bring women's experiences into the realm of sin-talk to remind us that the persuasive effects of sin-talk are partially dependent on the audience's situation. Using a rhetoric of reason, aimed at deconstructing the dualistic thought patterns that contributed to the depiction of women as denigrated body and symbol of sin, feminist theologians critique the sexist philosophical arguments found within much of classical sin-talk. Using a rhetoric of oppression, which aims at unsettling the positive self-image of classical traditions by reciting their history of atrocities against women, feminist theologians retell the history of sin-talk as one of misogyny and violence against women, and attack the *ethos* that lies behind this history. A rhetoric of oppression is also used to point to the destructive effects if the situation of the audience is not sufficiently kept in mind. These different feminist rhetorical strategies expose two misogynist rhetorical practices present in classical discourses on sin: a patriarchal rhetoric of life-denial, which emphasizes the sin of pride in such a way that it becomes particularly destructive in the lives of women; and a patriarchal rhetoric of death, which justifies gender violence by associating women with sin who are therefore worthy of punishment. Feminist theologians expose these misogynist, patriarchal rhetorical practices by implicitly focusing on the various rhetorical dimensions in classical sin-talk: by asking about the interests of classical (male) theologians when they talk about sin in certain ways (the *ethos* question); by asking about the kind of logic and values present in classical sin-talk (the *logos* question); and by asking about the audience presupposed in classical sin-talk, and the consequences if that sin-talk is inappropriate for some audience members who receive it (the *ethos/decorum* question).

Furthermore I explore how the critical rhetorical strategies of feminist theologians form part of a constructive, rhetorical, prophetic mode of sin-talk, aimed at addressing the very concrete evils that follow in the wake of patriarchal classical sin-talk, in particular gender violence. Finally, in constructing a death-denouncing, life-affirming rhetoric of sin, I refer to elements in the thought of two classical theologians, Augustine of Hippo and John Calvin, in order to show how feminist concerns, even where they would critique these very same classical theologians, nevertheless also align with certain elements in the classical traditions of Christianity. As I show in more detail, these two theologians are chosen for specific reasons: Augustine because of his central presence in classical Christian sin-talk, and Calvin because of his particular prophetic mode of sin-talk at the time of the Reformation.

OUTLINE

The next chapter, "*Kairos*," offers a brief examination of the rhetorical situation in which sin-talk occurs, with specific reference to women's situations and experiences. Two chapters ("Mary" and "Eve") follow that analyze prominent feminist voices who engage in critical rhetorical inquiry into two specific harmful patriarchal rhetorical practices found in classical Christian sin-talk. The final two chapters ("Grammar" and "Life") push toward a constructive discourse on sin, aimed at human flourishing, by first analyzing the already-existing constructive elements in feminist sin-talk, and then offering a rhetorical outline for further constructive feminist sin-talk. Throughout the process of this critical-constructive rhetorical inquiry, we shall see that the central practical effect in light of which classical sin-talk is interrogated is the widespread phenomenon of gender violence. I use the language of "gender violence" to refer to all forms of violence against women, including not only violence against cisgender women but all violence that targets people based on gender role expectations and/or associations, which includes violence against all who are seen as transgressing gender norms, including gay men and transgender individuals. As the next two chapters show, feminist critical rhetorical inquiry unearths two patriarchal rhetorical practices that contribute to a culture of gender violence. I call these, respectively, the patriarchal rhetoric of life-denial (which I link to the Mary symbol) and the patriarchal rhetoric of death (which I link to the Eve symbol). In the two final, more constructive chapters, sin-talk is once again correlated with the issue of systemic gender violence. However, despite the centrality of the issue of gender violence, this book is not an ethical examination of the phenomenon of gender violence per se, but rather a critical interrogation of Christian sin-talk in light of concrete female experiences of the world, in which gender violence is a central concern, aimed toward a construction of sin-talk that may instead contribute to human flourishing.

The task of this book is therefore to map the feminist conversation on sin through a rhetorical analysis that performs the following tasks:

1. It uses classical rhetorical concepts to name various rhetorical dimensions of classical Christian sin-talk that feminist theologians critique.
2. It identifies different rhetorical strategies that feminist theologians use to critique classical sin-talk.
3. It describes the problems in classical sin-talk as two destructive rhetorical practices, namely the rhetoric of life-denial and the rhetoric of death, which in combination are symbolized by the Mary-Eve dichotomy.
4. It argues that what we encounter within these feminist critiques of classical sin-talk is not so much a rejection of the notion of sin, but rather the

emergence of a constructive feminist rhetoric of sin that utilizes the same "grammar" as the classical doctrine of original sin.

5. It outlines the contours of a constructive feminist rhetoric of sin, making use of classical rhetorical concepts to do so, and centering this final proposal on a hermeneutic of life.

In short, in feminist theology's *critical mode*, we shall see three feminist rhetorical strategies (oppression, reason, difference), which critically examine classical sin-talk in its three rhetorical dimensions (*ethos*, *logos*, *pathos*), which yields a feminist critical exposé of two destructive rhetorical practices: the patriarchal rhetoric of life-denial (symbolized by Mary) and the patriarchal rhetoric of death (symbolized by Eve). This critical deconstruction enables the development of feminist constructive sin-talk, which consists of a retrieval of the inner pattern of the doctrine of original sin, and a counter-rhetoric characterized by a prophetic *ethos*, a decorous recognition of the *pathos* of the audience of sin-talk, and a *logos* focused on denouncing death and affirming life.