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Feminists Birthing a New Way of Being Church

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Article abstract

This text delves into the intersection of feminist theology and ecclesiological transformation, using Sisters in Solidarity (SIS) as a case study. It explores how feminist perspectives challenge gendered hierarchies within religious institutions, focusing on birthing change and fostering feminist solidarity. The narrative unfolds with a critical analysis of the Church's historical and contemporary treatment of women, especially in light of clergy sexual abuse scandals. It discusses the emergence of SIS as a proactive force, advocating for justice, healing and empowerment for marginalised individuals within the Church. The text also delves into theological underpinnings, emphasising the embodiment of the divine in female experiences and the importance of solidarity as a catalyst for transformative actions. Ultimately, it calls for a reimagining of ecclesiastical structures towards inclusivity, equality and a deeper engagement with feminist principles for a more just and compassionate Church.

Feminists Birthing a New Way of Being Church

KOCHURANI ABRAHAM

ABSTRACT: This text delves into the intersection of feminist theology and ecclesiological transformation, using Sisters in Solidarity (SIS) as a case study. It explores how feminist perspectives challenge gendered hierarchies within religious institutions, focusing on birthing change and fostering feminist solidarity. The narrative unfolds with a critical analysis of the Church's historical and contemporary treatment of women, especially in light of clergy sexual abuse scandals. It discusses the emergence of SIS as a proactive force, advocating for justice, healing and empowerment for marginalised individuals within the Church. The text also delves into theological underpinnings, emphasising the embodiment of the divine in female experiences and the importance of solidarity as a catalyst for transformative actions. Ultimately, it calls for a reimagining of ecclesiastical structures towards inclusivity, equality and a deeper engagement with feminist principles for a more just and compassionate Church.

KEYWORDS: feminist theology of liberation; Sisters in Solidarity (SIS); birthing change; gendered hierarchies; embodying the divine

Words like pregnancy, labour pains, birthing and midwifing have always been associated with female bodies and feminists have resolutely resisted biological essentialism that identify women primarily with bodily functions. Since the second half of the twentieth century, the feminist movement has focused mainly on awakening in women a deeper consciousness of their personhood. This has opened up new pathways for women to reclaim the faculties of their mind and spirit, which have been denied to them over the ages. These awakenings have become, for women, another experience of “birthing,” a process whereby they birth themselves as persons in their own right. The experience of being birthed again into personhood is, in turn, enabling women to birth change in different areas of life and this has become a major landmark in the evolutionary story of humanity.

Over the last few decades, women have boldly stepped into the many domains that had been once “reserved” for men, be it in the sphere of economics, politics, technological advancements, education, media or any other field of human engagement. These ground breaking moves have been potent in bringing about transformation even within hardened systems of power, as they shake the pillars that sustain the oppressive systemic forces, which keep women, other marginalised sections of society and the earth captive within its exploitative dynamics.

Of all the systemic powers that have a say on societal life, religion has remained and continues to remain very indisposed to letting women into its life-generating mechanisms of leadership, decision making and mediatory functions. The appropri-

ation of religious power by men as divinely sanctioned authority has made it difficult for women and other people belonging to LGBTQI+ groups to assert their rightful place and role within the religious framework. All the same, with the emergence of feminist theology and its many developments that examine women's positioning at the intersectionality of the class, caste, race and other identity markers with gender, the religious glass ceiling has increasingly been challenged, and broken wherever possible, since the last decades of the twentieth century.

In this paper, I wish to address the question of women birthing change within the sphere of religion and my thesis is that in this process, women are birthing a new way of being Church. For this I take the emergence of Sisters in Solidarity (SIS), in the Indian context, as a case study to look into the question of what it means to be Church and to explore a theology that is liberative and ecclesialogically significant for our present times.

The birthing story of Sisters in Solidarity

Sisters in Solidarity (SIS) is a platform that has brought together Catholic women with feminist theological sensibilities and a commitment to bringing about change in the Indian Church. SIS emerged in 2019, when some of us Catholic feminists in India decided to stand by a nun who dared to accuse a bishop of violating her sexually. This nun belonged to a religious congregation of the diocesan rite and the accused bishop was the bishop of her diocese as well as the patron of her congregation. Even though his sexual assaults occurred over a period of two years starting in 2014, she was too paralysed by fear and shame to report the crime to anyone. Finally, on the advice of a confessor, she mustered the courage to disclose her agony to Church authorities. While she approached different ecclesiastical leaders holding religious authority thanks to their position on the hierarchical ladder in India and at the Vatican, no one cared to address the issue by setting up a fact-finding commission or visiting the wounded sister, a daughter of the Church. For her, the Church was her family, as she had left her maternal home in her mid-teens to join religious life. Finally, being totally cornered by the accused bishop, she filed a criminal case against him, seeking justice by taking recourse to the law of the state. Ironically, through this act, she got labeled an offender against the Church by many who preferred to see the public image of the Church untarnished before civil society.

When news of a nun filing a criminal case against her bishop for sexual violence got reported in the media, some of us who were members of the Indian Women Theologians Forum (an association of Catholic feminist theologians in India), literally sought her out. Being convinced of the truth of her story, we called for a national meeting of Catholic women who were deeply concerned about the growing incidences of clergy sexual abuse in the Church and of the inappropriate ways in which it was

tackled by the Catholic hierarchy in the country. It was at this encounter in 2019, which brought together around fifteen Catholic women, that SIS was born.

The obvious question at this juncture would be to ask what we wanted to achieve through SIS? We see very clearly that we have a twofold prophetic task, i.e., to comfort the disturbed and to disturb the comfortable. In this case of the nun sexually assaulted by the bishop, our main concern was to reach out to the survivor and her companions who had been ostracised by the official Church. We began to accompany them very closely through counselling and other forms of therapy so that they could heal from their trauma.

Besides extending care for the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of the survivor nun and her companions, SIS has been instrumental in getting them enrolled in post-graduate courses through a distance education program given that the legal procedures would take a very long time to settle. In addition to providing the motivation needed for this undertaking, it has also meant finding the necessary funds and other assistance so that they could be constructively engaged.

Our prophetic task as the SIS also includes confronting the Church authorities who have been protective of abusers and who have covered up the crime of clergy sexual abuse. On many occasions, we have communicated our objections to their ways by sending strongly worded letters to the office bearers of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India, to the Nuncio and even to the Vatican. Through these voices of protest we have openly resisted the hegemonic clericalism that breeds sexual predators.

I think we are already being recognised as a presence, a voice, a pointing finger which challenges the powers that continue to stifle truth and justice under the mask of religion. But this prophetic task has also meant many of us have become black listed by Church authorities. Some of us have been labeled “controversial” and have been removed from key ecclesiastical positions and programs. But this has not prevented us from moving ahead on the prophetic mission we have shouldered as the SIS. Besides addressing the issue of clergy sexual abuse and other concerns of women, who are afflicted by gender-based violence within the Catholic Church in India, we have also looked into the issue of unnatural deaths of nuns by taking it up with the conference of major superiors in the country. In solidarity with survivors and other afflicted women, the SIS seeks to become a liberative voice raising theological questions and addressing relevant concerns in praxis.

While the Church hierarchy has taken an alienating stand on the survivors of clergy sexual abuse, the SIS, being true to its name, reaches out to them in solidarity. This solidarity has meant communicating to them, in tangible ways, the assurance

that they are not alone in their struggle for justice. I do not doubt that through this assertion of solidarity, those who are afflicted have an experience of God as Emmanuel, which means, “God is with us” (Mt 1:23). Accordingly, the SIS has become a collective which is birthing change in the way of being Church.

Theological underpinnings of the Sisters in Solidarity (SIS)

Feminists engaging with religion acknowledge the power of theology either to generate life or to suppress life-giving energies. Wherever theology is used to legitimise oppressive ideologies, it has played a repressive role in the life of many who have been conditioned to remain excluded and marginalised within the social hierarchies relating primarily to race, caste and gender. Women’s experiences of gendered exclusion and marginalisation within the structures of religion testify to this fact. All the same, in spite of the long-standing experiences of apparent powerlessness within the religious framework, feminist theologians identify theology as a liberative tool, which has the potential to bring about the much-needed transformation in society.

I take feminist theology of liberation as a broader framework to situate an initiative like SIS. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, one of the pioneers in this field, calls feminist theology “a critical theology of liberation,” based on her conviction that androcentric theology functions to justify the discriminatory praxis of the Church toward women.¹ Fiorenza acknowledges and critically analyses the oppressive sexist structures of the Christian Church and its traditions while, at the same time, rediscovering the liberating traditions and elements of the Christian faith and community.² In many parts of the world, the Catholic Church continues to be structured on the pillars of oppressive sexist ideologies, so it is important that feminist theologians engage in the task of re-envisioning theological precepts so that they become liberative for the subjugated sections of our societies.

In this paper, I shall focus mainly on a feminist theological re-reading of incarnation, which for me is the grounding principle of a collective committed to liberation, such as the SIS, and has implications on the way of being Church. Incarnation is all about the divine-human encounter that is grounded in the flesh and blood realities of life. While conventional incarnation theology has elaborated on the divine becoming flesh in the person Jesus Christ, the implications of this embodiment of the divine, in terms of its representation in ecclesiastical life, has been confined primarily

1. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology of Liberation,” *Theological Studies* 36, no. 4 (1975): 605-626. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056397503600402>.

2. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “To Comfort or to Challenge: Feminist Theological Reflections on the Pre-Conference Process,” in *New Women, New Church, New Priestly Ministry: Proceedings of the Second Conference on the Ordination of Roman Catholic Women*, ed. Maureen Dwyer (New York: Kirkwood Press, 1980), 43-60.

to male bodies and the authority bestowed on them to mediate with God. Feminist theologians interpret this dissonance in different ways. As observed by Laurel C. Schnieder, the fleshy divine individual body of Jesus and the fleshy divine communal body of Christ (i.e., the Church) suffer some incoherencies in traditional Christian theologies that manage to honour incarnation in terms of the body of Jesus, but forces actual bodies in the Church and outside of it, to the bottom rungs of a tortured hierarchy of being.³

Against the backdrop of the perceived contradictions in theological positions, liberation theologians have asserted that incarnation, which is a central Christian doctrine, must attend to the matter of the oppressed body and its constitutive relationship to divinity. The feminist, womanist, queer and black theologies that have emerged over the past few decades have engaged in decoding the significance of incarnation from the perspective of the broken and marginalised earthly bodies of the world today.⁴

Lisa Isherwood calls the embodiment of feminist liberation theology *the spiralling of incarnation*. Focusing on the embodiment of theology in the body, she observes that women do not hear the word of God as disembodied and dictatorial, but when they hear each other and speak, they hear the words of each other challenging them to right wrongs and embody the divine in their lives. In her words: “we have begun to hear the bodies of women and place them as word in our religious and theological reflections, we have allowed the flesh to show the divine rather than submitted to the divine moulding of the flesh.”⁵

In *Sisters in Solidarity*, I see the divine becoming embodied in female bodies in a way that subverts the theological association of incarnation with maleness. Being a collective of women committed to accompanying those who are ostracised by the clericalised male leadership of the Church, the SIS attempts to embody Jesus Christ where the so-called professional *alter Christus* does not want to be or dare to be, for reasons of hierarchical religious politics. A biblical text that could illustrate the SIS’s experience of walking with those afflicted by ecclesiastical estrangement is the Emmaus Story (Lk 24:13-35). We become like the Risen One, who joined those who were on the road to Emmaus, empathising with their experiences of dejection and hopelessness, accompanying them in the process of finding hope, meaning and fresh energies in life.

3. See Laurel C. Schnieder, “Promiscuous Incarnation,” in *The Embrace of the Eros: Bodies, Desires and Sexuality in Christianity*, ed. Margaret Kamitsuka (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 231-245.

4. The collection of essays in Margaret Kamitsuka, ed., *The Embrace of the Eros: Bodies, Desires and Sexuality in Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010) addresses these concerns.

5. Lisa Isherwood, “The Embodiment of Feminist Liberation Theology: The Spiraling of Incarnation,” *Feminist Theology* 12, no. 2 (2004): 140-156. <https://doi.org/10.1177/096673500401200>.

Accompaniment is the process of walking alongside someone and joining with him or her in solidarity, observes Rozella White. In her opinion, a theology of accompaniment refers to how individuals and communities enter into relationships with one another and walk together, modeling an incarnational relationship, one that is marked by presence, love and justice. In this walk, our stories are interconnected and contained by God's story. This incarnational walk entails mutuality, inclusivity, vulnerability, empowerment and sustainability as well as honesty and openness to new relationships. Dedicating time, care and compassion in deep authenticity for sustained relationships becomes crucial on this journey.⁶

When women choose to accompany others, exercising their spiritual and theological agency in ways that comfort those who are persecuted for seeking justice and truth, they are allowing the incarnation of Christ to be repeated in their flesh. Then, as pointed out by Lizette Tapia, they become a counter-discourse to the assumptions of femininity—essentialism, sexualisation and powerlessness.⁷ In a Church where women are destined to remain contained in gendered boxes and associated roles, these feminist moves, which gives flesh to the divine energy in a liberative manner, gives visibility to new ways of being Church in today's world.

Feminist theologians across the globe have consistently engaged with questions relating to the reclamation of the divine in female bodies and the bodies of vulnerable sections such as LGBTQI+ groups and that of the Earth. "God is present with us through our very humanity," argues Kelly Douglas.⁸ For Mercy Amba Oduyoye, understanding divinity and incarnation is a discourse on suffering and salvation as well as sisterhood and solidarity.⁹ Aruna Gnanadason observes that by reinterpreting doctrines such as sin, Christology, atonement, salvation and healing, women have attempted to offer a word of hope for victims and survivors of abuse and violence. In her opinion, women have seen the violence against their bodies in the light of the

6. Rozella White, "Walking Together in Solidarity: A Theology of Accompaniment" (lecture and handout, Practice Discipleship II Series, Luther Seminary Lay School of Ministry, Chippewa Falls, WI, October 12, 2013). <https://frzlock.com/Resources/Documents/Practice%20Discipleship/PD2%20Docs/Walking%20Together%20in%20Solidarity.White%20Final.pdf>.

Mike Danforth and Ian Chillag, "F-Bombs, Chicken, and Exclamation Points," April 21, 2015, in *How to Do Everything*, produced by Gillian Donovan, podcast, MP3 audio, 18:46, <http://www.npr.org/podcasts/510303/how-to-do-everything>.

7. Lizette G. Tapia-Raquel, "The Assumption of Desire: Toward a Feminist Theology of Incarnation" (ThD diss., Yonsei University, 2019).

8. Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 113.

9. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Spirituality of Resistance and Reconstruction," in *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life*, ed. Mary John Mananzan et al. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 170.

violence done to the earth and invites all women to discover together where the word of liberation lies for all women as we struggle to find a violence free world.¹⁰

The realisation that a male God, as projected by the Church, cannot get into the fleshiness of female sexuality and agony has led feminist theologians to assert that women and their flesh are the site of incarnation and divine revelation.¹¹ They insist on freeing God from the “totalitarian theologies” of empires,¹² and argue that the notion of the divine has become “a white-washed body” that is alienated from the struggles of slaves and refugees.¹³ They argue that the different contexts, experiences, languages, symbols, embodiments and revelations of divinity that multiple peoples encounter point to the need to be open to divine multiplicity and unlimited incarnation and this allows us to love who we are and who we are becoming, empowering us to truly be in the world with courage, compassion and commitment.¹⁴

As feminist theologies affirm, multiplicity is basic to the experience of a human–divine encounter. Since fluidity marks the ways of the Spirit, embodiment of the divine does not happen in uniform ways and cannot be limited to defined theological categories or religiously inscribed times and spaces. Re-envisioning incarnational theology beyond rigid definitions has strong implications for the way of being Church and this takes our discussion to ecclesiological considerations, from a feminist theological perspective.

Feminist solidarity as a way of being Church

Ecclesiology has been a question of serious contention ever since the emergence of feminist theologies. Women with feminist sensibilities have found themselves totally out of place within the gendered framework of the Church, with its theology and ministerial praxis. Over the past few decades, critical questions have been raised about the androcentric bias, the exclusion of women from ordained ministry and leadership structures, as well as the consequent gendered hierarchies that sustain Catholic ecclesiology. Weary of the gender politics within the ecclesiastical framework, feminist theologians have proposed new models of being Church that can pave the way towards realising the inclusive and egalitarian vision of a new social order initiated by Jesus Christ.

10. Aruna Gnanadason, “We Have Spoken So Long O God: When Will We Be Heard?” in “Theological Reflections on Overcoming Violence against Women,” ed. Elizabeth Stuart and Heather Walton, special issue, *Theology & Sexuality* 13, no. 1 (2006): 9–21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1355835806069782>.

11. Tapia, “The Assumption of Desire,” 26.

12. Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 48.

13. Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 101.

14. Tapia, “The Assumption of Desire,” 116.

In this discussion on feminist solidarity as a way of being Church, I find Schüssler Fiorenza's assertions about the *ekklēsia* of wo/men significant. Modeled as a congress of full citizens that creates a critical rhetorical place, Fiorenza believes that such a notion of being Church can change relationships of domination, exploitation and marginalisation.¹⁵ According to her, the *ekklēsia* of wo/men breaks open the complex kyriarchal relationships of authority and power that underpin Western history and tradition, offering a place from which the voices from the margins (can) seek to destabilise the centre.¹⁶ Seen from this perspective, the biblical vision of the *ekklēsia* becomes a critical reminder to keep focused on the struggles of those who strive for the emancipatory practices of radical democracy. The practical redemptive element of this symbol is reflected in the emancipatory movements — including feminism — that have emerged as actions of resistance and hope because of the disparity between the radical democratic vision of the *ekklēsia* of wo/men and its actual socio-political and cultural-religious realisations.¹⁷

While the idea of *ekklēsia* of wo/men is pertinent as a way for concretising feminist solidarity, I think the very notion of solidarity needs to be examined critically in view of realising its liberative potential without being weighed down by its shadows. Without doubt, solidarity builds collective embodiment and offers the possibility of expanding our social, political and ethical horizons.¹⁸ Further, solidarity is a way of being that is embedded in feminist cultural traditions and movements that resist women's socio-economic inequalities and patriarchal power.¹⁹ This makes solidarity a very appealing concept for those engaging with liberative feminist politics. All the same, it is important to pay heed to bell hooks' critical observations about universalising solidarity. She finds the idea of *common oppression* a false and corrupt platform that disguises and mystifies the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality. As she points out, women are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege and a host of other prejudices. Sustained bonding between women can occur only when these divisions are confronted and the necessary steps are taken to eliminate them. Divisions will not be eliminated by wishful thinking or romantic reverie about common oppression despite the value of highlighting experiences all women share.²⁰

15. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Sharing Her Word: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 112.

16. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethics: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 7.

17. Anne Tuohy, "Rhetoric and Transformation: The Feminist Theology of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza," *Australian eJournal of Theology* 5 (2005): 1-15. <https://acuresearchbank.acu.edu.au/item/87yzz/rhetoric-and-transformation-the-feminist-theology-of-elizabeth-schussler-fiorenza>.

18. Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (London: Routledge, 1998), 5.

19. Sylvia Walby, *The Future of Feminism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

20. bell hooks, "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women," *Feminist Review* 23 (1986): 125-138, 127.

Even as I pay heed to bell hook's critical observations, I find Hemming offering a breakthrough of the problematic of generalising solidarity. In her opinion, seeking solidarity with others is not based on a shared identity or on a presumption about how the other feels, but on feeling the desire for transformation out of the experience of discomfort and against the odds.²¹ Jaisy Joseph's take on solidarity, from a Christian perspective, throws further light on this discussion. According to her, solidarity recognises the interdependence of relationships that is capable of sustaining both mutual listening and mutual correction for the sake of Christian maturity.²²

Feminist solidarity takes diverse expressions depending on the socio-economic, cultural or political situations that trigger its emergence. Realising feminist solidarity in the religious sphere is perhaps the need of the hour. In this context, I take the initiation of collectives such as Sisters in Solidarity as contextualised expressions of *ekklēsia of wo/men* that could become a space for women to exercise their spiritual and theological agency for bringing about liberative changes in the way of being Church. Collectives of feminist solidarity can become a prophetic presence in the Church when they raise voices of truth, love and justice that challenge the violation of these values within and outside a given system. The prophetic task before us then is: "to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jer 1:10), as Jeremiah was told, even as he resisted this call saying he was too young and diffident.

Women awakening prophecy in the Church could facilitate its return to the Gospel vision in its structures and ways of functioning. This is also necessary for realising in the Church a life-giving spirituality, which can become an antidote to the cultic, male mediated religiosity. This could also set in motion the creation of ecclesiastical communities that become liminal spaces at the boundaries and at the threshold, making them liberative spaces, where power is shared and leadership emerges from below, where people imbued with the wisdom of the Spirit can give lead in organising the community's life and mission.

Conclusion

Women birthing change becomes imperative when the systemic powers that govern societal life fail to deliver justice for the vulnerable sections and do not safeguard the rights and dignity of all concerned in a given social setting. This is true also of religion though religious spaces and related institutions do not seem alluring to women with feminist sensibilities for their apparent patriarchal inscriptions. Even so, since religions continue to have a strong persuasive power on moulding people's outlook on life,

21. Clare Hemmings, "Affective Solidarity: Feminist Reflexivity and Political Transformation," *Feminist Theory* 13, no. 2 (2012): 158. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700112442643>

22. Jaisy A. Joseph, "Responding to Shame with Solidarity: Sex Abuse Crisis in the Indian Catholic Church," *Asian Horizons* 14, no. 2 (2020): 391. <https://dvkjournals.in/index.php/ah/article/view/2907>

liberative feminist interventions that can facilitate change become necessary, with a sense of urgency.

The praxis of liberation theology calls for critical interventions that can challenge sexism, racism, classism, casteism, anthropocentrism and other ideologies that sustain the oppression of marginalised sections and the earth. Engaging in resistance and solidarity with marginalised sections is a subversive act. It is a stance that empowers the broken, the vulnerable or suppressed groups to find their voice and speak for themselves, a stance that can help realise the Gospel vision of the kinship politics of the Reign of God.

It is in this setting that feminist solidarity becomes a catalyst for change and collectives, such as Sisters in Solidarity, testify to this possibility. Transforming the present ecclesiastical institution into an inclusive, egalitarian and participatory way of being Church may seem a utopian dream, but a breakthrough could be possible if we were ready to respond to these calls radically and with integrity. The challenge before us is to flow with the energies of the Spirit, beyond the binaries of the sacred and the secular, the body and the mind/spirit, the male and the female and become co-creators with Sophia in birthing the Church anew.

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