

“Revisioning Christian Ministry: Women and Ministry in *Agnes Grey*, *Ruth*, *Janet’s Repentance*, and *Adam Bede*”

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

It was this wish which was now arising in Margaret’s breast. She longed to be working for some object besides her own improvement; but she had no idea that religion could furnish it. Sometimes she fancied herself a clergyman, devoting himself to the improvement of his parish.

Elizabeth Missing Sewell, *Margaret Percival*

Lecturing, public readings, the profession of the dissenting clergymen, with others, may also be open to any [female] individuals strong in the purpose of undertaking duties only which they can discharge; resolving to keep thought confined to their work as much as possible, and for its sake to accept the sneers of the world.

Adams, Review of *Woman’s Mission*

In the mid-nineteenth century, the advent of Anglican sisterhoods, the reinstatement of the female diaconate, and the increased work for bible women and district visitors provided women in England with new opportunities to participate in the church.¹ These roles were offered in part as a response to the increasing numbers of single women who had to work in order to survive, but they were also a response to the number of women who desired an expanded role in the church. Many of the novels of the 1840s and 1850s that deal with religious issues reflect the developing arguments for and against women’s greater involvement in the church’s ministry.²

These novels are part of a literary and historical discussion of women and Christian ministry which is reflected in the two quotations that open this introduction. Margaret Percival is the title character of Elizabeth Sewell’s 1847 novel which follows the struggles of a young woman who considers conversion to Roman Catholicism. Margaret believes that Roman Catholicism’s long-standing tradition of conventual life for women would offer her a larger role in the church’s mission and is evidence that the religion is more open to women sharing in Christian ministry. Throughout most of the novel, Margaret agrees that the English Church has no “homes of refuge for women who are left unprotected” and “does not provide for the spiritual wants of persons who might not choose to enter a Society” (Sewell 1: 448). Frustrated

with this lack of opportunity, she imagines what it might be like to be a clergyman.³

With the aid of Mr. Sutherland, her uncle and a member of the Church clergy, Margaret eventually determines that women “may content themselves by visiting the poor under the sanction and direction of their own clergyman” (2: 420). With this conclusion, Sewell’s work argues that women have no need to take on responsibilities equal to those of the ordained clergy. Instead, women have a special (and subordinate) role dictated by their female nature.

The excerpt from the 1850 review of the thirteenth edition of *Woman’s Mission* argues that women should be allowed to try various professions, including the profession of a Dissenting clergyman.⁴ The author adds that “employments fitter for the woman’s nature” can be imagined, but women “must take some means of widening their sphere of action, that they may choose work that they *can* do, not what *they can best* do” (Adams, Review 191; emphases in original).⁵ Despite considering that women enter the ranks of the clergy in the Christian churches of mid-nineteenth century England, neither Sewell nor the author of the review gives unqualified assent to such a proposal.

However, it is significant that the suggestion is even made. Proposing that women be allowed to participate in the profession of the clergy meant much more than suggesting women be allowed to work as clerks (a role the 1850 review suggests as well), or as nurses, trained teachers, or tradespeople (as other texts of the period propose). In the 1840s, no major Christian denomination in England allowed a woman to preach, to act as an official scriptural authority, or to work as an official representative of the church. Women were not allowed into the ordained ministry of most Protestant churches until the second half of the twentieth century and were not ordained clergy in the Church of England until the 1990s.

While the dominant Christian gender ideology of the Victorian period was not automatically inimical to occupations for women such as nurse or clerk, it inherently opposed a public, authoritative, officially recognized ministerial role for women.⁶ For centuries, Christian doctrine associated women with evil, sin, and chaos, and not with the leadership, morality, and authority needed to be a member of the clergy. In *Relative Creatures: Victorian Women in Society and the Novel* (1974), Françoise Basch describes a shift in this predominant image of woman: “Until the seventeenth century the Pauline concept of the tempting and sinful woman, a permanent threat to spirituality and mysticism, was more or less universal. It was to be definitively abandoned in nineteenth-century England” (4). The image of woman as perpetuating Eve’s failings was replaced by one which more subtly maintained women’s subjection and subordination. While women’s evil nature was no longer emphasized, their secondary position was still very much assumed.

During the Victorian period, the dominant Christian gender ideology figured woman as morally superior to man but relegated her work to the domestic sphere. Their supposed natural moral and spiritual superiority made women ideally suited to act as moral examples for men and children, to create a morally protected safe-haven from the public sphere within the private or familial realm, and, under the direct supervision of clergymen, to serve as moral models and provide philanthropic help to women and families of the working classes. Basch sardonically

comments that a Victorian woman was thus “raised” to the position of “helpmate” (14).

Conduct manuals and advice books to women often used Christianity as supporting evidence, arguing that a woman should accept subordination to husband or father as the divinely-ordained position of women. Women’s primary function, they taught, was to provide the moral conscience and guidance to men whose work in the public sphere often led them away from morality and toward an ethic of self-interested capitalism. While promoted as the ideal to which all women should aspire, clearly middle-class women were better able to find the time and resources to engage in activities such as teaching their sons and giving food or money to working-class families in their community. However, all women were, at the very least, called upon to recognize the potential moral influence they could have on the men in their lives.

Despite the apparent assumption of men’s moral inferiority, the dominant Christian gender ideology asserted that men’s natural authority and leadership abilities made them suited to be the scriptural, doctrinal, and theological authorities within households and within institutional Christianity. Unlike women, men were fit to be members of the ordained clergy and thus the only official representative authorities of the various Christian denominations. Biblical texts from Genesis, Corinthians, and Timothy naming women as subordinate to men and restricting women’s speech in public were used during the Victorian period to support the silence of women in public, particularly on theological issues.

Furthermore, such texts were used to restrict women’s participation in Christian ministry. Because the Church’s hierarchy continued to exclude women from any official ministerial role, as discussion of sisterhoods and deaconess institutes arose, Victorian clergymen worked to carefully define and restrict the authority and recognition of such positions. When religious work by women outside the home was sanctioned it was to be done, as it is eventually in Sewell’s novel, under the close direction of a clergyman (Sean Gill 77).

Thus, the dominant Christian gender ideology supported a patriarchal vision of religion and society. As Christian feminist Elizabeth A. Johnson writes, “patriarchy is a form of social organization in which power is always in the hand of the dominant man or men” (23). Such a system “involves not simply the natural rule of men over women but very precisely the absolute rule of the freeborn male head of household over wives, children, male and female slaves, and nonhuman property as the cornerstone of the very structure of the state” (Johnson 23).⁷ To oppose this patriarchal vision by asserting the equal capacity and right of women to enter ministerial occupations was a feminist act.⁸

While religious novels of the mid-nineteenth century frequently raise issues regarding women and Christian ministry, most resolve those issues as Sewell and the author of the review do, by carefully qualifying and limiting a subordinate ministerial role for women. However, one group of novels written at mid-century reveals a more revolutionary treatment of women’s Christian ministry. Anne Brontë’s *Agnes Grey* (1847), Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth* (1853), and George Eliot’s *Janet’s Repentance* (1857) and *Adam Bede* (1859) portray women who are equally capable of undertaking the essential duties of the clergy.⁹ Their heroines’ ministries are independent of clerical direction and are not secondary to clergymen’s work. Consequently,

these four texts oppose the dominant and patriarchal Christian gender ideology of the time.

These novels do not present the work done by the heroines as an extension of their domestic duties or natural womanhood. Middle-class women visiting and caring for the sick and the poor was one acceptable and logical outgrowth of the gentle, generous nature often ascribed to women.¹⁰ Even an emphasis on women preaching in the novels could be seen as supportive of the ideal of women as purveyors of moral education, responsible for the morality of the family and of men in particular. However, while each of these four novels shows the heroine's ministry moving outside the home and immediate family, none offers the justification that this is simply the extension into society of women's natural duties.¹¹

No literary critic has argued that the heroines of *Agnes Grey*, *Ruth*, *Janet's Repentance*, and *Adam Bede* engage in a ministry equal to that of the clergy. In fact, while other critics have explored vocation, Christianity, or the role of women in one of these four novels, no other critical work has linked all four texts.¹² Furthermore, within critical discussion, the religious elements of these novels are often not carefully analyzed. Rather, Agnes' work as governess, Ruth's sexual "fall," Janet's alcoholism, and Adam or Hetty's characterization are consistent topics of critical studies.¹³

When critical attention is paid to the religious aspects of these four novels, Christianity is often used as grounds for criticizing the texts' anti-woman stance. Although their religious elements are often assumed to be endorsements of a patriarchal Christianity, each of these novels subverts norms of Christian ministry and challenges readers to see Christianity's core principles not as repressive tools for a patriarchal society, but as potentially liberating forces for women (and men), freeing them from a rigid binary gender ideology which limits women's role in Christianity. Because of their opposition to the dominant Christian gender ideology, these novels offer a unique perspective on supportive responses to expanding ministerial opportunities for women.

In offering a critique of the Christian institution, *Agnes Grey*, *Ruth*, *Janet's Repentance*, and *Adam Bede* challenge one of the most historically patriarchal institutions. It is also one of the strongest forms of patriarchy, "for it understands itself to be divinely established" (Johnson 23). Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot fictionally assert a more valid Christianity—one that is true to the original ideals of Christ. This reconceived Christianity is free of the hierarchical organization which was constructed within the institutional church years after Christ's death.¹⁴ They assert that those characteristics often ascribed to women, such as compassion, caring, and nurturing, are at the very core of Christianity and thus should be pursued by *all* Christians, male and female. They assert that women are equal in dignity, in moral comprehension, and in the ability to lead and undertake ministerial responsibilities. In their image of Christian ministry, they assert the human dignity of all people, regardless of gender.

Within this challenge to the idea of gendered religious roles, the portrayal of the male ministers in the novels is as significant as that of the female characters. In these novels, qualities such as compassion, forgiveness, and caring are not brought to the ministry by female characters but are already embodied in the positively-portrayed male clergy from the beginning. These

clergy are not criticized for being overly feminine. Thus, Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot assert that qualities such as compassion, forgiveness, and caring are not to be identified with women alone, but instead are characteristics of a good Christian minister, whether male or female.

In this way, Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot engage in a revisioning of Christian ministry which includes a new understanding of clerical roles and the opportunity for women to participate fully in those roles. I use the word “revisioning” because it captures the imaginative creation of Christian ministry found in these novels.¹⁵ The root “vision” emphasizes connotations of seeing, conceiving, and imagining, even from a mystical perspective. Additionally, Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot do not simply revise, or alter the original vision of Christian ministry; they do not say that women have “special” gifts that can be *added* to the churches through a ministry unique to women. Rather than simply making alterations to the present system of Christian ministry, Brontë, Gaskell and Eliot imaginatively conceive of a model of Christian ministry that emphasizes a Christian ethic of service and self-sacrifice for all who would act in the name of Christianity, and a model of teaching (preaching) and pastoral ministry that encompasses both men and women within its definitions. Yet this is not the first complete “vision,” but a “re-vision,” seeing anew an entire conception of Christianity and its ministry. These authors also do more than “envision” a Christian ministry, a word that emphasizes the personal, private nature of the vision—to picture to oneself. Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot conceive *and share* a vision of a ministry that supersedes gender boundaries.

Their ability to conceive of a different vision of Christianity relies in part on the presence, at any given time in history, of multiple forms of the religion (even within one religious denomination such as Anglicanism).¹⁶ The religious scene of the Victorian period included a wide variety of Christian denominations. Within the Church, one could be affiliated with the Oxford Movement/Tractarianism/High Church, meaning in general an emphasis on sacrament, ritual, and the tradition of the doctrines of theologians and not just the Bible. One could be affiliated with Evangelical/Low Church, tending toward an emphasis on tailoring the message of the Gospel to reach the wide social range of individuals in church on any given Sunday. Within the Established Church, one could also be affiliated with the Broad Church movement which emphasized the common roots of all Christian denominations rather than their doctrinal differences.

The Church as a single unit itself was also losing its establishment nature; over the course of the Victorian period, membership in the Church of England came to coincide less and less with citizenship of the country. As the numbers of Nonconformists, or Dissenters, rose, the Church became one among many competing Christian institutions. Nonconformist groups included Methodists, who by mid-century had long since institutionalized and removed themselves from the Church; Primitive Methodists, Baptists, Quakers, and a variety of other denominations which generally placed less emphasis on the sacramental and more emphasis on ministering to the individual were also Dissenters.

In essence, each of these groups had a different image of what it meant to be a true Christian church and what the church’s mission should be. Each attempt to define the Christian

church's mission included a definition of ministry and a distinction between the roles of the laity and the clergy. Thomas O'Meara, in *Theology and Ministry*, writes that each society fosters its own theology of ministry and that the Christian church, "rather than being eternal and perfect, is eminently historical," as are the goals of ministry (16-20). Lynn Rhodes, in *Co-Creating: A Feminist Vision of Ministry* agrees that no one description of ministry will fit what it should be and is like in every time period or place (120).¹⁷ During the Victorian period, as in other eras, a theology and definition of ministry was developed, contested, and modified to fit the changing needs of each church's members. In the absence of one defining model and surrounded by competing ideals, it is not surprising that Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot would propose their own models of Christian ministry.

It is also not surprising because Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot investigated their own beliefs and the doctrines of various Christian denominations. Each did more than practice a religion (or not practice a religion, as in the case of Eliot) based on what others were doing or saying. These three women were not afraid to espouse ideas which opposed the orthodox Christian opinions of the Church and even of many Dissenting denominations, and thus would not have hesitated to challenge the very structure of Christian ministry.

This intellectual courage and originality is evident in Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot's letters. Three examples demonstrate the ways in which they carefully considered religious issues and were capable of beliefs which took them outside of the boundaries of official Christian institutional thought. Anne Brontë's letter to Reverend David Thom expresses her disagreement with "orthodox" Christian views of the nineteenth century:

I was not aware the doctrine of Universal Salvation had so able and ardent an advocate as yourself; but I have cherished it from my very childhood—with a trembling hope at first, and afterwards with a firm and glad conviction of its truth. I drew it secretly from my own heart not from the word of God before I knew that any other held it. And since then it has ever been a source of true delight to me to find the same views either timidly suggested or boldly advocated by benevolent and thoughtful minds; and I now believe there are many more believers than professors in that consoling creed. Why good men should be so averse to admit it, I know not;—into their own hearts at least, however they might object to its promulgation among the bulk of mankind. But perhaps the world is not ripe for it yet. (Barker, *Letters* 220-21)

Brontë's letter indicates her awareness that the doctrine of universal salvation opposes the professed creed of most Christians, certainly of Christian institutions, including that to which she belongs. Despite this knowledge, Brontë illustrates her willingness to continue to espouse this belief and to provide in narrative form, in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, "as many hints in support of the doctrine as I could venture to introduce into a work of that description" (Barker, *Letters* 221). Not only was Brontë willing to believe a controversial doctrine, she was willing to publicly profess that belief in a narrative form, "boldly disseminating God's truth and leaving that to work its way" (Barker, *Letters* 221).

Similarly, Gaskell expresses her understanding of denominational differences and her willingness to oppose orthodox Christian doctrines. Writing in 1854 to her daughter Marianne, Gaskell shared her attraction to Church services, agreeing with Marianne that she finds herself “feeling more devotional in Church than in Chapel; and I wish our Puritan ancestors had not left out so much that they might have kept in of the beautiful and impressive Church service” (*Letters* 198a). Despite her shared “preference for the Church-service,” she cautions Marianne against attending the morning service because there are parts of the Litany which seem to Gaskell “so distinctly to go against some of the clearest of our Saviour’s words in which he so expressly tells us to pray to God alone” (198a). While she believes that attending the Church service would encourage “a temptation *not* to have a fixed belief,” Gaskell also acknowledges that she believes one must be at the same time open to possibilities as to the nature of God and able to define that nature for oneself:

It is wrong not to clear our minds as much as possible as to the nature of that God, and tender Saviour, whom we can not love properly unless we try and define them clearly to ourselves. Do you understand me my darling! I have often wished to talk to you about this. Then the only thing I *am* clear and sure about is this that Jesus Christ was not equal to His father; that, however divine a being he was *not* God; and that worship as God addressed to Him is therefore wrong in me; and that it is my duty to deny myself the gratification of constantly attending a service (like the morning service) in a part of which I thoroughly disagree, I like exceedingly going to afternoon service. But I must leave this subject now. (*Letters* 198a)

Gaskell is fully aware of the ways in which her Unitarian beliefs contradict the teachings of the Church; her attraction to the Established Church, though necessarily held in check, is evidence of her ability to “clear” her mind and remain open to varying images of God.

Eliot’s controversial views on religion and Christianity in particular are well-known. However, while some biographers and critics portray her complete rejection of Christianity, she maintained the “profoundest interest in the inward life of sincere Christians in all ages” (*Letters* 3: 231). Describing her “religious point of view” to Harriet Beecher Stowe in an 1869 letter, Eliot writes:

I believe that religion too has to be modified—‘developed,’ according to the dominant phrase—and that a religion more perfect than any yet prevalent, must express less care for personal consolation, and a more deeply-awing sense of responsibility to man, springing from sympathy with that which of all things is most certainly known to us, the difficulty of the human lot. (*Letters* 5: 31)

Writing to Stowe again on November 11, 1874, Eliot argues: “Will you not agree with me that there is one comprehensive Church whose fellowship consists in the desire to purify and ennoble human life, and where the best members of all narrower churches may call themselves brother and sister in spite of differences?” (6: 89). While these examples indicate her desire for what

could be called a religious humanism, Eliot's language still echoes ideas of Church and a spiritual community. The latter statement suggests that members of all churches, those who thoughtfully consider the matter, would be able to come together and unite because at the root of each denomination lies the same purpose. Eliot's almost latitudinarian avowal that all spiritual people share certain base principles and values was not one espoused by many within the Church's hierarchy.

Able to challenge the beliefs and practices of those who called themselves "Christians," Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot were capable of seeing alternatives, of believing in doctrines that were controversial, and of exploring for themselves the ramifications of institutional doctrines and their own beliefs. Their letters and their novels indicate their search for answers to questions about faith and religion—their own on-going spiritual journeys. Their willingness to oppose orthodox doctrines and espouse controversial, liberal beliefs is proof of the dynamic nature of Christianity, of spirituality, within the Victorian period. Furthermore, their controversial stances on other issues supports a reading of their novels as challenges to orthodox views of a gendered Christian ministry.¹⁸

Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot's works are part of the emerging nineteenth-century discussion about the intersection between Christianity and gender. Elizabeth Johnson writes that the goal of feminist theology "is not to make women equal partners in an oppressive system," but "to transform the system" of ministry as well (32). Because Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot engage in a revisioning of ministry and assert the equal capability of women to participate in that ministry, their works foreshadow the development of Christian feminism in the twentieth century. In the remainder of this introduction I will explain my choice of Christian feminism as a critical framework for this study, briefly explore the presence of Christian feminist ideals in the Victorian period, and outline the ways in which Christian feminist concepts of authority, power, care, and self-sacrifice will prove useful in analyzing these four novels.

In chapter two, I examine the historical debates which surrounded the accepted and proposed expansions of women's official roles within the ministry of Victorian England's various Christian denominations. The discussion about laywomen's relationship to the church and its ministry can be connected to the sometimes heated responses from laymen to a hierarchical church. As new opportunities for women's ministry evolved, discussion frequently focused on differentiation from clerical ministry, restricted authority, and official recognition.

The third chapter demonstrates that these historical discussions were reflected in a number of Victorian novels. An examination of the breadth and depth of these novelistic responses to proposed new ministries for women defines the literary context within which *Agnes Grey*, *Ruth*, *Janet's Repentance*, and *Adam Bede* were written. First, I include a brief survey of a number of novels which discuss women's proper roles in different ministerial offices. Second, I analyze the juxtaposition of clerical and female characters in works by Frances Trollope, Charlotte Yonge, Margaret Oliphant, Elizabeth Missing Sewell, Felicia Skene, and other prominent novelists of the middle of the century. Their presentations of women's ministry

can be distinguished from those of Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot; however, the prevalence of these ideas in mid-nineteenth century novels further supports the validity of closely examining this aspect of Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot's works.

In the fourth chapter I begin my close analysis of the four central texts of this study, starting with *Agnes Grey* and continuing chronologically through the other three texts in chapters five, six, and seven. In each of these chapters, I examine the various ways in which Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot create a positive, sustained comparison of the female and clerical characters in terms of physical, moral, and spiritual characteristics. These connections suggest that each author wishes the reader to compare the two characters, sometimes from the very beginning of the novel. Then, I present the ways in which the preaching and pastoral ministries of Agnes and Mr. Weston, Ruth and Mr. Benson, Janet and Mr. Tryan, and Dinah Morris and Mr. Irwine are equated within the four novels. In their portrait of ministry, Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot reconstruct its very definition in order to allow women to participate fully in the church's mission and in order to emphasize the need to empower others rather than to assert a hierarchical power *over* others.

In order to construct such a vision of ministry, Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot adapt ideas of the time about the clergy's responsibilities. Socio-historians Anthony Russell in *The Clerical Profession* (1980) and Brian Heeney in *The Women's Movement in the Church of England 1850-1930* (1988) define three duties that a clergyman was believed to fulfill in the mid-nineteenth century: leading public worship and celebrating the sacraments, preaching from the pulpit, and visiting and caring for parishioners (A. Russell 53-129; Heeney, *Women's* 78). While these novels do not encompass sacramental issues—the one duty in which no layperson could participate—they do address the last two aspects of a clergyman's duties, namely, preaching and pastoral ministry.¹⁹ Each novel de-emphasizes the traditional preaching of sermons from the pulpit and creates opportunities for the laity, both men and women, to participate in forms of nontraditional preaching. Each novel depicts alternative, often informal, methods of moral teaching which allow the laity, particularly women, to participate more fully in this aspect of a clergyman's duties. Each of the novels also strongly focuses on the third of the clergyman's duties, pastoral ministry. Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot portray equal pastoral ministries successfully undertaken by the main female characters.

After concluding my discussion of the ways in which each individual novel equates the ministries of the heroine and major clerical character, my conclusion offers a brief examination of the connections among these four novelistic portrayals of women and Christian ministry. Finally, I connect these novels to the contemporary struggles over gender and authority which are still with many, if not all, Christian denominations today.

Why Christian feminism?

While the presence of religion in *Agnes Grey*, *Ruth*, *Janet's Repentance*, and *Adam Bede* is evident upon reading the novels, my choice of Christian feminism as an interpretative

framework merits some explanation.²⁰ I do not intend to argue that Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot considered themselves to be what the term Christian feminist has come to mean in the twentieth century. However, in recent years there has been an increase in the number of literary analyses which successfully utilize one or more branches of Christian feminist theory in conjunction with studies of both contemporary texts written with an understanding of today's theory and texts from the past when there was no such unified field of study. These analyses demonstrate that Christian feminist theory and literary analysis are compatible and can be mutually enhancing.²¹ For my analysis of the novels by Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot, Christian feminism is a fitting choice for several reasons.

First, Christian feminist theory focuses on the *connections* between Christianity and feminism. While Christianity is a historical movement, a political structure, and an ideological construct and so can be studied through Marxist, New Historicist, or feminist perspectives, it is also a dynamic faith community with doctrines and ideas building upon centuries of thought. Christian feminist scholarship focuses on Christianity as historical, political, and ideological, but includes this history of faith community, doctrine, and thought. Using Christian feminism as the framework for my analysis is a logical choice; since the four novels I focus on are suffused with Christianity, a feminist interpretation should take into account the influence that Christianity has within the novel and had on the novelist. Feminist theorists do discuss issues relating to Christianity and its effects on gender ideology, but this is a secondary focus. Christian feminism provides a framework for these novels that places at its center the same intersections of gender ideology and Christianity which are found in these four novels.

Second, Christian feminism explores terms such as power, authority, service, self-sacrifice, and ministry within the context of Christianity. While feminist theorists also examine and define such terms, a Christian feminist focus often takes into account scriptural and doctrinal meanings which are not present or prominent in a general feminist stance. For example, Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982) and Joan Tronto's *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for An Ethic of Care* (1993) could be used as the primary framework within which to investigate the caretaking ministries of the female characters in these four novels. Missing from such an analysis, however, would be the Christian connotations of service and self-sacrifice as empowering that are found in the historical Christ's ministry and in biblical texts with which Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot would have been familiar.

Susan A. Ross' *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (1998) shows that Christian feminist ethics shares common ground with Gilligan and Tronto's feminist ethics in relation to care, the family, and love (180-86). However, Ross then applies those concepts to her study of Christian sacraments (187-202) demonstrating that in such a specific context the same terminology can take on additional meanings. In the works of Kaye Ashe, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Carol Becker, Joan Chittister, Letty Russell, and other Christian feminists there are definitions of concepts such as power, authority, service, and self-sacrifice as related to Christian ministry that will enhance our understanding of these novels.

Third, Christian feminism points out the dynamic nature of Christianity. Large religious

institutions are slow to change. As a result, novels with much religious content can easily be viewed as implicitly accepting an institutional and patriarchal Christianity. Christian feminist texts serve as reminders that in any time period, Christianity is not only a set of doctrines (which might not be as unified or fixed as it might appear), but a dynamic community of believers. While a hierarchical church may profess unity of belief, the community of believers is involved in a constant discussion of the church's structure and mission. *Agnes Grey*, *Ruth*, *Janet's Repentance*, and *Adam Bede* reflect this dynamic nature of Victorian Christianity.²²

Fourth, contemporary discussions of women and ministry in Christianity clearly articulate how women were and are excluded from Christian ministry, drawing our attention to the difference between a ministry based on gender complementarity and an equal ministry. Joan Chittister's Foreword to Kaye Ashe's *The Feminization of the Church?* argues that in today's Roman Catholic church "what is lacking, of course, is the inclusion of women in the structures of the church itself, not as tokens or as observers but as members, as authorities, as ministers, as women" (viii). Chittister goes on to say that many in the Roman Catholic church still propose a unique and distinct role for women within ministry (Foreword, *Feminization* viii). Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza states that the Christian churches today and in the past have allowed only men to be the public and visible representative of the institution (Editorial xi). Ashe, in the introduction to *The Feminization of the Church?*, argues that the Roman Catholic church today must allow women to be creators of religious culture, not just consumers, that women must "add their voices to the discourse on Christian ethics and claim their authority as responsible moral agents," and the ministry in every form must be open to women (Ashe xiii).

The language of these modern-day Christian feminists defines the essential difference between a ministry based on the complementarity of men and women and one based on equal participation in the church's mission. Concern with visible, public, official representation and participation in the creation of religious culture for a society is different than a desire for simply a role within Christianity, any role, even one that maintains gender boundaries in defining activities. Ashe's text is an example of how Christian feminists remind us of subtle differences, such as that between deciding what constitutes moral behavior and teaching that predetermined moral behavior (31). These distinctions underlie discussions of women in religion in the Victorian period as well; consequently, Christian feminist texts help to define the parameters of the debate.

Finally, the use of Christian feminism shows the relevance of these literary texts to our contemporary times. Today, women are still not allowed into the ordained ministry of the Roman Catholic church. (Nuns take vows but are not ordained and women cannot be ordained deacons.) While in most Protestant churches women can now be ordained ministers, they continue to encounter strong opposition from some male clergy and from both male and female parishioners who work to prevent their successful assumption of a parish (Becker 16, 58; Ashe 135). Many feminists and Christian feminists have noted that knowing the past difficulties and gains of women in terms of authoritative, recognized roles in society is important to the continuing movement toward greater equality in the future. Thus, noting the connections between

the dialogue in the mid-nineteenth century and today is essential to further growth.

Roots of Christian feminism in Victorian England

While using Christian feminism as a framework for studying Victorian novels may appear to anachronistically place modern concepts onto the texts, the same roots that Christian feminists uncover today within Christian texts were present for women of the nineteenth century to observe. Modern biblical scholars point to two traditions within the New Testament and the early Christian communities. The first is one of Jesus' radicalism: talking to women about the Torah (forbidden in Jewish society), or accepting women who traditionally would be rejected as immoral. This first tradition led to women's active ministry in the early church as deacons and leaders of Christian communities (Carr 48). Evidence of this ministry which appears in Paul's letters and elsewhere in the Christian Scriptures (Schüssler Fiorenza, *Memory* 47-48) could have been found by women of the nineteenth century as it is by women of the twentieth. The second tradition arose with the solidification of the church into an institution, the separation of the ordained ministry from the baptized call of all Christians, and the emergence of a pattern which drew upon pre-Christian cultural associations of women with chaos, evil, and sin. This led to the eventual suppression of women as active ministers and justified the subordination of women to the theological and spiritual authority of men (Carr 48).

The nineteenth century's Evangelical tradition of a close, personal study of the Bible certainly encouraged Victorians, including women, to carefully read, interpret, and apply Scripture to their daily lives. Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot all have connections to a tradition that would have encouraged individual scriptural study: Anne's father, Patrick, was an Evangelical clergyman within the Church; George Eliot was also influenced by Evangelical teachers; Gaskell's Nonconformist Unitarian beliefs endorsed a careful study of Scripture.

Added to this emphasis on individual study of the Bible was a newly popular critical approach to the Bible as a historical text, Christ as a historical figure, and Scripture as not divinely inspired but socially created. Originating in Germany and referred to in English as "Higher Criticism" of the Bible, this approach had a great influence on Eliot in particular; however, it created an atmosphere in which all three authors could have discovered for themselves the translation, interpretation, and social-historical debates surrounding many of the biblical quotations cited to prevent women from undertaking a ministerial role in the church.²³

Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849) is one of the earliest and most well-known Victorian novels which engages in just such a debate over biblical translation and contextual analysis. The two main female characters, Shirley Keeldar and Caroline Helstone, debate a working-class male character about the Pauline dictates against women preaching or speaking in public. Caroline provides both a social-historical explanation, "he wrote that chapter for a particular congregation of Christians, under peculiar circumstances," and a hermeneutic explanation, "I dare say, if I could read the original Greek, I should find that many of the words have been wrongly translated, perhaps misapprehended altogether" (329). Additionally, the composition by Shirley that is later unearthed by Louis Moore and is included within the novel, "La Première

Femme Savante,” is a reinterpretation of the story of Adam and Eve, a rewriting of the origins of original sin, and a call to reexamine who has the right to “write the chronicle” of God’s will (485-90).

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) that Shirley’s essay “countenances female submission” (394). Sally Greene’s “Apocalypse When? Shirley’s Vision and the Politics of Reading” (1994) effectively counters that when viewed within Brontë’s specific Christian beliefs and the feminist debates surrounding her, the essay “does indeed pose a radical alternative to orthodox Christian patriarchy” (364). As it questions the social context of the creation story and presents an alternative myth, the novel illustrates that the climate of the time allowed women to reexamine issues of Christian doctrine, women’s nature, women’s subordination, and women’s role in Christianity.

The influence of individual and critical studies of the Bible could have led Victorian women, and doubtless did lead as in the case of Charlotte Brontë, to see something beyond the patriarchal Christian traditions. They could have seen an early church tradition of a plurality of ministries open to both men and women, or an official ministry in the Christianity of the Bible that was not tied to gender, just as these early practices are cited by Christian feminists today as support for a more inclusive ministry. There is certainly evidence that some of the same issues raised by Christian feminists today were considered by some mid-nineteenth century Christians.

Interestingly, most modern Christian feminist texts omit the nineteenth century in England when they engage in a historical retrospective of such proto-Christian feminist thought. For example, Rosemary Radford Ruether’s *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (1998) moves from medieval women mystics, to women in the Renaissance period and in seventeenth century Protestantism, to American women of the nineteenth century, and finally to twentieth century Western European feminist theology. The revised edition of Elizabeth A. Clark and Herbert Richardson’s *Women and Religion: The Original Sourcebook of Women in Christian Thought* (1996) also moves from medieval women mystics, to the Protestant and Catholic women’s responses to the Reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to the German Romantic period and its treatment of women in religion, and finally to the American women leaders in the nineteenth century.

This greater interest in nineteenth-century America than in England is perhaps justified by the more overt movements in the former. Nancy Hardesty, Lucille Sider Dayton, and Donald W. Dayton argue, in “Women in the Holiness Movement: Feminism in the Evangelical Tradition” (1979), that from the 1820s through the 1850s there was a stronger movement toward including women in the official ministry of various Christian denominations in America than there was in England at the same time (232-34). This movement resulted in Antoinette Brown’s ordination in the Congregational church in 1853.

It is not until the 1850s that any significant number of English women began to write non-fiction prose texts which explore the same issues of women and Christian ministry. Catherine Booth’s “Female Ministry; or, Woman’s Right to Preach the Gospel” (1859, 1861), Florence Nightingale’s *Suggestions for Thought to the Searchers after Religious Truth*

(published in 1860, but written and privately circulated in the early 1850s), and Frances Power Cobbe's "Woman's Work in the Church" (1865) and "The Fitness of Women for the Ministry" (1876) offer a theology of Christian ministry for women as their American counterparts had done earlier.²⁴ Julia Kavanagh's *Women of Christianity, Exemplary for Acts of Piety and Charity* (1852) studies nineteenth-century women such as Elizabeth Fry, who was herself a minister in the Society of Friends, and the working-class Sally Martin, who led the official Church services in a prison because there was no chaplain to do so (343-44, 363). Kavanagh also identifies women throughout history who played an active role in Christian ministerial work, including the early deaconesses of the church who were "included amongst the clergy" (14).²⁵

Despite the later date at which many of these works began to be published, Julie Melnyk argues in her introduction to *Women's Theology in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (1998) that earlier in the century, English women used nontraditional genres to discuss theology (xi-xii). *Agnes Grey*, *Ruth*, *Janet's Repentance*, and *Adam Bede* represent nontraditional formats which prove that women writers like Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot used the novel form to actively consider the same issues which were more directly discussed in later essays, particularly women's participation in official Christian ministry. At the center of their portrayals of the equal heraldic and pastoral ministries of the heroines and clergymen, Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot define key Christian terms related to authority, power, and self-sacrifice. In doing so, they engage in a revisioning of Christian ministry and question gendered categories of characteristics and behavior.

Preaching: Revisioning power and authority

The first way in which Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot present a ministry for their heroines which is equivalent to that of the clergy is through a de-emphasis of sermons delivered from the pulpit and an emphasis on other, more informal and interactive methods of moral teaching. That these three novelists de-emphasize sermons delivered by the clergy is especially interesting given the denominational background of the authors and of their fictional clergymen, all of whom are either Low Church/Evangelical, Dissenting, or Methodist. To each of these groups, preaching in an official capacity was a central part of a clergyman's duties. While the groups they represent focused less on the hierarchy and more on individual, informal interaction, sermons were still considered an essential part of the clergyman's duties.

Religious historian Anthony Russell states that during the Victorian Period, if not still today, "the sermon [was], for many, if not the characteristic activity of the clergyman, then certainly the most conspicuous element of his role" (85). Regardless of denominational affiliations, preaching was viewed by clergy and laity as a central aspect of the ordained ministry, and an important way in which to reach parishioners (A. Russell 92-93, 98). For Evangelical or Low Church clergy, such as Patrick Brontë or Mr. Weston in *Agnes Grey*, preaching was "the main ingredient in [their] ordinary professional activity; . . . in the words of Ashton Oxenden [clerical handbook writer] it was the 'prime duty . . . second to none'" (Heeney, *Different* 40).

The length of sermons and the great number which were published and sold to Victorians also indicate the genre's preeminence among clerical duties. While length was a debated issue at the time, a sermon which lasted anywhere from thirty minutes to one hour was common. Of the total time spent at service, usually one half or more was spent listening to the clergyman preach; for example, Patrick Brontë frequently conducted services which lasted for two hours, "of which it was invariably Patrick's custom to preach for an hour" (Lock and Dixon 176). The public's interest in such lengthy discourses in both oral and written form may indicate many things: a longer attention span than in the modern age; a greater number of people with a strong sense of religious duty; a desire to combat the growing sense of religious doubt; or a genuine interest in the policies and ideas of the state's Church leaders. For the working classes, oral sermons offered one of the only opportunities to receive information and news. Additionally, the public interest signifies the importance and respect felt by the congregation for this official duty of the clergy.

Additionally, Robert H. Ellison writes in *The Victorian Pulpit: Spoken and Written Sermons in Nineteenth-Century Britain* that the evidence remaining indicates that sermons were popular among the reading public, as much or more so than novels (46). While there is little reliable information on the exact sales figures for Victorian sermons, nor can we know how many were actively read once purchased, Ellison is not alone in claiming the popularity of sermons. Walter Houghton simply writes that "sermons outsold novels" (21). The vast numbers of oral and written sermons indicate that the clergy and congregations of all Christian denominations felt preaching to be a significant part of clerical duties.

Given the importance placed on sermons, their absence from these novels, which otherwise include a great number of religious elements, is intriguing. However, many Victorian novels that focus on clerical figures minimally address this aspect of their role. Since it was such a central part of the clergyman's duties, why do Victorian novels include so few sermons and such infrequent references to the ubiquitous clergyman dutifully composing his sermon? One potential reason for this is that a sermon, no matter how well-written, does not push the narrative forward; lengthy summaries of sermons could lose the reader's interest. Even passing references to such discourses might distance readers who did not agree with the doctrinal ideas expressed so directly.

In his study, *Forms of Speech in Victorian Fiction*, Raymond Chapman argues that most Victorian novels do not directly relate sermons to the reader because of the inherent respect felt by authors and their readers for that form of discourse; "a realistic sermon would have seemed out of place in even the more didactic type of novel, and a parody would have been distasteful to the majority" (93). Frequently, novelists instead included brief parodies of clerical characters and their more informal speeches, as Dickens does with Reverend Chadband in *Bleak House* (409-16). Or, narrators and other characters comment on the style, language, and content of sermons they heard.

For example, in Anthony Trollope's *The Small House at Allington* (1864), young Mr. Crosbie sits in church unable to listen to Mr. Boyce's sermon in large part because his thoughts

are occupied with whether or not he should marry Lily Dale or not. However, Trollope also argues that if Boyce's argument had been deeper, Crosbie might have been drawn in: "It is very hard, that necessity of listening to a man who says nothing" (122). Trollope, as Chapman contends, describes the sermon through the narrator's comments on its style and content. In doing so, Trollope also successfully integrates the sermon with the narrative; the reader is not distracted by the reference to the sermon and its flaws because Trollope places greater emphasis on its effect upon Crosbie, his main character. Trollope's novels, among others, do sometimes contain brief references to sermon-writing, showing the activity to be integral to a clergyman's duties, but there are very few Victorian novels which directly transcribe a sermon.²⁶

I would argue, however, that *Agnes Grey*, *Ruth*, *Janet's Repentance*, and *Adam Bede* represent another reason why an author might choose to de-emphasize traditional sermons. These four texts are distinct from a majority of other Victorian novels because of the replacement of traditional pulpit preaching with an extensive and successful practice of nontraditional preaching. Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot redefine the preaching role as more interactive, less formal and dogmatic. They disperse the heraldic role to various male and female characters, thus allowing women to take on an essential clerical role.

Unlike other Victorian novels, *Agnes Grey*, *Ruth*, *Janet's Repentance*, and *Adam Bede* are not greatly concerned with praising or preserving the hierarchical structures of the institutional Church. Sermons delivered from the pulpit are inherently one of power over those who listen. The complete power of the clergyman during a traditional sermon is intrinsic to the one-sided nature of the discourse which precludes participation by the listener. Such a sermon can not respond immediately to the arguments, concerns, or specific questions of the congregation.

In contrast, the informal preaching emphasized in these four novels is interactive, concerned with the individual, and motivated by a desire to have the listener empowered by its ideas in order to pursue good actions. Reducing the importance of a sermon delivered from the pulpit—one in which the hierarchy of the Church is highlighted (from bishop to clergyman, and finally, down to the laity)—Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot move away from a vision of a minister as occupying a position within this hierarchy to which women cannot aspire.

Contemporary Christian feminism indicates how a return to the model provided by Jesus' ministry in the Christian Scriptures can help in this revisioning of preaching by redefining concepts of power and authority. Carol Becker defines two contrasting images: power *over* others and power *with* others (23). The first is the most commonly assumed definition and includes connotations and denotations of force, command, control, and dominance. The second, which is much less often discussed, defines power as working with the consent and help of the people (Becker 23). Becker argues that when clergymen exert power *over* the laity, they enter into a potentially abusive relationship (Becker 164). To have power *with* others is to recognize one's capability for dominance, but to work to empower others rather than to solidify one's own position (Becker 164). Letty Russell refers to this second type of power as a partnership or recognition of interdependence (33).

Similarly, Joan Chittister takes the definitions of different types of power as outlined by psychiatrist Rollo May and places them in a Christian context, showing how they are acted out in Christian institutions. Chittister defines May's "exploitative power," which exists in hierarchical structures, as an individual using the other for the service of the self. Chittister then explores how in a Christian context this has been connected to the idea that some individuals are closer to God than others, consequently know what God's will is, and define God's will for the community (Chittister, *Job's* 12). She argues that a hierarchical church frequently manifests manipulative and competitive power by restricting decision-making to a select, predetermined group (ordained men) and limiting the images of minority groups within religion through the technique of tokenism. For example, a group of women saints can be used by the male hierarchy to show the inclusion of women in positions of respect (Chittister, *Job's* 28-29). As authorities in the church's hierarchy, clergymen also carefully direct and limit women's ministerial work.

In contrast to these forms of power, Chittister poses nurturant and integrative power which, like Letty Russell and Carol Becker's concepts, suggest that power can be devoted to enabling others and to mutual concern. Nurturant power works to "enable the other so that the members of the human community can be strengthened by one another's gifts" (Chittister, *Job's* 35-36). Integrative power is working "with others for the sake of the development of both parties" (Chittister, *Job's* 39-40). Both include working with others as equals, listening and learning from each other, and accepting that the Holy Spirit breathes the vocational call where it will, not just into a select, predetermined group (Chittister, *Job's* 43).

This integrative power is not a twentieth century creation, but is present in the biblical images of Christ which were studied so carefully during the nineteenth century. In *Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology*, Letty Russell demonstrates that the hierarchical concept of power as dominance is not "consonant with Christ's message" of service and care (24-25). She argues that the Gospels work to redefine power and authority, both in terms of humanity's relationship with God and in terms of religious leaders' relationship with the people at large (L. Russell 23-24). Within the Gospels, power and authority are not associated with competition and control, but rather with empowerment and service (L. Russell 23).²⁷

Elizabeth Johnson writes in *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (1992) that "Jesus' preaching, life-style, and relationships with others" depict an idea of God which subverts any form of domination. Discussing the references Jesus makes to God as "'abbâ,'" Johnson contends that "Jesus' Abba, in other words, is not a patriarchal figure who can be used to legitimate systems of oppression, including patriarchal rule, but a God of the oppressed" (81). The empowerment of the oppressed and the marginalized is a repeated theme throughout the Gospels. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's analysis of the Gospel of Mark points out that the text presents Jesus' ministry as one which "struggles to avoid the pattern of dominance and submission that characterizes its social-cultural environment. Those who are the farthest from the center of religious and political power, the slaves, the children, the gentiles, the women, become the paradigms of true discipleship" (*Memory* 323).

Through his more radical emphasis on the servanthood of all, the Jesus of the Gospels argues that his followers “will discover a new kind of power, a power exercised through service, which empowers the disinherited and brings all to a new relationship of mutual enhancement” (Ruether, *Sexism* 30). At the time of the historical Christ, placing value on a form of power which is mutually enhancing was counter cultural, subversive, and unexpected. Christ embodies this form of power in numerous Gospel stories in which sinners, lepers, the blind, and others who are sick are healed because their “faith” has been strong enough to heal them. In these instances, Christ does not assert a dominant power over the individual who is healed. Rather, when Christ offers healing and forgiveness to women and men who are outcasts because of illness or socially unacceptable actions such as adultery, he brings them back into the community. This empowers them to become productive members of the community and to live better lives.²⁸

Christ’s ministry portrayed in the Gospels rejects the image of power over others in favor of an egalitarian vision of power with others. While “the disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord,” the author of Matthew’s Gospel writes that “it is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord” (Matt. 10: 24-25). The Gospels explain that Jesus “rejects not only the use of religion to sanctify dominant hierarchies but also the temptation to use prophetic language simply to justify the revenge of the oppressed” (Ruether, *Sexism* 29). Christ does not call for an overturning of the power structures, but a revisioning of power itself.

However, while Jesus’ dismantling of many common dualisms (slave/free, Jew/Greek, male/female) can be seen in the Gospels, the Pauline and post-Pauline church reasserted many of the hierarchical and patriarchal relationships which Christ had subverted (Ruether, *Sexism* 33). Although within Christian institutions the image of patriarchal submission “has won out over [the Gospels’] sociological and theological stress on altruistic love and ministerial service,” it cannot be justified theologically (Schüssler Fiorenza, *Memory* 334). Thus, to conceive of a Christian ministry which returns to Christ’s subversion of hierarchical and patriarchal structures offers a challenge to the institutional church which developed from the post-Pauline texts.

Within *Agnes Grey*, *Ruth*, *Janet’s Repentance*, and *Adam Bede*, it is integrative and nurturant forms of power which are represented in the informal sermons delivered by members of the laity and clergy alike. Like the model presented through Christ’s use of parables, these informal sermons capitalize on the immediate concerns of the listeners, often use a narrative style to enhance the interest of the listeners, and frequently avoid a prescriptive tone, choosing instead to allow listeners to apply the lesson to their lives. Christ uses parables to explain the “mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” because those who listen “seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand” (Matt. 13: 11-13). As Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot emphasize the importance and validity of informal preaching, they return to Christ’s vision of empowering others when teaching; they revision Christian institutional ministry as a non-hierarchical, individually-interactive heraldic ministry carried out by both men and women.

Pastoral ministry: Revisioning care and self-sacrifice

Pastoral ministry is the second aspect of a clergyman's duties which Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot equate with the work undertaken by their heroines. Women of the nineteenth century were encouraged to sacrifice their own wishes in order to fulfill their familial duties. While the image of Eve as temptress moved to the background in the Victorian period, images of a self-sacrificing Christ were used, and continue to be used in some denominations, to endorse a passive, silent role for women within a Christian society (Carr 163). Kaye Ashe, in *The Feminization of the Church?*, writes that even today "women approach this image of Jesus as the weak, powerless and suffering servant with understandable caution. History and cultural conditioning have cast them too readily in the role of self-sacrificing victims, destined to abort their own growth to full personhood in the interest of helping the men in their lives attain theirs" (142).

At the heart of many feminists' concern with the ideal of self-sacrifice is the assumption that it reduces one's power and, for women, entails submission to patriarchal structures. In "A (Qualified) Defense of Liberal Feminism" (1987), Susan Wendell argues that "self-sacrifice and over-identifying with others" too often hinder women's abilities to "co-operate in opposing oppressive social institutions and creating alternatives to them" (83). According to this analysis, self-sacrifice does not oppose patriarchal norms. In *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (1993), and in her earlier essay, "Women and Caring: What Can Feminists Learn about Morality from Caring" (1989), Joan Tronto agrees. Associating self-sacrificing with care-giving, Tronto writes that women who accept a care-giving role often also bear "the burden of accepting traditional gender divisions in a society that devalues what women do" ("Women" 184). Self-sacrifice is a particularly dangerous concept for the very reason that "those who are most likely to be too self-sacrificing are likely to be the relatively powerless in society" (Tronto, *Moral* 141).

The solution, as Sarah Lucia Hoagland sees it in "Some Thoughts About 'Caring'" (1991), is a replacement for "an ethics located in principles and duty" with one that does not slide into unhealthy practices of self-sacrifice (261). Instead, the alternative ethics "must provide for the possibility of ethical behavior in relation to what is foreign, it must consider analyses of oppression, it must acknowledge a self that is both related and separate, and it must have a vision of, if not a program for, change" (Hoagland 261). This new ethics must affirm "a diminishment of dominance and subordination" (Hoagland 252).

However, this definition of a new ethics of caring is almost identical to that which is embodied in Christ's ministry. The Gospel accounts portray Jesus as supportive of "ethical behavior in relation to what is foreign"; although Samaritans were outside of Jesus' own Jewish community (John 4: 7) and Hebrew Scriptures depict them as idolatrous and rebellious (Hos. 7: 17, 13: 16; Ezek. 16: 46-55, 23: 1-39), Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan uses one of these outsiders as the model of love of neighbor (Luke 10: 29-37). Jesus' words and actions call on the Jewish population to "consider analyses of oppression"; he is critical of the legalism of Pharisees, Sadducees, and other members of the priestly castes who assert unjust authority

over the Jewish people (Luke 6: 1-5, 18: 11-12; Matt. 23: 3-36). Jesus' words and actions contain a vision of profound reform; in the Gospel of John, Jesus moves beyond the law of Moses, which called for the stoning of the woman who had committed adultery. Instead, he does not condemn the woman and reminds those who would condemn her of their own sins (John 8: 2-11).

Finally, and most importantly to my discussion here, Christ's example of self-sacrifice relies on acknowledging a self that is distinct from and related to others. The Gospels do not advocate self-sacrifice as self-destruction. Rather, Christ asserts that the sacrifice of one's own interests to aid another individual leads ultimately to the restoration of the self. Christ proclaims: "He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it. He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me" (Matt. 10: 39-40).²⁹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, in *Sexism and God-Talk* (1983), writes that within Christ's message, "Service to others does not deplete the person who ministers, but rather causes her (or him) to become more liberated" (207).

Christian feminist Anne Carr writes that "while self-sacrifice is central to the Christian idea of love, there has to be a healthy and free self before genuine and responsible self-giving can occur" (58). Crucial to the Christian understanding of self-sacrifice is the recognition that it does not entail a denial of self-identity; indeed, self-identity is essential. One cannot sacrifice what one cannot identify. John Shelby Spong writes in *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (1998) that Christ was "one who knew who he was" and did not allow definitions supplied by others to become part of His "self-definition" (127). Spong argues that it was because of this firm sense of self-identity that Christ was able to sacrifice himself on the cross (127-32).

This particular understanding of self-sacrifice within a Christian context was, Walter E. Houghton argues, known to Victorians. In *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, Houghton distinguishes between two prominent ideals of self-sacrifice within the Victorian period, acknowledging that the Christian form was truly "self-renunciation" rather than "self-oblivion" (282). To renounce one's own interests in favor of another's depends on knowing one's interests and willingly denying them. This is different from a self-oblivion or self-abnegation which destroys the self and leaves the powerless with no voice. Consequently, within a Christian feminist definition, to sacrifice one's self is not to lose the power to define the self. Thus, while the dominant Christian gender ideology of the Victorian period may have asserted that women were called to sacrifice self-development and self-identity in service to fathers, husbands, brothers, or sons, those who carefully examined the Gospels could see the specious nature of the assertion that this was divinely-ordained. Christ's precedent for self-sacrifice was vastly different and his call was to men and women.

Christian feminists today also insist that self-sacrifice does not automatically include submission to a controlling power. Ruether writes that a call to a ministry of service or self-sacrifice

is not a call to become the passive supporter of the public order or the toady of the

powerful in the Church or society. Rather, ministry means exercising power in a new way, as a means of liberation of one another . . . Ministry overcomes competitive one-up, one-down relationships and generates relations of mutual empowerment. (*Sexism* 207)³⁰

One sacrifices personal interests to a goal or mission, not necessarily to a distinct individual in a hierarchy formed by humans.

Within the Christian Scriptures, Christ's self-sacrifice is often active and sometimes subversive (Carr 174-75). For example, Christ's ultimate self-sacrifice, the acceptance of death, subverted the expectations of his followers and challenged the dichotomies of life and death, king and servant. In *Women and Redemption*, Ruether alludes to the political and social turmoil of Jewish society at the time of John the Baptist and Jesus: "There were spontaneous and more organized violent street protests against Roman insults to Jewish religious sensibilities. There were popular bandits, such as Judas the Galilean, who in 6 C.E. organized a revolutionary resistance group" (15). There were also struggles within Judaism as some groups and individuals claimed the prophetic right to define how such revolutions against the Romans should be conducted.

Many of the Jewish people anticipated the arrival of a Messiah who would overthrow the Romans, leading the people to a unified kingdom on earth after overturning the social and political power structures which oppressed them. The Gospels present the apostles' persistent misunderstandings of Jesus' messianism. The writers of the Gospels point out that Christ's acceptance of death overturned the expectations of the Jewish people. As Jesus emphasizes his role as "suffering servant," the dichotomies of king and servant are reversed with the insistence that those in power must serve. This service will lead toward an egalitarian community. Schüssler Fiorenza writes that "Jesus' death—understood as the liberation of many people—prohibits any relationship of dominance and submission." For example, as Christ has done, leaders must recognize their equality with servants (*Memory* 318).

Thus, within a context which returns to the model of Christ, the movement toward self-sacrifice does not coincide with submission to a dominant ideology. Christ opposed the dominant ideology regarding the role of the Messiah and the proper roles of leader and servant. However, did Christ's egalitarian vision include a destruction of the hierarchical structures defining the positions of women and men? Schüssler Fiorenza notes that although the Gospels were written at a time when other New Testament authors clearly were attempting to adapt the role of women within the Christian community to that of patriarchal society and religion, it is all the more remarkable that not one story or statement is transmitted in which Jesus demands the cultural patriarchal adaptation and submission of women. (*Memory* 52-53)

In one of three feminist midrashes on the Gospels which begin Ruether's *Sexism and God-Talk*, she strives to expose the underlying significance of biblical stories related to women.

Imagining the response of the male apostles to Jesus' actions, Ruether writes: "The women, that was the most puzzling part of his behavior. He insisted on treating them as equals. He even supported their right to be members of the fellowship of disciples gathered around him, instead of staying in the kitchen and preparing the food, like proper women of Israel" (Ruether, *Sexism* 5).

The active presence of women in the discipleship of Christ can most easily be seen in the Gospel of John. Schüssler Fiorenza points out that John's Gospel presents a society in which the discipleship and leadership are shared equally by men and women. Women have a prominent place in the Johannine community and the Gospel describes the apostles as "'shocked' that Jesus converses and reveals himself to a woman. The evangelist emphasizes, however, that the male disciples knew better than to openly question and challenge Jesus' egalitarian praxis" (Schüssler Fiorenza, *Memory* 326).

John Shelby Spong points out that although Jewish law considered speaking with women in public to be dangerous, Jesus repeatedly entered into dialogues with women, treating them as equal adults, capable of understanding his message and deserving of answers to their questions. Although Jesus "lived in a world where cultural barriers were drawn that defined women as subhuman," he welcomed into discipleship a group of women, including Mary Magdalene (Spong 124). Furthermore, the paradigms of discipleship found in the women of John and Mark's Gospels are not just paradigms for women but for all who would follow Jesus (333).

As he moved past the barriers of prejudice in relation to Samaritans and Gentiles, so too did Jesus accept women, even in situations where they were to be most avoided. According to the Torah and Jewish practice at the time, women who were menstruating were seen as impure and "not worthy of human contact" (Spong 124). Despite this prohibition, when Jesus' cloak is touched by a woman with a chronic menstrual discharge, a touch his disciples would have found "defiling," he responds with "acceptance, love, and healing (Mark 5: 24-34)" (Spong 125).

Christ's egalitarian treatment of women, a "major cultural revolution [which] seems to have been identified with Jesus" (Spong 124) indicates that his vision did support a destruction of the hierarchical structures defining the subordinate position of women. Consequently, as expressed in the Gospels, Christ's principles do not suggest that women alone must lose their individual selves or submit to a patriarchal structure.³¹ As Christ's self-sacrifice is never passive or forced, so women must not be forced to accept a role of self-sacrifice because of their gender (Carr 175). Instead, the Gospels call on all those who would enter into the work of following Christ—the ministry of Christ—to engage in enhancing and empowering practices of self-sacrifice. The practice of self-sacrifice in this context is an ideal of Christian ministry. As Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot illustrate, all Christians are called to the ideal of self-sacrifice, not just women. Ministers are called to a particularly focused lifelong service to others.

The goal of this revisioned self-sacrifice is to create a system of power *with* others. While the concept of self-sacrifice as empowering others is central to the message of the New

Testament (Carr 58), it is potentially dangerous to the church as institution. To empower others through service and self-sacrifice is to work toward change in structures so that there are no servants (L. Rhodes 82). Christ's model of service disrupts the hierarchical and patriarchal vision of Christian institutional ministry. The goal of equality is consonant with a vision of interdependent power, not with a power of control or dominance. For this reason, Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot's revisioning of self-sacrifice and pastoral ministry subverts patriarchal, hierarchical norms, following instead Christ's vision of ministry.

Agnes Grey, *Ruth*, *Janet's Repentance*, and *Adam Bede* present revisionings of the concepts of power, authority, service, and self-sacrifice which simultaneously prefigure modern-day Christian feminist views and return to a definition of Christ's ministry which existed before the institutional church's development. The creative and imaginative potential of fiction allows writers to explore potential visions that might be deemed outside the realm of the possible by other thinkers. Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot move outside the patriarchal view of Christianity in their novels to present a ministry that allows for equal and not complementary participation for women and men in Christian ministry.

Werner Jeanrond's essay "Literary Imagination, Theological Thinking, and Christian Praxis" (1995) offers an important acknowledgment of how literature can contest the dominant Christian thinking of a time period. Jeanrond writes that

literary texts can function as challenges to the Christian thinker by pointing to forgotten and neglected dimensions of the divine-human relationship. But they can do even more: precisely by disturbing the discursive activity of theologians they may not only offer new material for more and different doctrinal systems or question the point of doctrinal systems altogether; they may also redirect the very focus of the theological exercise to the aims of Christian praxis. (80)

Jeanrond questions, "is it not the imaginative possibility of radical surprise, of radical otherness through which literature does at times challenge theological thinking?" (82) Jeanrond's point is that the very fictitiousness of literary texts allows them to present new visions of Christianity that might not otherwise be imagined by theological thinkers.

Choosing the method open to them, Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot used the powerful form of fictional narrative to convey a critique of the church and its ministry. In some sense, every Christian who writes a novel with prominent, significant clerical figures makes a statement about his or her own ideas about ministry, the church, and the church's work. These works by Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot are no exception. As the opening quotations from Elizabeth Sewell's novel and the 1850 review of *Woman's Mission* illustrate, Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot were not alone in reconsidering women's position within Christianity. In chapter three, I will examine other literary texts that reflect this increasing interest. First, I will explore the historical discussions that surrounded Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot as they wrote, grounding the novels' juxtapositions of women and clergymen in their historical context.

Notes

¹ Since I am concerned with women's participation within the official Church of England, within various Nonconformist denominations, and, at times, within Roman Catholicism, it is necessary to set up certain parameters regarding titles. I will distinguish through capitalization between the *Church* of England as the official state Anglican Church (the Established Church) and the Christian *church*, encompassing all Christian denominations at that time in England. Nonconformist or Dissenting groups will be distinguished by specific references to Methodism, etc. when such distinctions are necessary. Evangelicalism here always refers to the reform movement within the Church of England.

² Although "ministry" during the Victorian period also held a governmental or political meaning, I use the terms "minister," "ministerial," and "ministry" in reference to a religious clerical vocation. Also, in order to avoid the awkwardness of "clergyman/clergywoman," I use "minister" and its variants as gender neutral terms. For example, my use of "ministry" allows me to refer to the work equivalent to that of a nineteenth-century clergyman in England without affiliating that work solely with men.

³ An important distinction is made in this passage from the novel. Margaret imagines what life as a man would be like, which would include the possibility of a clerical vocation; she does not imagine what it would be like to be a woman working as a minister. However, as a woman she does wish to work in order to "extend the kingdom of Christ upon earth" (Sewell 1: 180). Thus, she seeks a form of ministry equivalent to that offered to men.

⁴ The author distinguishes between the clergy of the Church and the clergy of the unofficial, Nonconformist denominations in England by discussing *Dissenting* clergymen. Because they were not ordained by the Church, the suggestion that women participate in the ministerial work of Dissenting clergymen was perhaps not as threatening to prevailing ideas of women's roles in Christianity as would have been the suggestion that women enter into the male realm of the Church's ordained clergy.

⁵ While Carol Bauer and Laurence Ritt, in *Free and Ennobled: Source Readings in the Development of Victorian Feminism*, list the author of this article as T. H. Rearden (22), the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* refers to the author as Adams, first name unknown (3: 612). The article itself is signed "Is. Is.," a signature which *Wellesley* associates with Adams. Which version of *Woman's Mission* is being reviewed is also unclear; Elizabeth Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets, and William Veeder maintain that Sarah Lewis' *Woman's*

Mission is given a “rhapsodic” review in this article (128), but the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* makes no such notation and the article itself does not refer to Lewis’ text in particular. The preponderance of texts under a similar title that were published in the first half of the nineteenth century makes it difficult to say with certainty that it was Lewis’ text. However, her text was first published in 1839 and was extremely popular. Thus, it is possible that by 1850 it would have been in a thirteenth edition and so could be the text that is reviewed.

Charlotte Brontë wrote to Elizabeth Gaskell in August 1850 about this particular review, evidence that Gaskell may have read it as well. Charlotte writes that the review is correct in urging women to work toward the “amelioration of our condition” and in recognizing that men must work within the public social system to increase women’s opportunities (Shorter 163-64). Gaskell’s reply to Brontë has, unfortunately, been lost.

⁶ When I refer to the dominant Christian gender ideology, I mean that which had the largest effect on the greatest group of people, primarily that ideology which underlay the doctrines, structures, and customs of the time. Because of the overwhelming presence of Christianity in Victorian society, it can be assumed that the dominant Christian gender ideology had a significant effect on the society as a whole. Furthermore, I do not intend to suggest that no other currents of thought existed.

However, even the assumption of a dominant ideology has been problematized in recent years. For example, many now question the impact that an ideology of separate spheres may have had on Victorian society. Susan Morgan argues in *Sisters in Time: Imagining Gender in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (1989) that “no convincing historical argument exists to support the conclusion that the ideology of the angel in the house had the status of a dominant ideology” (10). Historian Amanda Vickery questions whether the language of separate spheres which kept the female “angel” in the house was a description, a prescription, or a desperate defensive position on the part of those who opposed women’s entrance into the public world of work. Vickery insists, however, that “the vocabulary of public and private spheres” had “currency” in the Victorian period, particularly in religious institutions—which are my focus here (400). Linda K. Kerber’s focus is on America in “Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History” (1989), but her point can be applied to Victorian England as well; Kebler writes, “the evidence that the woman’s sphere is a social construction lies in part in the hard and constant work required to build and repair its boundaries” (28).

On this debate over “separate spheres” ideology, see also Nancy Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987) and Mary Poovey’s *Uneven Developments* (1988). Poovey argues that “the middle-class ideology we most often associate with the Victorian period was both contested and always under construction; because it was always in the making, it was always open to revision, dispute, and the emergence of oppositional formulations” (3). Her focus on controversies that developed in the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s points to this period in particular as an unstable one for gender ideology (Poovey 4).

With regard to the debate over whether there existed any one dominant ideology within Victorian Christianity with regard to gender, my position is that although constantly contested, there was a continual attempt to assert the necessary and divinely-ordained subordination of women and to focus their activities within the home. That this attempt was often carried out in the spheres of law and religion made it a significant force within society.

⁷This definition of patriarchy shows the interconnected relationship between matters of class and gender. This connection will appear again in my discussion of Anne Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot's novels; as each challenges a patriarchal vision of women's religious roles, each also often presents challenges to a patriarchal class structure. While my primary emphasis in this study is on gender issues (women's involvement in Christian ministry), those class issues which are relevant will also be noted.

⁸ I define "feminist," regardless of historical period, as a concern with the equal worth of men and women, a critical exploration of gendered categories of feminine/masculine, and a questioning of the resulting restrictions placed upon male and female activities and behavior. There is significant critical debate over the attitudes of Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot, the three primary authors of my study, toward the emerging women's movement. Gaskell and Eliot in particular avoided total identification with the emerging women's movement, yet their lives and novels exhibit certain fundamental ideals of Victorian feminism. I will take up this discussion in greater detail as I consider each novelist's work separately.

⁹ I have chosen to treat the title of Eliot's story, *Janet's Repentance*, as a work distinct from *Scenes of Clerical Life*. Critical works are evenly divided over whether to refer to it as *Janet's Repentance*, emphasizing its significant length and differences from the other two *Scenes*, or as "Janet's Repentance," highlighting a distinction from Eliot's full-length novels. Although I refer to *Agnes Grey*, *Ruth*, *Janet's Repentance*, and *Adam Bede* as four *novels* at times, I acknowledge that *Janet's Repentance* occupies a middle ground; longer than many other Victorian short stories yet shorter than most Victorian novels, my treatment of it as a distinct text is my primary justification for referring to it as equal to the other texts. It is interesting to note, however, that *Agnes Grey* and *Janet's Repentance* are of roughly comparable length.

¹⁰ Ruth's job as a seamstress early in Gaskell's novel marks her as a member of the working class and not the middle class. If *Agnes Grey* has any claim to the middle class, it is because of her father's position as a clergyman, and the early nineteenth-century society surrounding Dinah in *Adam Bede* emphasizes mainly two classes, an upper and a lower, of which Dinah is a member of the latter. She must work in the cotton-mill in Snowfield in order to support herself, where she earns "enough and to spare" (Eliot, *Adam* 89). In Eliot's *Janet's Repentance*, Janet Dempster, with her husband's law practice and her substantial inheritance

after his death, is the only solid financial member of the middle class among these four heroines, but the despicable portrait of Dempster and the harsh criticism of his profession by the narrator qualifies this social position. While this might suggest that the Christian gender ideology did not apply to these women, lower-class women were to aspire to the same morality and position of influence on husbands and sons as middle-class women.

In rejecting this model of womanly influence, Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot are careful to demonstrate that their heroines undertake ministerial work not because of a sense of class responsibility or any norms of womanhood, but because they choose ministerial activities as a vocation. Their lower-middle class status also allows Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot to reject the model of the condescending “Ladies Bountiful,” bestowing charity on those beneath them and reflecting a “desire for social control of the poor” (C. Buchanan 146).

¹¹ By the 1830s, many women were utilizing the emphasis placed on religion and piety in women’s lives to justify their participation in movements for “moral reform” such as anti-slavery, Anti-Corn Law League, and temperance movements (Rendall 11). While some Churchmen saw even this shift of a woman’s “natural” piety and morality outside the home as potentially dangerous, arguing that it would “weaken her natural domesticity” (Heeney, *Women’s* 9), many women argued that if they were naturally more moral than men, it was logical that they be involved in social movements for moral reform.

For example, Josephine Butler, the wife of an Anglican clergyman, used the association of piety with Victorian women to argue that she should be permitted to work outside the home against the Contagious Diseases Acts (Sean Gill 101). The Contagious Diseases Acts focused the moral and legal blame for the spread of sexually transmitted diseases on prostitutes rather than on the men who visited prostitutes; Butler’s appeals that the laws ignored the role of men in the perpetuation of prostitution were controversial, especially so because she was a woman talking openly about sexual issues. Butler argued that her attempts to protect “fallen” women from prostitution and from unjust laws were justified because such efforts coalesced with the role of woman as moral protector. Thus, Butler utilized the emphasis placed on religion and morality in women’s lives to justify the extension of that role outside the home and into a controversial debate in society.

¹² The only critical text I have found which connects these three particular authors is Dianne F. Sadoff’s “The Clergyman’s Daughters: Anne Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot” (1989). However, Sadoff focuses on the novelists’ ideas of gender more than the characterization within their works. Her contention is the opposite of mine; she laments that “all three authors . . . covertly preach the repressive morality of Victorian daughterhood that hindered their own personal and professional enterprise” (Sadoff 325). Barbara Prentis’ *The Brontë Sisters and George Eliot* (1988) includes a discussion of both Anne Brontë and Eliot’s works, but Prentis does not talk about religion in *Agnes Grey* nor does she directly compare

Brontë's work with Eliot's.

¹³ A brief survey indicates the distinct focus of my argument from the history of critical responses to these works. In critical analyses over the past decades, religion in *Agnes Grey* has not been significantly studied. Inga-Stina Ewbank's *Their Proper Sphere: A Study of the Brontë Sisters as Early-Victorian Female Novelists* (1966), P. J. M. Scott's *Anne Brontë: A New Critical Assessment* (1983), Elizabeth Langland's *Anne Brontë: The Other One* (1989), and Susan Meyer's "Words on 'Great Vulgar Sheets'" (1996) focus less on religious issues in the novel and more on issues related to Agnes' marginalized role as governess. A recent dissertation written by Patricia Ellen Robinson entitled *Writing Upon the Table of the Heart: Anne Brontë and 19th-Century Evangelical Feminism* (1995) does analyze the religious aspects of Brontë's poetry and two novels. While Robinson does discuss the religious educational possibilities of the role of governess, she does not connect Agnes' "ministry" to the ministry of the clergymen in the novel.

Few critical works have approached *Ruth* with a focus outside of examining the novel's response to a sexual double standard. Ruth Y. Jenkins' *Reclaiming Myths of Power: Women Writers and the Victorian Spiritual Crisis* (1995) argues that both Gaskell and Eliot "subvert patriarchal scripts" in their fiction (154). However, her analysis of Gaskell's characterization of Ruth differs from mine. Jenkins states that Ruth embodies a female Christ figure who "challenges a patriarchal appropriation of God" (116). Jenkins does not note that Ruth is also figured as a *ministerial* character who challenges the male locus of power within Christianity. Pamela Parker's dissertation "Fictional Philanthropy: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Rise of the Public Woman" (1994) proposes that Gaskell is interested in exploring the ways in which philanthropy justified the entrance of women into the public sphere (4). However, Parker argues that Gaskell proves women are the correct moral authorities for society, defining a role for women within society and within religion that is unique to their gender, not one that is equivalent to that of the male clergy (142-43).

George Eliot's clerical figures are studied in depth in Oliver Lovesey's *The Clerical Character in George Eliot's Fiction* (1991). Lovesey focuses on how Eliot portrays humanized clergymen and poses these individualized characters against readers' expectations and stereotypes. However, Lovesey does not connect the humanized clergymen with the female characters in *Janet's Repentance* and *Adam Bede*. Lovesey instead argues that Mr. Irwine and Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede* are highly contrasted, not equal figures within the community (40-41). Analyses of *Adam Bede* that focus on Dinah Morris, such as Christopher Herbert's "Preachers and the Schemes of Nature in *Adam Bede*" (1975) and Elaine Lawless' "The Silencing of the Preacher Woman: The Muted Message of George Eliot's *Adam Bede*" (1990) frequently emphasize only Dinah's role as a preacher, rather than analyzing her pastoral ministry as well and how that is aligned with Mr. Irwine's work.

¹⁴ There are many examples of nineteenth-century thinkers who, although not concerned with gender issues, argued that there was a difference between Christ's teaching and the Christian institutions. Questions of Christ's divinity raised in David Frederick Strauss in *Leben Jesu* (1835-36), Ludwig Feuerbach in *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), and others, as well as a developing agnosticism during the period, maintained that the Christian churches of the time did not truly represent the Christianity of Christ, whether Christ was seen as divine or human (Cockshut 23-27). John Wesley, in beginning the Methodist movement in the eighteenth century, and John Keble, John Henry Newman, and others who supported the Oxford Movement did so because they believed they were returning to a truer depiction of Christianity. This questioning of the veracity of Christianity represented by churches of the time opened the door to a revisioning of what Christianity *should* be like.

¹⁵ For a similar use of the word revisioning, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her* (1983), in which she describes the "emancipation of the Christian community from patriarchal structures and androcentric mind-sets" as a "revisioning of Christian community and belief systems" (31). John Shelby Spong, in *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (1998), also argues that the church must undergo a process of "revisioning," particularly in relation to its views on women, moralism, sexuality, and the ministry (119). Nancy L. Paxton, in *George Eliot and Herbert Spencer: Feminism, Evolutionism, and the Reconstruction of Gender* (1991), describes Eliot's "re-visioning of the myth of genesis" in *Adam Bede* (51). In "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1976), poet Adrienne Rich defines "re-vision" as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (278). I have chosen to follow Schüssler Fiorenza's use of the word "revisioning" without a hyphen (echoed by Spong); her emphasis on emancipation from rather than reconsideration of patriarchal mind-sets best presents the meaning and spirit I wish to invoke.

¹⁶ Avery Dulles' *Models of the Church* (1987) is a useful text when examining varying models of Christian institutions throughout history. Dulles defines several different models, characteristics of which can be seen in several Victorian denominations, including church as sacrament, as institution, as mystical communion, and as herald. Although Dulles, a modern-day Roman Catholic theologian, is openly opposed to the ordination of women, his work provides a cogent theological framework for a discussion of church and ministerial models. In the same way, I acknowledge that my use of concepts from the work of Thomas O'Meara, who is not specifically concerned with women's role in Christianity, usurps his ideas for an argument he might not support. However, both Dulles and O'Meara acknowledge the plurality of church and ministerial models. Their discussion of the historical and natural adaptability of the church to a given society, while not admitting for a greater involvement of women, can be used in conjunction with the works of other Christian feminists to support attempts to open up closed

categories of ordained ministry and defined roles for women in the church.

¹⁷ The historical adaptability of ministry is a common theme in Christian feminist texts. Joan Chittister writes that there simply is not one “‘clear and constant’ tradition” of ministry within Christian history; rather, it has adapted to the pressures and needs of a given society (Foreword, *Lay* ix). Kaye Ashe describes how historical circumstances and not divine will caused the development of the clerical/lay split in most Christian churches (91). Both Chittister and Ashe acknowledge that they are part of a long list of theologians and Christian feminists who have argued this view of the historical and social creation of ministry.

¹⁸ Despite their similarly unorthodox beliefs, it is interesting to note that literary critics and biographers much more readily consider Eliot as unconventional, extreme, or controversial in her spiritual beliefs. This is, in part, justified by the overt expression of her challenges to organized religion and may also reflect the vast amounts of documentation of her thoughts available in letters and novels. However, while Anne Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell are more readily described as conventional Christians, both Anne’s Universalist beliefs and Gaskell’s Unitarianism place them outside orthodox Victorian Christianity. Furthermore, all three maintained that certain core Christian beliefs were valuable despite other disputes with institutional Christianity. For Brontë and Gaskell, the connection to organized Christianity remained much stronger. However, all three read texts which engaged in radical challenges to institutional Christianity. This makes a comparison of their works on this subject intriguing and justified.

¹⁹ One of the only novels of the Victorian period to explicitly compare the clergy and the laity with respect to the performance of the sacraments is Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891). The novel briefly treats the line between clergy and laity with respect to the baptismal sacrament—the only sacrament that in emergencies a layperson could administer. When Tess’s young infant is dying, her father forbids her to summon the parson. She hopefully says, “Perhaps it will be just the same!” (T. Hardy 144). In a brief scene, Tess lights a candle and her younger brothers and sisters witness the baptism of her child. “The next sister held the Prayer-Book open before her, as the clerk at church held it before the parson; and thus the girl set about baptizing her child” (144). Hardy reproduces the brief ceremony, closely aligning what Tess does and says with what the clergyman’s actions and words would be.

The validity of the baptismal sacrament is questioned when, upon the infant’s death, Tess seeks out the parson to ask for a Christian burial of her child in the church graveyard. When she asks if her baptism is as valid as his would have been, Hardy describes the parson’s feelings as those of “a tradesman at finding that a job he should have been called in for had been unskilfully botched by his customers among themselves” (147). Hardy’s reduction of the sacrament to a tradesman’s job actually serves to highlight the validity of Tess’ baptismal performance. While the parson may see the job as “botched,” the reader has seen the faith and

love with which Tess performed the ceremony, and is thus able to see that if it truly is simply a 'job' performed like that of any other tradesman, Tess' baptism is certainly valid.

The man and the ecclesiastic within the parson fight, but he does eventually assure Tess that her baptism will be the same for her child as his would have been. He refuses to perform a Christian burial for the infant, but again is moved to pity and tells her that an unofficial burial of the child in the Christian graveyard would be the same as if he performed the ceremony. Hardy writes: "How the Vicar reconciled his answer with the strict notions he supposed himself to hold on these subjects it is beyond a layman's power to tell, though not to excuse" (147).

This foray by a young woman into the sacramental realm of the clergy is rare in Victorian fiction, as is any reference to lay involvement in sacramental affairs. This may reflect the true sanctity that many saw in this facet of clerical life as one that should remain completely separate from lay activities. In this way, the absence of parallels between sacramental acts by clergy and laywomen may represent a deference to church authorities in that area. It may also reflect a strategic emphasis placed on other roles of the clergy. The minimal role of the sacramental in many Victorian novels is an opportunity for writers to de-emphasize this most divisive of the clerical roles.

²⁰ As with the term "feminist theory," "Christian feminism" is a broad category which includes numerous theoretical approaches. Within Christian feminism we find feminist theologians who study Scripture and church doctrine, historical Christian feminists who are students of women's leadership roles throughout Christian history, eschatological Christian feminists interested in the doctrinal ideas about women's salvation, Christological feminists interested in how Christ as man affects woman's place in Christianity, sacramental feminist theologians concerned with the relationship of women to the sacraments of Christianity, Christian feminists who are concerned with the language and liturgy of Christian denominations, and feminist pastoral theologians who explore the ministerial roles of women and men in Christianity.

Some Christian feminists affiliate themselves and their work closely with a particular denomination; Kaye Ashe's study of women in Roman Catholicism, *The Feminization of the Church?* (1997), and Carol Becker's examination of clergywomen in contemporary Protestantism, *Leading Women: How Churchwomen Can Avoid Leadership Traps and Negotiate the Gender Press* (1996), exemplify this tight focus on one particular Christian church. In contrast, Rosemary Radford Ruether's *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (1998) and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (1983, 1994) concern themselves with a general Christianity that encompasses many different denominations. Despite this wide variety, the core issue of Christian feminism—exploring the connection between women and religion—is the same, thus allowing me to draw upon works with varying approaches and foci.

²¹ Two brief examples demonstrate these different approaches. Jacqueline Trace's essay entitled "Dark Goddesses: Black Feminist Theology in Morrison's *Beloved*" (1991) examines Toni Morrison's contribution to Black feminist theology. Trace argues that Morrison develops the goddess image in her novel in keeping with the "hermeneutics of feminist theologians like Christ, [Mary] Daly, [Elisabeth Schüssler] Fiorenza, and [Naomi] Goldenberg" (Trace 15). Trace contends that Morrison consciously participates in the contemporary discussion of Black feminist theology.

In contrast, Susan K. Hagen's article, "Feminist Theology and 'The Second Nun's Tale': or St. Cecilia Laughs at the Judge" (1989-90) applies Christian feminism to Chaucer's tale. Arguing that analysis of the Second Nun's Tale had stagnated by the early 1980s, Hagen writes that "aided with information gathered in the last 10 to 15 years of feminist study in scripture and church history we discover that the 'Second Nun's Tale' reflects the changed status of women from the early Christian movement to the late fourteenth century" (Hagen 42). In this way, Hagen utilizes recent studies by Christian feminists, particularly historical and scriptural studies of women's roles in early Christianity, to reopen discussion about a literary text and its presentation of women within religion.

See also Dolores S. Williams, "Black Women's Literature and the Task of Feminist Theology" (1985); Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quests* (1986); Sandra Friedman and Alec Irwin, "Christian Feminism, Eros, and Power in Right Relations" (1990); Sarah Coakley, "Gender and Knowledge in Western Theology: The 'Man of Reason' and the 'Feminine' 'Other' in Enlightenment and Romantic Thought" (1991); and Ruth Y. Jenkins, *Reclaiming Myths of Power* (1995). Additionally, many useful examples of a theological and frequently a feminist theological approach to works by Alice Walker, Iris Murdoch, Margaret Atwood, Virginia Woolf, May Sarton, George Herbert, Herman Melville, Fyodor Dostoyevski, and others can be found in essays, edited by Werner Jeanrond, in *Literature and Theology at Century's End* (1995). A number of Victorian women writers are connected to issues of Christian feminism in Julie Melnyk's collection of essays, *Women's Theology in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (1998). For an example of how Christian feminists include analysis of literary texts within their works see Letty M. Russell, *Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology* (1987).

²² See Constance H. Buchanan's *Choosing to Lead* (1996) for a well-presented argument that scholars must fight the assumption "that religion is always conservative and an instrument of women's oppression" (129). Buchanan focuses primarily on the development of nineteenth-century American feminism.

²³ Gerda Lerner's *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (1993) provides a historical survey of feminist biblical criticism. She locates the beginning of translation and historical criticism of the Bible in England in the

seventeenth century (160). While Lerner argues that each generation of women writers appears to have been unaware of a tradition of other women viewing the Bible in this critical way, each generation took up the task (139).

²⁴ In America, investigations of the Bible's translations and the historical context for passages on women were in full swing by the middle of the nineteenth century. Elizabeth Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets, and William Veeder, in *The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America 1837-1883* (1983), point to Mary Wollstonecraft's earlier reevaluation of the meaning of certain biblical passages; they then move to Sarah Grimké's biblical exegesis in 1837, Mary Baker Eddy's scriptural commentary, and Julia Evelina Smith's translation of the Old and New Testaments (the first ever by a woman), completed in 1853 but not published until 1876, as evidence that a feminist study of translation and interpretation of biblical passages was strong in the nineteenth century in America (2: 166-67). They argue that works such as Grimké's and that of the poet Maria Weston Chapman, responding directly in 1837 and 1838 to charges that women could not have a public ministerial role in Christianity, were reflective of issues debated in America, but add that the works were published in England as well (Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder 2: 177-79).

²⁵ Similar discussions were taking place in the Victorian period about the role of women in the Jewish faith. Works by Grace Aguilar (1816-1847), including *Women of Israel* (1845) and *The Jewish Faith* (1846), describe biblical women who played an important role in the development of the Jewish faith. However, Aguilar's examples stress the ways in which the female characters in the Bible obeyed the laws of God concerning women (*Women* 1: 203), how the actions of individuals such as Miriam are "perfectly accordant with woman's nature" (*Women* 1: 205), and how women of her time are called to instruct their sons and work within domestic life to further their religion (*Women* 2: 335). Figures like Esther are chosen from among the many early women in the Bible because of their "sweet, gentle, feminine character" (*Women* 2: 117). Although Aguilar, like Kavanagh and other Christians, is interested in resurrecting positive images of religious women, her focus is more clearly on highlighting women's "natural" gifts and what these have done throughout history for the Jewish religion.

²⁶ One notable exception is Mrs. Humphry (Mary) Ward's *Robert Elsmere* (1888), which demonstrates how even when transposed at some length, the sermon could be included without interruption of the narrative. In this wildly popular novel of an Anglican clergyman who leaves the Church because of religious doubt, Ward includes references to Elsmere writing sermons, but does not present any sermons he delivers until he has left the Church and begun his association with the New Brotherhood. Elsmere's "lecture," which is essentially a lay sermon on "The Claim of Jesus upon Modern Life," is delivered in full to the reader. Ward includes the entranced response of the audience, which shows Elsmere's aptitude for preaching and their strong interest in the New Brotherhood's respect for the historical Jesus (Ward 552-65). Ward

further exemplifies in this passage the ability to incorporate a lengthy sermon-like discourse into a text without losing the reader's interest. Her description of Elsmere's pauses, the audience's reactions, the presence of Elsmere's wife who has *not* left the Church, and the inclusion of ideas that scandalously oppose the Church and its ministers help to maintain the reader's interest. Ward manages to meld the discourse with the plot of the novel, demonstrating Elsmere's change in thinking and his wife's growing respect for his new ventures.

²⁷ Most Christian feminist scholars note that the authors of the Gospels and the authors of the Epistles diverge significantly in their depiction of Christ's primary message. The authors of the Gospels emphasize Christ's "stress on altruistic love and service" which is required of all individuals, regardless of gender or societal rank; the post-Pauline writers of the Epistles return to a pre-Christian cultural insistence on "patriarchal dominance and submission structures, not only for the household but also for the church" (Schüssler Fiorenza, *Memory* 334, 315-16).

²⁸ See the Gospel of John, in particular, for examples of the empowered feeling granted to those who are healed or forgiven by Christ. For example, chapter eight includes the story of the woman convicted of adultery who is encouraged to begin her life anew.

²⁹ All biblical quotations not quoted within the novels by Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot are taken from the King James Version provided by Brown University Scholarly Technology Group (STG) at <http://mama.stg.brown.edu/webs/bible_browser/pbeasy.shtml>. I have chosen to use this edition of the King James Version because of its proximity to that which was available in the mid-nineteenth century; as a result, STG's searchable version provides passages which reflect the word choice and translations with which Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot would have been familiar.

³⁰ See also Letty Russell's *Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology* and Susan A. Ross' *Extravagant Affections*.

³¹ Laura Fasick writes in *Vessels of Meaning: Women's Bodies, Gender Norms, and Class Bias from Richardson to Lawrence* (1997) that

what power Victorian women were supposed to possess arose ostensibly out of an extreme version of the Christian paradox that he who humbles himself shall be exalted. The problem, of course, is that authority restricted to the domestic and affective realms can often seem ineffectual—indeed, impotent—in comparison to that which controls political, economic, and social functions. (6)

In contrast to Fasick, I argue that Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot move their heroines outside of the domestic realm by presenting their ministerial activities as equal to the public and official position

of the clergy. This represents a significant difference from the norm of the self-sacrificing woman who remained within the home and family circle.