Spirituality Forum follow up: Research on our Christian origins

During our first meeting after the Forum (October 2007), we decided that we would start to deepen the topic on the origins of Christianity. We used some basic texts, one written by a Bible expert – Francois Vouga – and others by feminist theologians, with a special attention to Schluesser Fiorenza and the research of women concerning the first Christian communities.

Our aim in doing this work was to carry on the interest and the need that had come up at the forum, i.e. to get to know better how Christianity was understood and lived in the first communities, before Christianity became the state religion in the Roman Empire. We were struck by the fact that these communities were so pluriform in origin, culture and way to live their faith, and we feel there is a connection with what is our present situation in many of our communities. We understand that there have always been many ways to live the Christian message and this can help us to be open to our culture diversities today. We believe that it is important to go back to the genuine message of the Gospel in order to get rid of the weight of Church historical power and institutional orthodoxy.

Another aspect of our search has been to acknowledge the work done by women, from S. Fiorenza to the many others that have revealed the presence and the role of women in the communities at the time of Jesus, and how later this presence has been discounted and denied through the centuries.

From our research we have chosen some topics relevant to the Grail Vision and history:

PLURALISM
The first Christian communities had different visions as far as the meaning of resurrection and Jesus message were concerned. The dialogue and the confrontation among the communities were continuous and produced conflicts and spiritual enrichment at the same time. This spirit of research has come down to the Second Vatican Council and we are committed to it in the Grail.

BASILEIA, The Vision of the Kingdom
The first communities believed in the vision of a Kingdom of Justice, Peace and solidarity with the poor announced by Jesus. The Grail Vision directly connects to it. Our vision has always been and, we hope, will be inspired by this message, that is also the fundamental message of many religions and of many spiritual paths.

THE HOUSE CHURCH
We see a connection between the Grail tradition of liturgical rituals and spiritual practices and the first communities gathering in the houses. We need to rediscover this tradition of celebrating in the community houses – Grail Centres – and building our liturgical rituals.
Wisdom
Feminist theologies point out at wisdom as the feminine symbol of divinity, in a way which can help us finding it in the Christian tradition as well as in other spiritual paths and religions.

Early Christianity
Looking at the reasons of success of the Christian spirituality in the first two centuries A.D, we became aware how it is important for the Grail to deepen its spiritual roots in order to build up a new identity in our fragmented and globalised world.

Summary of the book by François Vouga, Early Christianity, Torino: Claudiana (2001) the text we used for our research.

The introduction presents the main issues of this book:

“This work of analysis and historical reconstruction has led me to the conclusion that diversity was a constitutive element of Christian unity right from the beginning and that plurality is intrinsic to Christianity’s self definition...

In a period of history like our own with thought being torn apart by the breakdown of ideologies, post-modern pluralism of opinions and the development of unified global structures of commerce and information, I believe it necessary to insist on this striking fact: Christianity brings a tradition and a promise in which the legitimacy of diversity is a constitutive element of its unity.”

Basic premise

Christianity’s starting point consists of Jesus’ Easter appearances. The Easter proclamation is to be recognized as the founding moment of Christian faith, after which not only the Hellenistic tradition but also other early Christian movements consider Jesus’ life and teaching as salvific events.

In early Christianity a great variety of phenomena and trends existed and it’s not always easy to see how they related to each other. However, they shared two elements:

1) Specific aspects of Jesus’ life and preaching are taken up as the basis of Christian self-understanding.

2) The Jesus fact is interpreted from different cultural, intellectual, religious, geographical and social starting points.

The different trends are interdependent. Such interdependence may be polemic, identities may be defined in a process of mutual confrontation or shared theological concepts may develop. Discontinuity gives rise to forms of continuity which are codified in the early Christian writings. The literary sources show that the birth and development of early Christian movements are extremely important not only for their content but also for the reconstruction of historical events (see attached chart).
Early movements within Christianity

Between 30 and 60 AD we can distinguish four important trajectores:

- **itinerant preachers**
- **the wisdom movement**
- **Jewish-christsians**
- **Hellenists**

**ITINERANT PREACHERS**

The itinerant preachers believed that they were called to spread Jesus’ message and thus gave up financial and social security, family life and a fixed dwelling. In Hellenistic culture there is an analogy with the cynics (freedom consists in giving up everything, happiness is the fruit of virtue); in Jewish culture with the renewal movements. Itinerant preaching continued directed toward the Hellenistic communities and remains in the Christian consciousness (Saint Francis).

The radical nature of Jesus’ message is understood as an invitation to discipleship, following him means accepting a radical life-style change. In the OT it is connected to the prophetic tradition especially Elijah. Subsequently, the invitation to follow Jesus becomes, in the pagan-Hellenistic environment, a call to conversion; foreigners are called to become pilgrims through a life which gives them identity, dignity and hope. This movement disappears but its ideal remains and its founders become mythical figures.

**THE WISDOM MOVEMENT**

In Galilee the message was passed on in a sedentary environment as well as through itinerant preaching. The crowd which gathered around Jesus was made up of those followers who hadn’t abandoned home and family. They understood Jesus’ words as words of wisdom, as a way of understanding life itself. The appearances of the risen Jesus led him to be understood as a Wisdom teacher before being identified with the Wisdom of God in person.

**Its theological programme consists in the invitation to seek “seek and you will find”**.

The Galilean communities preserved the words and sayings of Jesus. Proverbial sayings and stories were collected, notes put together for personal usage; aphorisms and parables oriented towards practical living. These collections were not systematic in character; they presented no logical system of convictions but gave coherent indications for behaviour.

**The LOGHIA**: a collection of Jesus’ words: (maxims, short parables used by Lk and Mt) Various versions, the first towards 50 AD, the second after 60 AD.

**The Beatitudes** head the first collections of the Loghia sayings. The coming of the Kingdom is near and sets radical conditions clearly expressed in the Lord’s prayer. The preaching of the Kingdom postulates an existential decision for all: disciples, messengers and their hearers.

A form of Wisdom Christianity developed in Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia led by Judah Thomas. The Gnostic text called “The Gospel of Thomas” (first version perhaps around 50 AD), sayings, parables, short stories to
be put alongside the sayings source. The version which has come down to us is from the first half of the 2nd cent.).

**JEWISH CHRISTIANS**

The nucleus of this community is made up of Jesus’ relations (his brother, James, perhaps Judah, another brother and Cleopa whom Josephus presents, with some reserve, as the Lord’s uncle). They have celebrated Easter in Jerusalem and there have “discovered” Jesus. They stayed in the city after his death and the Easter appearances, making their home amongst the new converts who have impressed their own understanding of the Jesus event upon them.

Through Jesus they have in a certain sense converted to a new form of Judaism. They belong to communities which maintain their ties to the temple cult. They maintain a close connection between the preaching of Jesus and the classic themes of Law and cult. They strictly adhere to the laws of the Sabbath and circumcision as signs of Hebrew identity in a pagan society. They respect the purity laws regarding food, a new element in the Jesus movement and they also fast.

Their Christianity looks like Christian Pharisaism and considers itself to be a reform movement within Judaism. They were against spreading the gospel outside of Judaism (Mt 7,6; 10, 5b-6) and sent missionaries only when it was a question of opposing Christianity’s loss of Jewish identity (Gal 2,12; Fil 3,2).

**HELLENISTS**

The movement arises in Jerusalem and is composed of Greek speaking Jewish Christians who, after the persecutions in Jerusalem, (see Stephen) move into the countryside of Judea, Samaria and beyond, taking Christianity to Damascus, Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. From a historical point of view, Christian beginnings would be inconceivable without a group of Greek speaking disciples of Hellenistic culture who proclaim the gospel outside Israel.

The Hellenistic communities immediately become the home-base for subsequent Christian missions which they supported and financed. Their success had an extremely important influence on the subsequent development of Christianity in general which gained the adherence not only of Jews but also of pagans. Their widespread success changed the social nature of Christianity which became predominantly an urban movement in Hellenistic and Roman society.

As they came to terms with the Jesus event, his death and the resurrection they revised their idea of God and the Law, no longer based on reference to Scripture but on a formal claim concerning Jesus’ authority. It is now his word that defines the community’s new rules of behaviour whose radical nature no longer consists only in criticizing some norms (the Sabbath, the purity laws, circumcision) but also in strengthening the Law’s ethical demands.

Furthermore, new and different conceptual models are brought into use (see Mk and Paul) which enable the Jesus event to be interpreted in eschatological terms as salvation and the law as moral demand. The words of institution of the Lord’s Supper have come down to us exclusively through Hellenistic traditions as it is impossible to translate them into semitic terminology and were probably created within this movement.
We need to pay great attention to the fact that the history of early Christianity cannot be reduced to a smooth development from the “Hellenists” to Paul and then to “early catholicism” even though, historically, this theory has prevailed. We need to take into account the wisdom traditions of John and Thomas as well as the Gnostic traditions they gave rise to. The only means of access to the event of the life and work of Jesus we have goes through all these different traditions.

The Expansion of Christianity and How its Main Trajectories Developed

It is not possible to give a complete account of the development and expansion of the diverse Christian movements. Our information consists of fragmentary bits of information from which no generalizations can be made. Trajectories and traditions cannot be rigidly distributed geographically as people and ideas travelled appearing in new places yet taking different shapes. In this context some trends can be discovered.

PALESTINE

Up to 60 AD it remains the privileged home to the Jewish-Christian community in Jerusalem whose core group is made up of Jesus’ relations who recognize James as their leader and will later be led by a group of elders; theirs is a type of Christian pharisaim which takes the radical nature of Jesus’ demand for a “superior righteousness” (Mt 5,20, and repeated in the Sermon on the Mount Mt 5,18ss.) seriously, but is against the spread of Christianity outside Judaism (Mt 7,6) as it would imply breaking the law. The discussion about the Law which we find mirrored in the Markan controversies as well as in the antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount do not belong to Jesus’ preaching but rather to the first conflicts of belief in early Christianity.

After 60 AD A Jewish Christian community survived up to the beginning of the second Jewish war (130 AD). It was made up of Jews who maintained a connection to Jesus and the symbolic role of Jesus’ family was still strong.

EGYPT

Up to 60 AD there are different views about how Christianity was brought there, either by Mark or the therapeutics (ascetics who healed, followers of the Essenes or precursors of Christian monasticism) mentioned by Philo. Already before the year 50, Christianity is the result of a Wisdom mission which produced the sayings and the Gospel of Thomas.

SYRIA & MESOPOTAMIA

Up to 60 AD As well as the importance of Antioch and Damascus, at Edessa the tradition of Thomas (Judas Taddeus) develops a wisdom tradition...

The Johannine school probably arose in Syria and not in Asia Minor; it developed its own tradition which gives a kind of pre-Gnostic interpretation of Christianity Jesus’ dialogues and discourses.
ASIA MINOR

After 60 AD we find three situations in the area:

a) The communities characterized by Johannine Christianity moved out of Syria to Asia Minor after the Jewish war but by the first half of the second century, they are already in difficulty (see the three letters which testify that the group is breaking up) and only a few isolated groups remain.

b) A special role must be given to two works whose content and form connect them to Jewish-Christian apocalypse: the Revelation and The Interpretation of the Lord’s Oracles by Papias. The apocalyptic images represent an analysis of the present as well as a radical stand against the religious, political and social reality of the time. They are important for reconstructing the history of Asian Christianity, the relations between the churches and their social and political context.

c) There was a group of churches, prevalently pagan-Christian, whose reference-point was the apostle Paul, post-pauline churches whose centre was in Ephesus and Asia Minor. Although all these churches recognized Paul’s authority, they were by no means uniform; their theological heritage developed in different ways and even their mode of organization was not the same. They are united by their attempt to transfer the Pauline idea of charismata to new ecclesiological models; “gifts” are the ministries of a church which transmits salvation to all believers. These churches thus begin to create the necessary conditions for the church order represented by Ignatius at Antioch, by Polycarp at Smyrna and others.

GREECE AND ITALY

Sources attest the existence of a Jewish-Christian church at Rome and a Pagan-Christian church at Thessalonica at the end of the forties (of the first century).

After 60 AD Western Hellenized Christianity, coming out of the Hellenistic mission, Paul and Peter’s journeys and the existing urban churches, continues to spread. The main centres, Rome and Corinth are urban communities with marked Jewish-Christian traditions although mainly composed of pagans.

Corinth

The church has given up Paul’s charismatic structure and adopted the presbyterian model of the Hebrew or Jewish-Christian communities. It is hypothesized that a small group managed to impose the idea of a monarchical episcopacy like Ignatius in Syria. Against them, the church in Rome will uphold a traditional collegial church order which is traced back to the apostles.

Rome

Christians make up a fairly notable community attesting to the mobility of people and religious ideas in the Roman Empire. The biggest problem is the relationship between Christianity and Roman society and with the pagan population. It becomes important for Christians to behave in a irreprehensible
fashion in order to counteract hostility to Christianity (e.g., Nero) and lead unbelievers to faith. In 1 Clement, the author tries to keep in mind the various differences amongst the churches in Rome but emphasizes the idea that as creation is structured by divine order, so the social and political life of the church must be structured according to the divine order of collegiality. This means that the authority of bishops and deacons (exercised collegially) as well as that of the elders instituted by the apostles is recognized.

The reasons behind the spread of the first Christian movements

The DECISIVE CHANGES which determined the development of the diverse movements in the apostolic era, but particularly in the post-apostolic era, are as follows:

a) the vast expansion of the Hellenists in the synagogues and the conflicts with Judaism
b) the Pauline mission addressed directly to the pagans resulting in churches with no connection to Judaism and the consequent radical westernization of Christianity
c) the political and religious crisis in Israel which leads to the Jewish war, the destruction of the temple and the suppression of the state of Israel by the emperor Hadrian.
d) The writing of the four gospels, the writings drafted and distributed under the name of the apostles (1 Peter, Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, the Letter of James) Revelation and the Acts of the Apostles represent the effort made by different circles and schools to present a clear and logical interpretation of the event of Jesus Christ and of human life. The attempt to summarize pauline theology, fix the doctrine of the apostles and write a coherent narrative of the life and preaching of Jesus presuppose two hermeneutic shifts:

- The mode of argument adopted by the different trajectories within early Christianity has to be brought up to date in order to be meaningful on a long term basis. The received material and ideas are developed and re-worked in new schemes according to different intellectual, religious and social reference points.

- Internal and external controversies demand that the apostolic traditions which right from the beginning were pluralistic, be defined. The very drafting of the four gospels demonstrates that a conflict of interpretations existed among Christian movements and between Christianity and the surrounding religious environment.

THE RISE OF HELLENISTIC CHRISTIANITY

From the beginning of the forties AD, the Pauline mission represented the major novelty as it followed a specific programme and was aimed immediately at the pagans. This resulted in the need to think out the relationship between Christianity and Judaism and between Christianity and the Jewish Law.
Parallel to Paul’s missions are the “Hellenistic” missions (see the letters of Paul), similarly directed towards the pagans and increasingly using the rhetoric, forms of expression and strategies of popular Hellenistic and Roman morals. We can see how Hellenistic Christianity aimed mainly at pagan communities developed by identifying the ideas which were preached and their belief system:

- **Preaching content:**

  **Monotheism and the moral ideal** resonated with the pagan world. For some time philosophers and educated people had accepted as obvious that one God controlled the world and that the various divinities were manifestations of the same supreme being. Furthermore, the stoics and cynics as well as Roman education taught the ideal of self-control and abstinence. **The novelty lies in the exclusive nature of the God of Jesus Christ. This gave rise to an existential decision which led to the constitution of God’s family on earth that in turn granted symbolic and social identity to Christians.**

- **The development of a belief system:**

  Some of the fundamental themes of Paul’s preaching such as the death and resurrection of Jesus for us (on our behalf) understood as an event of reconciliation and salvation **presuppose the Jewish categories of cult and forgiveness.** However, in a situation in which the number of new converts are pagans, Christianity can no longer define itself in relation to Judaism. **Hellenistic pagan Christianity defines its identity through belonging to the Saviour of the world and through rules which govern all those Christian households which are meeting places for the church community.**

- **forms of community**

  At first the synagogues had provided a network of contacts and meeting places for the Hellenistic churches scattered over the Greek and Roman world, later **households** were of decisive importance in the development of Hellenist Christianity. The house is the **place where the word is preached and heard,** and where **the Lord’s Supper** (attested to only in the Hellenistic churches) is celebrated. The connection between rite and daily meal is found, as well as in Paul, in Mark (on which Matthew and Luke are dependent), and in Acts of the Apostles which recognize the “breaking of bread” as a founding moment of the life of the church.

- **reasons for success**

  **The preaching content** of Pauline and Hellenistic Christianity, **its capacity to evolve** and the **forms of expression** it created, provided broad sectors of the population with a **personal, religious and social identity which was dogmatically sound and yet at the same time sufficiently flexible to prove and remain attractive.**
THE INCREASING RADICALIZATION OF THE WISDOM CIRCLES

In the so-called “Gospel” of Thomas, wisdom is the starting point of a gnostic knowledge of God, the human being and the world. The aim of life is a return to the origin; wisdom is the revelation of a heavenly world. Hence the invitation to distance oneself from the world and the positive evaluation of solitude.

The figure of Mary Magdalene is particularly interesting in the Gnostic tradition where she occupies a place similar to the beloved disciple in John’s Gospel. She is an example of faith, understanding and knowledge of the Saviour and of his revelation and is thus considered a mediator and worthy interpreter of the Saviour’s words.

In early Christianity she undoubtedly has a special historical function as a founding figure of Christianity (see the Easter appearances) on a level with Peter, James and the beloved disciple belonging to the Johannine circles. It is particularly significant that Mary Magdalene is granted a special place in the Gospel of John (as the risen Lord reveals himself to her first).

THE COMMUNITY OF THE BELOVED DISCIPLE

Johannine Christianity, although sharing points of contact with the tradition that goes back to Thomas, both on a formal level (the dialogues and discourses of both gospels are built out of isolated saying and aphorisms which belong to the oldest collection of sayings) and as regards content, develops along a different trajectory. The similarities between the two texts cannot be attributed to a common source but rather to contact at various stages of their development. Next to Peter there is the beloved disciple to whom has been granted the authority of the witness who sees, believes, understands and has knowledge. This community recognizes the existence of other Christian movements but holds that the Johannine tradition is the best and superior form of Christian faith. The Johannine tradition centred around Jesus, the Saviour who descends from heaven, evolves in the synagogues and on the fringe of Jewish communities and is a sort of precursor of Christian Gnosticism.

Proto-catholicism

This term was introduced at the beginning of the 1900’s and refers to the division of Christianity into three phases: 1) idealistic anarchy; 2) the post-pauline era; 3) reaction to heretics and definitive form. The idea is of a transitory period defined both by its preceding and successive developments.

As the result of emerging social needs such as syncretism and gnosis in this period the Christian priesthood appears and the following elements are fixed:
- Christian doctrine
- A doctrine of the sacraments
- A doctrine of ministries
- The New Testament canon

The Catholic idea of a uniform, unified and orthodox church growing out of early Christianity reduces early Christianity to its majority from which was finally
victorious. In this way the diverse ways Christians at the end of the first and in
the second century responded to the distance which increasingly separated them
from their origins and the need to think out strategies for the future is grossly
underestimated.

There are in fact different models, in competition with each other which
while they cannot be reduced to one theological, ecclesiological or political
model, all contain elements which will form the basis of the changing shape
of Christianity in the future.

& Elizabeth Green, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Brescia: Morcelliana

Biography of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza began her theological studies in the nineteen sixties
at the University of Wurzburg in Germany where she gained her first degree in
pastoral theology. She then continued her studies in Munster, specializing in New
Testament studies (focusing on apocalyptic) and subsequently moving to the United
States where her reflections in feminist theology became of decisive importance. In
1971 she became member of the prestigious American Academy of Religion sitting on
the committee for women’s studies in religion, while in 1972 she took part in the
historical meeting held in Grailville: “Women doing theology”. She then became
professor of theology at the Catholic University of Notre Dame (near Chicago) and
during her sabbatical year (1974-1975) met many of the leading figures of North
American feminist theology. This enabled her not only to sharpen her own feminist
viewpoint but also to integrate an interdenominational and inter religious awareness
into her thought. From 1975 onwards she was active in the Women’s Ordination
Conference (WOC) as well as in various issues to do with women and the Church (in
1976 the Vatican Declaration against women’s ordination was published). In 1984
she moved to Episcopal Divinity School and in 1988 to Harvard where she still
teaches. Her life and work are characterized by the following concerns:

- connecting Christian theology with gender awareness and feminist
  engagement;
- a passion for the sacred Scriptures and their interpretation;
- a sense of belonging to the catholic Church with special attention to relations
  between women and the Church in their various forms.

Biblical Hermeneutics

ESF’s book In Memory of Her is a milestone in these studies as she is one of
the first biblical scholars to undertake both theoretically and practically a feminist
interpretation of Scripture.

ESF doesn’t believe that in the Scriptures a liberating “content” can be
separated from an oppressive “form” without erasing the historical nature of
women’s oppression.
Divine revelation, therefore, isn’t situated in the biblical text but rather in the life and ministry of Jesus and the community of equals (disciples) that he calls into being.

For ESF, the Bible is not so much an archetype as a prototype. As opposed to an archetype, a prototype doesn’t offer eternal models but ones that change over time according to different historical conditions. F thus believes that the Scriptures participate in the dynamics of a Church which creatively responds to history’s unfolding.

F broadens the concept of “salvation” giving it the meaning of “human wellbeing” and, because women are human, of “the wellbeing of women”. We can say that F establishes a correlation between “our salvation” and “the wellbeing of women” which is clearly understood in terms of liberation. F claims that at the end of the day, her critical and feminist perspective derives neither from Catholicism nor Protestantism: her social and theological standpoint and her hermeneutical starting point are liberationist and feminist.

The biblical texts originate in a patriarchal society and mirror its social and symbolic order. The Bible, however, has not only reproduced patriarchal thought and structures, it has also been a source of inspiration to women in their becoming whole persons.

In But She Said, F finds nine different hermeneutical strategies used by feminist biblical scholars which, she holds, are not mutually exclusive. F aims to encourage dialogue among feminist biblical scholars.

The first hermeneutical approach described by F is revisionist and holds that the Bible itself is not misogynist but only its subsequent interpretation. This first strategy consists in removing the layers of androcentric interpretation the text has accumulated over the years to lay bear its true sense.

In this fashion female figures forgotten by the Church’s theology and liturgy are brought to light. The second hermeneutical strategy (adopted by ESF in her work In Memory of Her), focuses on the androcentric nature of the biblical text. Such a text not only describes reality but actively discriminates women by “including them” in a supposedly generic “male”. Furthermore, the presence of women has sometimes been erased in the course of a text’s transmission. In some manuscripts the female Nympha in whose house the church in Laodicea met has become male. A feminist exegesis, then, must read the “silence” of the text.

The third strategy makes use of imagination to creatively re-read those stories built round female characters. Using role-play, creative writing, story telling and art it aims at building a bridge between women today and women in the text. Although this interpretative strategy opens up new horizons of interpretation, it runs the risk of simply re-playing the text’s androcentric perspective. A fourth way of reading the text focuses on woman as author and reader. Following von Harnack’s hypothesis that Prisca wrote the Letter to the Hebrews, other texts, such as the Gospel of John or part of Luke’s Gospel, could also have been written by women. However, warns F, while imagining that a woman has written the text may change the way we read it, it no way guarantees that the text itself is feminist. Feminist hermeneutics can also learn from the way women from different cultures and eras have read the Bible. F thus invites us to explore women’s interpretation. The fifth strategy centres on women’s history and, through the text, attempts to construct the religious life of women in antiquity. It proceeds by asking questions that are different from men’s, investigating women’s varying conditions to see what it meant for the women of Corinth, for example, to take part in the cult of Isis, be member of the
synagogue or belong to the fellowship of Christians. In the **sixth place**, F identifies the method she developed in *In Memory of Her*, as “social and historical reconstruction”. This strategy rejects a positivist view of history in order to understand history in terms of power relations. Historiography is a consciously constructed way of narrating history and is thus subject to different interpretations. This method doesn’t concentrate so much upon texts about women as on attempting, by using social and political as well as cultural and religious theoretical models, to create a space in which to situate women at the centre of Christian history. The **seventh strategy** of “ideological inscription” focuses on the texts themselves laying bare through gender analysis the way feminine and masculine have been constructed. F rejects this method originating literary criticism in that it doesn’t enable us to go beyond the text to a reality determined by precise social and political conditions.

The **eighth strategy** described by F comes from reader-response criticism and explores the way women read the text contributing to the creation of meaning. For example, it has been discovered that women read “exclusive” language differently from men putting into practice strategies that include us in a reality constructed by and for men. The aim is thus to enable women readers to “resist” the exclusion created by the text. The **ninth interpretative strategy** underlines the social and political standpoint from which women approach the Scriptures. If, in our interpretation, we bring issues from contexts as diverse as Africa or Latin America, we then open up the text to wider meanings rooted in different forms of oppression. The **tenth model** which is ESF’s own, aims to bring together various aspects of the aforementioned strategies. However, before taking a closer look at her interpretative strategy, we need to go back to the “new living centre” which F proposes. (Green, pp. 33-36)

We have seen that the criterion or canon of her interpretative proposal consists of women’s wellbeing; divine revelation, in fact, is not limited to the biblical text but is situated in the ministry of Jesus and his disciples. Furthermore, F insists (as opposed, for example, to Daly), firstly that the “new living centre” from which to critique kyriarchal ideology is not found on the margins of reality and, secondly, that women find creative ways to deal with their differences by creating mutual relation. SF aims to meet these demands using the concept of “women-church”.

**MAIN IDEAS FROM IN MEMORY OF HER**

**The Vision of the Kingdom- La Basileia**

Jesus proclaimed the *Basileia of God* and shared the theological concern for the renewal of the people of Israel as chosen people and Yahweh’s nation. However, he did not share their idea about the holiness of the Temple and Torah as God’s dwelling place. In his teaching Jesus conveys a vision of the Kingdom as the practice of fullness. As opposed to John the Baptist who preaches repentance and fasting in the desert, Jesus proclaims eschatological salvation and the fullness of the chosen people, Israel, as something already experienced.

Jesus makes whole the humanity of the masses, those who do not belong to the chosen people; he is friend of publicans and prostitutes, eating and drinking with them and with all who do not belong to the “holy people” and, according to them, are somehow lacking.
At the centre of Jesus’ vision is not the holiness of the elect but the fullness of all. Hence his parables make use of images from the world of women. His healings and exorcisms ensure women’s fullness.

Human holiness must express human fullness and the Beatitudes and the Magnificat both speak of an eschatological turning up-side down of world orders.

Jesus’ view of the *basileia* makes people whole, well, pure and strong, redeeming both humanity and the life of the people. The salvation inaugurated by the *basileia* isn’t located in the soul but expresses fullness of life for people in their totality.

As a feminist vision, Jesus’ vision of the *basileia* calls all women without exception to wholeness and autonomy as well as to solidarity with those women in difficult situations hard to bear.

**House churches**

House churches were the main structure of the Christian missionary movement, places in which the first communities gathered and where space, support and guidance were provided for every member. Many of these churches were founded by women or had women as patrons and supporters. These were educated and wealthy women who provided the church with funds for specific purposes. Often these women would teach and preach; they were apostles and ministers and some of them worked together with Paul.

Priscilla and her husband Aquila, Phoebe and Lydia all financially supported their churches and, because of their authority, helped other missionaries and Christians defending them in the law courts and other institutions. These communities were not patriarchal like society but were societies of equals.

Christians were not the first to gather in house churches, in the first century wealthy women had opened their houses to oriental religions and ecstatic celebrations (such as the Bona Dea rites). The synagogues of the diaspora were also house communities.

The members of the house churches were not only important people but came from every sphere and level of society. As a faith family, the fellowship explored different ways of living together (Gal 6,1-10). The house church offered equal opportunities for women because the home was considered women’s true sphere, this meant that the PUBLIC SPHERE of the Christian community was IN THE HOUSE. The church was “in her house” and the lady of the house in which the *ekklesia* met bore the main responsibility for the community.

Prisca and Aquila, for example, founded a domestic church in their house in all the places they lived. In their church, preaching the Word and apostolic service at the Eucharistic table were not separate ministries unlike Paul who preached but did not serve in one community. The example of Prisca leads us to think that the early church was not made up of “family” but of converts coming from different families (children, free women and men, relations). This mean that their church was structured as a RELIGIOUS SOCIETY and not as a patriarchal family.

In the house churches all members took part equally in the life of the society in a way which differed from the patriarchal structures of the time and from those societies composed of homogeneous groups: slaves, members of the lower classes, people from the upper classes, certain ethnic groups or women. We should remember that many societies were formed solely for social or economic purposes.
Whoever was a member of a Christian house church belonged, however, to a society of equals.

House churches were present in Rome up to and beyond the third century and women’s roles in them must have been considerable.

If we compare the role of women in the first Christian communities with that of the deaconesses who emerged later, we find that they were broader and did not reflect typical women’s roles of working only with women and children.

**The ekklesia of women**

In her book, *In Memory of Her*, F has attempted to re-construct the history of early Christianity as women’s history through a historical critical analysis of the Scriptures in the hope of overcoming the divide which separates academic biblical studies from today’s church of women. It is important to consider the spiritual implications of this re-construction.

Women, as God’s Church, have an ongoing history whose roots and starting point are in the women of Judaism, the Jesus movement and the movement of the early church. It is a history of oppression but also of conversion and liberation. This solidarity between women of history and women today is important because it enables us to recuperate our heritage as Christian women and members of God’s people. As Judy Chicago says: “our heritage is our strength”. The Church of women, then is both a future hope and a present reality, every time that the people of God gather for mutual enrichment, to defend religious rights or participate in the decision making process.

Ekklesia, in the New testament, means Church, a civil and political notion rather than a religious one; it indicates the assembly of free citizens who meet to decide on their own political and spiritual issues.

The Gospel is not a private affair to be lived out in an intimate, individual way but it is the community proclamation of the life-giving power of Sophia-Spirit and the divine vision of a different world and community. The centre of early Christian experience was not a holy book, rite, or mystic experience but the ongoing creation of relationships, the presence of God among and through each other. Not “in”, therefore but among us as Luke says in his gospel: “The kingdom of God is among you” (Luke 17,21).

Baptism is a sacrament which calls us to a discipleship of equals, that is, the overcoming of all divisions and structures of domination: a vocation consisting of engagement and solidarity. It is the experience of a “new Church” where everyone is accepted for what they are, roles can be exchanged and solidarity is practised, especially with the oppressed and the least of this world the majority of whom are women and children. The Gospel calls the Church into existence as a discipleship of equals, continually being transformed in the power of the Spirit. The ministry of a community called by Jesus is the same as his: feeding the hungry, healing the sick, liberating the oppressed and proclaiming the Kingdom of God. Christian spirituality thus means, eating and drinking, sharing together, talking to each other, welcoming each other and fighting for justice.

Christian feminist spirituality calls the Church of women to nourish, heal and free other women from every form of idolatry especially of masculinity, false selflessness and self sacrifice which puts the wellbeing of others before our own. Objections can be raised to women-church, of separating itself from the rest of the Church, for example, or of reversed sexism. What women church does is claim
freedom of expression and respect of differences, a space in which to develop a new self awareness, without idolizing masculinity but based on its own spiritual gifts, rights and reciprocity. Men should give up their model of domination based on the spiritual and religious control over women and over the Church as God’s people. The dream of a shared language belongs to God’s different world with humanity renewed in the power of the Spirit.

Women-church is a new model of Church which overcomes the typical divisions of patriarchy: religious/laywomen; housewives/workers; single/married; Protestant/Jewish and so on. These dualisms can only be overcome in solidarity with all women in universal sisterhood. A feminist biblical spirituality must be incarnated in a history through a women’s movement which struggles for freedom and equality lived out with prophetic engagement suffering together in solidarity. This women’s movement is truly ecumenical in that it embraces women throughout the world and any battle against structural sin won by Catholic or Jewish women or the women’s movement itself benefits the liberation of all women, and vice versa.

Finally, women-church must claim the female body as image and body of Christ, denouncing as sacrilege every form of violence against women; physical, psychological, economical, sexual and spiritual.

A feminist biblical spirituality must remain critical and communal in women’s liberating experience, in biblical faith and in keeping alive the memory of the struggles and suffering of our sisters in history.

In conclusion ESF writes. “Only when the ekklesia of women is joined by all those in biblical religion who share the vision of the people of God as the discipleship of equals, only then is the gospel proclaimed in the whole world. Only then will we be able to adequately tell what our foresisters have done in memory of her”.

**The Sophia-God**

For ESF the Divine Sophia is Israel’s God in the language and Gestalt of the goddess. Spirit-Sophia is the source of transforming energy among all creatures. She initiates novelty, instigates change, transforms what is dead into new stretches of life. Fertility is intimately related to her recreative power, as is the attractiveness of sex. It is she who is ultimately playful, fascinating, pure and wise, luring human beings into the depths of love. As mover and encourager of what tends toward stasis, Spirit-Sophia inspires human creativity and joy in the struggle. Wherever the gift of healing and liberation in however partial a manner reaches the winterized or damaged earth, or peoples crushed by war and injustice, or individual persons weary, harmed, sick, or lost on life’s journey, there the new creation in the Spirit is happening. (She Who Is by Elizabeth A. Johnson)

Sophia is called sister, wife, mother, beloved, and teacher. She is the leader on the way, the preacher in Israel, the taskmaster and creator God. She seeks people, finds them on the road, invites them to dinner. She offers life, rest, knowledge, and salvation to those who accept her. She dwells in Israel and officiates in the sanctuary. She send prophets and apostles and makes those who accept her “friends of God.” "She is but one but yet can do everything herself unchanging. She makes all things new" (Wis 7:27). (ESF – In Memory of Her)
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