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## **Women As Ritualistic Agents In The Roman Catholic Church: A Comparative Theological Dialogue With Bede Benjamin Bidlack And Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier**

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**Abstract:** In sub-Saharan African religious worldview, a woman inhabits the interstitial space of connectedness. She serves as the medium for the birthing of physical and spiritual life. Today, many in the continent have embraced Christianity and many profess the Roman Catholic faith. African Catholics can contribute to the ongoing discourse on the role of women as ministerial agents in the Catholic Church. To do this, they can articulate a theology of ministry that is grounded in the religious worldview of African indigenous religions.

**Keywords:** Daoism, Christianity, Priesthood, Women, African Traditional Religion, Life.

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### **Introduction**

Reading the pre-fall account of creation in the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis, one notices the refusal of God to limit the possibilities open to man and woman in relation to who they are. They are given all that has been created to become custodians over and through their interactions with the created world to achieve their destinies. However, as one reads the fall narrative, one notices that the pathways for the flourishing of life for them become the sources of limitations. The complementary relation between man and woman becomes the source of servitude for the woman. Her destiny is reduced to service to the man (Gn. 3:16).<sup>1</sup> She is defined by her biological abilities. The man, on the other hand, is punished in the context of his role as food provider and his link to the land (3:17 – 19). He becomes an agent of oppression and sorrow for the woman (3:16). The punishment proclaimed by Yahweh over the first man and woman becomes the grounds for understanding patriarchy as a disordered form of relationship. Also noticeable is the fact that this disordered patriarchy is linked to what many in Christianity assume to be the divinely ordained religious and cultural roles for men and women. Holding on to such views simply means reifying a disorder and upholding it as the norm.

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<sup>1</sup> All biblical quotes are taken from *The New American Bible* (Wichita, Kansas: Catholic Bible Publishers, 1970).

Millennia have passed since these stories of creation were first shared among our human ancestors. However, the question remains, what efforts have we made to right these disordered forms of relationship that continue to make themselves manifest in all aspects of human social life, religious and secular?

In response to the above question, in this work, I intend to engage two dialogical partners in an attempt to explore ways of articulating a theological vision that is inclusive of women as leaders in the liturgical life of the Roman Catholic Church. Central to this work is an attempt to address the loopholes in the Christological heritage of the magisterial church on which the exclusive vision of ministry hinges itself. In doing this, the comparative theological insights articulated by Bede Benjamin Bidlack will be addressed.<sup>2</sup> A second dialogical partner will be Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier whose theological insights offer a possibility for embracing women as legitimate agents of ministry within the liturgical life of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>3</sup> I will attempt to show clearly the psychological, and socio-cultural dangers a male dominated theological anthropology leads to unless it is clearly critiqued and called out for what it is. Finally, I will offer a corrective vision from sub-Saharan Africa, one that speaks of woman as embodied cosmic bridge builder uniting all cosmic realities to the spiritual realm.

### **Christology Reconsidered**

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Matt. 16:13). The question Jesus posed to his disciples as he entered the region of Caesarea Philippi is a relevant question for our times (16:13-20). It is important to pay attention to the location where that question is posed. Caesarea Philippi is a place outside of the center of Jewish religious power. In fact, it sits at the crossroads of exploration and militaristic struggles. Greeks, Romans, and the Muslim ruler of Egypt and Syria, Sultan Salah ad-Din Yusuf (Saladin) have all left their marks on this region.<sup>4</sup> It is in this region that the temple of the Greek god, Pan, the god of desolate places, was built. Yet, it is at this place, the place of the so called ‘uncivilized’ that Jesus poses the existential question to his followers. While biblical scholars along with Christian theologians interested in this passage would tend to focus more on the Christological

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<sup>2</sup> He is a systematic theologian who is in dialogue with Daoist thoughts in birthing forth new interpretations of Christian revelation.

<sup>3</sup> She is a systematic theologian who is in dialogue with Hindu feminist thoughts.

<sup>4</sup> See the work of John Wilson, *Caesarea Philippi: Baniyas, The Lost City of Pan* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2004).

motif behind the question and the ensuing discourse as found in the synoptic gospels, I am more interested in the viability of the location as a place where the generosity of otherness is expressed. Outside of the traditional center of monotheistic worship of Yahweh (Jerusalem), Jesus decides to ask his followers who he was by first recognizing the place of otherness in the shaping and gifting of identity.

Responding to the question posed by Jesus, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (16:14). Interestingly, Jesus did not say these responses are wrong. They are the legitimate views of others on who Jesus Christ is. Having recognized the legitimate voices of others, Jesus poses the question again to get a response from those who have known him directly. Yet, while one would have expected all his followers to be as verbose as they were earlier in their responses, only one of them gave a response. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (16:16). The response of Simon Peter is not primarily my focus here for the following reason; Though Jesus addresses the same question to his disciples, he did not invalidate what others have said of him. He did not say that the only way one can speak of him is by repeating what Simon Peter had said. It is this attitude of Jesus that makes for the possibility, among many, for speaking of him in light of non-Christian religious insights. If Jesus were to ask the same question today, I would think the responses would be as varied as it was two millennia ago. It might even include a comparison between Jesus and Lord Lao as has been done by the theologian, Bidlack.

Bidlack titled his work *What Child Is This? Jesus, Lord Lao, And Divine Identity*. The title of his work is a question posed not to Jesus but to those who must make sense of Jesus when the narrative surrounding his life is synonymous to narratives of other sacred figures in human diverse religious histories. Just as Jesus, in entering the sacred space of Pan, must ask his followers to state whom others, who are not his followers, say he is, so must Christians today proclaim who Jesus is as stated by non-Christians. For Bidlack, who Jesus is must be discussed within the context of Daoism. Lest one begins to fret because Bidlack has not begun the discourse within the realm of the familiar, the Christological traditions of the early church, the approach of Bidlack is as orthodox as it gets because he, like the early church, appropriates the language and insights of the alien to articulate what his faith accents to. The task of a comparative theologian, as noted by Bidlack, involves taking seriously the responsibility of "reading closely across religious

boundaries so as to examine carefully the texts in question."<sup>5</sup> This task, while exciting and insightful, can be challenging. It involves a journey into an unfamiliar terrain. For Christians who have been taught to believe that all that is worthy of being known about God's salvific plans for the cosmos are found in Christianity, such a journey into the unfamiliar can lead to uncomfortable self-discoveries.

Should one affirm what one encounters in the non-Christian religion? If one does, to what extent should one do so? Perhaps these are the wrong questions to ask. To encounter another religious tradition with the intent to pass judgment is similar to entering an art gallery blindfolded. One cannot experience the beautiful gift of otherness present in the religious tradition. By encountering another religious tradition and learning to appreciate their own salvific narratives, one learns that one's own religious history is not unique to one. In the words of Bidlack, "only by having the courage to face the similarities head-on can the theologian save Christmas."<sup>6</sup> Similarities abound between the birth narratives of Lord Lao and the Infant Jesus. Both are conceived and given birth to by virgins. Both births are accompanied by cosmic events, for Lord Lao, it is "dragons who accompany his birth."<sup>7</sup> For Jesus, it is animals, shepherds who seek the child, and angelic beings singing and announcing the great event. In fact, what can be said of both births is that they are extraordinary and point to extraordinary figures who united the divine-human worlds in their beings and destinies.<sup>8</sup> These divine-human links in the births and destinies of Lord Lao and Jesus the Christ point to the need to reorder a world that is in disarray. Thus, their destinies are inherently salvific.<sup>9</sup> It should also be pointed out that at the heart of this salvific mission lies absolute generosity. For Lord Lao, his destiny is to reorient dysfunctional kingdoms back to the Dao.<sup>10</sup> In Jesus Christ, the generosity of God and humanity are both affirmed and preserved. God engages humanity with a pure desire to share God's divinity with humanity through the incarnate Christ. The enduring hypostatic union serves as a constant witness to this divine gesture. Humanity also demonstrates a sense of generosity by willingly opening itself to be receptive to the gestures of

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<sup>5</sup> Bede Benjamin Bidlack, "What Child is This? Jesus, Lord Lao, And Divine Identity," in Michelle Voss Roberts (ed.), *Comparing Faithfully. Insights for Systematic Theological Reflection* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 196.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 202 – 203.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 209 – 210.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

love from God in and through Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the virgin birth of both Lord Lao and Jesus Christ and their divine-human identities point to God-in-relationship with humanity. By taking on human nature, God has engaged humanity in an intimate way. A form of hypostatic union exists in the two narratives of Lord Lao and Jesus Christ. The divine-human union in Lord Lao and Jesus Christ is also a union of two worlds, one perfect and the other imperfect with a propensity to be perfect.

It is important to explore further the notion of salvation as stressed in the work of Bidlack. As Bidlack has pointed out, salvation, in the *Huahu jing*, entails being saved from "political disharmony" that has fallen on the states ruled over by the Toba (Tuoba) rulers.<sup>11</sup> Lord Lao provides the necessary political insights to lead the state back to the path of justice and peace. There are the pragmatic and existential qualities present in the vision that Lord Lao provides. The same can be said of Jesus Christ. He provides the salvific path for Christians to follow as they seek God's reign on earth. On another note, the missions of Lord Lao and Jesus Christ do not end with them. They continue through those who embrace their worldviews. Again, as noted by Bidlack, "the Daoist world continues eternally with Lord Lao descending from above to re-tune kingdoms to the flow of the Dao. The Dao is never really separate from Earth... as advisor to the king, Lord Lao, despite his exalted status, never replaces the king or directly fixes problems. Instead, the human king must accept and follow the advice of the sage to establish Great Peace."<sup>12</sup> In Christianity, the followers of Jesus Christ are commissioned to bear witness to what they have seen and experienced in Jesus Christ. They are thus the vehicles through which God's grace in Christ is encountered in the world. Although Christian Scripture casts divinity as the dominant actor in the drama of union between divinity and humanity, the Christian understanding of the creation of humankind by the Word of God reflects the view that humanity, aided by the grace of God, is capable of cooperating with God (1 Tim. 2:5).<sup>13</sup> All these point to the relevance of alterity in the relationships between the divine and the earthly.

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<sup>11</sup> These were members of the Xianbei, the first nomadic groups that settled in present day eastern and inner Mongolia, and northeastern China. They formed the Yuan Wei dynasty that ruled northern China from 386 C.E. to 534 C.E. See René Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1970), 60 – 65.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>13</sup> *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*. Volume 1, trans. Richard Price and Michael Gaddis (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 67.

Bidlack calls attention to a Christian view of salvation that ought to be critiqued. While showing the cosmic relevance of salvation in Christ, Bidlack concludes that "in the Christian view of history, Jesus Christ came once in the past and will come once and for all in the future. The second coming will be that of the apocalypse when the world will come to an end and will be replaced by "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21:1)."<sup>14</sup> While this theological view seems to be very common among Christians, it ought to be critiqued because of the erroneous vision it has led to with regard to how Christians are to order their lives on earth. Thanks to the insights of liberation theologians who have called for a holistic understanding of salvation, one that speaks to the earthly realities and not solely the other-worldly. The mere fact that God has become human in Jesus Christ speaks to a God who has become part of human history. In the words of Raimon Panikkar, while following the thought process of many before him, "...the humanization of God corresponds to the divinization of Man. Christ is the revelation of God (in Man) as much as the revelation of Man (in God)."<sup>15</sup> To reveal is to make known what was there and previously unknown. This points to the fact that salvation is not simply an act done in a moment. Rather, it is a process, one that speaks to the ongoing relationship between God and humans. Thus, Christian hope is not only other-worldly. It is also grounded in the here and now. In the words of N. T. Wright, "God's space and ours – heaven and earth, in other words – are, though very different, not far away from one another...God's space and ours interlock and intersect in a whole variety of ways even while they retain, for the moment at least, their separate and distinct identities and roles."<sup>16</sup> The idea of "a new heaven and a new earth" has been misconstrued to imply a destruction of this earth before the new realities unfold. This view ought to be rejected because it has led many Christians to be lethargic and reluctant to embrace the political, sociological, cultural, economic, and psychological engagement with the world. There is a sense of hands-off approach which ought to be rejected. Again, Wright reminds us that "The transition from the present world to the new one would be a matter not of the destruction of the present space-time universe but its radical healing."<sup>17</sup> For this healing process to be appreciated, Wright

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<sup>14</sup> Bidlack, 210.

<sup>15</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *Christophany: The Fullness of Man*. Translated by Alfred DiLascia. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 17.

<sup>16</sup> N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope. Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 116.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

calls for a reinterpretation of the language of the second coming "in terms of a general hope for world renewal."<sup>18</sup>

Jürgen Moltmann situates Christian hope within the context of the continuum of incarnation-cross-resurrection-second coming. For Moltmann, "There can be no theology of the incarnation which does not become a theology of the cross. 'As soon as you say incarnation, you say cross.' God did not become man according to the measure of our conceptions of being a man. He became the kind of man we do not want to be: an outcast, accursed, crucified."<sup>19</sup> Just as Lord Lao has a soteriological mission aimed at reordering the kingdoms and the rulers on the path of Dao, the crucified Christ on the cross, according to Moltmann, is one who brings about an end to outcastness, accursedness, and all forms of marginality. Does this include the marginalization of women in the world constructed by the vision of patriarchy? I would say "yes." As Moltmann rightly states, "only if all disaster, forsakenness by God, absolute death, the infinite curse of damnation and sinking into nothingness is in God himself, is community with this God eternal salvation, infinite joy, indestructible election and divine life."<sup>20</sup> Consequently, one must ask, how is the turn in hermeneutic to be achieved as called for by Bidlack as Christians read the birth narratives of Lord Lao and the Infant Jesus? How are Christians to appreciate and learn from these two birth narratives? Moltmann offers a viable solution. Christians should move away from a theological vision that speaks of God in history. In his words, "to think of 'God in history' always leads to theism and to atheism. To think of 'history in God' leads beyond that, into new creation and *theopoiesis*. To 'think of history in God' however, first means to understand humanity in the suffering and dying of Christ, and that means all humanity, with its dilemmas and its despairs."<sup>21</sup>

### **Being human in Christ – A Womanist Vision**

Moltmann calls for a new way of speaking of the economy of God; one that places human history within the life of God. This, Moltmann argues, demands of us a new way of articulating what it means to be human. The work of Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, "Women's Virtue, Church Leadership, and the Problem of Gender Complementarity," speaks to

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>19</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God. 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition. With A New Foreword by Miroslav Volf* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 294 – 295.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 363.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 364.



this. She begins her work by locating herself within the narrative of vulnerability. She tells her story, her struggles, visions, and hopes. All theology must begin with an embrace of vulnerability. The God who suffers and rejoices with humans can only be spoken of through the mediating tools of our embodied experiences. Tiemeier invites the readers to encounter her theological vision through her own existential narrative and questions. If God-talk is to be embraced, it must also involve human-talk. In this context, it must necessarily involve woman-talk. In the world of patriarchy, woman-talk is most often not given its rightful place. A liberating theology ought to begin and end by embracing the untold stories, those that involve the pains and struggles of people at the margins. I am a male theologian who has benefited from the privileges linked to patriarchy. It is important that I also claim my own truth. However, I am a black man who inhabits two paradoxical worlds, one of privilege and one of marginality. Rather than deny these realities, I shall attempt to use both to present a prophetic response to the challenges Tiemeier invites her readership to address.

Many within the Roman Catholic Church have and continue to argue either for or against the inclusion of women within the ordained hierarchy of the church. Numerous theological, cultural, psychological, sociological, historical, and philosophical arguments have been given on both sides of the debate. While I do not intend to repeat these arguments, I am compelled to ask what it means to be a woman in a church that says the ministerial priesthood is closed to women. To ignore the expectations of women who continue to feel alienated in the church is to ignore a graced opportunity for dialogue and discernment. When women speak out and shed light on the narratives of silence and marginalization of women in the church they ought to be listened to by all the members of the church. The vocation of a theologian is to constantly reflect upon the realities of our world in light of the transforming presence of God. It is on this note that Tiemeier situates her theological narrative which reveals the hurdles she had to overcome as a young woman hoping to one day become an ordained clergy. As persons of faith, theologians are called to see within the very structures of marginalization opportunities for transformative visions and narratives. Thus, Tiemeier, though unable to fulfill her desire to become an ordained clergy, chose to become a theologian that explores interstitial realities. As a Japanese American woman who was raised in a multiple religious world, Tiemeier's vision of God-in-relationship with the world is one that cannot be reduced to a single story. As she writes,

"unlike the stereotype of the 'tragic mulatto (mixed-race person),' who is a victim of both worlds, my mixed childhood was nourishing in many ways, full of bridges and connections between worlds."<sup>22</sup> It is on this note that she explores the paradoxes inherent in the theological anthropology embraced by the Roman Catholic Church. For Tiemeier to be human is not reducible to abstract terms. Rather, it involves the totality of the "religious, historical, cultural, and scientific sources" that shape and define all aspects of human life in community.<sup>23</sup> To define humanity based on only one source is to do violence to the richness of our complex realities.

It is important that theologians like Tiemeier critique the argument made by Pope John Paul II that the exclusion of women from ministry is not shaped and validated by patriarchal tendencies inherent in cultures that have shaped Christianity beginning with Israeli, Greek, Roman, and other western cultures.<sup>24</sup> As Tiemeier rightly notes, at the heart of the Roman Catholic Church's theology on ministerial leadership is a vision of what it means to be human in society, one that reflects paradoxes and sometimes outright contradictions.<sup>25</sup> The curial document, *Inter Insigniores* that aims to present a holistic argument showing how the church cannot ordain women into the ministerial priesthood ought to be critiqued for what it is. At the heart of the document is a vision of what it means to be human in community. In this context, it is the church as a community of believers. The document presents arguments based on the practice of Jesus Christ who did not call women to be part of the Twelve (Luke 8:1); the apostolic tradition that barred women from leadership role in the church; the tradition of the church since apostolic times; and a theological focus on the sacramental relationship between the church and Jesus Christ himself, whom the ordained priest represents as an *alter Christus*, one who stands in the place of Christ.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, "Women's Virtue, Church Leadership, and the Problem of Gender Complementarity," in *Comparing Faithfully. Insights for Systematic Theological Reflection* ed. Michelle Voss Roberts (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 171 – 172.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>24</sup> John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter: Mulieris Dignitatem* (August 15, 1988) 26, in [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1988/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19880815\\_mulieris-dignitatem.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html) (accessed September 7, 2018). See also John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter: Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, (May 22, 1994) 2, in [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1994/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19940522\\_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html) (accessed September 7, 2018).

<sup>25</sup> Tiemeier, 174.

<sup>26</sup> See Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration: Inter Insigniores. On the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood* (October 15, 1976), in

However one may want to receive or critique the arguments of the church against women ordination, one thing is certain, it is grounded in an anthropological vision that sees men and women to be called to different roles both in the world and in the church, one where men are called to be leaders and women called to be followers. Can this be the only legitimate vision of what it means to be human in light of ministry in the church? Tiemeier offers an alternative vision, one grounded in a comparative theological analysis.

Comparing the Christian narrative on the person and role of Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ to the *Cilappatikaram*, a Tamil epic in Jainism that explores the ritualistic, cosmic, communal, roles of women, Tiemeier hopes to show how to be woman involves multiple layers of identity that must be embraced by the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church. At the heart of comparative theology is the intent to learn from other religious traditions. In this case, Tiemeier's work aims to show what Roman Catholic theology can learn about women as embodied ritualistic beings. She cautions against the theology that presents the female vocation as one defined solely by their reproductive functions – virginity and motherhood.<sup>27</sup> These have been used to define the person and vocation of "Mary the virgin mother of Jesus Christ."<sup>28</sup> The idea of receptivity, which Pope John Paul II used to explain the dignity, and role of women in the world and the church is called to question because it creates a narrative that presents "men as leaders of the church as Christ did and women as followers who receive Christ and others in their homes and in the world through motherhood and religious sisterhood as Mary did."<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Tiemeier sheds light on the confusing narrative that presents male and female as complementary genders by asking the following questions; "if Mary reveals something for both women and men, then why are roles in the Church rigidly defined according to gender? Is the theology of Mary and gender complementarity simply about those in power marginalizing and excluding women from power?"<sup>30</sup> One then must ask, are there other narratives that Roman Catholic theology can explore in order to broaden its perspective on what it means to be a woman? Tiemeier offers a

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[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19761015\\_inter-insigniores\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html) (accessed September 7, 2018).

<sup>27</sup> Tiemeier, 175.

<sup>28</sup> John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter. Mulieris Dignitatem* 2.

<sup>29</sup> Tiemeier, 175.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

solution, one that goes beyond gendered identity, as found in the *Cilappatikaram*.

In the *Cilappatikaram* epic, one encounters women who embody cosmic powers even within the patriarchal context of social expectations. Kannaki's fidelity to her husband, Kovalan, externally depicts the usual expectations for women in a patriarchal world. It serves as the means for attaining a trans-gendered identity, one that brings about cosmic harmony. Refusing to allow injustice reign in the city of Maturai that has claimed her husband's life, Kannaki speaks up against the unjust system. Her courage in speaking truth to power leads to the shameful death of the unjust ruler of the city. As the story goes, after her husband's death, Kannaki "rips off her left breast, circles the city three times, and curses the city."<sup>31</sup> By sacrificing that by which she is known, her biological and reproductive body parts, she becomes an icon of divine justice for a world that is disordered by injustice. Consequently, the city is destroyed by "Agni, the god of fire" whom she invokes to restore justice to the land that has become unjust.<sup>32</sup> Kannaki's cosmic powers is linked to her chaste life with karmic implications. Similarly, the *Cilappatikaram* epic presents another female figure by name Kavunti, whose renunciation of traditionally understood gendered lifestyle positions her as an embodiment of cosmic power and balance. She is the custodian of hidden knowledge, one that gives meaning to the cosmic and karmic realities shaping the lives of both Kannaki and her husband Kovalan.<sup>33</sup>

At the heart of the *Cilappatikaram* is the renunciation of everything worldly, including strict gender roles. Reading the story closely, one notices actions on the part of the women that go beyond societal expectations. The breast of a woman that is linked to sustenance of life within the context of strict gender roles, is itself rejected by Kannaki. Though faithful to her husband even in his death, the story points to the dynamism and complex identities a woman can lay claim to. Kannaki is not defined solely by her biological makeup.<sup>34</sup> The same can also be said of Kavunti who becomes a Jain ascetic. By renouncing every mundane thing, including her socially constructed role of being married to a man, Kavunti becomes an embodiment of wisdom. In fact, rather than deny their female gender, it is through it that both women become

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 181.

instruments of cosmic harmony. In the words of Tiemeier, "It is precisely through the gendered body that women are rendered ritually powerful."<sup>35</sup> This fact is not limited to the Tamil *Cilappatikaram*. The same can also be said of women in African indigenous religions.

### **Women and Cosmic Agency in African Indigenous Religions<sup>36</sup>**

Embodied femininity is at the heart of African indigenous religions. While fertility cults are headed by women, their roles go beyond their gender. Among the Yoruba people of western Nigeria, women serve as priestesses in the Osun cult. Within the Yoruba pantheon of deities, Osun is the deity responsible for child bearing. She brings healing to the sick and wealth to the poor and marginalized. She is the goddess of comfort for those who suffer and who are at the margins of society due to misfortunes.<sup>37</sup>

There are clear evidences showing how indigenous cultures of Africa during their encounters with western colonial agents and Christian missionaries moved from matriarchal to patriarchal focus in matters related to religion and socio-political structures. Among the Yorubas of western Nigeria, prior to colonial rule and Christian missionary activities there were women *babalawos* (*Ifa* priests).<sup>38</sup> The term *babalawo* (father of mystery) is sexist because it glosses over the place and role of women priestesses in the priesthood of the Yoruba religion.<sup>39</sup> Post-colonial and missionary encounters have led to a male only understanding of the term. The historical facts dispute this belief. *Ifa* priesthood (diviners) has never been historically limited to men. Again, the role of women in Yoruba religion is so pronounced that it would be impossible to deny that women had no place in the religious sphere.

The role of women as religious leaders in Yoruba religion goes beyond the rituals themselves. They are preservers of cosmic and social

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> See SimonMary Ahiokhai, "The Place of Women in the Catholic Churches of Africa: Using Inculturation as a Model for Inclusion of Women in the Ministerial Life of the Church," in *Theological Reimagination: Conversations on Church, Religion, and Society* ed. Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publishers Africa, 2014), 261 - 263.

<sup>37</sup> See Modupe Oduyoye, "The Medicine Man, the Magician and the Wise Man," *Traditional Religion in West Africa* ed. Adeolu Adegbola (Ibadan, Nigeria: Sefer Books, 1998), 112-120.

<sup>38</sup> See Peter McKenzie, *Hail Orisha! A Phenomenology of a West African Religion in the Mid-Nineteenth century* (Leiden/New York: Brill/Koln, 1997), 409. Also see Elizabeth M. McClelland, *The Cult of Ifa among the Yoruba* (London: Ethnographica, 1982), 88.

<sup>39</sup> Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde, "Women as Healers: The Nigerian (Yoruba) Example," in *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*. Eds. Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 164.

harmony. For example, the Yoruba people believe that “*aje funfun* (white witches) are benevolent female spirits who are consulted in times of national or tribal crisis.”<sup>40</sup> These female witches protect the tribes or nation from being destroyed. It is their responsibility to guide the tribe during times of crises by providing wise advice to the tribal leaders through the priestesses who act as their media of contact. These female white witches have a direct link with the *Iyaami*, the divine women who offer guidance to *Olodumare*, the creator, one of the three manifestations of the supreme deity. The other two manifestations are *Olorun*, the ruler of the heaven, and *Olofin*, the link between the heaven and the earth. The three *Iyaami* that guide *Olodumare* are called “*Ayere Eiye; Ayere Eiye; Oyeye Eiye Ti Se Oniko Eleiye*.”<sup>41</sup> The *Aje Funfun* (white witches) derive their authority and existence from the *Iyaami*.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, just as there are three *Iyaami*, there are three main categories of *Aje* (witches). These are *Aje Dudu; Aje Funfun; and Aje Pupua*.<sup>43</sup> The first and the third categories of witches are known for their malevolent tendencies; unlike the second whose members represent goodness in all their dealings with humans on earth.<sup>44</sup>

On another note, among the Binis of midwestern Nigeria, there are many creation myths. One of these myths stands out because of the prominent role women play in it. The creation myth claims that Osalobua (the Supreme God) had three children (all women) whose names were Obiemven, Olokun, and Oguiwu.<sup>45</sup> When Osalobua wanted to create the world, he sent his daughters as intermediaries. The eldest, Obiemven, turned the snail shell she was given and instructed to take along by a bird, named Owonwon upside down and a good amount of sand came out that filled the waters of the earth to create land. Later on, Osalobua divided the earth among his three daughters. To the eldest, he gave control over childbirth and fertility. To Olokun, the second daughter, he gave control over riches and wealth. And to the third daughter, Oguiwu, he gave control over death.<sup>46</sup> It is worth noting

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 164-165. See also T. Olunlade, “Ipa Ti awon Obinrin ko ninu eewo to jewo nipa Asayan Oriki at Orile Yoruba,” *Yoruba: A Journal of the Yoruba Studies Association of Nigeria*, vol. 1 (1999), 44-54.

<sup>41</sup> “Featured Priest Chief Ifawole: The Iyaami,” (October 3, 2009) in *Orishada.com*, <http://orishada.com/wordpress/?p=537> (accessed September 7, 2018).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> The complete narrative of Bini creation myth is from Cynthia Admabua Iruobe, “The Olokun - The Sea Goddess,” *The Guardian* (Saturday, August 24, 2002) in *Edofolks.com*, <http://www.edofolks.com/html/pub106.htm> (accessed September 7, 2018).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

the significance of this myth. The entire gamut of human existence is tied to the female deities. This Bini myth acknowledges the role women play in bringing life to the world, sustaining and nurturing it, and journeying with the matured life through the death process. Just as Kannaki becomes the protectress of the Tamil people and Kavunti, the guardian of the collective wisdom of the Tamil people, one can also say that these three divine-human daughters of Osalubua serve as the embodiment of divine justice, cosmic life, and eschatological hope for the Bini people.

Furthermore, for the Tiv people of northeastern Nigeria, a woman is regarded as both an emblem of communal continuity and as a sacred representation of divinity. The Tiv people believe that God has given them the knowledge of manipulating the *Akombo* (sacred object that links the community/family/individual with the divine) for personal protection as well as for the protection and survival of the community/tribe/nation.<sup>47</sup> Again, just as there are individual or familial *Akombo*, there is also the great communal *Akombo* that protects the entire tribe. As noted by Bruce Lincoln, there is a close connection between the great *Akombo* and a woman. Just as the former protects the community from extinction, the latter, through the multiple roles of fecundity nurturing, sustaining, and educating of the members of their nuclear and extended families makes concrete the continuous existence of the community.<sup>48</sup> The woman's role in Tiv society is not limited to childbearing. She plays a prominent role in nurturing all human lives in the community. Women who have reached puberty are the greatest *Akombo* among the Tiv people. This point is reflected in the tattoos drawn on the body of a pregnant woman. These tattoos are similar to the scarification on the great communal *Akombo* to protect the community when it is faced with grave danger that might lead to its extinction. The body of a woman becomes both the symbol of purification and continuity of the tribe. She bears on her body the past, present, and future of the tribe. In her body lies the meaning of existence of the Tiv people and becomes a testament to the entire tribe to be virtuous and holy.<sup>49</sup>

From all the examples given above on the role of women in African indigenous religions and the insights from the Tamil *Cilappatikaram*, one

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<sup>47</sup> Bruce Lincoln, "The Religious Significance of Women's Scarification among the Tiv," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (1975), 316.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

thing is certain, women play fundamental roles as ritualist agents. Roman Catholicism continues to resist any discourse that will lead to the embrace of the role of women as relevant leaders within the context of ministerial priesthood. Arguments proffered by the magisterium against women's ordination are at best grounded in an anthropological vision that presents the genders as ordered towards particular functions in society. We have seen, as argued above, that such a vision proceeds from a disordered anthropology that comes to be as a result of the fall of the first humans from God's favor. To situate any theological discourse on women's roles in ministry on a problematic anthropology is to forget that which Jesus came to correct. "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (Jn. 10:10). The life of God that Jesus mediates through God's church is not one to be restricted in any manner or form. Neither is anyone to be barred from being an agent for experiencing such a life. The fact that Jesus went to the territory of Pan to ask his followers questions about his identity and chose not to deny what people have called him speaks to an openness in the invitation of God to all who seek to follow God. Barring women from ministerial priesthood is itself a human attempt to define how God operates in God's world. Theologies in defense of male only priesthood are at best problematic and fall short of God's plan for all. It is as male and female that God made humanity. As male and female they fell from grace. As male and female they have been called into Christ. It is as male and female they have been sent to proclaim God's truth to the ends of the earth. Thus, it must be as male and female that they are invited to break bread and drink wine in memory of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Exclusionary theologies of ministry do not reflect this complimentary vision.

### **Conclusion**

The Daoist myth that presents the birth narrative of Lord Dao and the Tamil *Cilappatikaram* epic highlight possibilities for broadening what it means to be embodied ritualistic agents within the Roman Catholic tradition. As stated clearly by Tiemeier, "gendered bodily practices are themselves powerful, and the exclusion of women (or men) in the complex drama of the Eucharist is problematic. Both men and women may be actually necessary for symbolizing the mystery of salvation."<sup>50</sup> The theology on ministerial priesthood ought to be critiqued through the lens of the theology on and function of baptism. The foundation of the

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<sup>50</sup> Tiemeier, 182



Christian life is rooted in baptism. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines baptism as "the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as [children] of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission..."<sup>51</sup> Through Baptism, one "shares in the priesthood of Christ, in his prophetic and royal mission."<sup>52</sup> It is important that this understanding of the sacrament of baptism be brought to bear on the teaching on ministerial priesthood and the role of women in the church.

Canonical and liturgical norms that distance women from the sanctuary even in non-priestly roles betray a sense of forgetfulness on the part of the magisterium concerning the rich identity one is called to embrace through the waters of baptism. If baptism makes Christians priestly people, prophets, and missionaries who are called to and confirmed in the ministry of service through the sacraments of initiation, we, as church, ought to ask ourselves this question: how do women perform these roles in the capacity as baptized members of the church? It is just not enough to opine that they participate in the royal priesthood of the people of God. The identity derived from baptism is not one without a mission, it is an identity that calls us to service in the Lord's vineyard. The gifts one receives through the sacraments of initiation are meant to edify the Church from within and from without. The First Letter of Peter states this beautifully. It reads: "...you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1Peter 2:9). In other words, the gifts received through baptism are meant to be used in the mission Christ calls the church to through the Spirit of His Father. When women are constantly removed from the center of worship in our liturgies the rich understanding of our royal priesthood is diminished.

It is important to note also that baptism brings about an ordering of what original sin has disordered. In the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "The doctrine of original sin is, so to speak, the 'reverse side' of the Good News that Jesus is the Savior of all men [humans]."<sup>53</sup> As noted by feminist biblical scholars, the Genesis account of creation

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<sup>51</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church. Second Edition* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994/ Washington D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, Inc., 1994), 312

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 98. The word in parenthesis is that of the author.

before the fall from God's favor by the first humans points to a clear sense of equality among the sexes.<sup>54</sup> If through baptism all things lost through the sin of the first humans is restored then it ought also to reflect in the inclusion of women as active agents of ritual worship within the liturgical life of the church. Exclusion of women from ministry whether based on the argument of the example of Jesus, the apostolic tradition, or other arguments pushed forward by the magisterium ought always to be critiqued in light of what baptism in Christ has brought about for all within the created order.

Finally, the Roman Catholic Church's magisterium can benefit from one of the stories told of the Goddess Osun (Oshun) in Yoruba mythology.<sup>55</sup> It is told that *Oludumare* sent seventeen deities to the newly created earth to populate it with life. Osun was the only female deity amongst them. The rest were all male. Being arrogant in their ways, they thought they could do without Osun. They refused to include her in their work. They were unsuccessful. They appealed to *Olodumare* for help. And the supreme deity referred them to *Osun*. They forgot that she is the embodiment of life. She agreed to help them. She ushered in the water of life that brought about human life and all other living creatures on earth. Without the female presence in the divine work, God's plan for creation is never complete. It is for this reason that Yoruba *ifa* (priesthood) insists on including women as priestesses. For the Yorubas, priesthood that excludes women is like a human being missing half of his body. Such a person is as good as dead. The Roman Catholic Church's magisterium may appreciate the point here. Creation and its sustenance is not the work of a male god only. It is Trinitarian work, and this involves both the maleness, femaleness of God. Thus, to speak of God as Father, Son and spirit is as legitimate as speaking of God as Mother, Daughter, and Spirit.

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<sup>54</sup> See Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 17 - 20. See also Amnon Shapira, "On Woman's Equal Standing in the Bible A Sketch: A Feminist Re-Reading of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological View," *Hebrew Studies*, vol. 51 (2010), 7 - 42.

<sup>55</sup> See Bayyinah S. Jeffries, "Oshun: Yoruba Deity," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica.com*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Oshun> (accessed September 7, 2018).

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