
*Women Bishops
and Rhetorics
of Shalom*



A WHOLE PEACE



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Women Bishops and Rhetorics of Shalom: A Whole Peace argues that the theological concept of shalom offers a way forward for Christians advocating for social justice based on their faith in a world characterized by many faiths. To do so, it considers the rhetorical leadership of three women bishops who are all "firsts": Marjorie Matthews, the first woman bishop in a mainline post-Reformation church; Leontine Kelly, the first woman bishop of color in any mainline church; and Katharine Jefferts Schori, the first woman to lead a national church in the Anglican Communion. This book is recommended for scholars interested in communication, religious studies, and gender studies.

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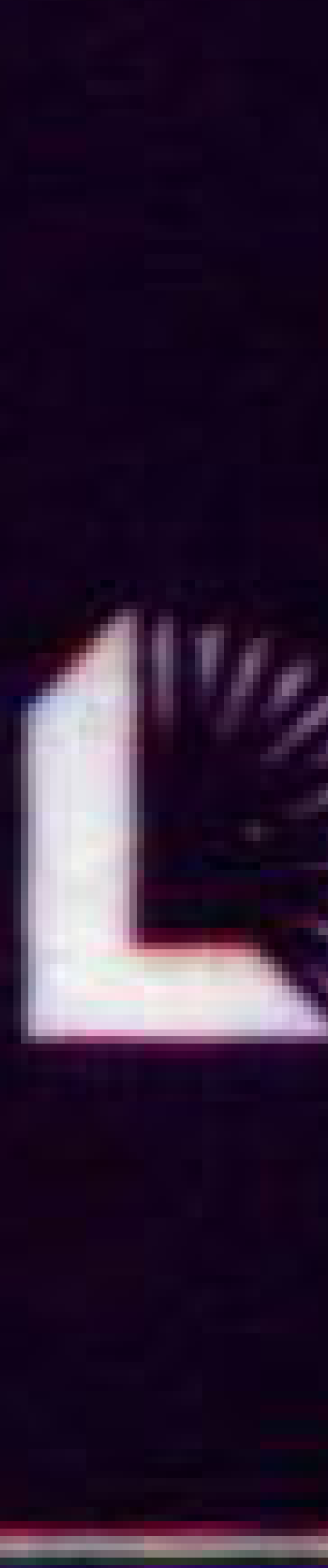
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Introduction

The longest conversation recorded in the Gospels appears in John's account of Jesus's meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well. Though the woman identified as a Samaritan and Jesus a Jew, Jesus broke custom and spoke to her. After their conversation about living water, the Samaritan woman ran into town to tell everyone about Jesus. "Certainly," Helen Bruch Pearson observes, "no one in town could have guessed that this outcast among outcasts would ever be found in the presence of the Messiah."¹ History remembers this woman, sometimes called the first evangelist, as the first person to tell others about Jesus, and this story as an early example that Jesus valued the testimony of women. Since that "sermon," many other women, some just as unlikely, have followed the Samaritan woman's example.

Like the Samaritan woman, Marjorie Swank Matthews, Leontine Turpeau Current Kelly, and Katharine Jefferts Schori hold distinctions as "firsts." When the North Central Jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church elected Matthews in 1980, the post-Reformation Christian church received its first woman bishop. Kelly became Christendom's first woman bishop of color in 1984 when the Western Jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church elevated her to the episcopacy. Jefferts Schori's 2006 election as the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church marked the first time in four hundred years of Anglican history that a woman led a national church in the Anglican Communion. As the first two women bishops in Protestant Christianity and the first woman to lead a major main-line denomination, these three women stand out as touchstones worthy of analysis.²

"There are no models for me," Matthews told a newspaper reporter following her election. "I'll have to make my own way."³ Of course, Matthews could look to generations of men bishops as models, but as Anita Allen observes, people need role models who look like them, too—who understand their unique experiences of discrimination in their particular contexts.⁴ Clergymen, regardless of sect, work in denominations that for their whole history have ordained men and elevated them to the office of bishop and, as a rule, never experience appointment to a church where even a few parishioners have reservations about men in the role of pastor. Thus, Matthews and Kelly had no models, and while Jefferts Schori could look to the example of previous women bishops, she was

first to break the highest stained glass ceiling in leading a national church.

How did Matthews, Kelly, and Jefferts Schori—three leaders with “no models,” make their own way? What strategies did they use to navigate the challenges of leading diverse and declining denominations in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century in the United States while also facing sexism (and in Kelly’s case, racism, too)? As Roxanne Mountford has observed, “for centuries, [women’s] bodies have been explicitly excluded” from Christian pulpits—not to mention leadership positions among clergy.⁵ Put another way, Helen Sterk writes, “rare is the church within which women are defined in religious and liturgical language and in terms of the biblical narrative, and therefore treated, as persons who hold value equal to men.”⁶

According to church historian Karen Jo Torjesen, women served as priests and even bishops in the first couple centuries of the Common Era. Prohibitions on women’s ordination and preaching developed as the church became more organized, institutionalized, and hierarchal.⁷ In the pre-Reformation church, while women were not ordained, a few women attained the rank of teachers of the faith, an honor rarely bestowed in Catholic history. Catherine of Siena relied on ethos and identification in her letters to the pope, and she eventually achieved her goal of persuading the pope to return to Rome from Avignon. She also taught, but she strategically downplayed her intelligence around her male superiors so they would not perceive her as a threat.⁸ In the late sixteenth century, Teresa of Avila relied on rhetorical strategies of humility, irony, and obfuscation to teach the faith. Initially, contemporary theologians condemned her work as heretical, but less than fifty years later, the church canonized her. Spanish language and history scholar Alison Weber explains, “Teresa was a captivating individual who was able to win over even hardened adversaries with her great charm, humor, and humility. But her personal powers were matched by her persuasiveness in writing.”⁹ Like Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila embraced contemporary stereotypes of women’s inferiority but then claimed that because women could not understand the scriptures, they made ideal teachers of the faith because they relied on God to supply what they were incapable of comprehending. Despite the social and institutional obstacles facing them, Saints Catherine and Teresa managed to teach the faith and make rhetorical arguments about women’s abilities. Later in the seventeenth century, even more women speakers and strategies would emerge on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

From its beginnings, American Christianity has included women who strategically navigate their way to the pulpit and podium. Michael W. Casey has argued that studies of the emergence of women public speakers in the United States often erroneously ignore women’s public speech within religious institutions. Quaker women spoke to promiscuous

(mixed-sex) audiences as early as 1662 in colonial America, often offering defenses of women's speaking and preaching. In the 1750s, Sarah Townsend preached at the New Light Baptist Church on Long Island, New York. Dorothy Ripley addressed Congress with the president's approval in 1806. A black woman known only as Elizabeth began her four-decade preaching career in 1808. Harriet Livermore preached to Congress in 1827. Therefore, Casey writes, "When the first important American female secular speakers emerged, they were stepping into an almost two-hundred-year-old tradition of female oratory."¹⁰

Campbell notes that for early women speakers, presence enacted equality. The woman rhetor "herself was proof that she was as able as her male counterparts to function in the public sphere," and I would add *religious sphere* as well.¹¹ However, presence alone could not overcome cultural beliefs and ostensible biblical prohibitions against women's speaking in public generally or in church meetings more specifically. Therefore, early women speakers—whether secular or religious—often gave a defense of their right or ability to speak as a part of their addresses. The more common strategies these early women used to assert their rights to the pulpit or dais included: constructing themselves as prophets who spoke messages directly from God, appealing to examples of women leaders and speakers in the Bible, attacking the sexism and racism of the church, and claiming spiritual equality to men.¹²

In the early 1900s, Aimee Semple McPherson founded the Foursquare Gospel Church. According to Kristy Maddux, McPherson developed a popular preaching style by relying on storytelling and developing relationships with her listeners—a few decades before the narrative turn in the field of homiletics.¹³ Later in the twentieth century, advocates working for women's ordination faced many of the same arguments their foremothers countered so effectively. Sonja K. Foss reports that arguments against women's ordination in the Episcopal Church included the assumption that women were too emotional, the fear that women as leaders would rely too heavily on intuition to make decisions, and the assumption that women needed to focus on child-rearing instead.¹⁴ Finlay adds that another argument against the ordination of women drew on the fear that women might one day want to become bishops.¹⁵

Despite the persistence of arguments against women's ordination, the Methodist Church approved the full clergy membership of women in 1956; the Episcopal Church did the same twenty years later. While the Roman Catholic Church and several conservative fundamentalist and many evangelical Protestant denominations continue to admit only men to the ranks of clergy, the ordination of women is growing in mainline Protestant denominations, including the United Methodist and Episcopal Churches, but also the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church USA, the United Church of Christ, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).¹⁶

Matthews, Kelly, and Jefferts Schori, then, entered the rhetorical-historical trajectory of women speaking in public, and in the church, at a particular moment. They simultaneously benefitted from the rhetorical history of speakers and strategies on which they stood and contributed to that history as role models for the women who would come after. They at once had models in all these women, but no models in the episcopacy particularly. As chief pastors in their denominations, whether regionally or nationally, what did the bishops prioritize in their preaching and writing as they interacted with the clergy, lay people, and communities in their care? The search for answers to these questions led me to the bishops' sermons.

The primary rhetorical form of ordained ministry in Protestant traditions, sermons addressed to religious adherents teach theology and apply scriptural texts to the specific needs of their audiences. As a rhetorical critic, I focused especially on moments where the bishops responded to tensions or crises they faced as leaders. In the pages that follow, I explain the rhetorical strategies each bishop used to address her audiences and manage the challenges she faced. Though their strategies and specific foci differed, one theme seems to unite the three bishops. Across the bishops' rhetorical corpora, the concept of *shalom* emerged repeatedly. All three bishops explicitly invoked the concept at least once in the bodies of their work to which I had access. Jefferts Schori mentions the term frequently, and Matthews and Kelly often talked about *shalom* without using the word itself. The lesson I take from across the breadth of these bishops' public discourse lifts up *shalom* as a rhetorical strategy, particularly for making claims about how Christians treat one another within the church and advocate for social justice in a diverse and multifaith world.

What does *shalom* mean? Translation provides a simple answer: *shalom* means "peace" in Hebrew. But *shalom* means much more. As a theological concept in Christianity, *shalom* refers to more than the absence of violence. Instead, *shalom*, sometimes called *pax Christi* or the peace of Christ, refers to the wholeness of all of creation, to the fulfillment of what Christians pray for when they say, week by week, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." To pray for God's kingdom to come on earth means recognizing that the church actively participates in making *shalom* a reality. Theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz prefers the term *kin-dom*. She explains: "I do not use *reign* or *kingdom* because of their sexist and classist connotations. *Kin-dom* is preferred because it includes a sense of community, of shared responsibility for survival and welfare."¹⁷ Importantly, the whole peace of God, whether construed as *kin-dom*, *shalom*, or *kingdom*, does not appear *ex nihilo*, nor does God bestow *shalom* independently. Instead, Christians join those of other faiths or no faith in co-creating *shalom* on earth.

As an especially capacious concept, *shalom* encompasses issues as widely diverse as gender and racial justice, environmental stewardship,

restorative and rehabilitative jurisprudence, peaceful conflict resolution, interfaith relations, and human dignity more broadly. All three bishops' Christian theologies likely include positions on each of these issues, though within the body of their public rhetoric, the bishops' foci differed. Marjorie Matthews emphasized gender equality. Leontine Kelly spoke most often about racial justice (with a secondary emphasis on the always-related issue of gender justice). Jefferts Schori seems primarily concerned with issues related to economic justice in an increasingly globalized political and economic landscape. Poverty, hunger, and healthcare around the world appeared as recurring concerns in her sermons addressed to U.S. audiences. To provide a backdrop for my analyses of the bishops' sermons, chapter 1 offers a more extended explication of shalom. The remainder of this chapter explains my approach as a feminist rhetorical critic and provides brief biographies of the bishops.

FEMINIST RHETORICAL CRITICISM

I identify this book as a work of feminist rhetorical criticism and myself as a feminist rhetorical critic. What then, do I mean by feminism and feminist rhetorical criticism? Helen Sterk differentiates between gender criticism and feminist criticism on three criteria: the inclusion of power, a focus on cultural bases, and the awareness of race, class, and gender. Specifically, she notes that gender-based criticism "uses men and women as categories of analysis" while feminist scholarship "brings in power analyses of differences between and among men and women, preferring to use categories such as masculine and feminine, to highlight cultural bases rather than any essential, biologically grounded bases of gender." She adds that "the goal of feminist scholarship tends toward advocacy of gender equity."¹⁸ Similarly, Dow and Condit suggest that "the moniker of 'feminist' is reserved for research that studies communication theories and practices from a perspective that ultimately is oriented toward the achievement of 'gender justice,' a goal that takes into account the ways that gender always already intersects with race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class."¹⁹ As I read the bishops' sermons as rhetorical texts, looking for how the bishops navigated the challenges of leadership in their particular contexts (as bishops, as women, and as "firsts"), I ultimately aim to produce historical-critical work that contributes to gender justice. For example, in chapter 4, I suggest that Jefferts Schori moved toward progressive, feminist goals within an ethic of civility through a rhetoric of transcendence. Intervening in a particular debate within rhetorical studies scholarship, my argument attempts to redeem civility as an appropriate approach for feminist rhetors who want to pursue gender justice without demonizing their rhetorical opponents.

I have avoided identifying rhetorical elements or strategies *a priori* and then seeking them out. To do so would likely mean finding what I went looking for and producing unimaginative criticism as a result.²⁰ Instead, I read the bishops' sermons as rhetorical texts through an emergent feminist rhetorical critical lens, a perspective that prioritizes questions of gender justice. I looked for both content and form: content that exemplifies each bishop's work to embrace her authority and responsibility as a bishop to articulate visions, overcome obstacles, and address the needs of the people and congregations in her care; and form that illuminates the efficacy of a particular strategy, especially for feminist use, as in my argument about transcendence and civility.

INTRODUCING THE BISHOPS

In her 2008 concession speech for the Democratic presidential primary, Hillary Clinton consoled supporters: "although we weren't able to shatter the highest hardest glass ceiling this time, thanks to you, it's got about 18 million cracks in it."²¹ The glass ceiling metaphor refers to a relation of invisible obstacles that limit the advancement of women in professions.²² Sociologists of religion refer to the same phenomenon within churches as the stained glass ceiling.²³ Barbara Finlay explains, "many studies of clergy find women somewhat segregated in lower-status, lower-paid positions that are less influential and have less career mobility potential than is typical for men."²⁴

Given the challenges of the stained glass ceiling, women bishops invite scholarly attention. Being first in their respective roles makes Matthews, Kelly, and Jefferts Schori especially noteworthy. Judith Craig, the United Methodist Church's third woman bishop, explains that

to be first is to carry unique and heavy burdens along with the thrill and wonder of making history. Marjorie [Matthews] was pulled in many directions; her presence was desired everywhere at once. Every move she made was under scrutiny by those who had doubts about women in the episcopacy.²⁵

In the United Methodist tradition of Matthews and Kelly, election to the episcopacy requires support from clergy and laypeople at jurisdictional (multistate regional) conferences.²⁶ Successful candidates for the episcopacy typically receive endorsements from organizations like the Black Methodists for Church Renewal, the United Methodist Women, and the Methodist Federation for Social Action. To receive such an endorsement, one must have at least a proven record of strong leadership skills. In the Episcopal Church, the House of Bishops elects the Presiding Bishop; his or her (!) election must then be confirmed by a vote of the House of