

- Well Virginia, thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed, and if you could just say your full name please?

- Virginia Ramey Mollenkott.

- Thank you, and are you lay or clergy?

- I'm a layperson.

- Yes, and what is your denominational affiliation if you have any?

- Yeah, well, currently Episcopal.

- Okay.

- I was raised Plymouth Brethren. I don't whether you even know about that. Some people don't. In England it's the low church opposite of the Church of England.

- Okay, interesting.

- Yeah, many kids who want to rebel against parents who are Anglican will become Plymouth Brethren and vice versa. There's no ordination, but women are not allowed so much as to ask a question.

- Wow.

- You wear a hat to show your subordination to all males, even your children, even your small sons.

- Wow.

- Yeah, I sat through many a Bible class where I could've clarified that two men were arguing just because they had a slight difference in the way they were defining their terms. I had to sit through it because I couldn't so much as point out to them that's what was happening. (laughs)

- Oh my goodness. You've come a long way from there, haven't you?

- Oh yes, I certainly have. I was still in it into my early thirties.

- Really.

- Yup.

- Well, I'm interested to hear. This might be a good time to ask. So I know it's probably a long story, but what led you to leave that denomination?

- Well it was very slow. I was born in Philadelphia in 1932, and attended the assemblies with my mother. My father left us when I was nine. So it was everything I ever heard. You know, we didn't even go to other churches because frankly, the Plymouth Brethren wonder whether anybody else is going to heaven other than themselves. And so we didn't go to any other churches and I didn't hear anything else for many years. It's fundamentalism, essentially.

- Yes.

- And so it took me... Well, I describe this to some degree in *Sensuous Spirituality*, which is subtitled *Out from Fundamentalism*. And in it I describe it was largely my doctorate, really, and working on Milton, John Milton, and reading his divorce tracts, which were so different from... I mean they were all based on scripture. He was, as you probably know, a 17th-century Puritan. And actually Secretary of State under Oliver Cromwell. And he interpreted the Bible so differently that I was blown away. The basic thing for him was that God is love, and anything that didn't teach love was not to be treated like it was divine scripture, but rather as an example of something that was believed at the time, or for some particular historical reason was believed. And that really freed me up.

- Yes.

- When Harvard had, I don't know whether you know about that conference, there was a big conference at Harvard a few years back about women in religion. And somebody joked at the end, who ever thought that John Milton would be a star? (interviewer laughs) at a conference on women in religion? Because there were feminists who wanted him out of the curriculum.

- Yes.

- Because he describes so well what an angry man will do to his wife, you know, when Adam is angry at Eve in *Paradise Lost*. Well yeah, but that's not Milton's view, that's his view of what an angry husband will say. (laughs) And so it was a big mistake to want to throw Milton out. But he certainly was my liberation, you know?

- I love it.

That is great.

- Yeah, I needed somebody to show me that you really could read the Bible in a liberating fashion. And that's what he did.

- And it was John Milton.

- And of course he was arguing for divorce for incompatibility, on the basis of scripture in the 17th century. And it took New Jersey a few years to come around to that. (Interviewer laughs) A few hundred years.

- Right. So where did you go to graduate school, Virginia?

- Graduate school, well, I got my B.A. from Bob Jones University. You should make note of that.

- Yes.

- I was so fundamentalist, although I certainly didn't agree with their racism. And many things I didn't agree with. But I kept my mouth shut or you would get thrown out. You know, couldn't disagree with anything. And I got my Master's at Temple University in Philadelphia and my Ph.D. at New York University.

- Okay.

- So that was all very liberating for me, each step of the way. I came out of that. Bob Jones wouldn't even teach modern poetry because they thought it wasn't spiritual enough.

- Wow.

- And a young actor named Ronald Reagan came when I was an undergraduate, and read some modern poetry at Bob Jones. And I thought my gosh, this is marvelous. So as soon as I got to Temple, I took a modern poetry course, and it was taught by an atheist.

- Really.

- Yeah, who, I had never seen anything like it. I mean, she was teaching Gerard Manley Hopkins, who was a Jesuit, so I wrote a paper on Hopkins. And of course approached him from a Christian perspective. And she wrote on my paper, "I don't agree with the words you say, "but this is wonderful." and gave me an A+. And I thought, well, I'd never seen that before, you know. At Bob Jones you either agreed with the party line, or you had a bad grade. So this was again very liberating for me.

- Yes. So Milton and Ronald Reagan have been influences on you. (both laugh)

- Well, he kinda gave me a nudge, you know? He read some T.S. Eliot, and oh my goodness, to say that that's not spiritual is really very blind-siding it.

- Yes, oh, it is. So what were you doing at the time of Re-Imagining, Virginia?

- I was teaching, so that was 19, what, 90?

- 93.

- What year was that? 93, yes. I was teaching at William Patterson University, when it was a college. I had gone there because I could see a divorce coming when I was at teaching at Nyack Missionary College. And in Nyack, there's this Christian and Missionary Alliance. And I knew that in any fundamentalist area, it's always the woman's fault no matter what. She gets a divorce, it's her fault, because she should have been submissive to whatever her husband wanted (laughs) And I became aware of feminist theology reading Betty Friedan, like so many other women, you know?

- Yes.

- The Feminine Mystique. And I thought, my eyes were on stems, and oh I'm not the only one, you know? I was at this college where I was a full professor and heading the English Department, but I was the only professor who was asked to bake cookies and stuff for meetings.

- Seriously.

- And one of the male professors who liked me a lot saw me coming in a little bit late to an afternoon meeting after we'd had a meeting all morning, and he said "the rest of us went home and had our lunch served to us. "You went home and had to make your own lunch "and do the wash, didn't you?" And I said yeah, I did. (laughs)

- Wow.

- Anyway, Friedan made me realize how widespread the feelings were. When you begin to get that sense of solidarity with other women, of course that empowers you.

- Yes. How did you become aware of feminist theology in particular?

- Well, of course immediately, having lived on the Bible, I mean we read through the Bible. When I was four I was reading out of the King James Version out loud already, with the family. So I had been through the King James Version over and over again. So everything I read I would immediately be comparing to what I understood scripture to say. And so immediately reading Friedan, I began to think about a lot of things in scripture from a different perspective. I mean, already I was intuitively going to what feminists have taught. That you ask yourself who profits from this interpretation?

- Right.

- You know, I never had asked myself that question, because it was just assumed that white male supremacy was right (laughs) and the other interpretations were wrong. It was very simple. But when I began to have a whole range of options, and the question was who's profiting from this, everything begins to look very

different.

- Absolutely. Well if we could move to Re-Imagining. This is great, Virginia. I know that you were a presenter at the '93 conference on church, and I kinda sent you a synopsis of your talk. I wonder if you have any thoughts about your presentation then? It's been a while.

- Yeah, well, thanks for sending me that synopsis.

- Of course.

- What struck me about it was that it wasn't a topic, as you can tell by just comparing what I told you about the Plymouth Brethren, I had no interest in church organization. That is, the way the Methodists differ from the Lutherans, differ from the Presbyterians and so forth. This was not my thing, you know? Because I had never been involved in any of that, although I was by then speaking in a lot of these churches and conferences and so on. But to be asked to speak about re-imagining a church structure, this was really a shock to me. But that was part of what I think is valuable about Re-Imagining. That it brought together women from many angles. They assigned people to speak, and I was glad I'm not the only one who got assigned to something that in a sense forced me to look at things from the angle I'd already been speaking from, but I hadn't applied it to that particular topic. So I was speaking all along about the importance of inclusion of everybody and particularly including LGBT people because I was one (laughs) and so I was forced to be concerned about that, and I'd been speaking about the right to reproductive freedom, mutuality, my concern has always been tremendous about mutuality in marriage and in other relationships. And I was forced to take that and apply it to the church and the church community. So that was a good thing. So I think we were all, in a way, brought into closer connection with one another by being asked in some cases to speak about things we really hadn't thought about from that angle before, you know?

- Yes, yes. Do you have any, I know it's been a long time. Do you have any memories from that conference at all?

- Yeah, my chief memory was when all the lesbians were called to the platform.

- Yes.

- And I remember so well walking by tables after tables of women, many of whom had tears in their eyes. And I'm sure part of it was grief for the suffering that they knew we had gone through, but I think some of it was the grief that they couldn't come and join us, that they wouldn't dare to get up there and admit they were lesbian because that would be it for them at their particular jobs. But it was such a feeling to be called to the platform in honor rather than in disgrace. And to be there and look out, and know that these women supported us and cared for us and cried for us, and cried with us. That was stupendous. And the other thing is being introduced to a widespread use, it's not I hadn't heard of it, but a widespread use of Sophia as the image for the Christ. And that was a tremendous gift. To hear it done rather than just argue that it can be done because scripture allows it and scripture does it. But to hear it done, that was another story entirely,

and just wonderful.

- That's good to hear. That was the only conference you participated in, is that right?

- Yes, that's right. Because I was teaching in a secular university, and traveling a lot, and speaking a lot in various Methodist women's conferences and Mennonite youth conferences, and Episcopal student conferences, and so forth. You know, Quaker seminary. And so I was around a lot, but I wasn't anywhere near where the Re-Imagining group continued to function.

- Sure, sure. Well, you were doing important work! Glad you were doing it.

- They were doing important work too, and I was glad to know it. I was very aware of the backlash, of course, and very sorry and angry about it, that people should lose their jobs over something so honorable.

- Yeah. It didn't affect you directly, I'm assuming.

- As far as I'm concerned, the way I account for the backlash is the patriarchy hates to give up power. All it is was the sheer jealousy. It's the same reason that gay marriage is so dangerous. Because a gay marriage, you have two people of the same gender coming together, usually, occasionally it'll be different than that. But they're coming together assuming the equality of friendship. They're not coming together assuming that one of them is in control and the other one submits. And so that's very dangerous to patriarchal marriage as it's been understood for centuries. I know why the patriarchs are not comfortable with it. (laughs) And it looks like here it goes, you know. And it will undercut, and it's already undercutting the idea of... a hierarchy in marriage.

- So how would you define re-imagining?

- I understood it as we're coming at the whole thing with new eyes. So we're re-envisioning our interpretations. And we're re-envisioning the way we get along with one another, the way we function together as a community. We're looking at it all, as I said in one article I wrote, we're looking at it all from low and inside, you know. That's a baseball term. I don't know whether you're a baseball fan.

- I'm not. You're gonna have to tell me, Virginia!

- When the pitcher pitches the ball, and it's just a little lower than the strike zone, and a little bit inside, so it cramps the batter so he can't get a good swing, you know? And that's how we started to read the Bible, from low and inside, as far as the... Our position in the church was low, and yet we were inside, you know? (Interviewer laughs) And we could see things very differently. And it was a bad shakeup for the patriarchs who had always felt like their interpretation was the only one. Now of course what we've had to find out, what white women have had to find out, is that our interpretation isn't the only one either. Black womanists have a lot to teach us, and Hispanic womanists have a lot to teach us, and so on. So we too have had to learn who profits from this interpretation. Watch out that it's not us, and not some of our sisters that we're

stepping on.

- Exactly. I think you might have already said this, but what aspects of Re-Imagining were most significant to you?

- Well it was the Sophia thing and the recognition of lesbians as part of the community. Those were the two things. But I also loved having people able to draw artwork even while they were listening. Those were some very creative things to do, you know? To allow everybody to use whatever gift they had in whatever way they had. So that was good.

- Did it affect at all your perspective on feminist theology or the church? Well, it strengthened what I already knew. I knew the church was not gonna like when women began to think for ourselves and speak for ourselves. And so the backlash just says, yeah you were right about that, weren't you? (laughs) And that women were bright and smart and capable of reading well, and supporting one another. What I hoped, well one of the things I think happened was... men have known all along to praise one another. You know, just listen to... a baseball player, a basketball player, talking about his team. He's always gonna praise his team. You're never gonna brag on just himself. He'll always praise the others. Otherwise he would be very quickly in trouble. And I think that getting together like we did at Re-Imagining began that process of standing together as sisters. Praising one another's work, lifting up one another's work. I think we could still do a better job of it, but I think we've done much a better job since Re-Imagining.

- Yeah, yeah. What do you think re-imagining means today, Virginia?

- It continues to mean that we have to be open to new ideas constantly. There's always more light to bring forth, you know? We can't afford to say, no we've already imagined it all the way it is, and there's no opening in our vision for anything new.

- Where do you think it's happening today?

- What do you mean happening today? Politically?

- Or, well, honestly one thing that comes to mind is the Christian feminists today that I just learned about from reading Jann Aldredge-Clanton's book. I mean, do you feel like there are movements or places where the re-imagining...

- That's my basic group. I was part of the founding of that. I've been one of the major speakers at almost every single conference that they've held except that I had to stop now. I guess I put an end to it in about 2012, 2013. Because I'm so crippled with arthritis. I have to use a wheelchair. It's very difficult to take, I can't take the automated wheelchair with me. So it was just too much, and I decided, well that's that, you know? I still do a lot of writing on the web site, do a lot of book reviewing and articles on their web site. We're very happy to have Jann, but she's only been with us a couple years. She's doing wonderful work, but we've been doing that work for years already. It's a great organization, and I would like to see even more interlinkage

with re-imagining, interlinking with all such organizations. There's a split off from Evangelical Women's Caucus, which is now Christian Feminism Today. And they believe in male-female equality, but no homosexual women or men. So it's like Women and Men Together, see, so you get the picture. Don't come here if you don't have a man in your life, if you're a woman, you know? But even then, you know, they're doing work too that's important. And to the degree that they're getting male-female equality right, we're supportive of them as Christian feminists today. But the big difference is that Christian feminists today work with and honor the lesbians among us.

- I'm sorry, what was the name of the group that doesn't honor lesbians?

- Well, one of the things they call themselves is Women and Men together. That's not the official name, and I'm not exactly sure of it, but check into it.

- I will.

- It's bigger than Christian Feminism Today.

- Oh, is it?

- Yeah. Jann Aldredge-Clanton could tell you exactly.

- Good, good.

- My memory is not what it used to be. There are also even more organizations that try to say they're feminist, but they're really into complementarity. And that's just another name for... a less threatening name for patriarchy. And then there's a whole movement of Christian patriarchy, they're proud of it! They get thousands of women to turn out to be told how subordinate they are. I don't understand it, what's with women? Those conferences have been extremely popular. And no backlash (laughs) No backlash to that! Nobody lost their job over telling women that they're subordinate to men, so. That's amazing to me.

- Well, I did want one last question and then I want to hear if there's anything else you want to bring up, but we are starting a web site, and I am in conversation with Christian Feminism Today to kind of work together, to get our organizations together. But I'm wondering if you have any ideas about other organizations, or who would benefit from it, or what we should include. Any ideas you have would be really appreciated.

- Well, I can think about that. What springs to mind is the feminist organizations within various church structures. I would assume that you're aware of Methodist Women and so on.

- Right, that's a very good idea, yes.

- Any of that, the women's organizations within denominational organizations. And also the LGBT ones, because to the degree that they have knowledgeable lesbians they're gonna be feminist. So you wanna



work with them. Bring them forward as much as possible.

- Absolutely.

- And above all, check into the Black and Hispanic organizations. Give them voice and leadership.

- Absolutely. Is there anything that we haven't discussed that you would like to add, Virginia?

- Well, just my feeling that the function for the re-imagining community ongoing is to continue to coordinate efforts that would otherwise be separate. Cuz you know, you got everybody working, and all this energy going in separate denominations and separate organizations, and it's a shame that this doesn't get coordinated because there's so much more bang for your buck if you put it together and work in a coordinated way. The more emphasis is placed on coordination and intercommunication and mutual support of this, the better.

- That is wonderful. Absolutely. And that is kind of our vision. Both preserving our history, and coordinating. That's great. I'm gonna turn off the recording then, if that's okay with you.

- Sure, sure.