

## God is Change: Earthseed and Feminist Theology in Octavia Butler's *Parable* Series

Dr Patricia Mary Hodge

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3786-8060>

Assistant Professor, Women's College

Research Scholar, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong

### Abstract

This paper examines Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, exploring how the texts interrogate and reimagine traditional Christian paradigms of God and religious leadership through the protagonist Lauren Olamina's creation of the religion of Earthseed, which rejects the concept of an immutable, male-gendered God. This paper employs a textual analysis of the texts, drawing upon theoretical frameworks of feminist theology and literary criticism to interrogate the gendered dynamics of religious authority, scripture, and the concept of God. The paper thus highlights how Butler raises issues about and within religion: its fixed symbols and meaning, gender-biased authority, and functionality in dealing with contemporary social, political and environmental issues. Ultimately, it argues that Butler's *Parable* duology serves not only as a critique of institutional religion but also as an effort to reimagine religion for a socially, politically and environmentally collapsing world.

**Keywords:** Butler, Earthseed, religion, gender, feminist theology

### Introduction: Theological Authority and Gender in Judeo-Christianity

While the Judeo-Christian tradition encompasses a wide range of denominations and sects that vary in their treatment of women, there are interpretations within both Judaism and Christianity that have historically limited women's authority to interpret religious doctrine in the same capacity as men. For example, the ordination of women as "rabba", a designation intended as the female equivalent of "rabbi", has faced significant opposition from within Orthodox Judaism. The Agudath Israel of America, an American organisation that represents Haredi Orthodox Jews, has denounced the ordaining of rabbas. In 2017, the Orthodox Union, one of the largest Orthodox Jewish organisations in the United States, released a policy barring women from serving as clergy

in its congregations, citing Jewish law, or Halakhah, in declaring that “a woman should not be appointed to serve in a clergy position” (Nathan-Kazis). This stance is rooted in the interpretation of Jewish law and custom, which traditionally assigns these roles to men. For example, the Talmud states, “Our Rabbis taught: All are qualified to be among the seven [who read], even a minor and a woman, only the Sages said that a woman should not read the Torah out of respect for the congregation” (*The Complete Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate Megillah 23a). This concept of “respect for the congregation” has been interpreted by many traditional authorities as a rationale for limiting women’s participation in public Torah readings, thereby reflecting social norms that prioritise male leadership in public religious settings.

Catholicism also prohibits women from being ordained into the priesthood, the episcopacy and the diaconate, while other Christian denominations have embraced women’s ordination. In his Apostolic Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church in 1994, Pope John Paul II wrote, “I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgement is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful” (“*Ordinatio sacerdotalis*”). This position is reinforced by Canon 767 of *The Code of Canon Law*, which states, “The most important form of preaching is the homily, which is part of the liturgy, and is reserved to a priest or deacon” (141). Resistance to female leadership is often justified by scriptural passages which are interpreted to reinforce male authority both within the church and the home such as 1 Timothy 2:12: “But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence” (*King James Version*). The intersection of religion with social, cultural and political hierarchies implies that this marginalisation reflects the broader societal structures in which women have been systematically excluded from positions of power.

There have also been movements within the Judeo-Christian tradition that challenge the marginalisation of women's religious authority. The Episcopal Church, the Church of England, and the Anglican Communion have ordained women into ecclesial authority. Movements such as The Hildegard Network and The Julian Meetings use the theological authority of Christian mystics Julian of Norwich and Hildegard of Bingen to validate women's authoritative and interpretative roles. In the Jewish context, groups such as B'not Esh (Daughters of Fire), a Jewish feminist spiritual collective, blend traditional Jewish practice with feminist theology. Beyond traditional institutional boundaries, alternative spirituality movements such as Goddess spirituality and Wicca challenge traditional organised religion, reclaim narratives that include or centre around women and incorporate the worship of female divinity. These developments and movements, whether within or beyond tradition, suggest that reinterpretation can serve as a powerful tool for reshaping not only religious institutions but also the social hierarchies that such institutions help to legitimise.

### **Disrupting the Canon: Scriptural Interpretation, Feminist Re-readings and Reclamations**

A foundational figure in the effort to reconstruct theological legitimacy for women is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who in *In Memory of Her* (1983) offers a re-examination of early church history through her criticism of the exclusion of women in church history. Fiorenza embarks on the feminist endeavour to reconstruct women's history in early Christianity, recover the silenced voices of early Christian women and highlight the roles of women as "apostles, missionaries, patrons, co-workers, prophets, and leaders of communities" (50). Here, Fiorenza explores the role and position of the figure of Mary Magdalene in church history to emphasise the larger issue of

women's roles in early Christianity. She highlights how, despite Mary Magdalene's representation as an apostolic leader, her gender was used to reinforce women's subordination:

While the *Gospel of Mary* argues for the authority of Mary Magdalene on the ground that Christ loved her more than all the other disciples, the *Apostolic Church Order* argues for the exclusion of women from the priesthood by letting Mary Magdalene herself reason that the weak, namely, the women, must be saved by the strong, namely, the men (51).

The contestation over Mary Magdalene's authority and the existence of her competing portrayals as apostolic authority and a figure that reinforces women's subordination highlights the broader struggle over women's roles in early Christian communities. As Fiorenza states, "the androcentric interpretation of the egalitarian primitive Christian traditions serves as a patriarchal ecclesial praxis", illustrating how interpretations of foundational religious figures were shaped by evolving theological and institutional agendas (51). This tension reveals a long-standing dynamic in which religious narratives are adapted or interpreted to support existing power hierarchies, often at the expense of women's voices.

Feminist theologians and scholars have argued for alternative readings that contextualise the Bible historically and culturally. Fiorenza argues for a "hermeneutics of suspicion that understands androcentric texts as ideological articulations of men expressing, as well as maintaining, patriarchal historical conditions" (60). This method exposes the androcentric biases embedded in religious texts that legitimise the "patriarchalisation of church office", thus calling into question the presumed neutrality of biblical texts, and highlighting the need to uncover hidden and marginalised voices, especially those of women (56). Phyllis Trible, in *Texts of Terror* (1984), takes a literary approach, re-examining what she calls "tales of terror with women as victims", which are scriptural narratives of the synagogue and the church in which women suffer violence

and trauma (1). These texts of terror are the tales of the Egyptian slave Hagar, who bears Abraham a son but is later exiled, the princess Tamar, who was raped by her half-brother, the unnamed concubine of the Levite, who is gang-raped and killed, and Jephthah's daughter, who is sacrificed by her father. Through close readings of these tales of terror, Tribble exposes the deep violence against women embedded and encoded in scripture and advocates for ethical readings that resist further harm. In the Jewish context, Judith Plaskow, in her works, most notably in *Standing Again at Sinai* (1990), insists on exploring, recovering, and reassessing the roles of women in Jewish tradition and on reinterpreting Jewish texts and rituals through a feminist lens.

### **Feminist Theological Interventions in Speculative Literature: Octavia Butler's *Parable Series***

What emerges in light of these feminist engagements with religious traditions that limit, and in some cases explicitly deny, women's religious authority is not just the question of women claiming the authority to interpret and preach doctrine, but more pertinently, the possibility of women authoring new religious visions. Literature has been one of the most fertile grounds for exploring these possibilities, with speculative fiction in particular offering a unique space for interrogating dominant paradigms.

Feminist speculative literature has long served as a site for challenging patriarchal norms and for imagining alternative structures, whether social, political or religious. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) presents a dystopian theocracy in which scripture is manipulated to justify the subjugation of women, thus offering a stark critique of how religion can be co-opted by patriarchal power structures and exposing the dangers of excluding women from religious interpretation. Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* (1996), which documents a Jesuit mission to an

alien planet, reflects real-world debates over gender, theology and authority. In *The Carhullan Army* (2007), Sarah Hall depicts a feminist resistance community in a future England that structures itself around shared values and rituals that resemble spiritual practices, thus highlighting how even secular feminist utopias engage with structuring meaning around belief systems. Situated within this literary heritage, Octavia Butler's *Parable* duology, comprised of *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), offers a nuanced exploration of religion and religious authority from a speculative feminist perspective. *Parable of the Sower*, which is set between 2024 and 2027, introduces the religion of Earthseed, documents the protagonist Lauren Olamina's experiences in her hometown of Robledo and her subsequent journey to Acorn with her followers. *Parable of the Talents* is set in the 2030s and documents the establishment of the first Earthseed settlement of Acorn, Lauren's opposition to the extremist Christian fundamentalist movement that takes over America, her fight against neo-slavery and Earthseed's eventual global rise.

In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren rejects her Baptist father's religious philosophy as she realises that it fails to fully address the contemporary crises of social collapse and environmental devastation. She contends that her father's interpretations of the Bible and philosophy of blind faith in God are historically placed in a timeline where society functioned very differently and now struggles to serve the needs of her contemporary dystopian reality (Butler, *Parable of the Sower* 15). In response, she founds Earthseed, a religion that is not centred on fixed dogma but on the principle of adaptability, with its guiding principle being "God is Change" (Butler *Parable of the Sower* 3, 17, 24, 287; *Parable of the Talents* 8, 47). This theology emerges not as an abstract ideal but as a lived practice shaped by Earthseed's commitment towards survival through a philosophy that anticipates change and embraces adaptability.

Butler partakes in feminist theological intervention through her appropriation of Biblical parables to proclaim Earthseed. Butler selects parables that are centred on agriculture and commerce, which are domains historically associated with masculinity. For example, the parables of the Lost Coin, the Yeast and the Lamp portray women in domestic roles and reflect the conventional association of women with the private realm of home and family. In contrast, the parables of the Sower in Matthew 13:1-23 and the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30 engage with the public and predominantly male spheres of cultivation and economy. In contrast, the parables of the Lost Coin, the Yeast and the Lamp present women in domestic roles and reflect the traditional association of women with the private sphere of home and family. Butler selects these particular parables for a conscious feminist intervention by re-interpreting key religious narratives, with Cathy Peppers contending that Butler uses “the very power of Biblical discourse to change it from within” (46). Lauren’s narrative, could, in this sense, be framed as a retelling of the Book of Exodus in the Old Testament, with Lauren playing the role of Moses, the prophet who leads and frees the Israelites from enslavement. She also assumes the mantle of multiple liberators in the Bible, from Moses, Noah and Christ, who were each entrusted with delivering humanity from destruction caused by human wickedness. Like Noah, she prepares for survival amid societal collapse, and like Christ, she offers a new doctrine, Earthseed, as the means of deliverance.

Lauren’s journey to freedom in *Parable of the Sower* is also a reimagining of Black liberation narratives as Lauren echoes historical Black leader, abolitionist and activist Harriet Tubman, who earned the nickname Moses because she led the enslaved to freedom via the Underground Railroad. Lauren assumes the role of a modern Tubman as she leads a group of destitute, impoverished and oppressed people towards liberation through a landscape where slavery is experiencing a resurgence. Tubman was known to experience vivid dreams and intense

visions due to her neurological issues, and she interpreted them as messages from God leading her on her liberation mission. Lauren's rare medical condition called hyperempathy syndrome causes her to experience the physical and emotional sensations of humans and animals around her as though they were her own. Lauren embraces her hyperempathy as a gift that enables her to empathise deeply and intimately connect with those around her. Tubman saw her mission to free the enslaved as divinely guided, and combined her religious conviction with her activism. Likewise, Lauren uses her spiritual vision to advocate for freedom and equality and inspire transformation among her followers. Like Tubman, Lauren combines her religious conviction with her activism. Lauren's leadership thus combines biblical and African American models of liberation and exemplifies the functionality of religious faith for social liberation. Lauren's story is a parable in itself, teaching the lesson that the cycle of exploitation and victimisation can be disrupted by embracing the doctrine of change from all the dogmas, doctrines, beliefs and habits that sustain historical exploitation. Lauren's *Earthseed* is her way of putting an end to what Ralph Ellison metaphorised as the boomerang of history in the Prologue of *The Invisible Man*: "Beware of those who speak of the spiral history; they are preparing a boomerang. Keep a helmet handy" (5).

Through her speculative fiction, Butler joins a community of feminist authors who use literature as a space to author new theologies and imagine what it might mean for women to shape and generate new religious visions. Butler's speculative theology of *Earthseed* represents a radical feminist intervention that simultaneously critiques the failures of patriarchal religion and proposes an alternative vision in which women are not only participants but authors of religious teachings. *Earthseed* challenges the exclusionary stance of canonical tradition and asserts a model in which women can not only interpret but even shape religious epistemologies.

This paper thus employs a textual analysis of Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of feminist theology and literary criticism to interrogate the gendered dynamics of religious authority, scripture, and the concept of God. The analysis is informed primarily by the feminist theological insights of Mary Daly, Rebecca Chopp and others, whose critiques of patriarchal structures within Judeo-Christian traditions help contextualise Lauren Olamina's authorship of *Earthseed* as a radical act of theological re-imagination. By situating Butler's speculative fiction within broader feminist engagements with religion, the paper traces how Butler's protagonist disrupts canonical religious authority and claims interpretive power, and positions Butler's work as both a critique and reconstruction of religious meaning.

### **Earthseed's Genesis: Philosophy of Survival**

Lauren Oya Olamina is the daughter of a Baptist pastor in the gated enclave of Robledo, situated in the city of Los Angeles, and which houses a mixed-race community that has to protect its resources against armed thieves who roam outside the walls of Robledo. Robledo will ultimately be attacked and destroyed. The destruction of Robledo, the loss of her home, family and community, would mark the beginning of her metamorphosis from the daughter of a Baptist pastor to the founder of the global community of Earthseed. Lauren learns early on that whoever leads the religious also leads the general. Although much of what she knows about leadership and community is based on her father, she does not agree with his rejection of radical approaches towards survival. In one of his Sunday sermons, her father preaches the story of Noah and the ark. God, in this story, wills the destruction of all mankind, except Noah and his family, who repented and placed their faith in God (Butler, *Parable of the Sower* 62-63). His sermon is meant to be

allegorical, teaching the inhabitants of Robledo to place their faith in God to rescue them from their current crisis. Lauren disagrees with this passive approach and believes that religion must actively assist the living to survive the dystopian world and ultimately find liberation. She writes, “It isn’t enough for us to just survive, limping along, playing business as usual while things get worse and worse. If that’s the shape we give to God, then someday we must become too weak—too poor, too hungry, too sick—to defend ourselves. Then we’ll be wiped out” (70). For Lauren, survival is impossible without humanity’s ability to adapt to the shifting social, economic, and political landscapes.

Thus, when Lauren begins conceptualising her religion of Earthseed, one of its key tenets is survival through adaptation, as opposed to her community’s tendency to barricade themselves from the world. She knows that the gates and walls of her cul-de-sac community in Robledo will not protect them forever and anticipates a Jericho-like invasion of Robledo when “those hungry, desperate, crazy people outside decide to come in” (Butler, *Parable of the Sower* 52). She proposes that they should prepare emergency packs for when the invasion finally happens, and that they should be educating themselves on how to wield weapons, handle medical emergencies and live off the land (54). Lauren’s warning calls for the community to make survival preparations are dismissed by her best friend, Joanne, and even misconstrued by Joanne’s parents as signs that Lauren needs psychological help because she thinks that the world is coming to an end (58). Lauren’s father admonishes her for potentially causing panic in the community (59). The community’s resistance to change is evident in Joanne’s responses to Lauren’s pleas for proactive change: “We can’t do anything”, and “I still don’t believe you. Things don’t have to be as bad as you say they are” (54, 56). Her community’s unwillingness to accept the necessity to adapt to the

dystopian world around it reiterates Lauren's recognition of the impossibility of introducing a new, adaptive belief system like Earthseed to Robledo.

### **Earthseed's Genesis: Rethinking God**

Lauren also glimpses the pervasiveness of patriarchal Christianity in Robledo. Richard Moss, who is a member of the community, develops his own religious system, which is a mixture of Old Testament Christianity and West African practices. He proclaims his belief that God wants men "to be patriarchs, rulers and protectors of women, and fathers of as many children as possible" (Butler, *Parable of the Sower* 36). Moss is allowed to openly preach his beliefs and operate his family according to his beliefs. He has three wives, the youngest of whom was sold to him, and numerous children who labour on his rabbit farm. His family does not attend church like the other members of the community, and the children are "educated at home by their mothers according to the religion their father had assembled, and they were warned away from the sin and contamination of the rest of the world" (40). The disparity between Moss's ability to openly practise his religion and Lauren's compulsion to conceal her Earthseed beliefs while she is in Robledo underscores the community's selective tolerance, which privileges patriarchal and traditional religious expressions while suppressing female-led religious frameworks. Lauren's decision to withhold Earthseed is thus a strategic one. Understanding that Earthseed will not be accepted in and cannot grow in Robledo, she waits for a context where it can be expressed and nurtured. After the invasion of Robledo and the dissemination of the community, Lauren embarks upon a journey to find a home and haven for Earthseed.

“At least three years ago, my father’s God stopped being my God. His church stopped being my church” (Butler, *Parable of the Sower* 7). Thus begins a teenage Lauren’s journal entry on her baptism day. Lauren arrives at this realisation after she has read, reflected upon and wrestled with the concept of God. Adrienne Rich writes, “We need to know the writing of the past and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us” (19). Through her extensive studies, Lauren observes that people define God in vastly different ways,— as “a big-daddy-God, or a big-cop-God or a big-king-God”, “another word for nature ... which turns out to mean just about anything they happen to not understand or feel control of”, or “a spirit, a force, an ultimate reality”— but none of these explanations satisfy her (Butler, *Parable of the Sower* 13). She also wonders if it is a sin against God to be poor, as they suffer the most (13). She questions God’s nature, purpose, and the meaning of faith in a world full of suffering, writing, “Maybe God is a kind of big kid, playing with his toys. If he is, what difference does it make if 700 people get killed in a hurricane – or if seven kids go to church and get dipped in a big tank of expensive water?” (15). As poverty spreads and her community grows more desperate, Lauren questions the usefulness of the comforting God her father believes in. She wonders if God, as the Deists believed, is a distant creator who “made us, then left us on our own” (13).

Lauren cannot accept her father’s approach of faith and duty towards a God who, despite being all-powerful and all-knowing, does not use his powers to come to the aid of his suffering believers. Her reflections lead her to the conclusion that the different definitions of God feel vague and appear to be shaped more by personal need than objective truth, leading her to conclude: “But what if all that is wrong? What if God is something else altogether?” (Butler, *Parable of the Sower* 15). These thoughts mark the beginning of Lauren’s search for a God that makes sense in the dystopian world of chaos and injustice. Jos writes, “Butler rejects the arrogance and hubris of those

who see God as an authority figure whose canonical texts clearly identify the good and the evil, the saved and the damned, and whose requirements must be enforced by judging and punishing others” (421). Lauren, thereby, distances herself from the traditional, personified deity of the Bible and articulates her belief in an alternative version of God shaped by human experience and action, rather than one that imposes rigid doctrines. Earthseed emphasises human responsibility in shaping God through actions and adaptability. Lauren writes, “A victim of God may,/ Through learning adaptation,/ Become a partner of God./ A victim of God may,/ Through forethought and planning,/ Become a shaper of God” (31). The philosophy of Earthseed thus highlights the importance of human agency and prescribes a redefined understanding of religious authority. Lauren pragmatically recognises that Earthseed will not be accepted in and cannot grow in Robledo. Metaphorically speaking, Robledo is not the right soil for Earthseed. Her decision to withhold Earthseed is a strategic one: she waits for a context where it can be heard and nurtured. After the invasion of Robledo and the dissemination of the community, Lauren embarks upon a journey to find a home and haven for Earthseed. Earthseed, under Lauren’s leadership, offers a religious model of survival that is rooted in change, self-determination, and collective hope.

### **Gender, Power and Theological Language: The Word/God**

Christian theology is built upon scriptural interpretation. Core doctrines that were established by the early Church Fathers, such as the Trinity, salvation, and resurrection, are rooted in biblical text. Practice is also linked directly to text, with sacraments rooted in scriptural narratives and commands, such as the sacrament of the Eucharist in Matthew 26:26-28 and Baptism in Acts 2:38. Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin based their theological frameworks on biblical exposition as denoted by the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*. This theological principle

asserts that “scripture is the one and only criterion for Christian faith and living, and beliefs and practices are true and truthfully Christian if and only if they correspond to the witness of the whole of scripture” (Wisse 20). Biblical passages are read and interpreted in churches across denominations, thus forming a liturgical rhythm linked to textual heritage. The Bible remains the foundation of Christianity, and all meaning originates from and is sustained by the text. As stated in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (*KJV*). This view elevates the text beyond a historical or literary artefact, as it is treated as divinely inspired and authoritative.

In the Old Testament, the phrase “the Word of the Lord” signifies the concept of revelation, wherein God speaks or reveals his power or intentions to a prophet. Examples of the explicit use of the phrase can be found in Genesis 15:1-4, when “the word of the Lord came unto Abram in a vision”, and in Zephaniah 1:1, where “The word of the LORD [which] came unto Zephaniah” (*KJV*). In both instances, God speaks directly to Abram and Zephaniah. In the New Testament, the concept of the Word evolved in the sense that the Scriptures did not merely contain the Word of the Lord; the Scriptures were the Word of the Lord. 1 Peter 1:25 explicitly states that the Word of the Lord also refers to Scripture: “But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you” (*KJV*). Thus, in Christian theology, the “Word” holds a central and foundational meaning. The Word creates the world, as stated in Genesis 1:3, “And God said, Let there be light: and there was light” (*KJV*). As the Word creates and governs Christian discourse and organises Christian reality, it can be conceptualised as active, generative, and world-shaping. The primacy of the Word in Christian worship implies that it continues to generate meaning through sacred liturgy and theological reflection. The Word can therefore be a force

which not only produces the world *ex nihilo*, but also generates new interpretations across time. It gives rise to more words, for example, through preaching and testimony, which can transcend the original text while remaining anchored in it.

This understanding of the Word as a generative force for new interpretations provides the foundation upon which feminist theologians like Rebecca Chopp build their critical interventions. In *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (1989), Chopp explores how the concept of the Word can be extended into the realm of language and discourse, allowing Chopp to engage the Word as a sign within a broader semiotic system and make it open to new meanings. In this way, the theological and the discursive are intertwined, as the Word participates in the ongoing re-creation of meaning. Quoting Charles Peirce, Chopp links the plurivocal nature of signs to “anticipate new meaning and are inherently transformative and open to new signification”, to feminism’s theological semiotics, which, with its plurivocality of signs, “may offer the greatest resistance against the oppression of totalitarian discourses and practices” (31). In this approach, feminist theology treats the Scriptures as “always open to transformation” because of their “multiplicity and plurivocality” (42). The Word as a theological principle is interpreted in feminist theological semiotics as a discursive, transformative sign or as “the perfectly open sign” (31), and there can be, as Chopp suggests, “a Word of plurivocality” that exists “beyond and beneath the Word of governance, command, and law” (29). This plurivocality exists in the space of women’s speaking, where there lies

the open possibility of transformation, of a freedom not only from the repressive ordering of patriarchy, but a freedom for creating, receiving, and reinventing new ways of speaking. In the space created among the Word, words, and women is the open possibility of change and transformation, not only in metaphors and concepts but in the ordering of language

itself. The Word in which women speak their words moves against the social-symbolic order precisely in its movement against the monotheism of Word as primal referent and patriarchal voice (29-30).

Chopp thus argues for a feminist theology that enables women to claim authority to speak and proclaim the Word from their own experience, challenging traditional views of revelation as a closed transmission of divine truth handed down from an authoritative, often male, source.

It is in this context and space of feminist theological re-signification that Lauren Olamina creates Earthseed. Earthseed, which is born from Lauren's experiences, observations, studies, and reflections, enacts Chopp's vision of theological speech rooted in lived experience. Lauren perceives Earthseed not as a creation of her imagination but as a discovery of an existing truth, stating that Earthseed is born out of "discovery rather than invention, exploration rather than creation" and from observing and analysing "everything [she] could read, hear, see, all the history [she] could learn" (Butler, *Parable of the Sower* 72, 200). Earthseed emerges not as divine revelation passed down by a transcendent male figure, and Lauren is not a prophet who merely communicates revelations over which she has no creative power. Earthseed instead emerges as a body of thought grounded in a woman's experiences in and interpretation of the world. Earthseed instead emerges as a body of thought grounded in a woman's experiences in and interpretation of the world, her conviction to eradicate injustices, and her desire to transform the world into a better place where her fellow humans can attain dignity, equality and freedom. The verses she writes are compiled to ultimately form Earthseed's sacred text, *The Books of the Living* (Butler, *Parable of the Talents* 73). *The Books of the Living* becomes Earthseed's sacred text and is significant because it does not emerge from divine revelation or institutional authority, but from Lauren Olamina's direct, lived experience in a world collapsing under the weight of climate crisis, social

fragmentation, and systemic violence. With this book, Lauren positions herself as a religious leader with scriptural authority, claiming the authority to guide people in matters of religion and spirituality through her new theology that is grounded in lived experience. *Earthseed* is, therefore, also a feminist theological intervention: through the concept of “God is Change”, it re-imagines revelation as a process that is human-centred and contextual.

### **Gender, Power and Theological Language: God as Verb**

God in the Christian tradition is fixed as a “He”. Daly in *Beyond God the Father* (1973) writes, “If God in ‘his’ heaven is a father ruling ‘his’ people, then it is in the ‘nature’ of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male-dominated” (13). While Daly’s analysis is rooted in a Christian context where masculine language and leadership often predominate, it is important to recognise that not all religious expressions of the divine conform to this model. In the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah, for instance, the emanations (sefirot) reflect both masculine and feminine attributes. The Shekhinah, as the feminine aspect of God’s presence, complicates the idea that religious symbolism is uniformly patriarchal. Nevertheless, Daly’s critique remains relevant within mainstream Christianity, where theological language continues to uphold male authority. In her cited quote, Daly thus links the religious symbols of Christology with the religious and social position of men. Daly, like Fiorenza, contends that this symbolic authority has influenced broader social structures, embedding male dominance in religious, cultural, and political life.

Feminist philosophers have tackled the question of an androcentric God by either rejecting, replacing, or reconceptualising the figure of God. Ecofeminist spiritualists like Starhawk in works like *The Spiral Dance* (1979) and *Dreaming the Dark* (1982), and Carol Christ in *She*

*Who Changes* (2004) and *Goddess and God in the World* (2016) challenge the tenets of Christianity by replacing the figure of God with the Goddess as the central figure in spiritual practice. Rather than rejecting the figure of God outright, feminist theologians like Rebecca Chopp seek to reconceptualise God through the lenses of women's experience and plurivocality, offering models that resist hierarchical, patriarchal constraints. Lauren maintains the concept of God within Earthseed, but reconfigures God to move away from the androcentric tendencies of traditional Christianity and chooses instead to personify the quality of change as God. When asked why, Lauren replies, "People forget ideas. They're more likely to remember God – especially when they're scared or desperate" (Butler, *Parable of the Sower* 203). Rather than adhering to a male-dominated divine structure, Lauren presents a God that is not fixed in gender or hierarchy, allowing her followers to engage with the divine through personal agency and adaptability.

Lauren's Earthseed is devoid of stories of an all-powerful God. "Earthseed deals with ongoing reality, not with supernatural authority figures. Worship is no good without action" (Butler, *Parable of the Sower* 202). Without the all-powerful symbol of God as the ultimate symbol of male authority, Lauren asserts that the equality of the genders is an innate quality of Earthseed. Butler thus also raises issues about and within religion: its symbols and meaning, gender-biased authority, its functionality in dealing with current issues and, in the process, attempts to redefine religion for a multi-cultural global utopia. Lauren's religion advocates activism and human effort, not dependence on a non-human force, or resignation or acceptance of misfortune as coming from God.

Chopp asserts the symbolic connection of the Word and God, writing, "Theology is knowledge and words about God, and linguistically, God is understood as the Word" (31). John 1:1 explicitly states this interconnection, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with

God, and the Word was God” (*KJV*). Chopp utilises this Word/God symbolic connection to transform God into a metaphor that refers to language itself. Chopp further writes, “The Word/God is the sign of all signs, connected, embodied, open, multivalent, all the things a sign can most perfectly be” (31). In this way, Chopp calls for a reconceptualisation of God not as a fixed figure but as an accessible sign. The Word/God as an open, evolving sign allows for the creation of a space where alternative conceptions, such as Daly’s metaphor of God the Verb, can take birth.

In *Beyond God the Father*, Daly critiques the traditional portrayal of God, which she sees as androcentric, as it can reinforce patriarchal values by positioning God as the ultimate figure of authority. She famously states, “If God is male, then the male is God” (19), highlighting the gendered nature of the traditional divine image, which can be and has been interpreted to reinforce male dominance. Daly’s radical challenge to this notion is encapsulated in her metaphor of God the Verb, where she asks, “Why indeed must ‘God’ be a noun? Why not a verb – the most active and dynamic of all? Hasn’t the naming of ‘God’ as a noun been an act of murdering that dynamic Verb? And isn’t the Verb infinitely more personal than a mere static noun?” (33). Daly specifically asserts that this Verb is intransitive, indicating a state of being without needing an object to act on that “limits its dynamism” (34). As such, the Verb conveys God, not as a static being but in the dynamic process of “Be-ing”, which is a state that Daly asserts can enable women to contest their nonbeing and self-affirmingly participate in their liberation (34). She highlights the inclusivity and liberation the Verb offers, writing, “Women in the process of liberation are enabled to perceive this (Verb) because our liberation consists in refusing to be ‘the Other’ and asserting instead ‘I am’ – without making another ‘the Other’ (34). God as Verb resists the cycle of domination and suggests a feminist ethic of relationality and mutual subjectivity.

Daly's God the Verb also disrupts the notion of God as a fixed, immutable being. This shift from noun to verb is a radical challenge to patriarchal theology, which often associates God with masculinity and a fixed, gendered power structure. The immutable nature of God is verified by multiple Bible verses, such as Psalm 102:27, Psalm 119:89, Isaiah 40:8 and James 1:17 and Malachi 3:6, which states, "For I am the LORD, I change not" (*KJV*). St Augustine famously argued in *The City of God* that God is immutable, unchanging, and eternal, stating, "For God is the Supreme Being—that is, He supremely is; and He is therefore immutable" (500). God the Verb challenges this immutable position of divine unchangeability by conceiving the divine not as a static being, but as a dynamic and active force that enables and invites continuous becoming, evolution and self-actualisation. Suchocki identifies Daly's point of transforming the concept of God as "the de-reification of God, positing God as dynamic energy" (59). This aligns with Lauren's transformation of God in *Earthseed*, where God is genderless (Butler, *Parable of the Sower* 203), and where God as Change becomes a force of transformation and adaptation. This transformation rejects the monism of the traditional Christian symbol of God. *Earthseed*, in contrast to traditional Christian theology, which often emphasises God's unchanging nature, stresses the imperative need to accept change and adapt to change to survive. This metaphor of God as Change reflects the belief that change is an ongoing, unstoppable force and that adaptation is essential for survival in an ever-evolving world. Lauren explains the primacy of change: "Everyone knows that change is inevitable. From the second law of thermodynamics to Darwinian evolution, from Buddhism's insistence that nothing is permanent and all suffering results from our delusions of permanence to the third chapter of Ecclesiastes ... change is part of life, of existence, of the common wisdom" (25). Lauren thus concludes that change is the ultimate reality: "The only

lasting truth/ Is Change” (Butler, *Parable of the Sower* 3, 73, 179; *Parable of the Talents* 8, 119, 47, 66).

## **Conclusion**

Lauren adapts the figure of God to reflect change, which is a concept rooted in human agency and transformation, rather than a static and absolute figure. In doing so, she embodies Chopp’s vision of a theological semiotics that resists monologic, patriarchal structures and instead opens space for plurivocal expressions. Lauren’s designation of God as Change reconceptualises the traditional figure of God into a dynamic metaphor that addresses the challenges of a world profoundly distinct from the one depicted in the Biblical text. For Lauren, God is reconfigured from the passive, distant figure she had studied in Robledo into an active force integrated into the flow of life. Just as Chopp and Daly advocate for a reimagining of God to reflect liberation and the participation of multiple voices that have been historically silenced, Lauren’s Earthseed seeks to empower individuals to shape a world that is not determined by fixed religious doctrines or oppressive structures. Thus, Lauren’s God as Change embodies theological critiques of gendered and patriarchal conceptions of the divine and offers an alternative vision of God that emphasises adaptability and agency, and the possibility of transformation.

Lauren’s journey is a story of survival and liberation, framed through the reconfiguration of religious leadership. As she writes, “... someday when people are able to pay more attention to what I say than to how old I am, I’ll use these verses to pry them loose from the rotting past, and maybe push them into saving themselves and building a future that makes sense” (Butler, *Parable of the Sower* 73). In this way, Lauren challenges the traditional religious narratives that demand passive submission, presenting a theology of active participation in humanity’s collective

salvation. Butler subverts the Biblical narrative of liberation by replacing the fixed commandments of God with the evolving verses of Earthseed, a doctrine driven by human agency rather than divine command. Lauren writes, “A victim of God may,/ Through learning adaptation,/ Become a partner of God,/ A victim of God may,/ Through forethought and planning,/ Become a shaper of God” (31).

To conclude, Earthseed and its guiding principle of God as Change are born out of the convergence of the praxis of religious, historical and political patterns of exploitation and absence in society. Earthseed acknowledges the injustices brought about by cultural formations of dominance and dualities, with religion being one of the key areas of exploitation. The transition from a theocentric religion to a human-centric religion is a difficult one involving the investigation of the concept of God. However, when the concept of God holds the infinite potential of Change, God can be reimagined and directed toward individual and collective well-being and development: “Alter the speed/ Or the direction of Change./ Vary the scope of Change./ Recombine the seeds of Change./ Transmute the impact of Change./ Seize Change./ Use it./ Adapt and grow” (Butler, *Parable of the Talents* 27).

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**Bio-note:**

Cr Patricia Mary Hodge is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Women's College, Shillong, and Research Scholar in the Department of English, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. Her research interests include contemporary dystopian fiction, feminist theology, post-secular studies, eco-theology and gender studies, with particular focus on the works

of Octavia Butler, Alexis M. Smith and Margaret Atwood. She can be reached at [patclhodge93@gmail.com](mailto:patclhodge93@gmail.com).

**ORCID ID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3786-8060>

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