Part I

Theoretical orientations
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FEMINIST APPROACHES TO RELIGION

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Introduction

Over the last fifty years, the application of feminist ideas and methodologies to the practices of theology has had considerable impact. Feminist theologians have challenged the way in which the discipline of theology understands itself, arguing that it is impossible to consider spirituality and belief in God (or gods) without understanding the way in which sexuality and gender affects the construction of these concepts. Indeed, feminist theologians have been extremely successful in attaining their goals: it is now difficult to imagine a university course in theology that does not in some way address issues of sexuality and identity.

By comparison, Anglo-American philosophy of religion has been somewhat tardy in taking seriously the effect that the exploration of issues of identity might have upon the construction and analysis of religious belief. A range of reasons might account for this reticence. There are, for example, relatively few philosophers of religion who are women. More far-reaching is the effect felt from the dominance of analytic philosophy of religion in the Anglo-American forms of the subject. Analytic philosophers of religion are committed to an approach that stresses the rational engagement with religion. This is most clearly seen in the way in which belief in God is explored. God is defined in terms that are believed to transcend their basis in the specificities of any particular faith tradition. Terms deemed common and acceptable to all the great monotheistic faiths are used to define what ‘the divine’ might be. The philosopher’s task is then to determine whether there are good grounds for holding to belief in such a God. Analysing belief and determining whether it is rational or not becomes the prime focus of concern: and, importantly, this need not imply engagement with the lived experience of religious believers. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. For example, Philip Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (1997) are at pains to allow space for philosophies of religion defined through the lens of different religious traditions, and D.Z. Phillips consistently exhorted philosophers of religion to place the believer at the heart of their considerations, e.g., in Reason without Explanation (1978).

While noting the importance of such strategies, the main thrust of the subject has been towards engaging with a more general understanding of what God and religion mean.

Pursuing philosophy of religion in this way elevates ideas of abstraction and general applicability. For feminists, approaching religion thus is problematic: not least because they wish to draw attention to the way in which the ideas humans develop about their world invariably
reflect their own individual experience and social placing. We are embodied beings, and the facts of embodiment affect our ideas about the world we inhabit.

This chapter explores the feminist critique of analytic philosophy of religion, as well as noting some of the ways in which feminists envisage future philosophies of religion. The plural ‘philosophies’ is significant here. There is no one generally agreed alternative feminist approach. Rather, a range of approaches are emerging that suggest something of the diversity possible when one allows the significance of gender and identity to shape accounts of religion and the divine.

The feminist critique of (philosophy of) religion

Feminist theology and the philosophical critique of religion

The feminist critique of religion has much in common with that of the nineteenth-century philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach. Feuerbach (1841/1957) argues that the concept of God is a human construction which reifies the values of any particular human society. For the feminist, to accept this claim is not sufficient in itself. If ‘God’ stands for those qualities that human beings and specific human societies deem valuable, precisely whose values does the philosophical concept of God reflect?

In addressing this question, feminists first turned their attention to the key attributes which define the God of philosophical theism. The theist’s God is defined in terms of power, knowledge and detachment. ‘He’ is all-powerful, all-knowing, and radically self-sufficient. Furthermore, this God is impassible (cannot suffer), an attribute with connotations of invulnerability. God is immutable (cannot change). If these factors are taken together, it seems that we have a telling picture of God made in ‘man’s’ image. Replace the word ‘God’ with the word ‘man’ and one is left with the stereotypical picture of what constitutes masculinity in a society whose cultural and social life has been – and continues to be – defined and dominated by men.

By tracing the development of the distinctively feminist philosophies of religion that have appeared in recent years, one gets a sense of the way in which the early feminist critique of religion has been built upon. The earliest feminist analyses of the concept of God were concerned with exposing the way in which the notion of God has been used to legitimate male domination. The post-Christian theologian Mary Daly, a key figure in the quest for a female-centred approach to spirituality, began by outlining the extent to which the concept of God is derived from male experience of the world. Writing of Christianity – although, arguably, her words could be applied to any of the major monotheistic faiths – she notes that ‘the myths and symbols of Christianity are essentially sexist’ (Daly 1975: 227). The language habitually used of God is distinctively male, both in terms of the attributes ascribed to God, but also in terms of the gender-language used of God. God is resolutely and definitively ‘He’. According to Daly, such language does not reflect a mere quirk of fate. It reflects an ideology that has a very real effect on the way in which human relationships are shaped. In a famous passage she notes that ‘since “God is male, the male is God. God the Father legitimates all earthly Godfathers”’ (Daly 1975: 227). The language of religion cannot be detached from the effect it has on human relationships. Divine male power supports human male power. Philosophers stand accused of distortion if they insist on viewing such language in abstract ways divorced from their context in human life and experience.

Feminist scholars of religion built upon Daly’s work, seeking to expose the concept of God as a male construct of divinity. Pursued in this way, the concept of God is revealed as supporting and justifying masculinist concepts and values. Sharon Welch provides a fine example of this method. At one point in her analysis of the atmosphere of ‘cultured despair’ prevalent in
the last throes of the Cold War in the late 1980s, she turns her attention to the concept of divine omnipotence. Rather than consider this concept in isolation from human practices, she asks what the desire for an omnipotent God signifies. Her answer is not a cheery one. For Welch, it reflects and justifies forms of destructive human behaviour. The desire to be ‘all-powerful’, reflected in the concept of God, speaks to a desire that should not be cultivated: ‘the political logic of such doctrines [is] the glorification of domination’ (Welch 1989: 111). An all-powerful deity lends itself to the drive for power. Moreover, idolising omnipotence contains the belief that absolute power is an absolute good: after all, God, as perfect, is defined as all-powerful. It would seem that in glorifying divine omnipotence, human beings – or rather human rulers – are similarly encouraged to seek after such power. Welch refutes the very idea that absolute power is good. We only have to consider human history to see the legacy of thinking of power in this way. As she puts it, ‘absolute power is a destructive trait’ (Welch 1989: 111). If this is so, ideas – be they philosophical or theological – can never be considered ‘innocent’. If God embodies absolute power (is omnipotent), consideration needs to be paid to the effect that this glorification of power has on human relationships. A crucial part of the feminist scholar’s work is, then, to connect ideas with practice.

It is worth considering how Welch proceeds in her analysis. Absolute power only makes sense when located against the backdrop of a hierarchical society. If rulers are to aspire to the power of God, the ruled are to submit to their ‘masters’ just as the Church is to submit to ‘her’ God:

The result of the theological valorisation of absolute power is the erotics of domination, the glorification of submission to the greatest power.

(Welch 1989: 117)

Such a belief has considerable ramifications for women, traditionally viewed as subordinate to men. If the hierarchical structure on which such ideas depend is also divinely ordained, there is no way in which women can challenge the impact that this structure has upon their lives.

The liberation theologian Dorothee Soelle provides a fitting example of what such beliefs might mean in practice. Concerned to illuminate the way in which ideas about God affect lived experience, Soelle describes the experience of a woman suffering domestic violence. She goes into this case in considerable detail, giving a sense of the woman’s isolation, of her dependence upon the whims of a brutal husband. She also considers the psychological bars forged by her religious beliefs that act against her resisting her fate. Living in a religious community, she finds it difficult to challenge her suffering because of a theology which sees suffering as something sent by God. As such, it must be accepted. Soelle claims that this woman’s experience reflects the logic which emanates from belief in an all-powerful God: God is visualised as a sadist who demands the sufferer to be a masochist with no choice but to conform to their lot and bear it (Soelle 1975: 10–16).

Like Soelle, Welch wants to challenge such thinking, making a similar connection between forms of theological language and human praxis. If such challenges are taken seriously, then the very way in which God is conceptualised must be reviewed. Moreover, as Soelle and Welch argue, the concept of God is not philosophically neutral; it can be mapped onto the social values that constructed it in the first place. As Soelle’s example shows, models of God have an impact on the extent to which justice is or is not possible for women.

Towards a feminist philosophy of religion: Jantzen and Anderson

While Welch’s critique of omnipotence engages with the key philosophical theme of power and considers it theologically, her central concern is not to create a feminist philosophy of religion.
Other feminist scholars have furthered this project. The work of Grace Jantzen (1998) and Pamela Sue Anderson (1998; 2012) suggests something of what a feminist philosophy of religion might look like. At the heart of both accounts is a critique of the method and concerns of the discipline itself.

Jantzen’s approach challenges the basic methodology that informs the analytic philosopher’s engagement with religion. At its heart, she argues, lies the assumption that the philosopher is a rational subject who weighs the evidence and comes to a (largely) detached response to the problems posed. That such a stance is unproblematic is rarely challenged. Issues of embodiment – what it might mean to be approaching this topic as a gendered and raced subject at a particular point in human history – are considered unnecessary and beside the point (Jantzen 1996).

We might, by way of illustration, consider Tim Mawson’s introduction to philosophy of religion (2005). For Mawson, ‘calling God a “he” and calling God a “she” is a matter of indifference philosophically speaking’. That is not to say that this kind of language might be of no interest to broader sociological investigations, but Mawson is at pains to dismiss such reflections as irrelevant for the philosopher: ‘power connotations are accidentally associated with the genders’ (ibid. 19, my emphasis). If we are to be ‘clear-headed’ as philosophers of religion we should not be distracted by such cultural variables. ‘We’ recognise that God is not gendered, and so the language we use is insignificant. (One wonders, at this point, precisely who constitutes ‘we’ for Mawson.) Resolutely refusing to engage with the implications such language might have for the construction of human relationships, he comes to this conclusion: ‘given that nothing can turn on the decision one way or the other, I’m going to continue within the tradition in which I have grown up, calling God a he’ (ibid. 20).

Jantzen, like Welch before her, resists such conclusions. Drawing upon Feuerbach’s contention that the way God is conceptualised reveals the values of the society that created that concept, she argues that the concept of God reflects the ideals and concerns of those who defined it. Given that men have been the main figures in the construction of the discipline and its debates, it is hardly surprising if the way in which religion is subsequently understood depends, similarly, upon masculine preoccupations.

The example to which Jantzen draws attention is the over-emphasis on death. Why, she asks, is the engagement with death of fundamental concern to philosophers of religion? Why is the topic of immortality a central one for the philosophical study of religion? ‘Can I survive my death? ‘What happens to me after death?’ Philosophers of religion have invariably related the concerns of religion to such questions. Jantzen’s response is stark: such questions reflect a discipline that is ‘necrophilic’; a discipline that reflects a masculinist obsession with death (1998: 137–41).

Whether she is correct or altogether fair in making this connection is a moot point. Are women really not interested in death? After all, Jantzen has harsh words to say about the French feminist Julia Kristeva, who offers powerful reflections on death as well as the related themes of loss, melancholia, and depression (Jantzen 1998: 196; Kristeva 1989). Jantzen seems to polarise the concerns of men and women while failing to pay adequate attention to the possibility noted at the beginning of the twentieth century by William James (1902/1985) that different individuals will respond differently to the concerns of the world they inhabit.

In place of the obsession with death that she perceives in the tradition, Jantzen suggests a different model for religious reflection focused on birth. Theorising birth allows women’s experiences and lives to shape Jantzen’s philosophy of religion. And there is good evidence for her contention that birth has been neglected as a philosophical category. The existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger (1927/1962: 295) may write of the individual being ‘thrown into the world’, but to consider the process of birth seriously undermines this assertion. We are not,
in fact, ‘thrown into the world’; we enter it through the body of a woman. To reflect upon this fact is to challenge Heidegger’s focus on the lonely individual who creates ‘his’ life as ‘he’ sees fit. The process of birthing reveals a different truth: we are immediately placed into a network of relationships (even if those relationships are sometimes far from adequate). Jantzen challenges the absence of a proper philosophical discussion of birth (and by extension relationship), and stresses, with Christine Battersby, ‘the ontological significance of the fact that selves are born’ (Battersby 1998: 3). To start here leads to a different set of concerns for philosophers of religion; and for Jantzen these revolve around questions of how to live, how to flourish, and how to acquire justice for all those who have been born (Jantzen 1998: 227–53).

There is much to commend Jantzen’s approach: not least because it makes philosophy of religion an ethical pursuit, with the question of the practice of living as significant as the reflection on beliefs (see also Hollywood 2004). Yet to engage with birth as a philosophical category is not without its difficulties for the feminist. One risks falling into the essentialist trap where ‘Woman’ is defined according to her specific reproductive function. This move has enabled generations of patriarchal thinkers to limit the scope of women’s lives. Invariably, such accounts of what it means to be a woman lead to the conclusion that because women give birth they are the ones best placed to look after children. Thus ‘the home’ and the private realm are the best place for women. The nineteenth-century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, for example, notes how to ‘watch a girl playing with a child, dancing and singing with it the whole day’ leads one to ask ‘what, with the best will in the world, a man could do in her place’ (Schopenhauer 1970: 81).

Connecting women with reproduction and child-rearing suggests a further connection with nature. While this might seem agreeable when thinking ecologically (see Griffin 1982), it is more problematic when placed alongside the history of western philosophy. For philosophers from Aristotle to Hegel, the perceived connection with nature means that women are less likely to be capable of rational thought than the male who has been viewed as more distant from the influence of natural processes.

Jantzen’s strategy for avoiding such conclusions is to emphasise less the actual experience of giving birth, and more the ramifications of thinking of humans as beings who are born. Rather than think of ourselves as ‘mortals’ (beings destined to die), something significant happens when we think of ourselves as ‘natals’ (beings who have been born). Less attention can as a result be given to thinking about the inevitable end of life in the grave, more on the relationships that support us in the present moment. As the writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935) (1923/1976: 46–47) evocatively puts it:

To the death based religion, the main question is, ‘What is going to happen to me after I am dead?’ a posthumous egotism. To the birth based religion, the main question is, ‘What must be done for the child who is born?’ an immediate altruism. The death–based religions have led to a limitless individualism, a demand for the eternal extension of personality … The birth-based religion is necessarily and essentially altruistic, a forgetting of oneself for the good of the child.

For Jantzen, theorising natality affects the way in which philosophy of religion is practised. New themes come to light. The philosophy of religion becomes political in the broadest sense, reflecting and shaping the way in which community and society are understood. Rejecting the notion that we are self-contained, autonomous individuals, she advocates the importance of dependency. Emerging from reflection on the mother/child relationship, this theme forms the basis for deeper discussion of the significance of relationship itself. Eschewing the obsession with
the individual – a concern that she locates at the heart of discussions of death – leads to renewed focus on this world. Under natality, this life and all that implies would be taken seriously. And for Jantzen’s own project this necessitates placing love and human flourishing at the heart of her theorising.

There is much in Jantzen’s project to excite the feminist philosopher of religion. At times, the topics deemed important by philosophers of religion can seem rather rarefied and of interest only to those working within the field. Yet aspects of Jantzen’s analysis need further interrogation. We have already considered the kind of challenge that might be made to the gendering of the concern with death; and we might further note that particular religious groups present a problem for Jantzen’s claim that death holds more interest for the male than the female. For example, the Spiritualist Church is a movement predominantly formed and led by female mediums. At the very least, this suggests that Jantzen is mistaken in her contention that women per se are not concerned with the question of what happens after death.

More problematic, perhaps, is her desire to avoid the essentialist trap by distancing the paradigm of natality from the lived experience of birthing. There is a tendency for her writing to suggest a clear distinction between life (and birth) and death (Jantzen 1998: 140). Considering the realities of the experience of birthing suggests a more complex relationship between life and death, for women suffer miscarriage, stillbirth, and sometimes death during labour. Such painful experiences of loss suggest that birth is by no means only connected to life and flourishing. If anything, the unpredictability of the process reveals that ‘in life we are in the midst of death’.

If we were only to focus on such criticisms, however, we would miss the distinctiveness of Jantzen’s approach. Philosophy of religion in her hands moves from being a purely theoretical engagement with religious belief to a method for ‘becoming divine’. In making this move, her philosophy is therapeutic: it is shaped by the desire to effect change in the self. This move is not so surprising when one realises Jantzen’s indebtedness to the French feminist and psychoanalyst, Luce Irigaray. It is from Irigaray that Jantzen derives her title ‘Becoming Divine’. What precisely this means is extremely difficult to pin down. Given her criticisms of the discussion of death, Jantzen cannot mean some kind of transcendent existence outside this embodied one. What she has in mind seems to be the pursuit of a full and fulfilling human life, one where the concern is to aid not just the flourishing of oneself but also that of others (see Jantzen 1998: 227–53). Feminist philosophy of religion in her hands becomes an implicitly political pursuit.

After reading Jantzen’s radical redesign of the subject, Pamela Sue Anderson’s work can seem rather traditional by comparison. Concerned with epistemology, Anderson cannot – indeed, will not – evade the practice of reason (1998). This is not to say that she offers a simplistic account of what ‘reason’ involves. Like Jantzen, she is critical of the idea that one can achieve an ‘objective’ stance on any subject. She rejects the notion that one can approach any subject as a detached observer, which is one of the central features of the methodology of analytic philosophy. Indeed, Anderson’s concern is to modify the definition of reason, arguing for recognition of ‘epistemic locatedness’ (Anderson 2012). In her early work, she applies the ideas of Sandra Harding to this end. Harding argues for an account of reason informed by recognising the possibility of different points of view (Harding 1991). This ‘standpoint epistemology’ introduces the idea that reason is always something applied by individuals. The problem with the kind of epistemology that underpins mainstream philosophies of religion is that there is a tendency to assume that ‘Reason’ is a universal faculty untainted by the concerns of the individual philosopher. Harding and Anderson refute the simplicity of this definition. However, to accept that the experience of being a particular individual at a particular time in history colours one’s concerns does not mean that ‘the truth’ is impossible to achieve. Rather, to arrive at ‘the truth’ involves a high degree of awareness of the issues that influence one’s discussions, and a willingness to
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engage with the concerns of others. And here gender becomes most significant. Our experience of the world, filtered through gender, race, and class, influences the things that we deem important. Problems arise when we uncritically accept the rightness of our position or when a profession – or discipline – is dominated by one group who espouse only one perspective on the world. If we are to attain any degree of awareness of what constitutes ‘the truth’, we will need to engage with a variety of perspectives in our philosophy as well as in our world.

At the heart of Anderson’s project is the alignment of love and reason. This might seem strange, for love and desire (defined as feeling or emotion) have invariably been juxtaposed to – or, at best, removed from – reason. Anderson resists this polarisation. In so doing, she forces engagement with the gendered construction of philosophy of religion. Historically, women have been associated with desire while men have been associated with reason. In identifying this distinction she builds upon the work of earlier feminist philosophers like Genevieve Lloyd (1984). This habitual identification goes some way to clarifying Jantzen’s resistance to defining natality through reflection on the actual experience of birthing. Women’s connection with natural processes has all too often been used to exclude them from the life of reason and thus from the work of philosophy itself. Kant, in his discussion of the differences between the sexes, notes that ‘a woman who has a head full of Greek [the language of the philosophers Plato and Aristotle] … might as well even have a beard’ (1764/1960: 78). Women, associated with nature, beauty, and sexuality are thus to be excluded from the application of cool-headed reason.

Anderson’s intention, however, is not to reject (male) reason in favour of (female) desire. Rather, she exposes this gendered construction, and attempts to bring both aspects of human experience together, for without engaging with desire there can be no satisfying discussion of the impulses that lead to the construction of religion in the first place. At the same time, to exclude reason would mean that there can be no critical engagement with religion; no interrogation of whether the particular forms that it takes are healthy for human beings or not. This attempt to unite two apparently opposed features of human life influences the eclectic sources that she employs. Philosophers like Kant are employed alongside continental theorists whose ideas are influenced by psychoanalysis (most notably, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray). Her method enables the development of a feminist philosophy of religion grounded in ‘the lived experience’ of being human (Anderson 1998: 33), where philosophy is not just about the application of reason, but also involves engaging with the desires that permeate every aspect of human life.

**Shaping the subject: feminism, identity and religion**

So what might happen to the content of philosophy of religion if the kind of perspectives developed by Jantzen and Anderson were taken seriously? While there is no one feminist approach to the subject, it is interesting to note the way in which identity and subjectivity underpin these diverse approaches.

**Thinking again about the concept of God**

Every man (according to Feuerbach) and every woman who is not fated to remain a slave to the logic of the essence of man, must imagine a God, an objective-subjective place or path whereby the self could be coalesced in space and time: unity of instinct, heart, and knowledge, unity of nature and spirit, condition for the abode and for saintliness.

Exploration of feminist philosophy of religion reveals that it involves more than refusal of the male pronoun for God or the substitution of that pronoun with that of the female. This does not, however, mean that there is little discussion of the way in which the concept of God has been constructed. Through critiquing the concept of God, different accounts of the divine emerge. For some, like Mary Daly, God is not ‘a being’ (or noun), but rather ‘be-ing’ (or a verb) (Daly 1973/1986: 33–34). In Anderson’s work a similar trend away from God as a being can also be detected; albeit in a rather different way. For Anderson, the divine is understood along the lines of Kantian regulative ideals (Anderson 2012: 135, 199–200). A similar idea illuminates Jantzen’s discussion of what it means to ‘become divine’. Divinity becomes a form of behaviour, rather than the description of a supernatural being.

Others, like Sallie McFague (1983), suggest a different approach which focuses on the language used of the divine. McFague argues for a broadening out of such images to include female language and imagery, as well as images which have no basis in gender. According to McFague, embarking on this process reveals the hidden and often revolutionary content of the Bible. The biblical writers use a plethora of images to describe God, and McFague argues that this is because they do not want us to fall into the trap of thinking we know what, precisely, God is. Accepting the need for different images of the divine supports a concept of God in tune with the concerns of feminists. In McFague’s theology (1983: 177–88), God is best understood as a friend, an image that suggests the importance of resisting paternal images which can trap us in the infantilism of childhood.

McFague is a Christian, her account of religious language informed by biblical categories. Other feminists have pursued a different path, arguing that what is needed is something more radical than a supplementing of the (male) images habitually used of God. What is needed is a ‘return to the Goddess’, and in making this analysis they embark on thealogy as opposed to theology.

At first glance, naming a deity in female terms suggests a simple reversal of the traditional God with its male language and dominance of male cultural forms. This need not be the case. For many theologians the attempt to establish the existence or otherwise of some divine being is not their primary concern. As Starhawk (1990: 11), a radical feminist writer from the United States, explains:

> When I say Goddess I am not talking about a being somewhere outside of this world nor am I proposing a new belief system. I am talking about choosing an attitude: choosing to take this living world, the people and creatures in it, as the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, to see the world, the earth and our lives as sacred.

‘Goddess’ is a way of expressing the significance of human life and relationships. At the same time, theologians use the language of Goddess to reflect upon what it means to be a woman. They argue, in a similar way to Feuerbach, that it is through religious language that one’s identity as a human being is formed. So Carol Christ sees the Goddess as a symbol that enables women to come to terms with their sexuality in a positive way. She writes of the Goddess as a ‘symbol [which] aids the process of naming and reclaiming the female body and its cycles and processes’ (Christ and Plaskow 1979: 281). Christ points out that, like the Christian God, the Goddess is often described in triune terms. She is Virgin, Mother, and Crone. Acceptance and appropriation of the different stages of a woman’s life in this dramatic way enables women ‘to value youth, creativity and wisdom in themselves and other women’ (Christ and Plaskow 1979: 281). Thus the task of thealogy is intimately connected to issues of female self awareness and self acceptance.
Such notions fit rather well with the contention Irigaray makes when calling for a ‘female divine’ that acts as a divine horizon for women’s self-becoming. Irigaray is renowned for advocating a feminism of sexual difference. What matters is not ‘equality’ with the male, for equality is invariably defined as women being given entrance to the male world where they are allowed to pursue male ways of being. Instead, she advocates the pursuit of genuine alterity for women: in other words, she wants women to be able to pursue the kind of lives which reflect their distinctive womanhood. The danger with such an approach, as the French feminist Michèle Le Doeuff astutely comments, is that it can lend itself to the kind of inequality that has dogged philosophy – and indeed women – for centuries (Le Doeuff 1998/2003: 65–66).

Women come to be defined as less rational than men, associated more with the natural world, and they are then supposed to glory in this identity. Emphasising ‘difference’, for Le Doeuff, is just another strategy for marginalising women.

Alongside such criticisms runs an even more damaging one. Is all this talk of ‘self-development’ a way of ignoring social inequalities in favour of private religious experience? In other words, I can focus on developing my subjectivity with little sense of the prophetic function of religion to challenge injustice (for details of these criticisms, see Raphael 1999: 37–40).

This is a damning conclusion and not entirely fair. As Melissa Raphael (1996) points out, theology necessitates a radical reappraisal of the notion of divinity. If the divine is not understood as a cosmic force or agent outside of this world, but as a way of endowing this life with meaning, a fundamental change in human attitudes to each other but also to the environment is needed. ‘Order’ does not come from without; and that has implications not only for the God who is understood as the ‘Prime Mover’ and the ‘First Cause’, but also for the Western capitalist intent to impose ‘order’ on an apparently ‘chaotic’ world: ‘An ecologically harmonious culture that listened to the rhythms of infinity would show patriarchal production to be the dissonant negative chaos that it is’ (Raphael 1996: 285). It also places an imperative on the theologian: to work for a world that is valued, not plundered.

**Thinking again about ‘patriarchal’ religion**

If theologians seek an account of the divine that stands apart from the main monotheistic faiths, other feminists attempt to re-engage with the mainstream religious traditions. Far from seeing these traditions as irredeemably patriarchal, reformist feminists suggest that there is much in the world’s religions that can be developed to critique the very values which emanate from a male-dominated and male-defined society. While the methods employed can look quite different, at the heart of such approaches is the attempt to take seriously the relationship between one’s religious tradition and the way it shapes and supports the construction of identity.

Melissa Raphael’s Jewish feminist theology of the Holocaust offers a useful example of the feminist method of deconstruction and reconstruction. Raphael begins by considering the way in which feminist categories influence and challenge Jewish reflection on the Holocaust. She contends that Jewish theologians, confronted with the horrors of the Shoah, have tended to focus their discussions on how God’s action – or inaction – can be justified. This reflects the typical way in which all theodicsists – Jewish and non-Jewish – proceed. Equally typically, they focus their attention on constructing forms of the Freewill Defence in order to offer some degree of justification for human suffering. Raphael claims that such a position reflects the assumption that it is human freedom and autonomy that defines humanity. She provides examples of the way in which the experience of the death camps is used by such theologians to support the idea that what matters is the extent to which those suffering were able to maintain a sense of their own autonomy and freedom, despite the horrors of their incarceration (Raphael 2004: 137–38).
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Raphael’s approach is different: reflection on the experience of women in the camps leads to an altogether different view of what makes us human. By considering ‘the sisterhoods’—groups of women in the death camps who supported each other—she suggests a different account of what it is to be human. It is an account that stresses less the notion of individual freedom, and more the idea of relationship. This perspective allows for a different view of the nature of God: one supported by the Jewish scriptures. Rather than conceptualising God as the ultimate example of a free individual (the image which she believes supports the Freewill Defence), she offers an alternative Jewish concept: that of ‘God immanent as Shekinah’ (Raphael 2004: 146–47). This is the God whose suffering face is known in the relationships between those in the camps.

Raphael’s methodology thus critiques the dominant approach to the Holocaust in Jewish theology by using feminist categories, while at the same time offering an alternative Jewish vision of the nature of God reflecting the feminist concern with relationship. Critically engage with the tradition, and then find within the tradition alternative sources for one’s theology. Tina Beattie’s approach has elements of such an approach, but begins by challenging the way in which feminist philosophers of religion approach the criticism of religion.

If Carol Christ argues for a return to the Goddess, Beattie contends that women need the Virgin Mary (Beattie 2002; 2004). This can seem a surprising conclusion, given the criticisms made by feminists of the mother of Jesus. Mary is, after all, an impossible ideal, the mother who is also a virgin. For Marina Warner (1990), she symbolises all that is wrong with patriarchal accounts of womanhood, where women are defined according to their sexual status, and where problematic sexuality is projected onto the female, thus allowing the male to embody rationality and spirituality.

Beattie sees things differently. The dismissal of Mary reflects a deeper malaise in Western theories of religion. Religion is invariably considered through the lens of Protestantism, and this involves tacit acceptance of the scientific paradigm where all is submitted to the eye of reason, and where the goal is to eradicate mystery. The philosophy of religion—a discipline shaped by the Enlightenment—cannot escape this inheritance; and Beattie has stern words for feminists who she believes have not adequately interrogated the problems for religious reflection of adopting this method (Beattie 2004: 119).

Beattie’s approach, by way of contrast, is informed by her Catholicism. This allows for a more positive reading to be given of Mary, where the maternal, excluded from Protestant theology, is restored to its rightful place. Mary’s image is seen as expressing the significance of ‘the inexpressible mystery of the Incarnation’ (Beattie 2004: 112). This might sound decidedly ‘unfeminist’. Beattie rejects this claim. Applying the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan and the feminism of sexual difference advocated by Irigaray, she argues that Mary’s perpetual virginity ‘affirms woman’s eternal liberation from the power of the phallus/serpent’ (ibid. 118). The Virgin Mother is not dependent on a man for her status as mother; her identity is grounded in a genuine female otherness, and thus she provides a powerful example of independent womanhood which conforms to feminist principles.

Beattie’s method is thus rather different from Raphael’s: critique the assumptions of feminist discourse, and then suggest readings for a key aspect of a specific tradition that furthers feminist aims. But more than that: Beattie argues that philosophers of religion need to recognise the unacknowledged specificity of their understanding of religion in Protestant forms of Christianity. Attention must be paid to the way in which cultural and social mores influence the understanding of religion. This necessitates attending to the socio-cultural locatedness of religious traditions just as seriously as we do the gender locatedness of individuals. And in the case of the philosophy of religion it means thinking again about the way in which Protestantism and its focus on right belief may have warped a more rounded view of what religion involves.
Over-emphasising belief at the expense of practice may, as Amy Hollywood (2004) suggests, distort our understanding of religion. It may also, as Beattie claims, have led feminists to misrepresent the role of the Virgin Mary.

This is not to say that Beattie’s engagement with Mary is unproblematic. Her concern is to explore the symbol of Mary, and in making this the focus for discussion she tends to neglect the uses to which this image has been put. Religion helps shape social identities, and if feminist approaches have been successful at anything it is at drawing our attention to the way in which religion has been used to oppress the powerless, something which seems to be ignored in Beattie’s analysis.

Raphael and Beattie both explore the way in which the concept of God relates to the developing identity of human beings. For Raphael, a theology that reflects the significance of relationship can be found within the Jewish tradition. For Beattie, the image of Mary, understood as the Mother of God, can enable the development of female identity. Beattie’s approach also suggests something of the willingness of feminist philosophers of religion and theologians to reflect critically upon feminism itself. It is this willingness to critique feminist philosophy of religion that suggests something of the future directions for this approach, and it is worth concluding with some reflections on what those possible futures might look like.

Future directions for feminist philosophy of religion

The success of the feminist approach to the study of religion has been most evident in its exposure of the implications ideas of God have on human identity and society. Early feminist critiques paid attention to the correlation between the concept of God and stereotypes of masculinity, as well as highlighting the implications such ideas have for women. Feminist philosophers of religion have similarly challenged the habitual methods employed by Anglo-American philosophers of religion when they turn their attention to religion. No method is immune, they note, from the concerns of those who formulate it. At the same time, attempts have been made to include desire and reason in the engagement with religion. This places the human subject at the heart of the discussion; a subject who should be understood not as an isolated individual defined purely by the ability to reason, but as an individual always understood through their concrete placing in society and through the relationships that support and define them.

Emphasising the human at the heart of religion goes some way to explaining the feminist focus on identity: both as it is shaped by religion and in the ways it shapes religious beliefs and practices. But if recognition of how embodiment affects philosophy and religion has driven the critique of male-dominated society, feminists are now becoming increasingly aware of how their own specific identities also affect and perhaps distort the discussion of religion.

Academic feminist theology and feminist philosophy of religion has not been immune from the prejudices and hierarchies shaping late-capitalist Western societies. In common with other institutions and disciplines, feminists working in the academy are predominantly white and middle-class. The concerns of educated, professional women may have little to do with the experiences of women whose lives are not shaped by these experiences. If one is in doubt, think of the recent debates surrounding the ‘glass ceiling’ in the professions: a concern of little moment for women who are not in the professions or themselves middle-class.

Ellen Armour’s response is to address such criticisms head-on through exploration of the issue of race. She advocates interrogating the concerns of ‘whitefeminists’ in order that race might be addressed more systematically than has been the case to date (Armour 1999). Armour argues that whitefeminists tend to ignore the fact that to be white is to be raced, thus enabling the projection of issues arising from race onto Black and Asian women. A false account of woman
that seeks to make all women ‘the same’ and ignores the prejudices Black and Asian women face in racist white society has to be challenged in order that the voices of all are heard and allowed to inform and change our discussions and – more importantly – our practice. As Pamela Sue Anderson (2012: xii) notes, feminists must be more subtle in their analysis of identity, and she urges a deeper engagement with theories of intersectionality:

Gender is inescapably formed by, and recognised where it intersects with, a range of social and material categories, including race, religion, ethnicity, class, age and sexual orientation.

To take gender seriously is not to stop with issues of sex and sexuality. It is to open up all the facets of experience that make us the people we are.

How might this wide-ranging reflection on the nature of identity influence future feminist discussions? To take on board Anderson’s reflections is to recognise how difficult it is to place critical reflections on identity at the heart of our discussions. It is not enough to assume that we can use the position of womanhood or ‘women’s experience’ as a starting point that will lead to the same conclusions for all.

Yet Anderson’s earlier reflections on epistemology suggest a way forward. When she adopts Harding’s standpoint epistemology she suggests something of the complexity of attaining any kind of ‘objective’ truth. To be true, a position has to take account of the variety of perspectives available. A similar method might be used here. Feminism is first and foremost a political movement concerned to expose and correct the marginalisation of women’s lives and experiences and to address gender injustice. The fragmentation of this movement is possible if we become fixated on the things that divide rather than unite us. Anderson’s solution is to adopt a method that thinks through the lives of those placed at the margins. In this sense, she is locating feminist philosophy of religion in the methods of liberation theology that inform the practice of feminist theology. Such a method allows for a deeper and more effective response to the ills that challenge the extent to which all women can live full and fulfilling lives. Feminist thinking, viewed in this way, comes out of and is vital for shaping political action; it becomes, as Anderson describes it, ‘a prescription for change’ (Anderson 1998: 119). At a time when the world’s economy is shrinking and when women are feeling the brunt of austerity measures, the commitment to a united women’s movement that takes account of difference is vital. For feminism to be effective it must think about the things that unite as well as the things that divide women.

That feminist philosophy of religion is a critical movement suggests something of its vibrancy. Feminist philosophers of religion do not rest easy with the identifications and issues that form the basis for current feminist theory. Nothing is set in stone, and the constant engagement and critical reflection upon what it is to be feminist allows for new ideas to develop and to be explored. It is this that ensures its continued importance for contemporary philosophy of religion.

Notes

1 The section on ‘Feminist Philosophy of Religion’ in Clack and Clack (2008) forms the basis for this extended and amended chapter.
2 Arguably [Valerie Saiving] Goldstein (1960) stands as the first paper of feminist theology. Saiving challenges the construction of sin along gender lines.
3 See Clack (ed.) (1999) for examples of the way in which philosophers have defined women.
5 This remains a contentious issue between ‘Christian Feminists’ and ‘non-Christian Feminists’. For further discussion of the issues that divide theologians from theologians, see the ‘Roundtable’ discussion in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 2000, Volume 16 No 2; also *Feminist Theology*, 2005, Volume 13 No 2. In the introduction to the latter, Lisa Isherwood notes that ‘this volume has its genesis in the growing unease that appears to exist between theologians and theologians’ (p. 133).

6 An example from the UK: according to the Fawcett Society, women are bearing the brunt of the fiscal retraction. See their UK Women’s Budget Group report ‘The Impact on Women of the Coalition Spending Review 2010’ (November 2010); also the joint Fawcett Society and Institute for Fiscal Studies Report, ‘Single Mothers, Singled Out: The Impact of 2010–15 Tax and Benefit Changes on Women and Men’ (June 2011) for supporting statistical analysis.