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Richard Grigg Ph.D.

Sacred Heart University, griggr@sacredheart.edu

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Enacting the Divine: Feminist Theology and the Being of God

Richard Grigg / *Sacred Heart University*

While feminist theologians have advanced radical reformulations of traditional symbols of God and have clearly explained the social transformation that they want such new symbolism to effect, they have been less interested in exploring the equally radical ontologies that their reformulations imply. Carol Christ has suggested, for example, that “a *thealogy* of the Goddess would be very different from the *theology* that we have known in the west,” a difference indicated by “the primacy of *symbol* in *thealogy* in contrast to the primacy of the *explanation* in *theology*.”¹ Feminists’ suspicion of ontological explanation is understandable, inasmuch as traditional ontological explorations have sometimes proved inimical to the quest for social and political liberation. Sharon Welch holds, for instance, that the limitation of ontological analysis as carried out in most academic theologies is twofold: “Specific historical concerns are bracketed, and the experience of certain groups of people is excluded from contributing to or determining that analysis.”² Thus, ontological analysis often creates abstractions that distract us from concrete circumstances of oppression, and it pretends to a universality that it does not have, since in reality it is drawn from the narrow experiences of the powerful.

But, despite these difficulties with some forms of ontology, there are good reasons for exploring the being of God in feminist theology. First, the concerns expressed by thinkers such as Welch have more to do with ontologies of human being and the world than with attempts to understand the being of God. Second, if feminist theologians wish to talk about

¹ Carol P. Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 123. “Thealogy,” from the Greek *thea*, “Goddess,” is a term that Carol Christ attributes to Naomi Goldenberg (see p. xvii, n. 1).

² Sharon D. Welch, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985), p. 38.

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God or Goddess at all, then they cannot avoid at least rudimentary ontological suppositions, any more than neoorthodox theologians could avoid philosophy and ontology, however ardently they wished to do so.³ Third, critics of feminist theology who are sympathetic with its social and political goals but who have no theological commitments of their own will inevitably ask why God-talk is necessary. What does talk of the divine add to the quest for liberation? What does it mean? Any answer to these questions will require at least an element of ontological explanation. Fourth, and more positively, it is useful to explore the ontology behind feminist God-talk because the feminist perspective on the being of God may represent a revolutionary way of thinking about the divine that sheds light on the future of God-talk in feminist theology and beyond.

This essay's central claim is that there is an implicit motif in much of current feminist theology according to which God is a relation that human beings choose to enact. This does not entail reducing the divine in Feuerbachian fashion to an unconscious, alienating projection or dismissing it as a mere imaginary entity. On the contrary, essential constituent elements of the divine may genuinely transcend the human—both “nature” and the “power of being” are familiar candidates in feminist thought—and one actualizes a relation to them consciously and in a way that is productive not of alienation but of positive transformation. But neither is God conceived in this current of feminist theology as an independent reality. Human beings do not simply enact a relation to the divine; they enact the divine itself, insofar as God is a particular transformative relationship between the self and nature, or the self and the power of being, or perhaps the self and other selves. At the same time, there is no hint here of the autonomous, overconfident self of the modernists. It is not a matter of a monadic subject, having fully formed itself *ex nihilo*, subsequently deciding to enact divinity. Rather, the pattern seems much closer to Martin Buber's observation that the “I” is formed by the relations in which it is engaged: the “I” of the “I-It” relation is a different “I” from the “I” of the “I-Thou” relation.⁴ Human beings choose to enact the divine, but they are to a large degree creatures of this relation and not

³ Recall Paul Tillich's argument in *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

⁴ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970). Buber's position obviously has influenced a large number of feminist religious thinkers. See, e.g., Carol Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite*, pp. x, 4, 105; Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973), p. 39; Christine Downing, “Artemis: The Goddess Who Comes from Afar,” in *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, ed. Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), pp. 123–24; Judith Plaskow, *Standing again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 157; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God:*

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just its creators.⁵

This perspective represents more than simply an incremental variation on previous Western approaches to the ontology of the divine. Indeed, it might well be read as a dialectical metamorphosis of traditional theism. Briefly put, traditional Western theism understands the divine as a transcendent Supreme Being. Modernity negates theism by reducing it to a projection of human subjectivity. The feminist position negates this negation by conceiving of the divine as neither an independent supernatural being nor a product of misplaced human imagination, but as a way of existence, a particular kind of relation that human beings can enact between themselves and others and between themselves and nonhuman beings and forces.

Feminist theology is obviously not a monolithic movement. There are many types of feminist religious thought, and tensions surely exist between different feminist theological camps, tensions indicated by labels such as “reformers” and “revolutionaries” or “feminists” and “wom-anists.” Yet the radical ontological motif of interest here seems to cut across some of these divisions: its traces can be found as easily in the thought of Rosemary Radford Ruether as in that of Carol Christ. Of course, following up these traces will entail more than simply summarizing the works of various feminist thinkers; my interpretation will of necessity be a constructive one. I shall lay the groundwork for this constructive reading by attempting to work out the logic behind the motif that I want to highlight. Then, in the second section of the essay, I shall look to particular thinkers and themes to flesh out this abstract logic. This will involve a consideration of what various feminist thinkers have to say about

An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), pp. 228, 252, 302 (n. 36); Dorothee Sölle, *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Theology*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), p. 185.

⁵ To say that human beings choose to “enact” the divine seems to convey the proper sense, then. Note that “enact” can mean, first of all, “to legislate,” which carries a creative, active sense, and that is part of what I want to highlight about the feminist reformulation of the divine. But “enact” can also mean “to put on a play,” in which case the persons who “act” are not acting as autonomous egos but are the vehicles for something else, namely, the identities that they are representing on the stage. Similarly, to enact the divine is to actualize the self’s creative powers at the same time that the self is formed by something beyond itself. Buber’s interpretation of the I-Thou relationship can be used not only as a key to how the self is formed as it enacts the divine but also as a model or analogue for the phenomenon of enactment itself: just as the relation enacted between I and Thou is not something unreal and merely external to I and Thou, so the relation to be discussed here, a relation enacted between the self and nature, other selves, and the power of being-itself, is something very real and something more than the sum of its constituent elements. Indeed, this relation is the divine (in contrast to the more traditional perspective that results from Buber’s own theological extrapolations from his I-Thou anthropology, according to which God is not a relation that human beings enact, but one of the poles in a relation, the Eternal Thou).

the pragmatic bent of feminist theological method, the notion of divine immanence, and the centrality of relationship in human existence. In the final section of the essay, I shall attempt to situate the feminist enactment model of deity in the wider contemporary discussion.

I

The logic at issue begins with the familiar observation that traditional male theologies are ideological. These theologies invariably employ male images to describe God—Father, Lord, King—and such images reflect and reinforce patriarchal power. One response to this observation might be to embrace an abstract philosophical perspective that promises to take us beyond ideological descriptions of the divine. From this perspective one supposedly recognizes that God is a transcendent reality that cannot be modeled in terms of human attributes and experiences. We cannot rely on human gender categories in our attempt to understand God. Instead, we must reach for abstract formulations such as the identification of God with being-itself. Or perhaps we should rest content with an apophatic theology, according to which we can only say what the divine is not, never what it is.

The suggestion here is that a carefully wrought philosophical theology can protect us from ideologically motivated notions of God. But a thoroughgoing feminist is bound to ask whether this isn't all a bit naive. Why should we assume that the philosophical vantage point from which we are trying to root out ideology is not itself ideological? This line of questioning uncovers an interesting paradox: a feminist might attempt to reveal masculine imagery for God to be ideological and inadequate by arguing that God's radical transcendence gives the lie to any description of the divine drawn from the realm of human experience. But this very notion of divine transcendence might be a peculiarly male creation, an expression of the assumption that the hierarchical structure of patriarchal society mirrors the divine-human relationship.

Thus, the attempt to avoid patriarchal ideology by eschewing all gender-specific imagery and insight in favor of philosophical abstractions soon breaks down. This is not to say that all descriptions of divinity are necessarily ideological, nor even less that all uses of reason are ideologically deformed, but only that this particular and familiar philosophical avenue turns out to be a dead end. But this is hardly the avenue that a committed feminist would choose in any case, for the feminist religious thinker typically wants to accomplish more than simply the negative task of removing destructive patriarchal elements from our notion of the divine. She wants, in addition, to find a notion of divinity that valorizes women's experiences and that empowers women in their spiritual, social,

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and political quests. Hence the decision to draw directly and unapologetically from women's experience in the attempt to talk about the divine. Most feminist theologies will make no effort, then, to be disinterested or (naively) objective: they will be self-consciously interested and perspectival, rooted in women's histories, experiences, and aspirations.

This methodological decision nonetheless requires justification. For, on what grounds do we assume that this self-consciously interested perspective will provide an accurate reflection of divinity? Of course, this perspective is probably no more problematic than any other interested perspective. Indeed, it will not be open to the charge of ideology in the way that traditional male theology is, for, in patriarchal societies, women's experiences are not a function of entrenched power. But this does not mean that the feminist perspective tells us about the reality of God. Isn't the feminist approach a form of wish fulfillment? Why should we assume that the reality of God reflects what we wish to be the case or what would be beneficial for us? However sound the feminist theological agenda may be in terms of the quest for justice, we cannot blithely suppose that what ought to be the case about God is in fact the case. Is feminist theology condemned, then, to escape the Marxist critique of religion as ideology only to fall prey to the Freudian critique of religion as illusion?⁶

This challenge sets up the final step in the logic of feminist religious thought; it makes clear where the trajectory of feminist theology ultimately leads. The feminist perspective can be defended against the Freudian charge of illusion by arguing that the charge misunderstands feminist theology's notion of divinity. The Freudian critique rests on the assumption that the religious person believes in a God who is a supernatural reality independent of the self. Because this belief is a function of what the individual wishes to be the case rather than a matter of reason and evidence, it must be dismissed as an illusion. After all, what we wish to be the case has no necessary connection with what is in fact the case about entities that are independent of us. But theology need not conceive of God as a reality independent of human projects and sensibilities, but can understand God instead as a reality that is actualized through those sensibilities and projects. The divine is a relation that human beings decide to enact. Theology's task, then, is not to gain access to and make claims about some objective entity that it naively supposes is "out there," but to actualize the divine. This claim follows naturally on the feminist inclination to pursue a theology that is, in the fullest sense of the phrase, a theology "from below," a theology that is openly a function of women's

⁶ See Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961).

experiences and goals. In short, what women in their quest for justice wish to be the case is, quite appropriately, constitutive of the divine.

It is important to note at the outset that this conception of the divine as a relation enacted by human beings goes well beyond the vision of the ultimate found in thinkers such as Heidegger and Tillich. Granted, both Heidegger and Tillich envision a nonobjective ultimate, and both tie the ultimate to the human subject. For the early Heidegger, one can only talk about *Sein* in relation to *Dasein*. And, for Tillich, one can only make sense of being-itself by reference to human being, through which being-itself is manifest as courage, the triumph over the threat of nonbeing. But both the relation between *Sein* and *Dasein* and that between being-itself and human being have an element of structural necessity about them that does not characterize the relationship between human beings and the sacred suggested by feminist theology. From the feminist perspective that we are exploring, human beings *choose* to enact the divine.

Again, in Hegel's pantheism it is human thinking that brings the Absolute to full self-consciousness. But this is a necessary process, not one human beings choose to initiate. While the Absolute requires human consciousness as a vehicle through which to realize itself, this process is nonetheless largely independent of human freedom, and the Absolute must therefore be regarded as self-originating, a *causa sui*. By contrast, to say that human beings can choose to enact the divine is to suggest that God is not self-originating, however much God may finally transcend the human beings who enact God.

II

Having explored the general logic leading to the enactment model of deity, we must turn to specific positions staked out by particular feminist thinkers, beginning with their commitment to a pragmatic theological method. A radically pragmatic theological method, that is, one that *begins* from pragmatic principles, implies one of two things: either the theologian has fallen prey to illusion in the Freudian sense, in that she or he assumes that what one wishes to be the case about the world, what would be useful for human purposes, provides insight into the nature of a self-originating deity; or one recognizes that the divine is not self-originating but is something that human beings decide to enact. But isn't there a third alternative, something between these two extremes? Suppose that we conceive of God as self-originating, yet radically immanent. This deity would be intimately connected with our own being. Perhaps in this case we could argue that our own wishes for justice and our projects on its behalf do provide insight into the reality of the divine, but that our projects do not enact the divine. This God is sufficiently immanent for us

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to assume that our quest for justice mirrors her being, but ontologically independent at least to the degree that she is not beholden to human beings for her existence.

But how do we know that there *is* such a God in the first place? How do we settle on this notion of deity? If a theology is radically pragmatic, if it uses pragmatic principles as its starting point, then it will have to make this decision too on pragmatic grounds. But, then we must ask all over again on what grounds we can assume that our wishes and projects can tell us about the nature of God, unless of course God is acknowledged to be not just accessible through those wishes and projects but in some sense a function of them. There is an all-important difference, then, between a radical theological pragmatism and pragmatic or instrumental approaches directed toward the natural world: in the latter case, the existence of the reality one seeks to know is not at issue. A pragmatist philosopher will probably point out that one never knows the world in and of itself apart from our projects, but the world is nonetheless a given, and it even asserts its independence by resisting some of our projects to shape it. There is no such givenness or resistance in the theological realm. As a result, we confront the notorious fact that there are almost no characteristics of the divine on which all investigators are forced to agree.

It turns out, then, that the proposed third alternative, focused on an immanent deity that is nonetheless self-originating, cannot issue consistently from a theology that begins with pragmatic principles, but only from a theology that starts with a notion of God derived from authority, or tradition, or faith, or argument, or some other source, and only subsequently brings pragmatic principles to bear.

Some of the most influential feminist theologies have a pragmatic starting point. This does not necessarily mean that the thinkers who have created these theologies subscribe to a particular school of philosophical pragmatism. Rather, it is a general methodological tendency that is at issue here: these feminist thinkers self-consciously intend to construct images of the divine that will empower women, and this is their primary criterion, their starting point, for determining what they take to be the truth about deity. Of course, we can uncover some connections between various feminist theologies and particular schools of philosophical pragmatism. Some feminist theologians do after all make explicit use of pragmatist thinkers. Rebecca Chopp, for instance, draws on the work of Charles Peirce.⁷ And John Dewey's famous pragmatist dictum that "the hypothesis that works is the true one" certainly applies to the feminist

⁷ See Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

methodological bent that is of interest here.⁸ Furthermore, both William James and Dewey, when they speak about religion, think of their pragmatic criterion of truth as a matter not of abstract intellectual usefulness, but as one of existential or moral usefulness. Thus, James claims that religion produces consequences “useful to life,”⁹ and Dewey links faith with the project of unifying the self and striving for our moral ideals.¹⁰ But the specifics of James’s pragmatism are tied up with his “radical empiricism,” as the specifics of Dewey’s pragmatism are tied up with his “empirical naturalism,” and it is thus not to be expected that feminist theologians will necessarily want to embrace these specifics or those of any other school of philosophical pragmatism.

Ruether’s *Sexism and God-Talk* provides a clear example of a pragmatic methodological bent. Images of deity, she explains, “must be transformative.”¹¹ This is consistent with what Ruether terms the “critical principle of feminist theology”: “Whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine.” Put positively, “What does promote the full humanity of women is of the Holy, it does reflect true relation to the divine, it is the true nature of things.”¹²

Ruether is certainly not alone here. Mary Daly, in her classic manifesto of feminist theological consciousness, *Beyond God the Father*, suggests a “pragmatic yardstick or verification process” for God-language: “In my thinking, the specific criterion which implies a mandate to reject certain forms of God-talk is expressed in the question: Does this language hinder human becoming by reinforcing sex-role socialization? Expressed positively. . . . Does it *encourage* human becoming toward psychological and social fulfillment, toward an androgynous mode of living, toward transcendence?”¹³

This same pattern, wherein one articulates both a negative and a positive form of a fundamental pragmatic principle, is found in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s approach to feminist Christian biblical interpretation. She holds that a feminist critical hermeneutics must “reject those elements within *all* biblical traditions and texts that perpetuate, in the name of God, violence, alienation, and patriarchal subordination, and eradicate women from historical-theological consciousness. At the same

⁸ John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: Mentor/New American Library, 1950), p. 129.

⁹ William James, *Pragmatism and Four Essays from The Meaning of Truth* (New York: Meridian/New American Library, 1974), p. 177.

¹⁰ See John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1934).

¹¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), p. 69.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹³ Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (n. 4 above), p. 21.

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time, such a feminist critical hermeneutics must recover *all* those elements within biblical texts and traditions that articulate the liberating experiences and visions of the people of God.¹⁴ The pragmatic starting point is clear: “The revelatory canon for theological evaluation of biblical androcentric traditions and their subsequent interpretations cannot be derived from the Bible itself but can only be formulated in and through women’s struggle for liberation from all patriarchal oppression.”¹⁵

We find a similar pragmatic hermeneutical principle in Judith Plaskow’s critical reinterpretation of Judaism. The authority that grounds her critique is “the experience of particular communities struggling for religious transformation.”¹⁶ And the particular community to which she is beholden is the Jewish feminist community and its quest for justice for women. To turn to the struggle for transformation as the source of authority and the criterion for one’s theological project is, of course, to embrace a pragmatic theological method.

Carol Christ provides yet another example of a pragmatic approach. As Sallie McFague observes, “Christ’s pragmatic position is illustrated by her lack of concern whether the Goddess is entirely immanent or also transcendent; what matters is the power for self-definition that it gives to women, its focus as a unifying symbol of female power.”¹⁷ It is worth noting how McFague’s formulation hints at the connection between a thoroughgoing pragmatism and one’s position on the ontological status of the divine.

If a pragmatic methodological bent is central to the whole notion of enacting the divine, so too is the concept of divine immanence. For, while not every theology that emphasizes divine immanence implies that we enact the divine, a perspective according to which we enact the divine will have to embrace divine immanence. One might claim that God is both immanent and transcendent and understand that claim in such a way that God holds on to most of the attributes of the traditional Supreme Being, for example, the ability to miraculously intervene in history and to resurrect human beings after death. This would be a God, in other words, who has a transcendent pole that owes much to traditional Western descriptions of deity, but who can also be said to embrace the finite in God’s own being. Now in a theology according to which we enact God, one might also speak in terms of both immanence and transcendence. There will necessarily be an emphasis on immanence in such a theology,

¹⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), pp. 32–33.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁶ Plaskow (n. 4 above), p. 20.

¹⁷ Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), p. 158.

insofar as God arises out of our own experiences, goals, and actions. But there can be a transcendent dimension as well, in at least two ways. First, as we shall see later on, the individual elements that human beings bring together in enacting the divine may transcend the human. Second, the relation that is enacted will itself surely surpass the individuals who effect it. Indeed, as was suggested above by reference to Buber's philosophy of the "I," the human self may end up, in some sense, being formed by the relations that it enacts.

But despite these very real elements of transcendence, some of the traditional supernatural attributes of divinity will most likely disappear in any enactment theology. A God who is beholden to us for her being and thus rooted in the finite, natural world cannot be conceived as a supernatural individual who can step in from beyond the finite world and violate its constitutive principles. For instance, we cannot expect, from the vantage point of this theology, to be resurrected from the dead.

A move away from traditional Western images of transcendence and toward a sense of the divine as immanent is a central dynamic in contemporary feminist theology, as Plaskow and Carol Christ make clear in their editorial remarks in *Weaving the Visions*.¹⁸ Feminist theologians are critical of traditional male theologies that so often end up, in Chopp's words, "reifying God."¹⁹ Indeed, one of the most powerful reasons feminists have for focusing on the image of the Goddess rather than on a male image to symbolize the divine is of course that the Goddess suggests something closer to women themselves, something radically immanent.²⁰

In *Beyond God the Father*, Daly provides a succinct formulation of the principle of immanence in feminist theology: "In hearing and naming *ourselves* out of the depths, women are naming *toward* God."²¹ Later on, she develops this emphasis on immanence and speaks of "the Goddess within" and points to "a sense of power, not of the 'wholly other,' but of the Self's be-ing."²²

Another example of feminist theology's commitment to immanence is found in Carol Christ's description of women's religious experience: "'Awakening' is perhaps a more appropriate term than 'conversion' for describing women's mystical experience, because 'awakening' suggests the self needs only to notice what is already there. Awakening implies

¹⁸ Plaskow and Christ, eds. (n. 4 above), p. 93.

¹⁹ Chopp (n. 7 above), p. 83. Chopp is speaking of Karl Barth. Compare Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, p. 33.

²⁰ See Nelle Morton, "The Goddess as Metaphoric Image," in Plaskow and Christ, eds., pp. 111–18.

²¹ Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, p. 33. First emphasis is mine.

²² Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon, 1978), pp. 111, 49.

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that the ability to see or to know is within the self, once the sleeping draft is refused. Conversion often seems to imply that one has turned from one source of authority to another, for example, from materialism to God. It seems to be characteristic of women's awakening that the great powers, while larger than the self, are within as well as without."²³

All of this implies a rejection of the traditional image of the divine as a supernatural individual who can stand outside the finite. In the words of Naomi Goldenberg, feminists ought to "radically depart from . . . all systems of thought that posit transcendent, superhuman deities."²⁴ At the same time, there is a type of transcendence that can be combined with the emphasis on immanence so essential to feminist theology, at least according to thinkers such as Ruether. Ruether rejects the transcendent, imperial God of patriarchal Christianity in favor of "the root human image of the divine as the Primal Matrix, the great womb within which all things, Gods and humans, sky and earth, human and nonhuman beings, are generated. . . . Here the divine is not 'up there' as abstracted ego, but beneath and around us as encompassing source of life and renewal of life."²⁵ In this image of what Ruether would have us call "God/ess," the divine is clearly immanent, but also all-encompassing, also transcendent to some degree.²⁶ The term "Primal Matrix" suggests an embracing framework or ground, something beyond us that we are nonetheless a part of.

While none of these examples of the feminist commitment to divine immanence demands to be interpreted in terms of the enactment model of divinity, each of the examples is fully consistent with the enactment model. And we should not overlook the radical implications that these thinkers themselves sometimes draw from their commitment to divine immanence. Most notable in this regard is the suggestion, clearly articulated by both Ruether and Christ, that religious persons should abandon the notion of life after death.²⁷ In order to gauge the significance of this move, we need to keep in mind the centrality of the hope for deliverance from death in traditional religion. The prolific and provocative literary critic Harold Bloom, who recently has made a number of well-publicized forays into the realm of religious studies, goes so far as to assert that "religion, whether it be shamanism or Protestantism, rises from our ap-

²³ Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon, 1980), p. 18.

²⁴ Naomi R. Goldenberg, "Archetypal Theory and the Separation of Mind and Body: Reason Enough to Turn to Freud?" in Plaskow and Christ, eds., p. 249.

²⁵ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (n. 11 above), pp. 48–49.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 257–58; Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite* (n. 1 above), pp. 210, 226, and "Rethinking Theology and Nature," in Plaskow and Christ, eds., pp. 314, 321, 323.

prehension of death.”²⁸ For Bloom, who sees himself as a nonreductionist critic seeking the defining essence of religion, “the category of the ‘religious’ is set against death even as the ‘poetic’ seeks a triumph over time.”²⁹ Put as an impish query, “If medicine someday could grant immortality (virtually, to those who could pay for it), you, of course, still would be religious, but what about your neighbor?”³⁰ Though one would do well to be on guard against the genetic fallacy here, Bloom’s point is surely worthy of attention, considering traditional religion’s focus on death, from the Four Passing Sights that sent Gautama on his quest, to the Resurrection of Jesus.

One might well argue that the rejection of the traditional emphasis on life after death by feminist thinkers such as Ruether and Christ does imply something about the being of the divine. A divinity who does not deliver us from death perhaps *cannot* deliver us. And she cannot because she is rooted in nature and the finite. Perhaps one can even construct a continuum of positions on life after death and show how each position corresponds to a particular notion of the being of God: traditional Christian theism puts great emphasis on a literal restoration of the individual after death, and it sees God as a supernatural person, wholly independent of the finite, natural world; Whiteheadian process theism often rejects the continued self-conscious existence of the individual after death in favor of “objective immortality” in the consequent nature of God, and its God is a limited, albeit self-originating, deity rather than an omnipotent Supreme Being; feminist theologians such as Ruether and Christ discourage the interest in life after death altogether, and their deity is not a transcendent individual, nor even self-originating, but a reality that human beings enact.

The underlying logic of feminist theology leads to the conclusion that human beings enact the divine. And the radical pragmatism embraced by many feminist theologians entails an enactment theology. Furthermore, the emphasis on immanence so evident in feminist religious thought is supportive of the enactment model. There is but one more piece of the puzzle to be put in place, then, namely, the centrality of relationship in feminist theology. In *Weaving the Visions*, Plaskow and Christ make clear that relationality is constitutive of human being for feminist theologians, and they note a connection between the feminist emphasis on relationality and that on divine immanence: the authors whom their collection anthologizes “agree that the self is essentially relational, inseparable

²⁸ Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 29.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

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from the limiting and enriching contexts of body, feeling, relationship, community, history, and the web of life. The notion of the relational self can be correlated with the immanent turn in feminist views of the sacred: in both cases connection to that which is finite, changing, and limited is affirmed.”³¹ The grace of God “always comes to us in, with, and through each other,” as Beverly Harrison puts it.³² And if this is taken to its logical conclusion, we can say with Carter Heyward that God *is* the “power of relation.”³³

In order to illustrate how all of the pieces fit together here, let us read Ruether’s *Sexism and God-Talk* in terms of the enactment model of deity. First, note Ruether’s claim that God/ess is experienced “in and through relationships, healing our broken relations with our bodies, with other people, with nature.”³⁴ It is when we overcome the destructive mind-set of man versus woman, rich versus poor, and spirit versus matter—dualisms that separate us from nature and from other human beings—that we find ourselves in relation to divinity: “Community with God/ess exists precisely in and through this renewed community of creation.”³⁵ But none of the constituent elements of this relation has, considered by itself, the qualities of deity, not even Ruether’s version of nature as an undergirding power. By itself, this power is only the “cosmic matrix of matter/energy.”³⁶ This is hardly the stuff of ultimate concern, that is, of religious passion and devotion. The cosmic matrix of matter/energy, while obviously the basis of our existence, is at best indifferent to the fulfillment of the human project as well as the future of any other species. It is perfectly possible, for example, that a huge meteor may someday slam into the earth and propel so much dust and debris into the atmosphere that life on earth will be obliterated. This would be totally consistent with the so-called laws of nature, the principles that obtain within the cosmic matrix. And it would make no difference to the cosmic matrix if this calamity were to occur just as oppressed peoples were first finding their voices.

The cosmic matrix of matter/energy is not God/ess, then, but it is a crucial element in the being of God/ess. For God/ess appears when one relates to the cosmic matrix, and the beings that it undergirds, in a particular fashion. When I recognize that I am not all, that I am only a small part of the encompassing cosmic matrix, that I am finite and must die,

³¹ Plaskow and Christ, eds. (n. 4 above), p. 173.

³² Beverly Wildung Harrison, “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love: Christian Ethics for Women and Other Strangers,” in Plaskow and Christ, eds., p. 225.

³³ Carter Heyward, “Sexuality, Love, and Justice,” in Plaskow and Christ, eds., p. 299.

³⁴ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, p. 71.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

then I may also recognize that I cannot set myself up in a position of dominance over other beings; I may come to accept the limitations of my own being and my responsibilities toward other beings, both human and nonhuman. And this relation to the cosmic matrix and the beings that it grounds enacts the divine. God/ess appears as this salvific relation, as this “renewed community of creation.” Buber’s philosophy of the self comes into play here, for while “I” must in some sense decide to engage in this relationship, the character of the “I” is determined by the relation itself. The relation empowers a new way of being for the “I.”

The difference between the undergirding power of nature considered by itself and the larger religious relation of which it is an essential, catalytic element is nicely, if unintentionally, suggested by the contrast between Ruether’s two expressions “cosmic matrix of matter/energy” and “Primal Matrix.” While the former suggests a dispassionate, even technical attitude, the latter has a poetic resonance. Again, while the word “matrix” in “cosmic matrix of matter/energy” is at least quasi-scientific, when it is capitalized and juxtaposed with “Primal,” it much more readily displays its original meaning of “womb” and its etymological connection with the word “mother.”³⁷

It is important to note the genuine interplay of transcendence and immanence here. Because God/ess is a relation that we enact, divine being is radically immanent. But because there are constituent elements of this relation that transcend us—the matrix of nature and all of the beings that it contains—and because the relation itself taken as a whole is infinitely more than our own being and sustains us in a new and more productive way of being even as we enact it, the divine is also transcendent.

The same reading can be made of Ruether’s most recent book, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*. “To believe in divine being,” she tells us, means to believe that the qualities of consciousness and altruism that we find in the human species “are rooted in and respond to the life power from which the universe itself arises.”³⁸ But are these qualities rooted in that undergirding life power in the way in which an Aristotelian effect is rooted in its cause, so that the effect can possess only those qualities already found full-blown in the cause? Or is it through the relationship between the human species and the underlying life power that these qualities first come into being? If we choose the latter option, then it appears that the power of life is not itself divine so much as the relation that is enacted between human beings and the power of life.

³⁷ “Matrix” is derived from the Latin *mātrix*, which is related to *māter*, “mother.” Compare *ibid.*, p. 49.

³⁸ Ruether, *Gaia and God* (n. 4 above), p. 5.

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Other feminist theologies exhibit a similar pattern. Daly, for instance, often appears to equate the divine with the “power of being.”³⁹ But just what “is” the power of being? At one point Daly explains that “Be-ing is the verb that says the dimensions of depth in all verbs, such as intuiting, reasoning, loving, imaging, making, acting, as well as the couraging, hoping, and playing that are always there when one is really living.”⁴⁰ But if *all* verbs are included, as Daly asserts, then “Be-ing” or “power of being” must also point to the dimensions of depth in hating, killing, mutilating, and so on.⁴¹ It seems unlikely, then, that Daly would want to equate the Goddess with the power of being in any simple, unqualified fashion. Her intention is probably more clearly expressed in her claim that the Goddess is “the Self-affirming be-ing of women.”⁴² This suggests that divinity is not to be identified with the power of being but, rather, with a particular way in which women can tap into the power of being in themselves and make it productive of a new feminist consciousness and mode of existence. Women enact divinity in themselves through a particular relation to the power of being.

Similarly, Carol Christ focuses on nature in her own “journey to the Goddess,” but not nature by itself. She explains that “Goddess symbolism unites two themes in my work: she is woman and she is nature.”⁴³ That is, Goddess is not to be equated with nature, but understood as a special kind of relation that can obtain between women and nature. The Goddess is born when women come to understand their rootedness in nature and finitude and claim the power that such rootedness confers. This is, says Christ, “a deeply relational power, which comes from understanding the connection of my power of being to that of all other life.”⁴⁴

The telos of all of these radically relational theologies, namely, the enactment model of deity, is succinctly expressed in Dorothee Sölle’s observation that “today, the dispute over whether God can be thought of beyond us as resting in himself and unrelated, or whether God is the relationship itself and can be thought of only as relationship, seems to me to be one of the most important arguments between male-patriarchal and feminist theology.”⁴⁵

³⁹ See, e.g., Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (n. 4 above), p. 28.

⁴⁰ Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* (n. 22 above), pp. 23–24.

⁴¹ There might be ways to avoid this, of course. For example, one might interpret evil in Augustinian fashion, i.e., as a privation, so that it would have no depth dimension and would not be a function of the power of being.

⁴² Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, p. 111.

⁴³ Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite* (n. 1 above), p. xi.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁴⁵ Sölle, *Thinking about God* (n. 4 above), p. 181.

III

The enactment model of deity suggested by some feminist theologians can be read as a dialectical reconfiguration of traditional Western theism. Traditional theism thinks of God as an independent supernatural being who has created the universe. Modernity negates this theism by declaring the God of theism to be a mere fiction, a projection based on infantile psychological needs or on the economic substructure of a particular society. That current of feminist theology according to which we enact God negates the modern negation of theism by reconceiving God as neither a supernatural individual nor a mere fiction, but a transformative relation that human beings choose to enact. This God is both radically immanent and genuinely transcendent.

Perhaps the Heideggerian and Tillichian approaches to the ultimate can also be described as dialectical reconfigurations of theism. But the feminist approach can be distinguished from them. Heidegger's ontology focuses on the notion of the "ontological difference": Being is not to be confused with beings. Being is no-thing. When Heidegger's thought is moved into a theological register, as it is in the work of Tillich, one might talk about the "theological difference": God is not to be confused with beings. God is not a being, but being-itself, the ground and abyss of being. Where the feminist enactment model of deity is concerned, we should perhaps speak of the "theological difference": God (or Goddess) is not a being, but neither is God to be identified with being-itself. Rather, God is a particular kind of relation between human beings and being-itself, nature, and other beings.

It may be tempting to situate this feminist approach to the being of God by labeling it "postmodern." After all, it is a negation of modernity's negation of theism. But the term "postmodern" is, at best, uninformative and, at worst, misleading. First, the label "postmodern theology" is annoyingly ambiguous, in that it is used to describe everything from fideistic theologies that reject the modern demand for argument and justification—for example, the work of D. Z. Phillips and Alvin Plantinga—to theologies informed by contemporary poststructuralist theory—the work of Mark C. Taylor, Edith Wyschogrod, and Charles Winquist, for instance.

Second, a recurring theme in postmodern theory, as the term is ordinarily used outside theology, is the disappearance of the human subject conceived as a unified personal center. Yet, some of the most influential feminist theologians apparently have no interest in abandoning the centered self. In Daly's vision of woman, for instance, centeredness is crucial: "Unlike the suspended, crucified, self-sacrificing victim, she stands stably

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on the earth, Self-assuring and Self-centering.”⁴⁶ Daly celebrates “Self-Centering Spinsters” who move about the axis of their own be-ing.⁴⁷ And Ruether calls us “to affirm the integrity of our personal center of being, in mutuality with the personal centers of all other beings across species and, at the same time, accept the transience of these personal selves.”⁴⁸ One of the manifestations of the oppression of women is that women “scarcely have been allowed individuated personhood at all.”⁴⁹ Abandonment of the notion of personal centeredness hardly seems the effective course of action for a feminist, then.

Third, a characteristic sensibility of postmodernism is summed up in Jean-François Lyotard’s oft-quoted statement that the postmodern is “incredulous towards metanarratives.”⁵⁰ But feminist theology appears committed to something approaching a universal emancipatory narrative. To be sure, feminist theologians are becoming ever more sensitive to the pluralism within their own ranks and are quick to attack any “false universalism.”⁵¹ But consider Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology*. Daly clearly wants to be able to make a cross-cultural critique; she feels confident that she can and must condemn Indian suttee, Chinese foot binding, African genital mutilation, European witch burnings, and American gynecology. It seems unlikely that such cross-cultural moral indictment is possible if one abandons metanarratives altogether.⁵²

The feminist notion of God as a relation that human beings enact, then, must be deemed a distinctive contribution to the contemporary discussion of deity: it stands apart from the Heideggerian ontological difference, the Tillichian theological difference, and cannot easily be fit into the category of the postmodern. While feminist religious thinkers have

⁴⁶ Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, p. 388.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

⁴⁸ Ruether, *Gaia and God* (n. 4 above), p. 251.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiv.

⁵¹ Plaskow and Christ, eds. (n. 4 above), p. 5. Compare Welch (n. 2 above), chap. 5.

⁵² Compare Sabina Lovibond, “Feminism and Postmodernism,” in *New Left Review* 178 (November–December 1989), pp. 5–28. Yet another potential conflict between postmodernism and at least some forms of feminist theology arises from the postmodernists’ rejection of ordinary notions of reference and the desire of most feminist theologians to have their God-talk function referentially. See, e.g., Sheila Greeve Davaney, “Problems with Feminist Theory: Historicity and the Search for Sure Foundations,” in *Embodied Love: Sensuality and Relationship as Feminist Values*, ed. Paula M. Coe, Sharon A. Farmer, and Mary Ellen Ross (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), pp. 79–95. And see Carol Christ’s reply, “Embodied Thinking: Reflections on Feminist Theological Method,” in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5 (Spring 1989): 7–15. Note that God-talk understood in terms of the enactment model of deity involves few of the referential claims familiar in traditional theologies yet does point to something other than a purely imaginative construct.

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been concerned first and foremost with fashioning a conception of God that empowers women in their various liberatory struggles, there are also more purely conceptual strengths to be found in their descriptions of the divine. Theologians, feminist and otherwise, would do well to begin plumbing these strengths.