

CURRENT THEOLOGY

FEMINIST THEOLOGY: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION*

According to Sandra Schneiders's useful definition, feminism is a comprehensive ideology, rooted in women's experience of sexual oppression, which engages in a critique of patriarchy, embraces an alternative vision for humanity and the earth, and actively seeks to bring this vision to realization.¹ Feminist theology may be considered that part of this quest for justice which is concerned with critical analysis and liberating retrieval of the meaning of religious traditions. In the roughly 35 years of its existence, contemporary feminist theology has produced a vast, international body of literature that ranges across all of the theological specialties and beyond. The notes that follow revisit several salient themes and debates in the area of systematic theology, although no hard and fast division obtains between this discipline and feminist ethics and biblical hermeneutics.²

The current intellectual ferment first came to expression in Valerie Saiving (Goldstein)'s now-classic 1960 article, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," in which she raised the question of the applicability of prevailing theological statements to all human beings. Her own suggestion, that teachings about sin as pride or will-to-power and about redemption as negation of self or self-giving love might look very different from the perspective of women's experience, struck a deep chord.³ Since then, virtually every aspect of inherited theology has been scrutinized for the ways in which its context has shaped its content, the two being inextricably linked.

In 1985 Mary Jo Weaver identified six tasks for feminist academi-

* The overall planning for this survey was done by Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J., who also wrote the Introduction with Susan A. Ross. The section on "The Physical and Social Context for Feminist Theology and Spirituality" was written by Susan A. Ross; that on "Key Religious Symbols: Christ and God" was written by Mary Catherine Hilker, O.P.

¹ Sandra Schneiders, *Beyond Patching: Faith and Feminism in the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist, 1991) 15.

² For recent treatments in *TS* of feminist biblical scholarship and ethics, see Phyllis Trible, "Five Loaves and Two Fishes: Feminist Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology," *TS* 50 (1989) 279-95; Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Notes on Moral Theology: Feminist Ethics," *TS* 51 (1990) 49-64. Cahill writes, "Virtually by definition, feminist theology is 'moral' theology or ethics" (50).

³ *Journal of Religion* 40 (1960) 100-12; reprinted in Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) 25-42. See also Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington: University Press of America, 1980).

cians.⁴ The first three involve pointing out the absence of women in a field, recognizing that whatever knowledge about women in fact exists has been trivialized, and searching out the lost traditions of women. Much work on these initial tasks was undertaken during the 1970s and early 1980s. The other three tasks entail reading old texts in a revisionary way, challenging the discipline methodologically, and working toward a truly integrated field. In the last ten years these latter tasks have been taken up with enthusiasm and rigor by feminist theologians, resulting in works that not only fall under the general rubric of systematic theology but also stretch the boundaries of what has been understood to be systematic theological discourse.

While earlier (i.e. pre-1980) feminist theologians could be characterized as either "radical" or "reformist" in view of their relation to patriarchal traditions,⁵ no such classification can be made now. This is due to the diversity that prevails in approaches to the constructive tasks of theology, to the point where feminist theologies would be a more accurate nomenclature. Even the term "feminist" is problematic, given its association with largely white, middle-class, well-educated women. In the U.S., the "womanist" theology of African-American women and the "mujerista" theology of Hispanic women now take their place at the table, along with the insights of Asian-American women. Indeed, attention to diversity, otherness, and difference has emerged as an essential methodological concern of feminist theologies.⁶ This shows itself in several ways.

First, the recourse to experience is a major though controverted move in all women's theologies. As in Saiving's essay, "women's experience" in distinction to the claim of "common human experience" functions as a theological resource and criterion.⁷ Yet it became increasingly evident in the 1980s that the nature of that experience needed more careful scrutiny. Does the appeal to experience refer to bodily, socialized, psychological, historical, religious, political, cultural, racial, class, or economic experience?⁸ Is it an appeal to their

⁴ *New Catholic Women: A Contemporary Challenge to Traditional Religious Authority* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 154–55.

⁵ See *Womanspirit Rising* 1–17.

⁶ The struggle is reflected in a dialogue between two colleagues: Susan Secker, "Women's Experience in Feminist Theology: The 'Problem' or the 'Truth' of Difference," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 1 (1993) 56–67; and Jeanette Rodriguez, "Experience as a Resource for Feminist Thought," *ibid.* 68–76. For a helpful theological perspective on the category of "difference" using the thought of Bernard Lonergan, see Cynthia Crysdale, "Horizons That Differ: Women and Men and the Flight from Understanding," *Cross Currents* 44 (1994) 345–61.

⁷ Consult Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), or Anne Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), in contrast with David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1975).

⁸ See Anne Carr, "The New Vision of Feminist Theology," in *Freeing Theology: The*

own experience by white women who fail to consider the difference that race makes, thereby effectively erasing women of color the way traditional male theology overlooked all women?⁹ Ann O'Hara Graff has pointed out that "there is no unified body of women's experience, but rather there are multiple forms and multiple dimensions of women's experience,"¹⁰ proposing that this multiplicity can be located in three "key complexes": social location, language, and the quest for human wholeness. "Whose experience?" has become a key question, and the answer is not easily arrived at. Yet there can be no doubt that experience continues to be central and that the particularity of that experience is increasingly critical for feminist theologies.

Second, attention to difference is also to the fore in analyses of subjectivity and language. While theologies influenced by postmodernism declare the death of the subject, feminist theologies question its demise just as women have begun to name themselves as acting subjects of their own history.¹¹ Concern for community as intrinsic to the self is likewise central to feminist theologies which question Western individualism and its concomitant idea of the isolated self apart from relationships and social location.¹² The role of language and reason in relation to the role of emotion in human life is a related question, as is the power of voice for defining subjectivity.¹³ Indeed, "hearing one another into speech" has been one of the defining metaphors of feminist theologies.¹⁴ In short, concerns for the nature of the self, the self's embeddedness in communities, and the power of language to constitute the self are central to feminist reflection and another entry point for the emergence of difference.

Third, diversity emerges as feminist theologians continue to grapple with the patriarchal nature of traditional religions, resulting in the boundaries being pushed among denominational divides and between

Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective, ed. Catherine LaCugna (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993) 5–29, at 22–23.

⁹ Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Sex, Race, and God: Christian Feminism in Black and White* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), esp. 11–26.

¹⁰ "The Struggle to Name Women's Experience: Assessment and Implications for Theological Construction," *Horizons: Journal of the College Theology Society* 20 (1993) 230.

¹¹ See Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Feminist Studies* 14 (1988) 67–79; Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (Berkeley: University of California, 1990).

¹² Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism and Self* (Boston: Beacon, 1986) is one such analysis from a white Western woman, while Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En la Lucha (In the Struggle): A Hispanic Woman's Liberation Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) underscores that self-in-community is more representative of women in nondominant cultures.

¹³ See Rebecca Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1989); and Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject: Women's Discourses and Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

¹⁴ The phrase is from Nelle Morton, *The Journey Is Home* (Boston: Beacon, 1985).

these and postpatriarchal religions. Since a concern for justice is at the root of all feminist theologies, creative fidelity to tradition requires hermeneutics of both suspicion and retrieval in order to wrest resources that support the full humanity of women. The extent to which inherited theological traditions provide resources for feminist theologies is a much-debated question. Answers range from Elizabeth Johnson's rich retrieval of Sophia for language about God,¹⁵ to Kwok Pui-lan's affirmation of her Asian pagan/Christian identity,¹⁶ to Emily Culpepper's use of Christianity as compost for the growth of new religious traditions.¹⁷

As the following notes make clear, feminist theologies may be pluralist in nature but they are united by a shared passion for justice for women. Visions of right relations and well-being in ecclesial and societal human communities as well as between human beings and the earth continue to inspire the work, while the lives and struggles of actual women around the world provide the resources and the ultimate test of the adequacy of all feminist theologies.

THE PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT FOR FEMINIST THEOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY

This section will review recent literature in feminist theology that provides foundational categories drawn from the contextual linkage of theology and location, both physical and social. Beginning with embodiment, the ever-widening and intersecting relationships with self, other, community, and cosmos serve to ground feminist theologies and provide bases from which to reconceive new models of self and God, as well as the inherited theological tradition.

Embodiment

Feminists and traditionalists alike argue that embodiment is central to the Christian tradition.¹ But given the wide range of meanings

¹⁵ *SHE WHO IS: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

¹⁶ "Claiming a Boundary Existence: A Parable from Hong Kong," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3 (1987) 121–24.

¹⁷ "The Spiritual, Political Journey of a Feminist Freethinker," in *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions*, ed. Paula Coeey, William Eakin, and Jay McDaniel (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991) 146–65.

¹ See, e.g., Pope John Paul II, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1981); Susan A. Ross, "'Then Honor God in Your Body' (1 Cor. 6:20): Feminist and Sacramental Theology on the Body," *Horizons* 16 (1989) 7–27; Maria Theresa Porcile-Santiso, "Roman Catholic Teaching on Female Sexuality," in Jeanne Becker, ed., *Women, Religion and Sexuality: Studies on the Impact of Religious Teachings on Women* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990) 192–220; Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Women and Sexuality*, 1992 Madaleva Lecture in Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 1992).

which embodiment can assume, there is no one definitive feminist perspective on embodiment. What distinguishes feminist theological treatments of embodiment are these related features: (1) a suspicion of views that see women as being more “naturally” embodied than are men;² (2) a rejection of a dualist framework (e.g. body–soul) for conceptualizing embodiment;³ (3) a concern to place embodiment in a historical and social context;⁴ (4) an extension of embodiment as a value to wider issues, such as the nature of the person, norms for moral action, and the human relationship to the earth;⁵ (5) a celebration of embodiment in new forms of ritual and liturgy.⁶

The “suspicion” with which feminist theology holds theories which link women to body and nature is a basic issue for feminist theologians. This linkage has often been the grounds for establishing a dualistic hierarchy of mind and soul over body, in which men are identified with mind/soul and women with body. Yet there is also a feminist concern to value the “distinctiveness” of women’s embodied

² See Sherry B. Ortner’s classic article “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” in Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Woman, Culture and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1974) 67–87, and further discussion in Carol MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern, eds., *Nature, Culture and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1980).

³ This is a theme repeatedly emphasized by Rosemary Radford Ruether; see *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: Seabury, 1975) and *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983).

⁴ Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food for Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California, 1987); idem., *Fragmentation and Redemption* (New York: Zone, 1991); Martha Reinecke, “This is My Body: Reflections on Abjection, Anorexia, and Medieval Women Mystics,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58 (1990) 245–65; Giles Milhaven, “A Medieval Lesson on Bodily Knowing: Women’s Experience and Men’s Thought,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57 (1989) 341–72; Margaret Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon, 1989).

⁵ Paula M. Cooley, Sharon A. Farmer, and Mary Ellen Ross, eds., *Embodied Love: Sensuality and Relationship as Feminist Values* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987); see Christine E. Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1994). Feminist ethics warrants, and has received, separate surveys of its own; see, e.g., Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Notes on Moral Theology: Feminist Ethics,” *TS* 51 (1990) 49–64; “Professional Resources,” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1994) 257–305, with special focus on method, ecofeminism, and womanist ethics; and Lois K. Daly, ed., *Feminist Theological Ethics: A Reader* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994). I will focus my attention on the broader foundational issues underlying feminist theology, which by definition includes ethics (see Cahill, “Notes”).

⁶ Barbara Walker, *Women’s Rituals: A Sourcebook* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990); Marjorie Procter-Smith, *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990); Marjorie Procter-Smith and Janet R. Walton, eds., *Women at Worship: Interpretations of North American Diversity* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993). For a thorough and elegant consideration of theoretical issues in ritual, see Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1992). Mary Collins provides a helpful overview in her “Principles of Feminist Liturgy,” in *Women at Worship* 9–26; See also Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985).

experience.⁷ While recognizing that menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth are distinctively female experiences, feminists note that their meaning across cultures may vary widely.⁸ There is no "purely natural" experience that is not at the same time mediated by culture.⁹ Thus feminists reject views that assign an essential "femininity" to women without a critical examination of what such a term implies.¹⁰ Likewise, feminists see the "complementarity" of masculine and feminine, especially as it is used in magisterial documents, as a new form of dualism.¹¹

Christine E. Gudorf's critical approach to embodiment stresses the importance of "bodyright" as the right to control one's own body. She observes that the absence of bodyright is a heritage of Western patriarchal mind/body dualism. The failure to value bodyright results in such serious personal and social ills as violence against women and children and compulsory military service, especially for minority groups.¹² Similarly, Delores Williams and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes argue that the embodied experiences of African-American women have been particularly vulnerable to control and exploitation by others.¹³

⁷ The "distinctiveness" of women's experience, especially embodied experience, is debated among feminists. French feminists, notably Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, interpret this as "essential" to women. See Toril Moi, ed., *French Feminist Thought: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987); also C. W. Maggie Kim, Susan St. Ville, Susan Simonaitis, eds., *Transfigurations: Theology and the French Feminists* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993). American feminists tend to look toward social and historical forces, rather than biological or "natural" ones, to explain "difference"; for a helpful discussion, see Anne E. Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988).

⁸ Anne E. Carr and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, eds., *Motherhood: Experience, Institution, Theology* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1989); also Carr and Schüssler Fiorenza, eds., *The Special Nature of Women?* (London: SCM, 1991); Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, eds., *The Will to Arise* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992); and, for a contemporary Western perspective, Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993). See also Clarissa W. Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1991); Phyllis H. Kaminski, "Reproducing the World: Mary O'Brien's Theory of Reproductive Consciousness and Implications for Feminist Incarnational Theology," *Horizons* 19 (1992) 240-62.

⁹ See Gudorf, *Body, Sex*; Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Ark, 1984); idem., *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon, 1970).

¹⁰ See, e.g., John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem* no. 10, in *Origins* 18 (October 6, 1988) 261, 263-83, at 269.

¹¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Catholicism, Women, Body and Sexuality: A Response," in *Women, Religion and Sexuality* 221-32; See also Mary Aquin O'Neill, "The Mystery of Being Human Together," in Catherine M. LaCugna, ed., *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993) 139-60.

¹² Gudorf, *Body, Sex*, esp. chap. 6.

¹³ Delores Williams, "A Womanist Perspective on Sin," in Emilie M. Townes, ed., *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Maryknoll, N.Y.:

Bodily integrity—freedom from violence, harassment, surrogacy, and freedom to choose or refrain from sexual intimacy—is essential for full personhood for women.

Constructively, feminist theologians (as well as feminists in other disciplines) argue that a greater appreciation for the embodied character of human existence has the potential to transform our understanding of what it means to be human, challenging prevailing notions of rationality and autonomy as superior to affectivity and interdependence. Beverly Wildung Harrison has sounded this theme, which has been echoed, in various ways by Paula Cooley, Mary Ellen Ross, and Linell Cady, to mention only a few.¹⁴ An “embodied morality” is one in which one’s rationality and emotions are integrated, and one which considers the concrete, as well as the theoretical, consequences of one’s actions, and which celebrates the joys and the delights of women’s sexuality.¹⁵

Ecofeminist concerns will receive more detailed attention below, but it is worth pointing out here the connection between hierarchical and dualist conceptions of the relation between soul and body with those of the human to the natural world. This connection was recognized 20 years ago in Rosemary Ruether’s *New Woman, New Earth*,¹⁶ and it has been developed at length in her *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*.¹⁷

Finally, the focus on embodiment in feminist sacramental and liturgical theologies is important to note. In a 1987 essay, Christine Gudorf observed that male control of the sacraments represents a ritualization of what is ordinarily women’s realm (feeding, caring for the sick, etc.). The solution, she argued, lies in men’s greater participation in daily life and women’s greater involvement in sacramental administra-

Orbis, 1993) 139–49; Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “The ‘Loves’ and ‘Troubles’ of African-American Women’s Bodies: The Womanist Challenge to Cultural Humiliation and Community Ambivalence,” in Townes, *Troubling* 232–49. See also Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993).

¹⁴ Beverly Wildung Harrison, “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love,” in Carol S. Robb, ed., *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics* (Boston: Beacon, 1985) 3–21; see Cooley, Farmer, and Ross, *Embodied Love*, and Paula Cooley, “The Redemption of the Body: Post-Patriarchal Reconstruction of Inherited Christian Doctrine,” in *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991) 106–30.

¹⁵ See Joan M. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethics of Care* (London: Routledge, 1993). The literature on “care” ethics is extensive; for a helpful survey, see Cynthia Crysdale, “Gilligan and the Ethics of Care: an Update,” *Religious Studies Review* 20 (1994) 21–28; Mary D. Pellauer, “The Moral Significance of Female Orgasm: Toward Sexual Ethics That Celebrates Women’s Sexuality,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 9 (Spring and Fall 1993) 161–82.

¹⁶ See n. 3 above.

¹⁷ Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1992).

tion.¹⁸ In discussing the role of "emancipatory language" in liturgy, Marjorie Procter-Smith writes: "Language that makes women's experience visible must therefore recognize the physical realities of women's lives," and she goes on to emphasize negative as well as positive dimensions of women's embodiment.¹⁹ Ann Patrick Ware, in a critique of the Easter Vigil, notes the persistence of dualistic metaphors (which have historically served women badly), the use of overwhelmingly male language, and the frequent reference to the sacrificial death of Christ.²⁰ In the same volume, Sheila Redmond discusses how family violence is all too often ignored in liturgy. This denial perpetuates a division between the private, domestic sphere of the body and the public sphere, suggesting that the bodily and psychic pain experienced by many needs no public or ritual acknowledgement.²¹ In "God's Embodiment and Women: Sacraments," I emphasize the bodily tie which connects the sacraments and human life, and argue for a serious consideration of women's ambiguous experience of sacraments.²²

The emphasis on embodiment and the role of mothering has also been an important theme.²³ Most of the essays in the anthology *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa* concern the role of sexuality and marriage in women's lives.²⁴ The authors of these essays argue, in differing ways, for an integration of women's embodied experience in marriage and motherhood into ritual and symbol. The importance of incorporating one's own cultural experience into ritual is also crucial. Hispanic women theologians, both *mujerista* and Latin-American, emphasize the importance of the family and are critical of feminist views which argue for women's equality in an individualist sense that ignores the ties of women to families and children.²⁵

¹⁸ "The Power to Create: Sacraments and Men's Need to Birth," *Horizons* 14 (1987) 296–309.

¹⁹ Procter-Smith, *In Her Own Rite* 68.

²⁰ *Women at Worship* 83–106. See Hilkert, below, for more discussion of sacrifice in relation to Christology.

²¹ Sheila Redmond, "Remember the Good, Forget the Bad: Denial and Family Violence in a Christian Worship Service," *Women at Worship* 71–82.

²² Susan A. Ross, "God's Embodiment and Women: Sacraments," in *Freeing Theology*, 185–209; see also idem., "The Bride of Christ and the Body Politic: Body and Gender in Pre-Vatican II Marriage Theology," *Journal of Religion* 71 (1991) 345–61.

²³ Carr and Schüssler Fiorenza, *Motherhood*; Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994); also Virginia Held, *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Science and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993).

²⁴ *The Will to Arise* (above n. 8); see also Ursula King, ed., *Feminist Theology from the Third World*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994) for an extensive and very helpful compilation of essays.

²⁵ See Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Yolanda Tarango, *Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988, 1992); Isasi-Díaz, *En la Lucha (In the Struggle): A Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); see also her earlier articles, "Mujerista Theology's Method: A Liberative Praxis, A Way of

They share a concern for integrating popular culture into religious praxis and reflection. Similarly, Korean theologian Chung Hyun Kyung as well as Chinese theologian Kwok Pui-Lan argue for incorporation of women's religiosity, within its cultural context, into Christian ritual.²⁶

While embodiment remains a crucial and essential element of feminist theology, it is also an ambiguous element. While any "special" or "distinctive" knowledge of women through the body is always mediated through social structures, it is also impossible to escape biological reality.²⁷

Mutuality and Friendship

The embodied self lives in a context of relationships. As with the category of embodiment, feminist theologians are critical of conceptions of the self which abstract from physical and social context. The work of Mary E. Hunt, as well as that of Janice Raymond and Carter Heyward, has stressed friendship as a foundational relationship for women, more important affectively (and, they argue, also morally) than the traditional association of women with marital or parental relationships.²⁸ As a model for "right relation," Hunt's conception of friendship challenges classic models, such as Aristotle's or Augustine's, for their inherent inequality. Insights from women's friendships include their potential availability to everyone, their ambiguous and fluid nature, and their qualitative, rather than quantitative, dimension.²⁹

For most feminist theologians, mutuality as a normative principle counters hierarchical structures of relationship, which are, at best, viewed by feminists with suspicion. This concern carries over into almost every dimension of feminist theology, encompassing relation-

Life," *Listening* 27 (Winter 1992) 41–54; "Silent Women Will Never Be Heard," *Missiology* 7 (1979) 295–301.

²⁶ *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990); Kwok Pui-Lan, *Chinese Women and Christianity: 1860–1927* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1992); idem., "Claiming a Boundary Existence: A Parable from Hong Kong," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3/2 (Fall 1987) 121–24.

²⁷ For a perspective which recognizes both the biological and the social, see Paula M. Cooley, *Religious Imagination and the Body: A Feminist Analysis* (New York: Oxford University, 1994).

²⁸ Mary E. Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship* (New York: Crossroad, 1991); idem., "Lovingly Lesbian: Toward a Feminist Theology of Friendship," in Robert Nugent, ed., *A Challenge to Love: Gay and Lesbian Catholics in the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 135–55; Janice Raymond, *A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection* (Boston: Beacon, 1986); Carter Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1984); idem., *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco: Harper, 1989).

²⁹ Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness* 110.

ships with God, other human beings, and the nonhuman world.³⁰ Carter Heyward argues that homosexual friendship provides a better model for real mutuality in relationship than do heterosexual relationships: “. . . in our present social order, mutual sexual relationships are available largely in same-sex relationships. I have come to believe that it is unwise to expect true personal equality—mutuality of common benefit—between women and men in a sexist society.”³¹ Jacqueline Grant, however, argues that “discipleship” provides a more “empowering” model for equality in relationship and explicitly rejects models of “service” and “servanthood,” especially for African-American women, given their imposed servanthood in slavery and beyond.³²

Although too complex an issue to treat in detail here, the influence of object-relations theory and other psychoanalytic theories warrants mention.³³ Object-relations theory focuses on the relationship between mother and child and on the “pre-Oedipal” period in childhood development.³⁴ In brief, feminists who use object-relations theory argue that because women remain overwhelmingly the primary parent for young children (at least in industrialized Western society), boys must learn to separate from their mothers to become individual persons, while girls (who are potential mothers) see their selfhood in relationship.³⁵ These developmental issues have serious repercussions for theology, especially in relation to conceptions of God and God’s relation to humanity, as well as for ethics.

Mutuality thus takes on a normative quality in feminist theology,

³⁰ See, e.g., Sallie McFague’s delineation of the message of Jesus as inclusive and nonhierarchical, in *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 45–57.

³¹ Carter Heyward, “Sexuality, Love and Justice,” in Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, eds., *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989) 293–301; see also Susan Nelson Dunfee, *Beyond Servanthood: Christianity and the Liberation of Women* (Washington: University Press of America, 1989).

³² Jacqueline Grant, “The Sin of Servanthood and the Deliverance of Discipleship,” in Townes, *Troubling* 199–218; see also her *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989).

³³ Probably the most influential work has been Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California, 1978).

³⁴ Diane Jonte-Pace, “Object Relations Theory, Mothering, and Religion: Toward a Feminist Psychology of Religion,” *Horizons* 14 (1987) 310–27; idem., “Situating Kristeva Differently: Psychoanalytic Readings of Woman and Religion,” in David Crownfield, ed., *Body/Text in Julia Kristeva: Religion, Women, and Psychoanalysis* (Albany: State University of New York, 1992). For two related studies using psychoanalytic categories to interpret ritual, see Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992), and William Beers, *Women and Sacrifice: Male Narcissism and The Psychology of Religion* (Detroit: Wayne State, 1992).

³⁵ The most complete treatment of object-relations theory for feminist theology remains Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon, 1986).

serving to criticize oppressive and hierarchical relationships and to model new possibilities.

Social Location

The embodied, related self also comes from a distinct social and cultural environment. While earlier (white) feminist theology tended to generalize about "women's experience," assuming commonalities across cultures, more recent theology has emphasized the distinct issues that concern women of diverse backgrounds. Most prominent in the American scene are the voices of African-American and U.S. Hispanic women.

In a 1990 roundtable discussion,³⁶ six African-American woman scholars debated the usefulness of the term "womanist" as an appropriate nomenclature for African-American women scholars in ethics and theology. Cheryl Sanders argued that "womanist" is problematic, rooted in secular culture, and of questionable value to Christians. The five respondents to Sanders (Katie G. Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, M. Shawn Copeland, bell hooks, and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes) all defended the term, with Copeland arguing that it "makes visible and gives voice to African-American women scholars in religion who are in the process of crafting a distinct perspective that takes the experiences and traditions of black women as a source for theologizing on the black experience."³⁷ In a 1992 article, Diana L. Hayes writes of becoming aware of her own voice and the need to work for liberation "not just of self but for others."³⁸ The work of Cannon,³⁹ Townes,⁴⁰ Delores S. Williams,⁴¹ and Renita Weems⁴² draws on the long-neglected history of African-American women as well as the Bible in giving birth to a theology which is rooted in the survival through centuries of oppression of strong women and men.

In many cases, womanist theology has taken (white) feminist theology, as well as traditional (male) theology, to task for its use of certain metaphors and values. Katie Cannon suggests that "truth-telling"

³⁶ "Roundtable Discussion: Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5/2 (Summer 1990) 83–112.

³⁷ M. Shawn Copeland, "Roundtable" 101.

³⁸ "Church and Culture: A Black Catholic Womanist Perspective," in William O'Brien, ed., *The Labor of God: An Ignatian View of Church and Culture* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1991), 73; see also Jamie Phelps, O.P., "Choose Life: Reflections of a Black African-American Roman Catholic Woman Religious Theologian," in Melanie H. May, ed., *Women and Church: The Challenge of Ecumenical Solidarity in an Age of Alienation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

³⁹ Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988).

⁴⁰ Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1993); *idem.*, *Troubling*.

⁴¹ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993).

⁴² Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away* (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988).

may not always be of primary importance in ethics for the oppressed,⁴³ Jacqueline Grant has argued strongly against the model of Jesus as "servant," given the long history of African-American servitude.⁴⁴ Nearly all womanist theologians draw heavily on the fiction of African-American women writers, as well as on the long-neglected history of African-American women.⁴⁵

The term *mujerista* as an analogous term for Hispanic feminists was also discussed in a subsequent roundtable discussion.⁴⁶ Ada María Isasi-Díaz defines *mujerista* theology: "As a liberative praxis, *mujerista* theology is a process of enablement for Hispanic women insisting on the development of a strong sense of moral agency, and clarifying the importance and value of who we are, what we think, and what we do."⁴⁷ In her own work, Isasi-Díaz emphasizes the importance of her method, "ethnomethodology," based in a critical approach to social sciences and the life stories of Hispanic women.⁴⁸ This method seeks to make explicit the connections between the community and theology by drawing on the life experiences of Hispanic women.

María Pilar Aquino, an Argentinian educated in Spain and now teaching in the U.S., develops a systematic perspective on Hispanic women's experience that is based in Latin America in her book *Our Cry for Life*.⁴⁹ Rooted in the liberation theology of Latin America, as well as the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Karl Rahner, Aquino's theology emphasizes its collective nature, which is enriched by the originality, resistance, creativity, solidarity, hope, and freedom of the experiences of women in Latin America.⁵⁰

The social reality of injustice and struggle defines the work of women theologians, but in a particularly important way for non-Western and poor women. Thus, questions that may be of more import in the North American scene (like the issue of women's ordination) are

⁴³ Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*; idem., "Moral Wisdom in the Black Women's Literary Tradition," in Plaskow and Christ, *Weaving the Visions* 281–92.

⁴⁴ Grant, *White Woman's Christ and Black Woman's Jesus*.

⁴⁵ This is true of (white) feminist theologians who have also used African-American women's fiction as a resource for theology; see Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

⁴⁶ "Ada María Isasi-Díaz et. al., "Roundtable Discussion: *Mujeristas*: Who We Are and What We Are About," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8 (Spring 1992) 105–25. See also Isasi-Díaz's earlier essay, "Toward an Understanding of Feminismo Hispano in the U.S.," in Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, Christine E. Gudorf, and Mary D. Pellauer, eds., *Women's Consciousness, Women's Conscience: A Reader in Feminist Ethics* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985) 51–61.

⁴⁷ Isasi-Díaz, "Mujeristas" 108.

⁴⁸ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En la Lucha* 62–79; see also *Hispanic Women*.

⁴⁹ María Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, trans. Dinah Livingstone (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993); note that Aquino does not use the term "mujerista," preferring "feminist" as qualified by social location.

⁵⁰ See chap. 5, "Methodological Premises for Theology from the Perspective of Women," *Our Cry for Life* 81–108.

less significant than concerns for equality within marriage,⁵¹ for freedom from sexual exploitation and domestic violence,⁵² and for sheer economic survival.

Social location also serves to challenge received theological definitions and categories. The concept of sin, for example, has a highly developed social character in womanist and mujerista theology and “engages both a hermeneutic of suspicion and a hermeneutic of resistance,” especially in relation to theologies that promote such virtues as patience and forbearance.⁵³ “Sin is not a matter of disobedience but of not being for others,” says one of the women interviewed in *Hispanic Women*.⁵⁴ Similarly, virtues are related to social context and cannot be assumed to have the same significance for all women, much less all human beings.⁵⁵

As “difference” has emerged as a critical issue for women-centered theological efforts, painful questions have arisen concerning ways in which women from different social locations can share concerns and sources. How is “difference” acknowledged without reduction to a mere acknowledgment of one’s own social location? Toinette Eugene laments what typically occurs in writings by white women: “After the disclaimer [of one’s social location], nothing again indicates that difference is recognized.”⁵⁶ Another problem arises from the “appropriation” of material by those who do not share the same social location.⁵⁷ That difference must *make* a difference remains more an ideal than a reality.

⁵¹ Aruna Gnanadason, “Towards an Indian Feminist Theology,” in Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park, eds., *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989) 117–26; Judith Mbula Bahemuka, “Social Changes and Women’s Attitudes toward Marriage in East Africa,” in Oduyoge and Kanyoro, *The Will to Arise* 119–34.

⁵² Marianne Katoppo, “The Church and Prostitution in Asia,” in King, *Feminist Theology from the Third World* 114–22; Yayori Matsui, “Violence Against Women in Development, Militarism, and Culture,” *ibid.* 124–33; but see also Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, eds., *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1989) for a North American perspective.

⁵³ M. Shawn Copeland, “‘Wading Through Many Sorrows’: Toward a Theology of Suffering in Womanist Perspective,” in Townes, *Troubling* 109–29.

⁵⁴ Isasi-Díaz and Tarango, *Hispanic Women* 90.

⁵⁵ Katie G. Cannon, “Moral Wisdom in the Black Women’s Literary Tradition,” on truth-telling, in Plaskow and Christ, *Weaving* 281–92; Jacqueline Grant, “The Sin of Servanthood,” on service, in Townes, *Troubling* 199–218; Emilie M. Townes, “Living in the New Jerusalem: The Rhetoric and Movement of Liberation in the House of Evil,” on obedience, in Townes, *Troubling* 78–91.

⁵⁶ “Special Section on Appropriation and Reciprocity in Womanist/Mujerista/Feminist Work,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8 (Fall 1992) 91–123.

⁵⁷ For a revealing account of this situation in women’s literature, see Katherine J. Mayberry, “White Feminists Who Study Black Writers,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 12 October 1994, A48. For a Native American woman’s view, see Andy Smith, “For Those Who Were Indian in a Former Life,” in Carol J. Adams, ed., *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* (New York: Continuum, 1993) 168–71.

Ecofeminism

The physical context which makes all of earthly life possible is the ecosystem. As feminist, womanist, and *mujerista* theologians have developed "new patterns of relationship,"⁵⁸ the relationship of human beings to the nonhuman world has been one of special concern. Hierarchical relations of domination/submission have had devastating consequences for women and for the earth, especially when the creation narratives seem to support such relations.⁵⁹

As Rosemary Ruether and Sallie McFague have suggested, new understandings of the doctrine of creation are needed. Indeed, Ruether begins *Gaia and God* with a chapter on three creation stories (the *Enuma Elish*, *Genesis*, and the *Timaeus*) and argues that contemporary science suggests a new creation story, one that portrays the origin of life as fundamentally interrelational.⁶⁰ Similarly, Sallie McFague argues for an "organic" model for creation which "supports both radical individuality and difference while at the same time insisting on radical interdependence of all the parts."⁶¹ Elizabeth Johnson suggests that a consideration of "Creator Spirit" as Wisdom can better support a theology of interrelation.⁶²

Ruether, McFague, and Johnson see the potential within the Christian tradition to reformulate and reenvision the relationship between God and humanity, and between human beings and the nonhuman world. But other feminists find this retrieval of Christian tradition unsuccessful. Emily Culpepper suggests that Christianity might serve as "compost," helping to fertilize new forms of relating to the sacred.⁶³ Theologian Carol Christ questions the value placed by patriarchal religions on human self-consciousness, since it elevates some species over others;⁶⁴ she suggests that humanity "consider whether there is any reality 'higher' than the finite, the earth, that which changes."⁶⁵ Ruether shares this suspicion of the fear of finitude, and asks whether

⁵⁸ See Margaret Farley, "New Patterns of Relationship: Beginnings of a Moral Revolution," *TS* 36 (1975) 627-46.

⁵⁹ See the very helpful survey by Mary Ann Hinsdale, "Ecology, Feminism and Theology," *Word & World* 11 (1991) 156-64; Rosemary Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth; Gaia and God*. See also Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Woman, Earth and Creator Spirit* (New York: Paulist, 1993); Elizabeth Dodson Gray, *Green Paradise Lost* (Boston: Roundtable, 1979).

⁶⁰ Ruether, *Gaia and God* 15-58.

⁶¹ Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 28.

⁶² Johnson, *Woman, Earth and Creator Spirit*.

⁶³ "The Spiritual, Political Journey of a Feminist Freethinker," in Cooley, Eakin and McDaniel, *After Patriarchy* 146-65.

⁶⁴ "Rethinking Theology and Nature," in *Weaving the Visions* 314-25.

⁶⁵ "Reverence for Life: The Need for a Sense of Finitude," in *Embodied Love* 51-64.

Christian eschatology has refused to accept the inevitable limitations of earthly existence.⁶⁶

The consequences of a distorted relationship to the earth have had a disproportionate effect on poor women, men and children.⁶⁷ Indeed, a critique of the devastating repercussions of unequal power relations is at the core of feminist theology and spirituality, as women envision and live into new forms of relationship. Here, the boundaries between systematic theology and ethics begin to dissolve, as the concern for justice and right relation extends into every dimension of life.

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KEY RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS: CHRIST AND GOD

At the center of debates about whether Christian feminist theology is possible are the religious symbols of Christ, the cross, and the Trinity. Focusing on critical questions under dispute in the fields of Christology and soteriology and the theology of God, the following section will highlight recent contributions to constructive theology in those areas.

Christology and Soteriology

Over 20 years ago Mary Daly dismissed Christian fixation on the person of Jesus as "pure idolatry," and the Christian myths of sin and salvation as "products of supermale arrogance" serving to legitimate the oppression of women through blaming a woman for humankind's destruction and exalting the violent death of a unique male savior.¹ To date, both post-Christian feminists and Vatican documents continue to emphasize the theological and symbolic significance of the maleness of Jesus. The former argue that Christianity is by its very nature "hopelessly patriarchal" and "harmful to the cause of human equality,"² while the latter insist that the Incarnation of the Word according to the male sex is "in harmony with the entirety of God's plan," and that if the role of the presider at the Eucharist were not taken by a man, "it would be difficult to see in the minister the image of Christ. For Christ himself was and remains a man."³

Rejecting both of those positions, most revisionist Christian feminist theologians maintain that the maleness of Jesus has no theological

⁶⁶ *Sexism and God-Talk* 257.

⁶⁷ See Shamara Shantu Riley, "Ecology Is a Sistah's Issue Too: The Politics of Emergent Afrocentric Ecowomanism," in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* 191–204.

¹ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon, 1973) 71–73.

² Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 53, 76. See also Naomi Goldenberg, *The Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions* (Boston: Beacon, 1979) 4.

³ *Inter insigniores*, in *Origins* 6 (3 February 1977) 522.