

CURRENT THEOLOGY

THE NATURE OF WOMEN AND THE METHOD OF THEOLOGY

This reading of the state of the question regarding theological anthropology and method in the work of feminist theologians¹ will challenge the traditional, objectivist canons that have come to define scholarly writing. The research undertaken in its preparation convinced me anew that truth is approached only when each one admits having a personal perspective, and works conscious of the limitations and the openness afforded by that perspective. Wanting practice to embody convictions, I renounce "the desire to establish myself as an authoritative impersonal consciousness capable of generally valid insights drawn with the humanistic equivalent of scientific objectivity," as Nancy Mairs puts it so perfectly.²

To my mind, the questions of theological anthropology and the question of theological method are intricately connected. I will advance that point of view, but not in the expected order. Feminist theologians did not begin with method, but with theological anthropology. I suspect it was because the androcentric bias is much easier to espy in the statements made about one's own sex and about a humanity so obviously modeled on "man" than in either the exercise of or the reflection on method in theology. In one of the many ironies that abound in this field, however, secular feminists of the most radical order are now writing with a clarity born of passion about the ways in which method (read discourse) is the field in which the deformation of women is more fundamental and thus more dangerous.³

¹ I have broadened the scope to include women writers who are not considered feminist theologians and to include critics of feminist theology. I do so in the interest of giving a reading that traces developments and identifies unresolved issues for Catholic theology as a whole.

² N. Mairs, *Voice Lessons: On Becoming a (Woman) Writer* (Boston: Beacon, 1994) 49. Mairs is one of the writers who would not be considered a feminist theologian; yet her work, *Ordinary Time: Cycles in Marriage, Faith and Renewal* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), is a masterful account of, among other things, a woman's struggle to understand and live her faith. When Mairs writes of experience, her writing is concrete and particular.

³ In addition to Mairs's *Voice Lessons*, which is a delightful introduction to the whole question, see Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" trans. Annette Kuhn, *Signs* 7 (1981); Margaret Whitford, ed., *The Irigaray Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing A Woman's Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988); Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds., *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1980).

CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

Women in theology have wrestled with Christian anthropology at least since Mary Daly wrote *The Church and the Second Sex* in 1968.⁴ Heirs to a theological tradition that includes debates about whether or not women have a soul, can exercise authority, and may represent Christ at the altar, women undertook the arduous task of analyzing arguments over our own being conducted by men whose lives were led, for the most part, in crippling isolation from women.⁵

It is difficult to convey the shock women felt when confronted by the misogyny that informs the theological tradition of Christianity. Women were blamed for the incursion of evil into the world, taught that we were created by God subordinate in the order of authority because inferior in the order of creation, shaped by rituals and regulations that held the most natural functions of our bodies to be unclean and defiling. Moreover, there was nothing we could do about it as women. No woman could redeem, forgive, or purify another; for that she needs the ministrations of a man—first the male savior and then the male priests.⁶ Since the order of creation is immutable, the woman remains under the authority of the other even when she has been forgiven and purified. The woman who was held responsible for the advent of evil would always be confined to a “subordinate role” in the drama of redemption, for the Christian story as it came to be told casts men in the leading role.⁷

Still, this is not the whole picture. There is a double tradition with regard to women in Christianity. The conflicting truth is that women are baptized into Christ in the same way as men, initiated into the saving mystery of life in the Body of Christ, taught that we are to live as “other Christs,” and inspired to live lives of heroic sanctity—even martyrdom—in imitation of him. Moreover, one woman, Mary, is believed to have been preserved from original sin, invited to conceive,

⁴ Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968). For an overview of Christian anthropology, see Regina A. Coll, *Christianity and Feminism in Conversation* (Mystic: Twenty-Third, 1994) chap. 4.

⁵ For a review of this history, see Alvin John Schmidt, *Veiled and Silenced: How Culture Shaped Sexist Theology* (Macon, Ga: Mercer University, 1989). For a fascinating account of the systematic exclusion of women from the world that was thinking about such things, see David F. Noble, *A World Without Women: The Christian Clerical Culture of Western Science* (New York: Oxford University, 1992).

⁶ Of course, with the Reformation the role of the priest in the forgiveness of sins was undercut, but this does not really change the situation. The assurance of forgiveness comes through faith in the redeeming work of the savior, Jesus Christ, and personal confession of sins to him.

⁷ “Subordinate role” is the terminology employed by the Second Vatican Council to insure that no one thought Mary’s role equal to that of her Son; see *Lumen gentium* no. 62.

bear, and raise the Son of God, and taken bodily up into heaven to reign.⁸

It is no wonder that women have gone to work with a vengeance on this question of Christian anthropology. Some have read and reread the creation story, until the notion of the inferiority of women in the created order could be driven from it.⁹ Others have studied the interactions of Jesus with women, searching for ways to argue that the defilement traditions inherited from Judaism and from the pagan world have been overturned by his teaching.¹⁰ In direct challenge to the tradition that women must be under the authority of men, scholars have sought to unearth evidence that women have exercised authority and been leaders of Christian churches.¹¹ Mariology has come under severe scrutiny.¹² All of this contact with the primary texts has led many women to conclude that the sources are poisoned because evidence has been suppressed or changed. This has led, in turn, to deep suspicion of the authorities once considered bedrock for theological investigation.¹³

Gradually women came to see the internal coherence of the Christian double tradition about women. The tradition could hold conflicting beliefs—that women were defiled and defiling, yet called to heroic sanctity, created inferior yet equally baptized into Christ—because of an underlying commitment to a dualism of body and spirit. “Equality of souls, inequality of sexes,” Eleanor Commo McLaughlin termed it.¹⁴ Contemporary feminist scholars have realized the connection

⁸ While it is possible to recount in general terms the tradition of the male savior without running into the Protestant/Catholic divide, it is impossible to speak of Mary without doing so.

⁹ See Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

¹⁰ Hisako Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994) is especially good on this.

¹¹ See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1987).

¹² Until very recently the scrutiny of Mariology took the form of a fierce deconstruction. More recently the figure of Mary has received an interpretation at once positive and feminist, especially by women of cultures where devotion to Mary continues to be strong. All women have been taught, however, to restrict the meaning of Mary's motherhood and keep her role subordinate to her son's. It will take great efforts to liberate theology from that bias. For a review of the literature on this, see Elizabeth Johnson, “Mary and the Female Face of God,” *TS* 50 (1989) 500–26.

¹³ I direct a theological center for women whose mission is to teach women with questions about their faith to think about them anew in the light of the best contemporary scholarship. Most of the women who come are not professional theologians. I have been astounded by the depths of the distrust these women bring to any study of Scripture, church history, or church documents. There is a world of theological work to be done when the “faithful” approach foundational texts with a (sometimes uncritical) hermeneutics of suspicion.

¹⁴ E. C. McLaughlin, “Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes: Women in Medieval Theology,” in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974) 213–66.

between this body/spirit dualism and others that plague contemporary life: male and female, "first" world and "third," reason and desire, nature and culture, transcendence and immanence, private sector and public world.¹⁵ The effort to assert a created equality between the sexes has resulted in a suspicion of all other hierarchies by which one member of a pair is considered better than the other.

The work of reinterpretation has been immensely aided by changes in the Western world, where attitudes toward women based on any notion of essential inequality or uncleanness have been widely challenged. Church documents now are noticeably free from dependence on the argument from the natural inferiority of women.¹⁶ Church practice, too, has adapted. For example, a purifying ritual such as the churching of mothers after childbirth has been replaced by the blessing for mother and child; and rules forbidding menstruating women to be lecturers at the liturgy have been dropped. But the public face of the Roman Catholic Church remains exclusively male, and there is no coherent doctrine of the human being, male and female, to account for it.

Twenty years ago, I culled from a review of the extant secular feminist literature three competing visions of humanity. The first vision assumes a polarity between male and female in which differences in being correlate to differences in roles; the second advances an androgyny wherein male and female embrace whatever belongs to the other to approximate a "third" way of being; and the third vision boldly holds up a unisex ideal which, in theory, could be modeled on either female or male, but in reality is clearly modeled on the traditional male way of being in the world.¹⁷ As others rose to nuance and challenge that framing, the question became whether Christian theology holds that there are two natures or one for human being(s).¹⁸ That is, are women and men so different from each other that the Christian tradition needs distinct teachings about the male and the female? Or is it the case that any differences between the male and the female are inci-

¹⁵ See Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (New York: Paulist, 1993); Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); and Christine E. Gudorf, "Renewal or Repatriarchalization? Responses of the Roman Catholic Church to the Feminization of Religion," in *Horizons on Catholic Feminist Theology*, ed. Joann Wolski Conn and Walter E. Conn (Washington: Georgetown, 1992) 37-60.

¹⁶ I found it neither in the multiple drafts of the failed U.S. Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Women, nor in the section of the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that treats the creation of man and woman (nos. 2331-36).

¹⁷ Mary Aquin O'Neill, R.S.M., "Toward A Renewed Anthropology," *TS* 36 (1975) 725-36. See also "Imagine Being Human: An Anthropology of Mutuality," in *Miriam's Song II: Patriarchy, A Feminist Critique* (West Hyattsville, Md.: Priests for Equality, 1988) 45-48.

¹⁸ Anne E. Carr reviews this history in "Theological Anthropology and the Experience of Women," *Chicago Studies* 19 (1980) 113-28; and in *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988).

dental to the oneness of human nature and have no bearing on the shape of the Christian revelation about the meaning of being human?

Currently, I see three discernible vectors in the attempts to forge a coherent Christian anthropology in response to these questions. The first, and the one that has come to dominate mainstream feminist theological writing, is best represented in the works of Elizabeth Johnson. Committed to the position that there is only one human nature, this position advocates a celebration of that human nature in "an interdependence of multiple differences."

Not a binary view of two male and female natures, predetermined for ever, nor abbreviation to a single ideal, but a diversity of ways of being human: a multi-polar set of combinations of essential human elements, of which sexuality is but one. Human existence has a multi-dimensional character. If maleness and femaleness can be envisioned in a more wholistic context, their relationship to each other can be more rightly conceived.¹⁹

Several things flow from this position. Sexual differentiation is considered to be on a level with other differences: those of culture, race, geographical region, language, etc. Bodily differences that count in procreation have nothing to tell us about any other dimensions of human life. They are not paradigmatic and can be ruled out when one is considering life in the *ecclesia*. It is not surprising, then, that this way of thinking emphasizes the humanity of Jesus and considers his maleness to have no bearing on his role as savior.

In my opinion, the outcome of this approach is clearly an androgynous Jesus, one who embraces all that can be said of the male and the female, and who provides a comprehensive model for women as well as for men. Having all that he needs in himself, Jesus has no real need of women. Moreover, as the model of human being, this image of Jesus would call all to a similar androgyny.

Such inclusivity comes, however, at the high price of character and personality. Janet Martin Soskice highlights the problem.

The difficulty with many well-intentioned retellings of the story of Jesus is that we are left with such thin fare. Anything exclusively male, hierarchical and violent must go, so gone is talk of fathers, kings, lords and blood. What we have left often seems to be a sort of asexual "nice guy," or a genderless "Good Figure" who runs the risk of losing all historical particularity, or we get a jagged and moralizing Hebrew prophet who loves the poor but, unfortunately, about whose life great but usually patriarchal myths have been spun. It is a paradox that feminist theology, which lays so great a stress on particularity and embodiment, should end up with so featureless a Christ.²⁰

¹⁹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, "The Maleness of Christ," in *The Special Nature of Women?* eds. Anne Carr and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991) 111.

²⁰ Janet Martin Soskice lectured in November 1994 at Harvard Divinity School on "Blood and Defilement: Feminism and the Atonement." This quote is taken from an (untitled) excerpt of her remarks published in *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 24 (1995) 7.

The scholars who thus treat Jesus' maleness understandably see no difficulty with the ordination of women. Yet the fundamental anthropology and Christology at work undercut any argument that the health of the *ecclesia* depends on such a move. For if Jesus represents all of humanity, including women, before God, why can male priests not do the same? If women identify with the man, Jesus, then why not with the men who are currently his priests? In rejecting any idea that there is a special nature of women and men, this approach can advance the ordination of women only on the grounds of fairness or justice: it is unjust to exclude women from orders, though it cannot be argued that the church needs women there. Left without anthropological grounding, the question of whether or not the Church should ordain women becomes a sociological consideration.

Critics of feminist theology set the second direction, one most comprehensively covered by Francis Martin in *The Feminist Question*.²¹ Here the effort is to defend and develop the traditional theory of complementarity within the boundaries established by church practice and teaching. Man and woman, created different from one another, complete each other in irreplaceable ways.²² The body is considered a "revelation of the totality of the person and thus a sacrament"; this means that sexuality is "intrinsic or essential to the human person," and cannot be discounted in ecclesial life.²³

The role of headship or office is closed to women in the Roman Catholic Church, so Martin's argument goes, not because the female is inferior, but because she symbolizes "receptivity" by her way of being, a receptivity, however, that is in no way inferior to "activity," which is symbolized by the man.

Office is a personal, and therefore a relational, endowment by which the disciple represents Christ as other, as over against the church. In and through such a person Christ sacramentalizes his governing, teaching and sanctifying activity in serving his body, the church. Only male body persons are apt for this kind of sacramentalizing, because they embody that aspect of causality that is termed *active*. Females show forth the receptivity of Christ, a reality that characterizes him within the Trinity and is historicized in the Incarnation and continued in the church. It is in this way that male and female are made in the image of God who is Christ; who is at one and the same time *other* and actively active as well as immanent and actively receptive.²⁴

²¹ Francis Martin, *The Feminist Question: Feminist Theology in the Light of Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). I take it that Martin represents what is coming to be known as the *Communio* school.

²² For a fine presentation of the theory of complementarity, see Prudence Allen, R.S.M., "Integral Sex Complementarity and the Theology of Communion," *Communio* 20 (1993) 523-44.

²³ Martin, *The Feminist Question* 393.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 404-5.

In this way, Martin sets up a series of analogies. Christ the Head is to his body, the Church, as transcendence is to immanence, as male is to female, as active is to receptive. While Martin clearly wants to deny that there is a hierarchy at work in this lineup, he cannot make it stick. To begin with, there is no specifically ecclesial role for women, so the complementarity seen in the sexually differentiated bodies has no effect on the shape of church life. Next, Jesus the Christ is male. Logically, his human embodiment can only sacramentalize, then, one side of the analogy. But this is not what Martin contends. The same holds true of the male ministers: logically, they should be limited in what they can "sacramentalize," but Martin says they also show forth "the feminine dimension of Christ who in the Trinity is infinite receptivity" by receiving the imprint of Christ's death and resurrection.²⁵ In other words, the man can sacramentalize the active and the receptive; the woman can only sacramentalize the receptive. The attempt to sail complementarity past the hidden rocks of an implied inferiority founders on the shores of traditional Christology and the practice in the Roman Catholic Church regarding office.

I have proposed a third direction of thought regarding Christian anthropology.²⁶ It, too, recommends that we take seriously the complementarity revealed by the human body, male and female, and by the creation stories of Genesis. But I have come to see that if we think through the idea of complementarity, regardless of where it leads, we will not only have to develop new forms of life in the *ecclesia* but revise all our theology as well. If we correct the inherited subordinationist reading of the creation story and reinterpret it as a story of reciprocity between the man and the woman, both in original goodness and in the mutual responsibility for the incursion of evil, then we should be suspicious if there is no evidence of such a reciprocity and mutuality in the story of redemption. Moreover, if the body is indeed a revelatory text, then the truths revealed by the interdependence of the man and the woman in the creation of new physical life cannot be ruled out when it comes to the second birth of life in the *ecclesia*. Finally, if a certain incompleteness vis-à-vis the sexually differentiated other is a dimension of our humanity, then the humanity of Jesus must be incomplete as well. Let me say it as boldly as I can: that would mean Jesus alone could not accomplish the redemption of all humanity.

My appeal, then, is for women to maintain a more thoroughgoing suspicion and a riskier faith: suspicion of the inherited theological tradition, the one that has carefully separated woman from the divine; and faith in the possibilities of the canonical texts preserved for us by the Holy Spirit at work in the Church. From those very texts, the

²⁵ Ibid. 405.

²⁶ Mary Aquin O'Neill, R.S.M., "The Mystery of Being Human Together," in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: Harper, 1993) 139-60.

image of Mary developed through centuries until the Reformation placed her on the margins of Christianity and until Roman Catholicism, in its concern for the separated brethren (sic), cut her image down to an acceptable size. I think we need to look again at the Mariological tradition, not only by searching Scripture for the basis of the doctrinal development, but by looking through the lens of liturgy, art, devotional life, and our own bodily experiences as well.

The irony is that, for women to accomplish a recovery of Mary on our own terms, we would have to realize the distinctness and irreplaceability of our way of being embodied in the world. This is precisely the realization kept from us by the dominant discourse in theology.

IS THERE A FEMINIST THEOLOGICAL METHOD?

As women learned what had been written and decided about us in the tradition we call our own, as we felt the desire to be part of shaping that tradition for the future, women began to do theology. Having learned our *métier* principally from the men who dominated the field for centuries, it should not be surprising that we began by doing theology as they had done it. Now, however, there are new generations of women in theology whose educational experience includes having had women as teachers and having access to a body of theological literature authored by women. It is natural, then, for the question to arise: Have women developed a discernible method in doing theology? Have we made a contribution to the way theology is done?

In the consideration of Christian anthropology, I have already uncovered several of the methodological constants in the theology being done by women. Let me review them and add another.

1. Women approach the texts of Christianity with suspicion. Convinced of an androcentric bias, we can no longer simply accept as revealed what we have been told to accept. This has had a profound effect on the way many women theologians use texts. That is, apocryphal literature, teachings condemned as heretical, the writings of overlooked or sidelines players in the great controversies, literary and artistic creations of the female imagination are brought into the work of doing theology, often on a par with or as a means to judge the "authoritative" texts.²⁷ The repercussions of this for the Church are enormous.

I would add, however, that I do not find the same degree of suspicion being directed at texts considered "feminist." Theologians committed to the liberation of women are in danger of developing a new canon, with assumptions that harden into tradition, if we refuse to question

²⁷ Ritual and prayer forms are also being generated out of the vast energy released by the writings of women in theology, but it is rare to find a serious analysis of the theology implicit in them.

ways of thinking considered "feminist" because they seem to advance the cause of women in the moment.²⁸

2. The suspicion of hierarchies also marks the writings of women. It began with the struggle against the age-old assumption that men are superior to women. That struggle has resulted in a challenge to a range of hierarchies, especially those predicated on binary thinking. Women theologians are trying to hold together what had been cast as either/or, and to think out a theology based on interrelationships. This effort has repercussions on all hierarchies, even on those that are not binary. Letty Russell has this to say, for example:

The emerging feminist paradigm trying to make sense of biblical and theological truth claims is that of *authority as partnership*. In this view, reality is interpreted in the form of a circle of interdependence. *Ordering* is explored through inclusion of diversity in a rainbow spectrum that does not require that persons submit to the "top" but, rather, that they participate in the common task of creating an interdependent community of humanity and nature. Authority is exercised in community and tends to reinforce ideas of cooperation, with contributions from a wide diversity of persons enriching the whole.²⁹

The preoccupation of women theologians with the question of difference is also related to the suspicion of hierarchies. Katherine E. Zappone explains that "within a patriarchal socio-cultural framework, to describe someone as different usually means that she or he is different from the norm. Consequently difference carries with it the implication of inferiority and inequality."³⁰

3. Experience is a central norm in theologies done by women. Pamela Dickey Young has shown that the term has at least five dimensions of meaning: "women's bodily experience, women's socialized experience (what culture teaches us about being women), women's feminist experience (response to women's socialized experience), women's historical experience, and women's individual experiences."³¹ As the body of women doing theology has become more colorful and diversified, differences among women have emerged in ways that are sometimes painful to confront.³² The original complaint that men cannot speak a

²⁸ In a very important new work, Tina Chanter argues that we need to rethink a distinction that has become canonical for feminists, namely, the difference between sex and gender (*Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers* [New York: Routledge, 1995] esp. chap. 1).

²⁹ Letty Russell, "Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation," in Letty Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 144.

³⁰ K. E. Zappone, "'Women's Special Nature': A Different Horizon For Theological Anthropology," in *The Special Nature of Women?* 92.

³¹ P. D. Young, *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology: In Search of Method* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 53.

³² One of the most famous texts is Audre Lorde's "Open Letter to Mary Daly," written after the publication of Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* and published after Lorde received no reply from Daly herself. The open letter can be found in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Freedom, Calif.: The Crossing, 1984) 66-71.

universal truth for women now unravels into many strands: white women cannot speak for black, anglos for latinas, educated for the unlettered, etc. Subject to what Wendy Kaminer calls "feminism's third wave," theologians, too, begin to deconstruct ourselves.³³

A new entry into the field may well bring greater clarity to this central category of experience. After a long absence from the conversation about feminist thinking, students of Lonergan have taken up questions of method in that context and, with moves typical of their teacher, introduced important distinctions into the conversation. In particular, the "different kinds of difference" that result from horizon analysis auger well for the question of who can speak for whom and how radically differences keep us from hoping to understand each other.³⁴

Francis Martin accuses feminist theologians of replacing revelation with experience and thus of failing to do theology at all.³⁵ I don't know of any critics who said that black theologians were replacing revelation with their experience when men of color began to deconstruct the Christian traditions that led to enslavement and racism. It may be harder, however, for men to understand the crisis that faith undergoes when a woman is confronted with the terror of what her own religious tradition has had to say about her kind. Besides, for a woman to claim that her experience provides grounds for judging the theological tradition is to raise once again the issue of authority that plagues the history of women and Christianity.

Strangely, this authority of experience is a two-edged sword. To have authority as a scholar, a woman must adhere to the contemporary standards of scholarship. Ironically, these very standards rule out personal references or narratives, so that an inclination to argue from the concrete experiences that inform her judgments is snuffed out by the interiorized demand that she distance herself in order to remain objective. This accounts, I think, for the high level of abstraction that characterizes much current writing on the experience of women, even when the women writing are new voices, rising up from out of the mainstream.

At the same time, any claim that the body of women shares experiences that ground the judgments being passed on Christian theology runs up against the prevailing opinion that women as a group are not different from men as a group, and that the differences among women, when it comes to experience, are as profound as any to be found between particular men and particular women.

³³ W. Kaminer, "Feminism's Third Wave: What Do Young Women Want?" *New York Times Book Review* (4 June 1995) 3; 22–23.

³⁴ See Cynthia S. W. Crysedale, "Horizons That Differ: Women and Men and the Flight from Understanding," *Cross Currents* (Fall, 1994) 345–61. There is also now a book-length collection of essays edited by Crysedale, *Lonergan and Feminism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

³⁵ *The Feminist Question* 205.

Thus, while women writing theology have mined new sources and introduced the question of women's experience into consideration, I cannot see that there is a distinct "feminist method" in theology, or even a method that brings into theological discourse a textual equivalent of the woman's way of being embodied in the world.

THE INTERSECTION OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND METHOD

The words of the poet Audre Lorde give entree to the connection I want to draw out between anthropology and method. In the title of her now-famous essay Lorde warned, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House."³⁶ And in a conversation with poet Adrienne Rich, she uttered these equally powerful words:

We have been taught to suspect what is deepest in ourselves, and that is the way we learn to testify against ourselves, against our feelings. The way you get people to testify against themselves is not to have police tactics and oppressive techniques. What you do is to build it in so people learn to distrust everything in themselves that has not been sanctioned, to reject what is most creative in themselves to begin with, so you don't even need to stamp it out.³⁷

This is precisely what the dominant discourse has done to women. We want to articulate a wholistic view of reality, protecting the interrelationships that our intuitions tell us are precious; but we also think that we must articulate it in and through an adversarial discourse that makes of writing an act of war in which the aim is to vanquish those who disagree. We want to present the fruits of reflection on our own experience, but know we must do so in a way that will be comprehensible to the minds of men and measure up to the codes set by them. We who speak at least two languages must always be sure, when we venture into the public realm, that we are writing in the only one that is respected there.³⁸ Luce Irigaray expresses it this way:

I can thus speak intelligently as sexualized male (whether I recognize this or not) or as asexualized. Otherwise, I shall succumb to the illogicality that is proverbially attributed to women. All the statements I make are thus either borrowed from a model that leaves my sex aside—implying a continuous discrepancy between the presuppositions of my enunciation and my utterances, and signifying furthermore that, mimicking what does not correspond to my own "idea" or "model" (which moreover I can't even have), I must be quite

³⁶ See *Sister Outsider* 110–13.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 102.

³⁸ I am reminded of an experience I had while doing postdoctoral studies in Jerusalem. After hearing a lecture on the crucifixion I made, for the first time, a connection between the blood and water that flowed from Christ's side and the blood and water that accompany a vaginal birth. I mentioned this to a fellow student, because I was excited at what I thought I had discovered on my own. He told me that I would have to prove that this imagery "was extant at the time John's Gospel was written." Without thinking, I shot back, "No, I wouldn't; I would have to prove that people were born then the way they are now." His response was typical of those who taught us to distrust what is most creative in ourselves.

inferior to someone who has ideas or models on his own account—or else my utterances are unintelligible according to the code in force. In that case they are likely to be labeled abnormal, even pathological.³⁹

The deformation is profound. Having been taught to think of ourselves as “the second sex,” as the “opposite sex,” as man’s “helpmate,” and the “other”—because this is the way the textual tradition speaks and writes about us; having been taught by the academy to write of ourselves as “one,” or, worse, as “man,” it is very hard to know who we are, or what a woman is in herself. The poets know the deep structures of the dilemma. Listen to Daisy Zamora, in conversation with Bill Moyers:

MOYERS: You told the audience, “I wanted to be myself—and for a woman that’s hard.”

ZAMORA: Yes. Because to be yourself you have to challenge many things that you receive as a cultural inheritance. That’s the way it is in Nicaragua, and I think it’s generally like that in the rest of the world, with some differences. I think it’s hard in all parts of the world to be a woman because we women don’t know what we are, what kind of human beings we are, what part of humanity we are considered to be. We don’t know what we are to do with our lives or why we were born, or for what purpose.⁴⁰

Rejecting the inherited self-understanding as “second,” “opposite,” “helpmate,” “other” is a first step, but it entails several risks. One risk is that women will reject the inherited self-understanding only to fall under “the tyranny of the same,” and thus lose ourselves in a whole new way.⁴¹ A second risk is that we will be required to revisit the link between the body and nature. It is a connection that many want to put away forever because of the threat it is thought to pose for hard-won advances. Yet it may well be that we can only find ourselves and thus make a space for the feminine, with all that might mean, by acknowledging, claiming, even loving the realities of the female bodies that are our created endowment.⁴²

I find interesting and promising for theological anthropology and method, then, the voices calling for an effort to “write the body.” Such an effort requires a confrontation with the text that is the female body and an exercise of the productive imagination that would render it in words. It would bring a complementarity of discourse, whereby some of us could seek, not to conquer the reader, but to invite him or her into

³⁹ L. Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Cornell University, 1985) 149.

⁴⁰ Bill Moyers, *The Language of Life, A Festival of Poets* (New York: Doubleday, 1995) 437.

⁴¹ For an extended analysis of this theme and others in the writings of Luce Irigaray, see Tina Chanter, *Ethics of Eros*.

⁴² For a review of this struggle over embodiment, see Susan Ross, “Feminist Theology: A Review of the Literature,” *TS* 56 (1995) 330–35.

a space that welcomes difference, does not seek to overcome it, and consequently becomes a matrix for creation.

I am sorely aware that my own efforts in this essay reveal how hard it is to shake off the old patterns, to write theology in a new way. But if we are prevented from trying by the fear of failure, theology will be the poorer, and so will women and men struggling to make sense of what we have been taught and what we are now experiencing. There is inspiration for the labor in the words of Nancy Mairs: "I just keep inscribing the fathers' words with my woman's fingers and hope that the feminine will bleed through."⁴³

*Mount Saint Agnes Theological
Center for Women, Baltimore*

MARY AQUIN O'NEILL, R.S.M.

⁴³ *Voice Lessons* 49.

PACIFICA

Editor-in-Chief: John Honner S.J.
honner@ariel.ucs.unimelb.edu.au

Manuscripts, enquiries and
subscriptions:
Pacifica, P.O. Box 271,
Brunswick East, Victoria 3057,
Australia

Mordecai Roshwald
The Historical Perception of Judaism

John Thornhill
A Theology of the Scriptures?

Terry A. Veling
Marginal Writing and Marginal
Communities

John Martis
Jean-Luc Marion's
God Without Being

James T. Bretzke
Cultural Particularity
and the Globalization of Ethics

John A. F. Davis
The Constructive Theologies of
Hodgson and Kaufman