Women and the Philosophy of Religion in the Twentieth Century

Beverley Clack

What is the Philosophy of Religion?

In order to map the relationship between women and the development of an explicitly feminist approach to the philosophy of religion, it is necessary at the outset to say something about the different philosophical strands which shape feminist philosophies. That there is no one way in which women have approached the philosophical grappling with religion suggests something of the range of philosophical approaches possible to the investigation of religion.

The early part of the twentieth century saw the emergence of what became the dominant way of practising philosophy in the English-speaking world, usually known as 'analytic' philosophy. Influenced by the preoccupations of the Vienna Circle of the 1920s and 1930s and the early philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein,[1] the practice of philosophy became intimately connected to the analysis of language. In the verification and falsification debates that followed, a further shift enshrined the significance of this concern for philosophers engaged in the study of religion. This was now to be shaped by the question of meaning and the methods by which the meaningfulness of statements can be established.[2] Rather than address the kind of existential questions that absorbed generations of previous philosophers - why am I here? what does it mean to be a creature who knows that they will die? how am I to live well in the world? - the emphasis moved to considering the rational basis for religious beliefs. Can such beliefs be justified? Or, indeed, can they be shown to be erroneous? Philosophy of religion, shaped by this set of interlocking preoccupations, comes to be modelled as a form of scientific enterprise. The

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[1] See Friedrich Waismann, *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1979.

[2] See Antony Flew and Alaisdair MacIntyre, eds., *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, London: SCM, 1955. We should also note here the influence of A J Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1936] 1971.

philosopher marshals the evidence and provides arguments for and against a particular belief or set of beliefs. For religious interpretations of the world to be taken seriously, they must in some way conform to the rigours expected by that paradigm or be rendered meaningless. And we should note here that in practice this means that theistic and atheistic philosophers of religion share the same playing field; they simply come to different conclusions about the veracity of religious claims.[3]

While the twenty-first century has seen something of a challenge to this model,[4] the continuing grip of this form of philosophising on the philosophy of religion cannot be underestimated. This does not mean that this is not the only way in which it might be practised. Feminists, as we shall see, have been in the vanguard when it comes to thinking differently about the ways in which the meaningfulness of religious practice and narrative might be understood. Of particular significance for establishing alternative ways of shaping a philosophy of religion are the practices of the so-called 'Continental' European tradition. What passes for philosophical enquiry looks rather different when considered through this lens. While it is concerned with the application of critical thought, crucially it is also conceived to be a creative enterprise that involves engaging with a range of intellectual disciplines. Psychoanalytic theory, literature, sociology, and history all have their parts to play in an approach that seeks to model philosophy as engaged with the concrete experiences of human beings, located in specific historical and geographical locations. When religion is viewed through these lenses, the focus shifts. Now it is less about establishing the veracity of religious positions, and more about exploring the uses

[3] We might, for example, compare Richard Swinburne's classic piece of analytic philosophy of religion, *The Coherence of Theism* (1977) with J L Mackie's critique of religion, *The Miracle of Theism* (1983). The debate between them is not about the criteria for judging religious belief; it is, rather, about the opposing conclusions that they reach in their interpretation of the evidence.

[4] See for example the Centre for Philosophy of Religion at Leeds University, where philosophers of religion consider a diffuse set of concerns, including depression, time, lived religion, and logic in relation to the philosophy of religion.

(and the abuses) of religion. What emerges from such an approach are complex and creative ways of considering human life and experience.[5]

As we proceed, we will see something of the way in which these different ways of doing philosophy influence the ideas of feminist philosophers of religion. For now, it is worth noting the significance of a further aspect to the philosophical investigation of religion. There has always been some degree of overlap between philosophy of religion and philosophical theology. If philosophical theology starts from a faith position - often Christian - and seeks to develop and define it through philosophical categories, philosophy of religion - at least on the surface - purports to start from a position of studied neutrality. In practice, this is not all it seems.[6] This is hardly surprising, given that all of us, in one way or another, hold a faith position. As the theologian Paul Tillich notes, it is impossible to be human and not to hold to faith in something or other, for “faith is a total and centred act of the personal self, the act of unconditional, infinite and ultimate concern”.[7] What makes the supposed neutrality of philosophy of religion a powerful tool for feminists is that they have been able to use its more general notion of ‘religion’ to develop alternative and creative religious perspectives. In the work of Melissa Raphael, this leads to the combining of wisdoms drawn from her Jewish faith and the practices of Goddess Spirituality.[8] An alternative approach is found in Pamela Sue Anderson’s embracing what she calls ‘the

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[5] For an account of the differences between the continental and analytic approaches to the philosophy of religion, see Grace Jantzen’s ‘What’s the Difference? Knowledge and Gender in (Post)Modern Philosophy of Religion’, *Religious Studies*, 32:4 (1996): 431-48.

[6] Richard Swinburne’s *The Christian God* (1994) is a case in point. Here, the mask of apparent neutrality is stripped away to show that the account of ‘religion’ that shapes his apparently objective philosophy is grounded in the ideas of the Christian tradition.

[7] Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith*, New York: HarperCollins, [1957] 2009, pp. 9-10.

[8] See her *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust*, London: Routledge: 2003.

Spiritual Turn.'[9] We will see something of the creativity possible in philosophy of religion as we proceed.

Modelling Women in Philosophy and Theology

That feminist philosophy of religion might provide a creative space for women as they engage with ideas of faith and religion might seem surprising, given the largely negative thinking about women in the texts that form the archive for much philosophical and theological reflection in the Western tradition.

Feminists have spent much time exposing the misogyny (or women hating) of foundational philosophy texts.[10] This is important, as much that passes for philosophical practice - at least in the analytic tradition - involves accepting the implicit gendering of reason. It can come as something of a surprise to realise that the generic 'Man' does not, in fact, include 'Woman'. The more detailed our reading of the discussion of what it is to be human, the more it becomes apparent that it is the male who defines what it is to be human, while 'Woman' is defined in relation to (and invariably in opposition to) man. The role of reason as the defining feature of human being owes much to assumptions about the different qualities of men and women, and the necessity of excluding Woman from the status that resides with being its practitioners.

Central to this exclusive rendition is the claim that 'Woman' is defined by 'her' lack of reason. That woman is defective when it comes to the ability to exercise reason has long excluded her from the practices of philosophy. From Aristotle on, women have been considered by nature to be incapable of reasoning: or at the very least limited in the extent

[9] See Anderson, 'A Turn to Spiritual Virtues in the Philosophy of Religion: The Thoughtful Love of Life', in *Philosophers and God: At the Frontiers of Faith and Reason,* edited by John Cornwell, Michael McGhee, Bloomsbury: 2009, pp167-185.

[10] See Beverley Clack, *Misogyny in the Western Philosophical Tradition: A Reader*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999.

to which she can reason. In excluding her from the fullness of reason, woman is excluded from full humanity itself, the capacity for rational reflection is what differentiates humanity - or rather the human male - from other animals.

For Aristotle, woman's inferiority is grounded in her inferior capacity for reason.[11] Kant makes a similar distinction when he turns his attention to the relationship between the sexes. Man, Kant argues, is capable of the higher reasoning necessary for what he sees as the highest forms of moral action, while woman is defined by her ability to sense. Her moral inclinations result from her "many sympathetic sensations, goodheartedness and compassion",[12] while male morality is more robust, shaped by knowing where one's duties lie and acting accordingly.[13] Kant emphasises the complementary of the sexes. Sexual difference is a good thing! Yet something of a sleight of hand is going on here, for Kant does not mean that the qualities associated with man and woman are to be equally valued. After all, the meaning of humanity is to be found in the ability to exercise reason, and so her apparent difference from man, in the end, renders her inferior to the central business of being human: namely, the exercise of reason.

We should not be surprised to find that claims of woman's inferior powers of reasoning dominate discussions of who can and cannot be a philosopher. The very notion of what it means to philosophise is shaped around a form of critical transcendence that woman cannot, because of her very nature, attain. If man is capable of the superior exercise of reason, woman's reproductive function aligns her with the forces of nature which reason

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[11] See Beverley Clack, Misogyny in the Western Philosophical Tradition, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999, section on Aristotle, pp. 30-45.

[12] Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, [1764] 1960, pp. 77.

[13] For a feminist analysis of this hierarchical construction of moral frameworks, see Carol Gilligan's classic account (1982).

seeks to overcome. She is connected with the forces of nature in a way in which man is not.

We might be perplexed to find this purported connection formulated as a 'Bad Thing'. After all, as inhabitants of the 21st century, it is impossible to avoid acknowledging the destruction that ideas of human separateness from the rest of the natural world have had on our world. We might well feel that acknowledging a deep connection to nature would be a very good thing indeed. However, the history of philosophy and theology reveals the extent to which this idea has been used to exclude women, not just from her place in the decision-making processes of the political world, but also from claiming her place as a philosopher. It is here that we see considerable overlap between philosophical and theological ideas. Much centres on the way in which the processes of physical reproduction are formalised. For Plato, it is her role in reproduction that links woman to the world of animals and natural forces: precisely the physical world that his philosopher is exhorted to escape. In the *Timaeus*, he goes as far as to suggest that failure to cultivate the life of the mind required if one is to transcend the mutability of the physical world will lead to one being reincarnated as a woman or an animal.[14] For his pupil Aristotle, it is the male who provides the rational shaping principle that must be applied to the passive matter provided by the female body.[15] Similarly, we have seen how Kant formulates the feminine in connection to physical beauty and bodily attributes. The masculine, conversely, is grounded in the ability to transcend the physical through the exercise of reason.

Reason might be the hallmark of humanity, but women are invariably depicted as less rational than men. Here, the link with theological misogyny can be discerned. For

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[14] Plato, *Timaeus*, 90-92.

[15] Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals*, Book 1: 21, 22; Book II: 3.

Augustine, ruminating on where exactly the image of God in which human beings is to be found, it is in the mind that humans reflect the divine imprint. The ability to reason connects us to God. Woman's lesser ability to reason reveals her to be 'the second sex', a fact revealed in her creation out of the body of Adam. Subservient and subordinate, she must be united with man as husband if she is to share fully in the divine image.[16] For the Church Father Tertullian, writing on female dress, this image of the 'second' human being is taken quite literally. All women are to be designated daughters of Eve. They share Eve's role in the creation of physical life, but crucially they also share in her guilt for the fall of humanity.[17]

It is not difficult to find philosophers who share such views of woman as weaker than the male, and who, similarly, ground that weakness in her to the physical world from which the male would do well to effect an escape. Arthur Schopenhauer, 19th century pessimist and misogynist, notes in his diatribe against women that women's role in child rearing is something that the male should be grateful he has not the attributes to share. "Watch a girl playing with a child, dancing and singing with it the whole day", he says. And then ask "what, with the best will in the world, a man could do in her place."[18] What, indeed. Woman's ability to look after children reflects her immature nature, for she is fundamentally childish. Such an infantile being requires the lordship of the man, and once her role in reproduction is over, she should simply fade from view in the same way that the beauty which captivated him in the first place will also be revealed to be transient: "just as the female ant loses its wings after mating, since they are then superfluous, indeed

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[16] Augustine, *On the Trinity*, Book XII.

[17] Tertullian, *On Female Dress*, Book 1, Chapter 1.

[18] Arthur Schopenhauer, 'On Women' in *Essays and Aphorisms*, edited by R J Hollingworth, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970, p. 81.

harmful to the business of raising the family, so the woman usually loses her beauty after one or two childbeds, and probably for the same reason."[19]

Underlying this history of loathing is a view of woman as a perplexing being whose differences from the male requires attention. Who is she? What exactly does she want? That woman is a mystery to man might be our curse, but it is also where following this distinctive perspective allows for creative reflections on religion and meaning to emerge. If woman's own voice is largely absent from the history of philosophy and theology, when she finds that voice her distinctive perspective brings with it new possibilities for developing religious ideas. It is, then, with relief that we turn to the writings of twentieth century feminists as they engage with and depart from this disturbing intellectual inheritance.

The Advent of Feminist Philosophy of Religion

Tracing Theological Foremothers

Given the history of the relationship between philosophy and theology, played out on women's bodies and how they have been understood, it is fitting that feminist philosophy of religion as a subject in its own right should emerge out of the investigations of feminist theologians whose ideas were also shaped by their studies in philosophy.

Mary Daly (1928-2010) is in many respects the most significant of these foremothers. For a woman often dismissed by fellow academics for her style of provocative writing,[20] and, in more recent years, for her radical separatist feminism, Daly was highly educated. She held not one but three doctorates: two from the University of Fribourg in Sacred Theology and

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[19] Schopenhauer, *On Women*, p. 81.

[20] See her *Wickedary*, conjured with Jane Caputi (1987).

Philosophy, and one in Religion from St Mary's College, Notre Dame. This layering of interests enabled her to develop a far-reaching critique of Christianity based on a detailed knowledge of theological and philosophical traditions. At its heart, Daly's critique was concerned to expose the way in which the notion of God has been used to legitimate male domination and the oppression of women.

Daly begins her analysis by describing the connection between the concept of God and male experience of the world.[21] There are intellectual forebears for such an idea: Ludwig Feuerbach in his *Essence of Christianity* (1841) suggested a similar view of religion, where the concept of God arises out of human reflection on the world and the projection of human values onto a God who, despite being created out of human desires, is visualised as external to them. Daly goes beyond this gender-neutral projection and highlights the importance of understanding whose values, precisely, have been used to construct the idea of God. If for Feuerbach it is what *human beings* consider to be most valuable that shapes the concept of God, for Daly it is the gender of that God that is most significant. Exposing the masculine nature of that construct, she concludes that “the myths and symbols of Christianity are essentially sexist”.[22] This sexism is felt in the habitual male language used of God, along with, in Christianity, the identification of a male with the embodiment of ‘God the Father’. More importantly, Daly draws attention to the impact such language has on human relationships. The masculine gender given to God wasn't simply a matter of convenience, necessitated by a history where the depiction of God cohered with the social conventions of the day. It is not the case the philosopher of religion Tim Mawson would later claims, that “everyone understands” that male language used of God is not meant to lead to the conclusion that God is an actual male. For Mawson, “calling God a

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[21] See Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, London: Women's Press, [1973]1986

[22] Mary Daly, ‘The Qualitative Leap Beyond Patriarchal Religion’ (1975) in Marilyn Pearsall (ed.), *Women and Values*, Belmount: Wadsworth, 1993, p. 227.

'he' and calling God a 'she' is a matter of indifference philosophically speaking". There might be "power connotations *accidentally* associated with the genders" [23] (my emphasis); but the 'clear-headedness' of philosophers of religion means they will not be distracted by such cultural variables. Refusing to consider that there might be implications of such language for human relationships, he concludes: "given that nothing can turn on the decision one way or the other, I'm going to continue within the tradition in which I have grown up, calling God a he."[24]

For Daly, this kind of philosophical whitewash ignores a brutal fact. When God is constructed as male, the male takes on the primary role in a society. In possibly the most famous couplet in feminist theology, she concludes that "since 'God' is male, the male is God". If God is best described using male and masculine language, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that God *is*, in some sense, male. And patriarchal societies depend and draw upon this image of the divine male for their power. As Daly goes on to say: 'God the Father legitimates all earthly Godfathers'.[25] Theological language matters, and its influence extends outside the Church.

Feminists working in the study of religion built upon Daly with the concept of God being critiqued for the support it gives to justifying the valorisation of concepts and values derived from the experience of the male. Sharon Welch, for example, analyses the concept of divine omnipotence, and in so-doing suggests something of the importance of these theological discussions for the later concerns of a nascent feminist philosophy of religion. Welch draws attention to the post-war Cold War and the use of nuclear weapons to provide a model of 'security' based on Mutually Assured Destruction. Here, she sees a

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[23] Tim Mawson, *Belief in God*, OUP: 2005, p. 19

[24] Mawson, *Belief in God*, p. 20

[25] Ibid.

secular version of the desire for an omnipotent God. With Daly, Welch holds there to be a connection between theological beliefs and forms of human behaviour. Indeed, she concludes that accepting the existence of an all-powerful God poses a real problem for human relationships,[26] for "the political logic of such doctrines [is] the glorification of domination".[27] God, as perfect, is all-powerful, and as a result absolute power emerges as an absolute good. Human rulers are justified in aspiring to such power. Yet as she goes on to show, human history reveals the dangers of this understanding of power. "Absolute power is a destructive trait", she argues.[28]

Welch shifts the discussion of theological ideals into the realm of practical action: a move we will see replicated in the concerns of the first feminist philosophers of religion. Behind the notion of absolute power is a hierarchical structuring of society where, if rulers are to aspire to the power of God, the ruled are to submit to their 'masters', just as the Church is to submit to 'her' God: 'The result of the theological valorisation of absolute power is the erotics of domination, the glorification of submission to the greatest power.'[29] As women have historically been described as subordinate to men, this theology acts to enshrine a sense of female inferiority. It is not just that women's lives and voices are less significant than men. If this order is divinely ordained, there is no way in which women can challenge the impact of this structure on their lives.

Welch provides a model of feminist critique when she connects theological language and human praxis. The concept of God is not philosophically neutral, but can be mapped onto

[26] See Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989

[27] Ibid, p. 111

[28] Ibid

[29] Ibid, p. 117

the social values that constructed it in the first place: and these social values have been derived from male experience and the concerns that this has engendered.

For some feminists, this meant that it was necessary to move beyond patriarchal forms of religion in shaping spirituality. For Carol Christ (1979; 1998), the inescapable conclusion of the analysis of Daly and of the kind of analysis of divine attributes like that offered by Welch is that patriarchal religions cannot escape their formation in patriarchal history. As they cannot enable the flourishing of women, new forms of feminist spirituality are required. For Christ and others (Goldenberg 1979), this required returning to and reinterpreting the ancient religious traditions of the Goddess (Raphael 1999).

Not all felt this shift to be necessary. Rosemary Radford Ruether's response to the kind of critique mounted by Daly et al was to develop a critical feminist liberation theology by identifying a 'Golden Thread' concerned with liberation running through the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament (1983; 1998). It was not necessary to put aside Christianity if one accepted the critical analysis of the concept of its God. Other narratives could also be identified. The positive reclamation of religious tradition was furthered by figures like Janet Martin Soskice (1984) and Sarah Coakley (1996), who argued that there were good reasons not to discard religious traditions which had emerged from a history defined by male-domination. For Coakley, the self-giving (or *kenosis*) of the Christian God offers a radical way of reformulating ideas of vulnerability. For Soskice, the plethora of images offered in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament is rich enough to challenge the patriarchal models which have disproportionately shaped Christian theory and practice.

Explicitly Feminist Philosophies of Religion: Jantzen and Anderson

There were, then, plentiful sources available for feminists working in the philosophy of religion to use as they started to shape a specifically feminist approach to the discipline. The last years of the twentieth century saw the emergence of two explicitly feminist philosophies of religion, both published in 1998. Their approaches suggest the variety of stances that could be taken, while also reflecting the two different approaches shaping philosophy of religion upon which we reflected at the outset of this article. The task to develop a specifically feminist philosophy of religion was taken up by Grace Jantzen (1948-2006) and Pamela Sue Anderson (1955-2017), and consideration of their respective accounts suggests something of what a feminist philosophy of religion might look like. For both, a central concern was to critique the method and concerns of the discipline itself. The extent to which they draw upon the analytic and Continental traditions is particularly interesting.

Jantzen's approach challenged the basic methodology informing the analytic philosopher's engagement with religion. At its heart, she argued, lies the unproblematic assertion of the philosopher as a rational subject who weighs the evidence and comes to a (largely) detached response to the problems posed. Issues of embodiment – what it might mean to be approaching this topic as a gendered and raced subject at a particular point in human history - are considered unnecessary and beside the point.

Like Welch, Jantzen rejects attempts to ignore the significance of the gendered construction of God. The way God is conceptualised reveals the values of the society that created that concept; thus the philosophical construction of God reflects the ideals and concerns of those who defined it. Given that men have been the main figures in the construction of the discipline and its debates, Jantzen argues that the way in which they

understand the nature of religion depends upon masculine concerns more generally understood. Moreover, the themes considered significant by philosophers of religion reflect (albeit unconsciously) the dominant gender bias.

Jantzen's focus is on what she sees as the philosophical obsession with death. Why is the engagement with death such a fundamental concern for analytic philosophers of religion? Why is the topic of immortality a central one for the philosophical study of religion? 'Can I survive my death?' 'What happens to me after death?' Her response to such questions is stark. They reflect a discipline that is 'necrophilic', or 'in love' with death.[30]

What, Jantzen asks, might a philosophy of religion look like if it focused instead on birth? Immediately, one gets the sense that Jantzen intends to bring women's issues and lives to the fore. Women are, after all, the ones who give birth. There is good evidence for her claim that birth has been neglected as a key philosophical category. The man sometimes described as the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger, writes of the individual being "thrown into the world".[31] Consideration of the actual process of birth undermines this assertion. We are *not* actually thrown into the world for we enter it through the body of a woman. To reflect upon this fact is to challenge Heidegger's key assertion that what matters is the lonely individual, making 'his' life as 'he' sees fit. The process of birthing reveals a different truth. We are born into a network of relationships (even if those relationships are sometimes far from adequate). Jantzen challenges the absence of a proper philosophical discussion of birth, and stresses, with Christine Battersby, "the ontological significance of the fact that selves are born".[32]

[30] Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998, chapter 6.

[31] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell, [1927] 1962, p. 295

[32] Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998, p. 3

To engage with birth as a philosophical category is fraught with difficulties for the feminist. One runs the risk of falling into the essentialist trap that defines woman's 'essence' according to one specific reproductive function, something which, as we have seen, patriarchal thinkers have done for hundreds of years.[33] Jantzen's solution is to emphasise less the actual experience of giving birth, and more the ramifications of modelling human beings as beings *who are born*. Rather than focus on the end of life - we are mortal, destined to die - we might think instead of the beginning of life and the experience of life itself. We are 'natals' (beings who have been born), and for Jantzen the emphasis on natality enables a set of new issues to emerge for philosophical investigation.[34] An example: the facts of community and society will have to be taken seriously if birth is taken seriously. Proceeding from the view that we are not born as self-contained, autonomous individuals makes relationship vital for human self-understanding. The primacy given to 'the individual' in discussions in philosophy of religion must therefore be challenged. Consider what this means for the discussion of death. In traditional philosophy of religion, what matters is what matters 'to me' as an individual; thus the possibility of 'surviving death' is a key issue for debate. For Jantzen, a philosophy grounded in the paradigm of natality takes *this* life seriously. Human growth and flourishing, ignored in mainstream philosophy of religion, become as a result important as such themes open up questions of what it means to flourish or to love life.

There is much to commend Jantzen's approach. The focus on life opens up the discipline to relevance for the work of practical politics as well as philosophical analysis.[35] Yet

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[33] See Beverley Clack (ed.), *Misogyny in the Western Philosophical Tradition*, London: Macmillan, 1999, for examples of the way in which philosophers have defined women.

[34] Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, chapters 6, 10.

[35] See, for example, Beverley Clack, 'Evil, Feminism, and a Philosophy of Transformation' in Nick Trakakis, *The Problem of Evil*, Oxford: OUP, 2018, pp. 123-150.

aspects of her analysis need further interrogation. It is by no means clear that men are more concerned with death than women. One might, for example, consider the structure and development of the Spiritualist Church, a movement predominantly formed and led by female mediums. At the very least, this movement seems to suggest that Jantzen is mistaken in her contention that women *per se* are not concerned with the question of what happens after death. Similarly, her desire to avoid the essentialist trap by distancing her paradigm of natality from the lived experience of birthing is problematic. There is a tendency for her writing to suggest a clear distinction between life (or birth) and death. Considering the realities of the lived, bodily experience of birthing suggests a more complex relationship between these features: it is not the case that only life comes out of gestation and birth. Women suffer miscarriage, stillbirth and sometimes death during labour. Such painful experiences of loss suggest that considering birth itself might reveal a rather different set of values than Jantzen wants to suggest. It might well be the case that what we find in the consideration of birth is further evidence of the claim that 'in life we are in the midst of death'.

Ultimately Jantzen's philosophy of religion is driven by her concern to construct a practical alternative to that offered by the analytic tradition. Rather than involving the clarification of religious belief, her philosophy of religion involves a quest that we might 'become divine'. This phrase may form the title for her important book, but it is not altogether clear what exactly she means by this. Given her criticisms of the discussion of death, she cannot mean some kind of transcendent existence outside this embodied one. What she has in mind seems to be the conditions and practices necessary to establish a full human life. This life is not just about what aids one's own flourishing, but also that of others and, indeed, the planet itself.[36] Pamela Sue Anderson's philosophy of religion, while posing a

[36] See Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, chapter 10, 'Justice in the face of the natals', pp. 227-253

similar challenge to the methodology of the mainstream discipline, is shaped by a different set of concerns.

Anderson's concern is with epistemology, and thus with the ways in which knowledge can be established. Central to this discussion is the use of reason. Like Jantzen, she denies any simplistic idea that one can achieve 'an objective' stance on any subject. It is impossible to approach any subject as a detached observer: one of the central features of the methodology of analytic philosophy. Anderson's concern, as a result, is to modify the definition of reason. To do so, she employs the work of Sandra Harding, a feminist philosopher who argues for a definition of reason that takes account of the different perspectives that inform its application.[37] This 'standpoint epistemology' introduces the idea that reason is always something that is applied by individuals. The problem with the kind of epistemology that underpins mainstream philosophies of religion is that there is a tendency to assume that 'Reason' is a universal faculty untainted by the concerns of the individual philosopher. Harding (and Anderson) refutes the simplicity of this distinction. However, to accept that the experience of being a particular individual at a particular time in history colours one's concerns does not mean that 'the truth' is impossible to achieve: rather, to arrive at 'the truth' involves a high degree of awareness of the issues that influence one's discussions, and a willingness to engage with the concerns of others. In this sense, Anderson has much in common with the goals of standard analytic practice.

At the same time, Anderson modifies the emphasis on reason by considering the element of human experience commonly juxtaposed to it: desire. Building upon the work of feminist philosophers like Genevieve Lloyd, she exposes the way in which women have been associated with desire, feeling and emotion, while men have been associated with

[37] See Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1991.

reason.[38] In part, this clarifies Jantzen's resistance to defining natality through the experience of birthing. To focus on the physical process of reproduction invariably connects women to the natural processes that have been used to exclude them from the life of reason and thus from the work of philosophy itself. If we return to the discussion of Kant on the differences between the sexes that we considered earlier, we find him using this connection to deny the possibility of the woman philosopher: "a woman who has a head full of Greek [the language of the philosophers Plato and Aristotle]…might as well even have a beard".[39] Women, associated with nature, beauty and sexuality are excluded from the application of cool-headed reason.

But Anderson's intention is not to reject (male) reason in favour of (female) desire. Rather, she challenges the binary of this gendered construction, and attempts to bring both aspects of human experience together, for without engaging with desire there can be no satisfying discussion of the impulses that lead to the construction of religion in the first place. At the same time, to exclude reason would mean that there can be no critical engagement with religion; no interrogation of whether the particular forms that it takes are healthy for human beings or not. This attempt to unite two apparently opposed features of human life influences the eclectic sources that she employs. Philosophers like Kant are employed alongside Continental theorists whose ideas are influenced by psychoanalysis (most notably, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray). Her method enables the development of a feminist philosophy of religion grounded in 'the lived experience' of being human[40] where philosophy is not just about the application of reason, but about engaging with the desires that permeate every aspect of human life.

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[38] See Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*, London: Methuen, 1984

[39] Immanuel Kant, *Of the Beautiful and Sublime*, tr. J T Goldthwait, Berkeley: University of California Press, [1763] 1960, p. 78.

[40] Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, p. 33

Conclusion

At the end of the twentieth century it was possible to predict a rosy future for feminist approaches to the philosophy of religion. That it has not quite been so reveals much about the preoccupations of twenty-first century gender studies which have challenged the very idea of a 'feminist' approach to the study of religion. Under the influence of the works of Judith Butler, the idea of 'women's experience' as something that might challenge the habitual representations of religion has been challenged by the desire to consider all forms of gender as performative, and, moreover, to challenge the kind of philosophies that would have made a distinction between the social shaping of gender and the realities of the sexed body. Feminism has been caught up in what this disruption of sex and gender might mean, and whether feminists will find some way of unifying in the face of such challenges is not entirely clear. Yet the return of a popular feminist movement concerned with issues of sexual harassment and sexual violence suggests the recognition of the cost of excluding women's voices is as strong as it ever was. If we turn our gaze to the study of religion, the significance of understanding its role in constructing stereotypical ideas of what it is to be female cannot be ignored. It is possible, then, that the 21st century might, once more, require space for thinking about the philosophical engagement with religion as an important aspect of liberating feminist practice.

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