

Introduction: Feminist Theology, Difference, and Christian Discourse

It is hard to imagine a more optimistic beginning than the early movement of second-wave feminist theology.¹ Bolstered by the momentum of secular feminism² and by a boundless confidence in the critique of Christian orthodoxy, these pioneering scholars set about the task of liberating all women. It is easy to appreciate this initial enthusiasm. As Rosemary Radford Ruether notes, the fundamental impetus for change was at first simply to challenge the patriarchal notion that women are inferior.³ The fight for equality ensured that feminist scholars across all disciplines would argue for

1. The feminist movement has been categorized by three distinctive “waves.” The first wave—during the nineteenth and early twentieth century—focused on the pragmatic issues of women’s education and the right to vote and was debated primarily in the United Kingdom and North America. The second wave came to prominence in the United States in the early nineteen sixties. Third-wave feminism is generally accepted as the period of feminism arising in the early nineteen eighties. The distinction between second- and third-wave feminisms is discussed in this book.
2. There is no doubt that Betty Friedan’s *The Feminist Mystique* was the first major publication of second-wave feminist thought; however writers such as Gloria Steinem, Germaine Greer, and Kate Millett are just some of the highly successful feminists to catapult the “feminist question” into broader disciplinary inquiry; including Christian theology. See Betty Friedan, *The Feminist Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1963).
3. Rosemary Radford Ruether, “The Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3.

the status of women alongside men, especially in regard to the qualities favored by Enlightenment philosophers: rational thinking and moral judgement. This early feminism was thus aptly noted for an “enthusiasm for sameness.”⁴ Society was being charged with blindly, wilfully even, failing to see that women are in fact the same as men. However, to be rightly elevated to the lofty status of “sameness,” women needed to convince the world that they had been—that they were indeed still being—oppressed. A central strategy in this regard was the concept of consciousness raising, together with appeals to women’s experience.⁵ There was a strong belief that if women could share their stories with the wider community then a consensus would emerge regarding the need for revolution. Certainly, such appeals had a positive effect with respect to women’s opportunities, especially in North America. And yet the process also revealed something deeply problematic about early second-wave feminism, for the experiences being shared, the consciousness being raised, and the opportunities being granted were almost exclusively for the *same* kind of woman: white middle-class woman.

African Americans such as Alice Walker led stinging attacks on the privileging of white women’s experience and the preposterous claim that a housewife from the suburbs could ever speak about the oppression of a North American black woman.⁶ In response, womanist theologians sought to share the experience of women who were oppressed primarily because of race. The critique of categorizing experience grew with the inception of Mujerista theologies,⁷ which challenged feminists to consider the experience of

4. Susan F. Parsons, “The Dilemma of Difference: A Feminist Theological Exploration,” *Feminist Theology: The Journal of the Britain & Ireland School of Feminist Theology* 14, no. 5 (1997): 53.

5. Seen as a form of political activism, consciousness-raising groups were pioneered by the second-wave feminist alliance known as the “New York Radical Women.”

6. See Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

Latinas living in the United States. Questions of race and class became critical factors as feminist theology attempted to define its boundaries and cement a definite methodology. Further questions of colonialism saw the emergence of influential feminist theologians such as Kwok Pui-Lan and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, writing from Asian and African perspectives, respectively.⁸ In each new representation, the critique of second-wave white feminism became more forceful. It was clear that white middle-class (heterosexual⁹) women had become the normative portrayal of women's subjugation. Hence one recent writer argues that "the same patterns of exclusion and marginalization that have been identified in traditional theology have tainted the liberationist project of feminist informed theologies."¹⁰ Specifically, feminist theology was charged with "essentialism," though this was precisely what feminist theology had been trying to overcome. As Alcoff notes, whether woman was "construed as essentially immoral or irrational or essentially kind and benevolent she [was] always construed as essentially *something*."¹¹ To be accused of repeating this pattern under the banner of feminist theology was a hard pill to swallow. Yet

7. See Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the 21st Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996).

8. Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000). Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

9. The claims of heteronormativity in feminist theology are certainly not without basis; however, many second-wave feminists (theologians and otherwise) went on to advocate for a "lesbian lifestyle" as the only possible means of escaping the patriarchal reality. For instance, an early collective of feminist writers (including prominent theorist Sheila Jeffreys) argued in 1979, "We do think . . . that all feminists can and should be lesbians. Our definition of a political lesbian is a woman-identified woman who does not fuck men. It does not mean compulsory sexual activity with women." See Women Only Press Collective, *Love Your Enemy? The Debate between Heterosexual Feminism and Political Lesbianism* (London: Onlywomen, 1981). Hence this particular critique is complicated by the unarticulated notions of sexuality embedded in these texts.

10. Angie Pears, "The Problematization of Feminisms and Feminist Informed Theologies in the Twenty-First Century," *Political Theology* 7, no. 2 (2006): 222. See also Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," *Signs* 13, no. 3 (Spring 1988): 406.

11. Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism," 406.

this challenge was important and necessary, lest feminist theology continue down the familiar road of objectification and oppression.¹²

At the same time, the ideals of feminist theology—equality, autonomy, and subjectivity—were being discredited in the wider philosophical schools. The libertine principle of equality, which had supplied the framework for the modern democratic state, was naturally an intrinsic feature of the feminist worldview.¹³ A move toward the equal status of women and men was assumed to be a positive step forward in the struggle for women’s emancipation. But exactly how “all men are created equal” was not originally part of the discussion. During these first decades of feminist theology, notions of equality were increasingly scrutinized to reveal the power structures that govern proposed social contracts and the manner in which the “masculine self” serves as an archetype for the liberal community.¹⁴ The idea that all individuals could achieve the self-defining autonomy was found to be so laden with a Kantian notion of educated reason that “autonomy” could be simply dismissed as a bourgeois classism. That is to say, freedom and autonomy were seen as the result of a Western education typically pursued by men. Pressing further, French philosophical writers like Lacan and Derrida suggested that “the self-contained, authentic subject conceived by humanism to be discoverable below a veneer of cultural and ideological overlay is in reality a construct of that very humanist discourse. The subject is not a locus of authorial intentions or natural attributes or even a privileged separate consciousness.”¹⁵

12. What’s more, there has been an interesting attack on the whole enterprise of academic feminism, especially in regard to women’s experience. See Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Feminism Is Not the Story of My Life* (New York: Anchor, 1996).
13. For an insightful and rather early account of the entanglement of feminist ideals within broader post-Enlightenment patriarchal systems, see Zillah Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* (New York: Longman, 1981).
14. Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian theology: Cartographies of Grace*, Guides to Theological Inquiry (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

These startling changes in the wider philosophical discipline brought a new set of challenges to feminist theology in considering women's emancipation and ensured that straightforward appeals to equality would be no longer possible. Yet perhaps the most significant blow to the fight for women's equality was the collapse of the category of gender itself. Secular theorists such as Judith Butler have undone much that was accepted as normative and stable regarding gender.¹⁶ Butler's work regarding the "performance" of gender binaries and her efforts to destabilize such binaries has been enormously influential in feminist theology. Butler has argued (along with several others¹⁷) that we are inevitably culturally predisposed to a binary gender discourse.¹⁸ Discourses around sexuality and desire are all formed to ensure that the heteronormative gender binary is kept intact. Instances of transgression (such as Freud's famous subject Herculine Barbin) are used by Butler to highlight the circular nature of gender binaries, and to demonstrate the essential flaw in such binary constructs; presumably a normative construct is incoherent if it ensures that a large portion of the population is considered abnormal. Categories that we might label with terms like intersex, gay or cross-dressing are not in fact examples of rule perversion but rather examples that demonstrate the flawed system. Gender can neither be reduced nor expanded to merely male and female. Gender, if anything, is fluid.¹⁹

15. Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism," 415.

16. Butler's most influential publications to date have been the following three books: Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1993); Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

17. For an excellent recent account, see Lisa M. Diamond and Molly Butterworth, "Questioning Gender and Sexual Identity: Dynamic Links over Time," *Sex Roles* 59 (2008): 356–76.

18. The term *gender binary* is referring to the categorizing of all humans into two distinct, opposite and unrelated terms of *man/masculine* and *women/feminine*.

19. See especially Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

Butler's work has helped feminist theologians to evaluate the construction of gender and how such a construction relates to faith.²⁰ However, Butler's theories also represent a threat to any sustained feminist theology. In rejecting gender binaries, feminist attempts to reclaim or revalue the particular identity of women seem redundant.²¹ Add to this the fragmentation of appeals to women's experience (the critical starting point for the previous decades of feminist theology²²), the intractable problem of essentialism, and the uncertainty about how to even frame the self or autonomy, and suddenly the enthusiasm for "sameness" in early second-wave feminist theology seems naive at best. What feminist theologians have instead discovered is a sea of chaotic and often conflicting narratives. The story of modern feminism is, as Susan Frank Parsons observes, the story of a developing awareness of difference.²³

The Difference Difference Makes

No concept has garnered more attention in feminist theology over the last twenty years than that of difference.²⁴ The recognition of the importance of difference has been applauded as the "coming of age"

20. Nicola M. Slee, *Faith and Feminism: An Introduction to Christian Feminist Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003), 110.

21. Susan Frank Parsons, "Feminist Theology as Dogmatic Theology," *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 126.

22. Indeed many still argue that experience must form the catalyst for constructive feminist theology. See Margaret D. Kamitsuka, *Feminist Theology and the Challenge of Difference*, AAR Reflection and Theory in the Study of Religion Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

23. Parsons, "The Dilemma of Difference," 52.

24. For instance, discussions at the AAR are reported from 1991 in a session entitled "Appropriation and Reciprocity in Womanist/Mujerista/Feminist Work." Cited in Judith Plaskow, "Dealing with Difference Without and Within," *Journal of Feminist Studies of Religion* 19, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 91–95. Further, a roundtable was held by the *Journal of Feminist Studies* in 1994 in response to the infamous publication discussing antifeminism: Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against Women* (Crown, 1991). In addition, the Britain and Ireland School for Feminist Theology Conference in 1998 was also on the theme of "difference."

of feminist theology, the entry of theology into a new arena of debate around matters of difference and plurality.²⁵ Yet feminist theologians continue to advocate for the importance of their discipline, even though the problem of the relation between feminism and difference remains unresolved. As Parsons says, “Something simply needs to be said about difference, and the difference difference makes.”²⁶

There have, of course, been a number of significant attempts to deal with difference while maintaining a feminist and theological framework. Serene Jones provides an outline of a growing group of scholars²⁷ advocating for a strategic essentialism:

The strategic essentialist is a “pragmatist” or “functionalist,” because she uses practical effect as the measure of theory. Instead of relying on rigid principles (either constructivist or essentialist), she asks: will their view of women’s nature advance the struggle for women’s empowerment? She also makes calculated, “strategic” decisions about which universals or essentials might work in a given context and which might fail.²⁸

This response is both politically and pastorally charged. The appeal of such an approach for feminist theologians seeking to effect real change is obvious. Further, it takes seriously the critique of poststructuralism regarding the impossibility of a “view from nowhere.” It creates a theoretical openness and a willingness to adapt to changes in the wider conceptual and cultural frameworks.²⁹ However in theoretical terms it does not avoid the use of power to categorize (and who has such power?) or the inescapability of further,

25. See Ann Brooks, *Post Feminism: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms* (London: Routledge, 1997), 1.

26. Parsons, “The Dilemma of Difference,” 52.

27. See Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989). And Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance: A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy*, trans. Elizabeth Guild (New York: Routledge, 1991).

28. Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian theology: Cartographies of Grace*, 44.

29. Serene Jones outlines quite helpfully the way “universal” approaches to women’s emancipation has shifted over recent years. See *ibid.*, 46–48.

possibly damaging constructs of women. As categories and needs proliferate, one must wonder about the effects of such fragmentation and the collapse of any collective or communal vision. The strategic essentialist still has to make normative judgements about woman and the nature of emancipation. Further, though strategic essentialism was originally proposed as a tool for intercultural dialogue and exchange, it is increasingly (quite problematically) favored as a theological tool for doctrinal exposition. For example, Nancy Dallavale employs a strategic essentialism to consider the sacramentality of “woman” in relation to the Catholic understanding of creation. In her account, a biological essentialism is necessary.³⁰ Not only does Dallavale reinscribe the gender binary as an essential element for continuity with tradition,³¹ she pushes the use of essentialism beyond cultural and political negotiation and directly back into the dogmatic realm it was imagined to evade.³²

Another important response to gender and difference within feminist theology has come from scholars seeking to incorporate the work of French theorist Luce Irigaray.³³ Irigaray affirms the otherness of the feminine and wants to raise the status of women’s “semiotic”³⁴

30. Nancy Dallavale, “Neither Idolatry nor Iconoclasm: A Critical Essentialism for Catholic Feminist Theology,” *Horizons* 25, no. 1 (1998): 23–42.

31. *Ibid.*, 42.

32. Susan Abrahams has recently published a significant critique of strategic essentialism, with particular reference to the manner in which such essentialism seems “remarkably easy to co-opt for right-wing nationalist goals.” Further, she observes how the early ideals of strategic essentialism have been lost in moves that co-opt strategic essentialism in theological anthropology. She notes, “Strategic essentialism as a category was significantly influenced by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s presentation as a concept to challenge Western feminisms historical complicity with imperialism. Spivak’s understanding of the term, however, was in the context of cultural negotiations. Thus transnational feminist work not only identifies patriarchal institutional control of women but also explores the ways in which gendered, cultural, and political identity can be mobilized as part of a strategic proposal to patriarchy. Spivak never used strategic essentialism as an anthropological category.” Susan Abraham, “Strategic Essentialism in Nationalist Discourses: Sketching a Feminist Agenda in the Study of Religion,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 161, 157.

33. Irigaray is actually from Belgium, but is commonly categorized with the French school of philosophy, where she has published most of her feminist theory.

or unique unconscious and aesthetic experience. In fact, Irigaray wants to challenge the entire Western tradition of phallogocentric culture and to encourage woman toward a radical femininity. She claims that “the possibility of sex-specific cultural and political ethics is our best chance today.”³⁵ By affirming embodiment (and bodily epistemology) and sexual desire toward the other, women are encouraged to pursue their *jouissance* and find themselves “anew, as subjects.”³⁶ Many feminist theologians work within this framework. In the 1993 volume *Transfigurations*, essayists contributed to a discourse relating feminist theology to French feminist theory.³⁷ Tina Beattie is a contemporary scholar seeking to utilize Irigaray’s thought within a Catholic feminist theological account of difference.³⁸ In dealing with issues of race and gender, Ellen Armour uses Derrida as a supplement to Irigaray in order to bring white feminism “to its end” and to respond to the challenges of difference.³⁹ Yet Irigaray remains troubling for the risks she takes in moving toward essentialism. Foundational feminist theologian Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza stands at odds with Irigaray’s tactics, claiming that Irigaray wishes to “divinize sexual difference,” while Schüssler Fiorenza’s own agenda is to demystify gender constructs that are dualistic, heterosexist and essentialist.⁴⁰ Parsons defends Irigaray against these charges, and

34. Semiotic refers to signs and symbols. Irigaray argues that there is a unique semiotic flourishing within the emancipated woman, especially as the Oedipal structuring of language is exposed. See Luce Irigaray, *The Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

35. Irigaray, *Thinking the Difference: For a Peaceful Revolution* (New York: Routledge 1994), 6.

36. Irigaray, “Women-Amongst-Themselves: Creating a Woman-to-Woman Sociality,” in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 190.

37. C. W. Maggie Kim, Susan M. St. Ville, and Susan M. Simonaitis, *Transfigurations: Theology and the French Feminists* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

38. Beattie argues that Irigaray “mimetically refigures the *persona* configured within the [Catholic] narrative in a subversive affirmation of the potential of Catholic symbolism for the creation of a culture of sexual difference.” Tina Beattie, *God’s Mother, Eve’s Advocate: A Marian Narrative of Women’s Salvation* (London: Continuum, 2002), 35.

39. Ellen T. Armour, *Deconstruction: Feminist Theology and the Problem of Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

points to the openness of Irigaray's woman and her overall refusal to define woman. For Parsons, Irigaray challenges the easy alternative between essentialism and social constructionism.⁴¹ Similarly, Diana Fuss argues that Irigaray is in fact teasing out the contradiction employed by Aristotle that a women's essential characteristic is to have no essence; for Fuss, Irigaray's employment of essentialism is strategic, a "lever of displacement."⁴² Yet Irigaray is still extremely close to a heteronormative account of women that seems to rely on certain embodied experiences (especially sexual) for human naming and flourishing. Here lies the totalizing dimension of Irigaray's proposal. This becomes particularly clear as soon as one thinks beyond woman and the feminine—and it becomes clear too for any theological account that wants to affirm the dignity of celibacy. Regardless of whatever open-ended possibilities are imagined, Irigaray still sets up a strict boundary around "women" and proposes a self-definition that seems inadequate to the challenge of difference.

In short, what began as an enterprise seeking the equality of all women everywhere has become punctured by the very notions that first provided its impetus. This does not signal the failure of feminist theology, as some suggest,⁴³ but only a challenge that has not yet

40. Sarah Coakley, "Feminist Theology," in *Modern Christian Thought*, volume 2, *The Twentieth Century*, ed. James C. Livingston et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 437.

41. Parsons, "The Dilemma of Difference," 71.

42. Diana Fuss, "Essentially Speaking: Luce Irigaray's Language of Essence," *Hypatia* 3 (Winter 1989): 62–80.

43. Angie Pears describes the history of feminist theology as one of "fierce expectation followed by limited effectiveness." Pears, "The Problematization of Feminisms and Feminist Informed Theologies in the Twenty-First Century," 221. Though she fails to define her understanding of these terms, I would argue that this is an inaccurate reading of this brief period of intellectual activity. Consider a comment made by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. "I am often asked, 'With whom did you study feminist biblical criticism?' And I usually reply, 'Feminist biblical studies as an academic area of inquiry did not exist forty years ago when I was a student. Therefore, we had to invent it.' This question does not simply bespeak historical forgetfulness. It also reveals how far we have come in the past thirty years. I remember in the 1960s when I could read everything that appeared on feminism; in the 70s when I could still read everything in feminist studies in religion; in the 80s when I was still aware of everything published in feminist biblical studies; and in the 90s when I could still keep tabs on everything that appeared in feminist

been resolved. And notwithstanding this unresolved problem, it is necessary for the church to continue to engage with the critique leveled by feminist theology against the Christian tradition. In many quarters it seems very little has changed since the explosion of feminist theological scholarship in the 1970s.⁴⁴ Systematic theology is an apt example of a scholarly field that has shown little interest in issues of gender and has generally failed to engage with scholarship from women and from non-Western and nonelitist contexts. The same apathy can be felt in many pockets of the church; in many quarters there is still outright denunciation of any theology that would present itself as “feminist.”⁴⁵ If a theological framework, feminist or otherwise, is going to account adequately for human difference, it would appear that a different course is required.⁴⁶

Mistranslation: A Different Language?

It is significant that central to Irigaray’s critique of Western phallogocentric culture is her critique of language. Taking her cue from Lacan, Irigaray suggests that the entire Western system of thought and symbol is corrupted by a phallogocentric desire to name and oppress the other. This system is so entrenched that women have no option but to create their own semiotic world with its own space to experience embodied life. This is not to suggest that women

Christian Testament/Early Christian studies. Yet, today, I find it impossible to be aware of everything published in the field. Feminist biblical studies have grown into an intellectually strong and healthy discipline.” Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Reaffirming Feminist/Womanist Biblical Scholarship,” *Encounter* 67, no. 4 (2006): 362.

44. Issues such as women’s ordination highlight this fact.

45. Consider the populist antifeminist rhetoric of Christian figures such as Mark Driscoll, Wayne Grudem, and John Piper.

46. It is worth noting that Angie Pears argues for a more radical contextual approach as a way forward, particularly in regard to seeking justice. I am not sure how much more contextual feminist theology could be. See Pears, “The Problematicization of Feminisms and Feminist Informed Theologies in the Twenty-First Century.”

can exist outside language games. Rather, Irigaray suggests, “in this division between the two sides of sexual difference, one part of the world would be searching for a way to find and speak its meaning, its side of signification, while the other would be questioning whether meaning is still to be found in language, value, and life.”⁴⁷ Whether Irigaray’s alternative semiotic is indeed possible is a matter of contention; yet Irigaray’s critique of the ordering of language is potent, and theology of any vein would be foolish to ignore her analysis.

At the Britain and Ireland School of Feminist Theology Conference in 1998, Alison Webster presented a paper titled “Translating Difference: Lesbian Theological Reflections.” Webster used the biography of Eva Hoffman⁴⁸ to stimulate discussion of the problem of difference. She suggested that the difficulty in providing an account of difference in scholarship may come down to issues of translation as opposed to issues of description. Webster suggests that when we draw from experience we are drawing on a multiplicity of changing categories. For instance, sometimes we may find it necessary to speak from a gender category, other times from a class or race category, and so on. We understandably select these categories as means of translation, and then go on to enact such translation in our language exchange. Webster observes,

It set me thinking theologically about what we, as feminist theologians, are after through our encounter with difference. Is it merely to hear articulated an infinite variety of partial visions—or is it to bring these visions back together in some way? Are we in search of a common language? Or just dreaming of one? Or trying to create one?⁴⁹

47. Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London: Continuum, 2004), 126.

48. E. Hoffman, *Lost in Translation* (London: Minerva, 1991).

49. Alison Webster, “Translating Difference: Lesbian Theological Reflections,” *Feminist Theology: The Journal of the Britain & Ireland School of Feminist Theology* 21 (1999): 50.

Webster provides no answer, but in reflecting on the problem of difference in her own life,⁵⁰ she begins to nudge toward a common language—and this may be precisely what a Christian feminist theology needs.

In my judgment, feminist theology has reached an impasse in regard to difference because it has largely failed to draw on the categories that give rise to its own discourse—that is, theological categories. For instance, in a recent monograph Margaret D. Kamitsuka has provided a lengthy exploration of “woman” in light of difference. In her 2007 publication *Feminist Theology and the Challenge of Difference*,⁵¹ Kamitsuka argues for a retrieval of women’s experience in ways that acknowledge race and sexuality in more transparent terms. Kamitsuaka seeks to offer theoretical tools that may “be deployed to face the challenge of difference for constructive theological purposes.”⁵² Along the way, she shows how postmodern, poststructuralist, postcolonial, queer, and postliberal theories help to articulate the problems and to define the human subject who is embodied, sexed, and different. She concludes with the questions,

Is our analysis of selfhood, power, and agency full enough to be able to reconsider how normalizing terms such as these (and many other besides) might be reworked? Can the contested terms be negotiated, even appropriated, as feminist technologies of care that could foster a spiritual performativity celebratory of difference?⁵³

Kamitsuaka’s is a considered and thorough piece of constructive theory. She has clearly articulated the challenges to contemporary feminist theories (especially in relation to the problems of power⁵⁴),

50. Webster’s paper was a series of reflections on the varied relationships she has enjoyed and the categories of experience that matter or seem significant to each relationship.

51. Kamitsuka, *Feminist Theology and the Challenge of Difference*.

52. *Ibid.*, 26.

53. *Ibid.*, 158.

54. See chapter 4, “Theorizing Power.”

and she employs hermeneutical moves to celebrate rather than flatten difference. However, by her own admission Kamitsuka seeks to “make the case for how a poststructuralist feminism that is attentive to difference can go forward productively in negotiation with the (patriarchal, heteronormative, etc.) Christian tradition.”⁵⁵ That is, Kamitsuka has made a methodological commitment to contemporary philosophical theory, *and then* moved to integrate such theory with the Christian tradition. This is a common methodological strategy in contemporary feminist theology; the work of gender, analytic, and poststructural theorists has been decisive in helping feminist theologians to articulate the challenges and responses to the problem of difference. However, when this strategy is adopted, theology is unable to consider—not as a secondary matter but as a starting point—the resources of Christian theological language.

In this book, I will argue that Christian theological discourse provides both a common theological language that can reframe the conversation around gender and difference, as well as a subtly (yet radically) different way of formulating the question of difference. The questions I will raise in relation to Christian doctrine are fundamentally questions of discourse. Christian theology is discourse. God’s self, God’s revelatory acts, God’s telos are themes that give rise to particular habits of speech. As Rowan Williams suggests, the theological endeavor is one of “forming a consistent speech for God.”⁵⁶ In this sense, Christian theology is always pressing toward a coherent language of God and creation. Admittedly, the grammar of doctrinal theology may seem like a foreign dialect to the kind of feminist theology I have recounted in the preceding pages.⁵⁷ Yet I

55. Kamitsuka, *Feminist Theology and the Challenge of Difference*.

56. Rowan Williams, “Prologue,” in *On Christian Theology*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), xii.

57. In this publication, terms such as *feminist theology* and *systematic theology* are often used. For the sake of clarity, some mapping is required at this point. First, feminist theology is a broad

hope to show that difference is first and foremost a question not of experience but of Christian doctrine. Many feminists will be uneasy with such an approach. I do not wish to suggest that appeals to individual experience render discourse a-theological; but I hope to show that doctrine can provide an alternative—and surprisingly rich and enabling—resource for feminist enquiry. I will argue that an approach grounded systematically in the tradition of Christian doctrine can provide theological coherency to otherwise unresolved problems of gender and difference.

Difference, Doctrine, and Discourse

Feminist theology has attempted to build its anthropology upon reflection on oppression. The importance of consciousness raising and giving women the power to speak cannot be overestimated. Yet in considering such tactics, it is fitting to question the kind of human experience that has been paramount in such feminist anthropology. By beginning with different human experiences, feminist theology was destined from the outset for radical fragmentation.

discipline that employs, at the least, a hermeneutic of suspicion in religious discourse. Such discourse is not necessarily related to the Christian tradition, and further, “feminist theologians” do not necessarily represent a confessional standpoint. The category of *feminist theology* as used in this book is meant to designate those theologians who are engaging, critiquing, and reconstructing the Christian theological tradition. There is no assumption made against confessional positioning (hence, post-Christians such as Daphne Hampson are most certainly included). Consequently, when categories such as *prayer* are discussed, I am assuming that whether confessionally Christian or not, a feminist theology aimed toward the Christian tradition would account for “prayer” as a matter of particular Christian theological discourse. Insofar as *systematic theology* is concerned, I am happy to contend with a generous and broad definition, such as that offered by Sarah Coakley: “An integrated presentation of Christian truth, however perceived (that’s what *system* here connotes); wherever one chooses to start has implications for the whole, and the parts must fit together. However briefly, or lengthily, it is explicated (and the shorter versions, have, in Christian tradition, often been as elegant, effective, and enduring as the longer ones), systematic theology attempts to provide a coherent and alluring unfolding of the connected parts of its vision.” See “Is There a Future for Gender and Theology? On Gender, Contemplation, and the Systematic Task,” *Criterion* 47, no. 1 (2009): 4.

Methodologically, one might say that difference per se has had no anchor. I will argue that the discourse of Christian doctrine can provide an explanation not only of the goodness of difference but also of humanity's inability to navigate the challenges of otherness. This may seem an insular attempt to defend Christian territory; but that is not the intention of this publication. Indeed, I wish to show that Christian doctrine has its own resources of self-criticism, and that these resources can be an important part of a feminist critique of the complicity of Christian discourse in oppression and abuse. I wish to show, further, that such a doctrinal approach to feminist discourse is uniquely positioned to provide a means of articulating human flourishing, especially in relation to creaturely difference. This is not to suggest that I will ignore or merely contest insights from contemporary secular theory. Rather, I will aim for a more complex and fluid relation between Christian and secular discourse. Again, Williams is instructive here:

Theology seeks also . . . to witness to the gospel's capacity for being at home in more than one cultural environment, and to displace enough confidence to believe that this gospel can be rediscovered at the end of a long and exotic detour through strange idioms and structures of thoughts. . . . But there can come a point here where the passage through unfamiliar media of thought provokes a degree of crisis: is what is emerging actually identical or at least continuous with what has been believed and articulated? This is a question that prompts further probing of what the "fundamental categories" really mean.⁵⁸

Contemporary critical theory has made claims against metaphysics that cannot be ignored. And yet theology does not simply have to let other disciplines set the rules for discourse. Given that much contemporary theory is directed to discourse itself, theological method has been left in a puzzling state. What is easily forgotten, as

58. Williams, "Prologue," xiv.

Paul DeHart notes, is the way method in theology is “inextricably bound up with doctrinal issues.”⁵⁹ Contemporary theoretical discourse often fails to understand the particularities of Christian grammar (what Williams calls the “fundamental categories” of doctrine), and is therefore unable on its own terms to resolve the matters that remain so problematic for feminist theologians.

I will examine three areas of classical Christian doctrine: the doctrine of creation, the doctrine of the fall, and the doctrine of the Trinity. Each doctrine is considered in terms of its explanatory power in relation to the challenge of difference. Christian doctrine tells a particular story of God, a God who creates and redeems, and I will argue that this story can inform a contemporary discourse about difference, and can reframe theoretical questions for a contemporary feminist theology. In exploring Christian doctrine, I will engage mainly with a range of contemporary theologians. My aim here is to stage a dialogue between the contemporary schools of feminist theology and systematic theology, each of which has tended to ignore the contributions of the other.⁶⁰ This approach will allow me to test the claim that Christian discourse has its own internal resources for exploring theoretical questions of difference.

In focusing on the particular doctrinal narrative of creation—fall—redemption, I am not concerned to develop a narrative theology, or to perpetuate the problematic notion that “God is a story.”⁶¹ Rather than seeking to claim allegiance to scriptural imagination in opposition to abstract metaphysical conceptions,⁶²

59. Paul J. DeHart, *The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology, ed. Gareth Jones and Lewis Ayres (Blackwell: Oxford, 2006), xv.

60. Of course, this publication will demonstrate how this is changing. For a helpful introduction into the ways in which feminist theologians are engaging more intentionally with classical doctrine, see Joy Ann McDougall, “Keeping Feminist Faith with Christian Traditions: A Look at Christian Feminist Theology Today,” *Modern Theology* 24, no. 1 (January 2008): 103–24.

61. For an important critique of postliberal narrative approaches, see Francesca Aran Murphy, *God Is Not a Story: Realism Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

my approach seeks to work with a broader sense of “narrative” and “tradition.” As valuable as postliberalism has been in reconfiguring the role of Scripture in theological method, the approach taken here is one that accepts a wide network of “tradition” as important to claims of Christian identity and Christian discourse. Thus “narrative” is deployed in a somewhat ad hoc manner in this book, one that resists the temptation to locate a fixed and definite internal logic of the tradition. My aim is not to start out with an inflexibly consistent hermeneutical or methodological procedure, but instead to deploy a more flexible methodological pattern that I believe reflects something of the untidiness and complexity of Christian language and tradition.

Ninna Edgardh notes that despite the troubling status of difference in contemporary scholarship, to follow Christ is to be grounded in “the conviction that God, who is more different from us than anything we could imagine, takes on our own shape as a human being in order to make humanity change, and thus make us all different.”⁶³ Though critical theory often garbles the particularities of Christian grammar, contemporary theology should give doctrine a chance to speak on its own terms. The argument of this approach is that the most potent and resourceful theological response to the challenging questions of gender and difference is to be found in a retrieval of a doctrinal framework for feminist theology.

62. A sharp distinction that George Lindbeck easily assumes. See George Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. James L. Buckley, (London: SCM, 2002).

63. Ninna Edgardh, “Difference and Desire—a Queer Reading,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 48, no. 1 (2009): 43.