CLASSICAL THEISM, PANENTHEISM, AND PANTHEISM: ON THE RELATION BETWEEN GOD CONSTRUCTION AND GENDER CONSTRUCTION

by Nancy Frankenberry

Abstract. The argument of this article is that, philosophically, there are but three broad conceptual models that Western thought employs in thinking about the meaning of *God.* At the level of greatest generality, these are the models known as classical theism, pantheism, and panentheism. The essay surveys and updates these three conceptual models in light of recent writings, finds more flaws in classical theism and panentheism than in pantheism, and suggests a feminist response to each.

Keywords: classical theism; feminism; models of God; nature; panentheism; pantheism.

Despite the appearance of a confusing diversity of symbols and images for what might be meant by the term *God* in today's highly destabilized theological climate, only three broad conceptual models figure, philosophically, in the Western discussion for rendering religion's language of devotion into philosophy's language of reflection. At the level of greatest generality, these are the models known as classical theism, pantheism, and panentheism. Logically, these three forms exhaust the possibilities of relating the terms *God* and *nature,* by locating the reference range or ontological target of God-language either "outside," "inside," or coincidental with, the whole of reality. In this paper I canvas and update these three conceptual models in light of recent philosophical writings and also suggest a feminist response to each. My focus is philosophical, rather than theological, and my subtext concerns the subtle relations between

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gender construction and God construction, for although it has become customary to affirm that conceptions of God are imaginative constructs, it is comparatively seldom that anyone other than feminist critics bothers to specify what, socially, they are constructed of, or who does the constructing, or how, when, or where.

Classical theism is defined by a set of metaphysical and moral attributes associated with absolutist conceptions of perfection derived from Greek philosophy and accorded to a Supreme Being. For classical theism, the God-question in an age of science is the question of whether, in addition to everything else that exists, there also exists an entity describable in terms of such predicates as necessary, eternal, infinite, unchanging, self-sufficient, simple, one, and all-powerful and all-knowing. Panentheism is defined as the conception of "all in God," or God as an all-inclusive whole, sympathetically feeling the feelings of all the parts and comprising a self-surpassing totality. For panentheism, the God-question in an age of science is the question of whether or in what sense the whole of nature forms a macrocosmic unity that is also a complex, integrated individual. Pantheism is defined as the doctrine that God is neither externally related to the world, as in classical theism, nor related by asymmetrical internal relations, as in panentheism, but rather is identical with the world. As the impish philosopher Miss Piggy puts it, "Everything is simply divine." For pantheism, the God-question in an age of science is no longer the ontological question of *whether* a Supreme Being exists, nor even the cosmological question of *how* contemporary relativity physics might be compatible with the metaphysics of a macrocosmic unity of all reality. It becomes, instead, the empirical question of just where humans happen to see the face of God in nature and the semantic question of whether to call it God or Nature.

The Model of Classical Theism

Classical theism may be traced in the West primarily to the influence of the Greek conception of the nature of perfection, leading to an exaltation of the completely changeless and necessary, and to the postulation of an absolute creator as the unconditioned cause and purpose of the world. This model, although now in profound disrepute, provided the underpinning of a substantial area of human culture for more than 2,000 years. Christian theology, principally in the hands of such architects as Anselm, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin, formulated its original reflections about the identity of the God of biblical religion in terms of this philosophical

conceptuality. In doing so, it tended toward oversimplification. According to the one-sided logic of the Absolute, the difference between God and the world is conceived exclusively in terms of opposition: God is eternal while the world is temporal; God is unchanging, whereas the world is in flux; God is impassible whereas the world is affected by suffering; God is one, whereas the world is many; God is self-sufficient, whereas the world is dependent. For feminist philosophers, the invidious contrasts presupposed in this list of metaphysical categories invite the question of whether the preference for the one over the many, for the independent above the dependent, and for the incorporeal over the material is itself complicitous in the history of Western thought with the establishment and consolidation of male authority.

Doctrines of divine sovereignty combined with divine immutability led to the conception of an exclusively self-sufficient, omniscient, and all-powerful deity, the totally Other. As the God of the onto-theological tradition became the God of identity, of self-coincidence, of a perfection unaffected by any otherness, and a self-sufficiency amounting to narcissistic self-contemplation, his nature was early on exempted from all the metaphysical categories which were applied to individual things in the temporal world. The roots of this metaphysical conception run deep in the soil of Mesopotamia and Egypt, whose kings stood to their subject populations in the same relation in which God was to stand to the whole world. Later the Christian Church, under the influence of its partiality for the static categories of Greek metaphysics and the imperial qualities of rulership, "gave unto God the attributes which belonged exclusively to Caesar" (Whitehead 1978, 342). In the final metaphysical sublimation in which the imperial deity became the one absolute, omnipotent, omniscient source of all being, he also became internally complete, requiring for his existence no relations to anything beyond himself.

The incoherence of the classical conception of God has been so amply documented in the modern period that its persistence in an age of science seems as much a matter for psychoanalytic study as for philosophical comment. It is evident, for example, that the doctrine of omniscience, if interpreted as simultaneous knowledge of past, present, and future contingent events, cannot be reconciled with genuine creaturely freedom. The doctrine of omnipotence, if interpreted as unilateral power to effect any possible state of affairs, creates notorious problems of theodicy. And the logic of the *relation* asserted between the infinite God and finite things is so murky as to give rise to the acute dilemma that, if the alleged infinite is set over

against the finite, so as to exclude it, how can it properly be described as infinite? Or, alternatively, if the finite is set over against the infinite, is *it* not absolutized, with the result that the infinite becomes a superfluous hypothesis?

Indeed, the problem of the intelligibility of classical theism provides the most telling philosophical objection to it. Whenever divine transcendence gets modeled in spatial or temporal terms, it winds up weaving insuperable paradoxes around a God said to exist "beyond space" or "before time." In the fourth century, in answer to the question of just what was God doing before creation, it was still possible for Augustine to dismiss such troublemakers by snorting, "He was preparing hell for people who ask questions like that!" But in the twentieth century, inquiring minds want to know what the nonmetaphorical truth of "heaven," "hell," or "creation" could possibly be, and the traditional theological evasions are simply not philosophically satisfying. For many contemporary critics, it is no longer very informative to be told by theologians that human concepts only apply analogically, metaphorically, symbolically, or paradoxically to the divine. As long as classical theism remains persistently incapable of explicating with any cogency why the analogy is apt, or the metaphor fitting, or what the symbol is symbolic of, or how the paradox is intelligible, it forfeits any cognitive content to the use of God-language and might just as well admit to sheer, unrelieved agnosticism.

An even more fundamental critique of classical theism has been produced by feminist critics who find in the classical conception of God a not-too-subtle mask of an authoritarian patriarch, a "Father Knows Best" who, although removed from the world, controls it according to plan and keeps human beings in a state of infantile subjection. Although it is unlikely that Mark Twain imagined the feminist implications of his quip that "God created man in his own image, and man, being a gentleman, returned the compliment," precisely that recognition has helped to fuel the feminist repudiation of what Whitehead called the "metaphysical compliments" paid to the image of God. It is even more unlikely that the American theologian John Dillenberger, writing some years before the beginning of the second wave of feminism, anticipated the confession of sexism we can now read in his observation that:

> The general notions of the omnipotence and omniscience of God define power and knowing in ways that are actually analogous to what sinful man would like to be able to do and know. . . . . Sinful man would like to have all power to eliminate the problems that frustrate him and the world, and to know all things—past, present and future. . . . The traditional conceptions of

omnipotence and omniscience are among the clearest illustrations of the way in which man has made God in his own image, in the image of his sinful self. (Dillenberger 1964, 158)

The most explicit connections between "sinful man" and his construction of a supreme being have been exposed by radical feminist thinkers such as Mary Daly (1973), Naomi Goldenberg (1979), and Daphne Hampson (1990). For these feminists and others who share with Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud the suspicion that the idea of God is the original overhead projection screen on which human values are objectified, the entire critique of Western theism becomes a case of saying not simply that the emperor has no clothes, but that "There Is No Emperor." At the same time, other feminists have been producing theological constructions which invite us to admire his new clothes, or even to construct a Queen or Mother Goddess out of whole cloth, as it were. My own view is that these efforts do not get to the root of the anthropomorphic problem. The best way to think about that problem, it seems to me, is modestly, tentatively, nondogmatically—and in the following four ways. First, simply as a matter of principle, male roles and functions taken as analogies for God are in no way superior to parallel analogies drawn from female experience. Second, the parent image, whether Father-God or Mother-Goddess, is a seriously flawed image, one which frequently reinforces patterns of permanent infantilism and cuts off moral maturity and responsibility. Third, if biblical images or theological concepts of God as predominantly male are inherently silly, images or concepts which are predominantly female are no less anthropomorphic. Fourth, even the project of listening to women's voices, of grounding theological construction in the specificity of "women's experiences" may not sufficiently take into account the prior construction of those experiences by an androcentric culture and language in which, as French feminists remind us, "woman" is only effect of "man."

For these reasons, the critique of the classical tradition undertaken by process theologians and others is incomplete insofar as it omits an analysis of gender inflections implicated in the metaphysics of divine power. From the perspective of feminists and other proponents of liberation, the history of the theological discussion of divine attributes is now being read as thoroughly embedded in a discourse of domination that disproportionately inscribes male bias and underwrites masculine identity projects. Why, one might ask, are not sensitivity, compassion, and tenderness associated with the understanding of divine power in the recent literature of the prevalent "perfect being theology" (see Morris 1987), just as are

independence, impassibility, and self-sufficiency? Surely the reasons have as much to do with the history of asymmetrical power relations sustained by a "masculinist prejudice" as with the "monopolar prejudice" exposed by process metaphysics. One could speculate that the psychogenetic developmental process which in boys requires initial separation and subsequent connection and which in girls follows a pattern of connection seeking differentiation (Chodorow 1978), finds its metaphysical expression in the masculine construction of the classical dualisms that form the basis for the very mythos of Western culture. Or one could theorize gender differences as *the* paradigm by which hierarchical oppositions of any kind get posited in the symbolic order, and played out politically according to a pattern of seeking to absorb the other into the same. But whether one relies upon a psychoanalytic feminist theory of gender construction or emphasizes the social and cultural history of gender roles and their institutional organization, the goal is to replace the logic of opposition with the logic of difference, and to displace any absolute difference *between* male and female, masculine and feminine, in favor of foregrounding the multiple differences *within* each.

To the logical, philosophical, and feminist critiques of the model of classical theism, one more, the scientific, deserves to be mentioned. Just as the concepts of substance and matter are cosmologically outdated in a world of interrelatedness and processive becoming—where matter turns out to be energy "mattering"—so, too, the classical model of God has declined hand in hand with the mechanistic conception of nature that so long accompanied it in the West. Although Thomas Kuhn's work has taught us that there is no clear criterion for telling just when an old paradigm is so overwhelmed by anomalies that it is worth abandoning, many contemporary thinkers would be willing to employ the distinction Imre Lakatos (see 1970) has drawn between "degenerative" and "progressive" research programs in the theory of scientific rationality to conclude that classical theism is a degenerative program, one that has stalled long enough.

THE MODEL OF PANENTHEISM

More progressive, in the opinion of a good number of contemporary theologians and philosophers, is the framework afforded by panentheism, or "neoclassical metaphysics," as Charles Hartshorne calls it, more generally known as process theology in one of its several forms. Conceived as the ultimate whole, God is the final unity of all reality, ceaselessly in process of becoming, according to a model

which privileges becoming over being and values relationality as much as independence. In the words of the biologist Charles Birch and the theologian John Cobb:

> God is not the world, and the world is not God. But God includes the world, and the world includes God. God perfects the world, and the world perfects God. There is no world apart from God, and there is no God apart from some world. Of course there are some differences. Whereas no world can exist without God, God can exist without *this* world. Not only our planet but the whole universe may disappear and be superseded by something else, and God will continue. But since God, like all living things, only perfectly, embodies the principle of internal relations, God's life depends on there being some world to include. (Birch and Cobb 1981, 196-97)

To the classical contention that God differs from all else categorially, panentheism adds the claim that God is categorially *similar* to all else in another aspect of the divine reality. Charles Hartshorne's presentation of the detailed logic of this model in terms of "dual transcendence" achieves a nonparadoxical articulation of the manner in which God can be said to be *both* necessary and contingent, *both* finite and infinite, *both* temporal and eternal, *both* changing and unchanging, *both* many and one, *both* actual and potential, *both* cause and effect. The tricky conversion of binarisms into dipolarities is accomplished without formal contradiction by virtue of maintaining a distinction of "aspects"; that is, the different respects, either concrete or abstract, in which each contrasting term is predicated. On the assumption that the concrete is related to the abstract as the inclusive to the included, Hartshorne is able to show that *how* the divine actuality exists, concretely, is contingent, finite, temporal, changing, etc., while the bare fact *that* the divine exists is necessary, infinite, eternal, unchanging, etc. In other words, the traditional categories according to which classical theists sought to affirm the difference between God and the world refer, for panentheism, only to the abstract pole of the divine dipolarity, whereas all the action, or value, resides in the concrete pole which includes the abstract. In this way there is no stupefying paradox in the panentheistic claim that God is necessarily contingent, absolutely related, infinitely finite, eternally temporal, etc., in contrast to creatures who are only contingently contingent, relatively related, finitely finite, etc. (Hartshorne 1948, 1970).

From this simplified account, it should at least be possible to discern the bare-bones logic of panentheism. Less apparent, even after the last decades of scholarly debate, are the problems with this logic. The four issues which I only briefly present here have to do, first, with a concern drawn from feminist theory in general; second, with

an objection from astrophysics; third, with what may be called the Ode-on-a-Grecian-Urn objection; and fourth, with a strictly logical point.

Not surprisingly, the process view of relationality as literally constitutive of God as well as self has proved deeply appealing to feminists in the field of religious studies. Indeed, if there is currently one term in feminist theology and critical theory in general that ought to be paid overtime, as Humpty-Dumpty said, because it does so much work, it is "relations." By now, the literature verges on becoming a pastiche of platitudes about the power of "relations." The philosophically provocative question is, what *type* of relations? The model provided by process philosophy spells out the meaning of relationality in terms that presuppose the general theory of physical relativity, offering a conception of the universe as an inexhaustible totality whose unity is implicated in any single selective abstraction from it. The fundamental image of nature as a web of interpenetrating fields and integrated totalities now replaces the older notion of self-contained, externally related particles. The being of any entity, in this account, is constituted by its relationships and its participation in more inclusive patterns. Freedom of self-determination is possible in the processive sense whereby the becoming of the many internally constitutive relations of causal influence yields a new emergent unity that is more than the sum of its efficient causes. Therefore, both external and internal relations characterize the becoming of actual entities.

But how inclusive are the patterns and how internal are the relations? And are organic models what we want here? From the standpoint of gender politics, is the time perhaps ripe for reevaluating the premium currently being placed on wholeness, unity, the holistic, and the organic, and for remembering that, historically, women have suffered not so much from fragmentation in their lives as from repressive unity? After all, feudal society as well as reactionary, totalitarian movements in the modern period have continuously employed organic metaphors for the social order. Even the medieval dualistic worldview could see social relations as a web of interconnection—albeit under the sacred canopy of heaven, not to be torn by individuals stepping outside the place rightfully ordained to them by God in the great hierarchical chain of being. But those who consider it the task of feminism to tear away at deep social cleavages and pervasive webs of dominance and exploitation, precisely to shatter the unity of the patriarchal cosmos, will need plenty of elbow room. Do we get that, or enough of that, from a panentheistic understanding of the relation of whole and parts? I am

suggesting that organicism's political, gender, and class preferences need to be examined more expressly by process theologians.

A related concern has to do with the use of the body-soul analogy to depict the world as the body of God and God as the soul of the world. Can not this analogy too easily invite a relapse into the gender-inflected ideas of the soul as the male principle (active, of course) and the body as the subordinate, passive partner? In what way does the image of the "male" mind, exerting control over the unruly "feminine" body, continue to inform persistent, unconscious views of the distinction between "God" and the "world" even in the panentheistic construction? The metaphorical pull of familiar male obsessions is surely not far from the surface here.

The second issue I wish to raise concerns an additional claim found in panentheism, beyond the use of the whole-parts model, and that is the idea that this one web of life is an integrated totality with its own emergent properties, a whole that is newly totalized each moment. "Totality" or "all-inclusive whole" is thus a token-reflexive term referring to a new "one" every time it is used. Such a God is said to receive from and influence each newly arising process of becoming. From the standpoint of scientific theory, the most serious problem regarding the coherence of this model is the fact that it appears to require an absolute simultaneity of events present in the divine experience and a division of the universe as a whole into "past" and "future." This result conflicts with the central tenet of relativity theory that there is no unique simultaneity between individuals in different inertial systems. The scientific problems with the panentheistic model so boggle the imagination that at least one philosopher of science who has wrestled with the question has been led to speak of "the God of the Infinitely Interlaced Personalities" (Fitzgerald 1972, 262). Whether Charles Hartshorne's interpretation of Henry Stapp's revision of Bell's Theorem succeeds in retrieving a single character out of the multiple divine personalities is currently an open question.

Even if these questions can be adequately resolved, there remains a third feature of panentheism that invites critical consideration. Ingredient in the idea of deity, as Hartshorne explicates it, is the idea of "a universally powerful though not all-determining freedom, itself with aspects of contingency and finitude, unsurpassably influencing as well as unsurpassably influenced, an unborn and undying but not immutable Life able to appreciate and cherish everlastingly our and all creatures' experiences," and in this way "endow our fleeting days with abiding significance" (Hartshorne 1983, 362). Thus, for Hartshorne, "abiding significance" becomes

a matter of preservation of value without loss in the divine life in which, he affirms, all achievements are everlastingly received and integrated so as to be fully retained. Not the actors, who perish, but their acts are considered immune to loss in the divine cosmic awareness. In order for value really to be meaningful, and in order that the wellsprings of human motivation not run dry, Hartshorne and other process thinkers seem to think that the everlastingness of value must be guaranteed as a matter of strict metaphysical necessity, not simply as a matter of hope. But is it necessary that something must endure forever in order for its significance to matter? Is it not sufficient that our fragile, novel, risk-filled acts of radical contingency can strut and fret their hour across the stage, even if they are heard no more? Is not death the mother of beauty rather than of tales signifying nothing?

My final question concerning the model of panentheism has to do with the use of the ontological argument, in a particular modal version, to establish the necessity of the abstract pole of the divine nature. Even if it were possible to represent the proof correctly within a consistent system of modal logic, this proof would still be vulnerable to the oldest objection of all, namely, that it is invalid to deduce existence (= ontological status) from thought (= logical status). This vulnerability is obscured in Hartshorne's modal version of the ontological argument because he uses, in addition to the terms *existence* and *thought,* a third term, *actuality.* Therefore, his is not an argument that moves from the *thought* of God through the *essence* of God to a conclusion about the necessary *existence* (= *actuality*) of God. Rather than reproducing the old argument that existence (as identical with actuality) is deducible from thought, Hartshorne's ontological argument only claims that existence (as an abstraction from actuality) is deducible from thought. In this way, the argument moves from the *thought* of God through the *existence* (= *essence*) of God to the necessity of some *actuality* of God's state. In the end, only *essence* can be deduced from thought, as Hartshorne himself agrees, and that essence cannot produce any actuality because it is itself produced only as an abstraction from actuality. At best, Hartshorne's argument provides an ontological definition of the *existence* of God, in his peculiar sense of *essence,* and not a valid ontological argument for the *reality* of God.

Once one peels away the argument for the divine necessity, and with it the rationale for the entire set of abstract attributes that serve to distinguish *God* from the *world* in panentheism, what exactly is left? If all the places panentheism proves problematic turn out to be instances in which it departs from pantheism, the suspicion grows

that pantheism might be the far more straightforward position. Indeed, perhaps panentheism is just pantheism for people with Ph.D.'s.

THE MODEL OF PANTHEISM

In considering the model of pantheism, it is important to distinguish two types: monistic pantheism and pluralistic pantheism. Although classical Spinozistic pantheism devalued the importance of dynamic and pluralistic categories, and Hindu forms of pantheism have relegated change and pluralism to the realm of the illusory and phenomenal, the contemporary meaning of pantheism is not exhausted by these monistic types. Prescinding from the Hindu conception in which Brahman is above all knowledge and pantheism simply serves as a speculative justification of polytheism, and prescinding also from nineteenth-century romantic and idealistic forms of pantheism, we are left with something like the "pluralistic pantheism" to which William James finally concluded at the end of the long struggle that took him past "piecemeal supernaturalism" (James [1908] 1977; [1902] 1985, 407–10). This pantheism finds echoes today in a series of new movements, embracing everything from James Lovelock's "Gaia hypothesis" (that the earth behaves like a single entity), to the "deep ecology" movement, to the eclecticisms of all those in the entourage of the women's spirituality movement and the New Age movement. For nearly two decades, the author Annie Dillard has been writing, religiously, of the remorselessness and extravagance of nature's terrible beauty. And very recently the historian Catherine Albanese, canvasing diverse forms of pantheistic piety since the early republic, has issued this late twentieth-century report on nature religion in America: "it is alive and well, growing daily, and probably a strong suit for the century to come" (Albanese 1990, 198).

Philosophically, the chief problem with pantheism, according to critics from within the camp of panentheism, is the difficulty of deriving a warrant for the criteria of human good if pantheism is the final metaphysical truth. How are we to establish any priority in the ordering of values and commitments if nature as a whole is considered divine and known to contain evil as well as good, destruction as much as creation? In light of this concern, John Cobb and various process theologians have long recommended a fundamental distinction between Creativity as the Ultimate Reality and God as the Ultimate Actuality. In this way, God's character is identified only with the good. Others, including David Tracy, who view such a metaphysical

distinction as dubious, have pointed out that the denial of an identity between ultimate reality and God may foster the unfortunate view that ultimate reality is not finally to be trusted as radically relational and self-manifesting (Tracy 1990, 139).

The pantheistic model, in my appraisal, is capable of countering both of these cautions. In the first place, contemporary pantheism would underscore the blunt fact that the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike, whatever model of God one holds. Cobb and other critics of pantheism are right that human efforts toward compassion and justice are frequently not reinforced, matched, or mirrored by "Ultimate Reality." Nature is often indifferent to human desires and deaf to our moral urgencies, a sign, perhaps, of the remorselessness of the divine nature, but a fact that should be no more disturbing to our religious and ethical sensibilities than the discovery that the Sermon on the Mount contains no urban renewal program, or that the Buddha's injunction to practice compassion provides no guidelines for the Human Genome Project. Ethics, like government, represents the human, historical gift to life on this planet. Both come in better and worse forms, and neither needs the backing of natural law or divine command. In the second place, by collapsing the distinction between God and creativity, pluralistic pantheism indeed identifies the religious ultimate with the metaphysical ultimate, but this identification may or may not entail the further (Christian) specification of ultimate reality as radically relational and self-manifesting. Due to its extreme generality, the pantheistic model is susceptible to multiple specifications of various kinds, on lesser levels of generality as found within the more concrete symbols and images of the world's religious traditions. Indeed, one advantage that pantheism enjoys is precisely this "vagueness," in the sense stipulated by C. S. Peirce, as a logical property tolerant of instantiations that are contradictory of each other at their own level (Peirce 1934, pars. 447–50, 505–6).

According to another set of critics, the most significant objection to pantheism in its pluralistic form today is the semantic question, Why call it God? Answers to this question tend to vary according to the two major types of critics who pose it. To neo-orthodox theologians who are nettled by the idea of Nature as God, and to conservative fundamentalists who are offended by it, one answer to the question Why call it God? is, Why not?

Alternatively, when the challenge is posed by scientists and secular critics, contemporary pantheists are usually willing to say, "If the word [God] offends thee, pluck it out. But attend to Nature." On this point, the words of the early twentieth-century American poet

Harriet Monroe are unequivocal: "Call the Force God and worship it at a million shrines, and it is no less sublime; call it Nature, and worship it in scientific gropings and discoveries, and it is no less divine. It goes its own way, asking no homage, answering no questions" (Monroe 1938, 454). Like many others who recoil from anthropomorphic mythmaking, Monroe expressed astonishment at the audacity of the various religious creeds in imposing a name and anthropomorphic traits upon the Creative Force animating the universe. Indeed, avoidance of personalistic language in favor of vague talk of a "force" has become characteristic of contemporary pantheism, which often carries an emphatically depersonalized ring. What this approach may lose by way of conceptual clarity, it gains by way of adroitly sidestepping the problems that anthropomorphism creates. A good example of this tendency occurs in the well-known passage from Alice Walker's *The Color Purple,* in which the character Shug recounts to Celie the epiphany that came over her when she learned to get the old white man off her eyeball:

> It? I ast.
> Yeah, It. God ain't a he or a she, but a It.
> But what do it look like? I ast.
> Don't look like nothing, she say. It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found It. (Walker 1982, 177–78)

Shug's first step into what I am calling pantheism was trees, she says. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. One day it came to her: "that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed."

From a feminist perspective, such expressions of pan-connectedness might give one pause. Long-standing perils lurk here, as Catherine Keller has noted (1986, 1989), since the relational web remains the perennial snare for women, as well as the object of gynophobia for many men. How can a religious feeling of "not being separate at all" coexist with a self-affirming feminist politics of autonomy? What happens to women's hard-won freedom without some measure of separation and independence? Are not most women already *too* empathetic, and therefore more in need of moving toward separateness rather than toward some mystical state of pan-connectedness in which we're supposed to *bleed with the trees* now?

Nonetheless, it is hard to improve upon Shug's epiphany. Perhaps it can be amplified by considering the closing lines of Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning," which is very probably the finest expression of religious naturalism to appear in American poetry in

this century. It is a poem of sustained meditation, unfolding somewhat in the tradition of Dante's *Vita Nuova,* except that the traditional roles within the genre are reversed here, the Beatrice-figure becoming the pilgrim in whom an intensified sense of reality is accomplished, the poet acting as the guide. As the poem progresses, the woman learns that no religious vision or promise of permanence abides "As April's green endures," and that she must, as Stevens puts it elsewhere, "keep coming back and coming back/to the real" in order to find there all she needs. Finally, at the close of "Sunday Morning" she is ready to take a decisive step into the robust particularities and ambiguities of life on earth. Having recognized that the only paradise she shall know lies in her ability to respond to the encircling world ("these are the measures destined for her soul"), she can turn her awakened attention to the rich particulars of her slowly turning planet: the deer, the quail, the berries.

> We live in an old chaos of the sun,
> Or old dependency of day and night,
> Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
> Of that wide water, inescapable.
> Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
> Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
> Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
> And, in the isolation of the sky,
> At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
> Ambiguous undulation as they sink,
> Downward to darkness on extended wings.
>
> (Stevens 1976, 70)

The birds which bring "Sunday Morning" to a close embody in their movement the dance between reality and imagination Stevens pursued throughout the rest of his poetry. They make "ambiguous undulations" as they descend gracefully in the inevitable direction, the pressure that reality exerts upon them. Yet their evening flight is like the imagination: an unhurried exploration that hovers—as the final phrases of the poem themselves do—"on extended wings" before disappearing into the dark.

Yet for all that, Stevens's vision is distinctly aestheticizing, rather than politicizing, and I do not intend these reflections to signal the seductive pleasures of a retreat away from the world of political engagement. As we come to learn our place in this old chaos of the sun, slouching toward the closing years of the twentieth century, there are signs that we may also be learning to forge new links between nature religion and activist politics on behalf of the environment. Certainly, the worldview of contemporary pantheism affords as much space for collective action as for individual reverie, for

political as well as for aesthetic interests. And at the grassroots level, analysis of the membership in such movements as Green politics shows that previously privatized forms of spirituality are now going public.

It would seem, too, that of the three models considered here, pantheism is the most attractive from the perspective of what we know of women's ways of using or generating religious symbols and myths. Of course, it remains extremely difficult to generalize across cultures, religious traditions, or historical periods with respect to the different ways in which males and females appropriate or construct religious symbolism. Nevertheless, the historian Caroline Bynum has detected a certain consistency, finding that, *within* a single tradition, women's symbols and myths "tend to build from social and biological experiences; men's symbols and myths tend to invert them" (Bynum 1986). Women's mode of using symbols seems given to "the muting of opposition, whether through paradox or through synthesis"; men's mode seems characterized by "emphasis on opposition, contradiction, inversion, and conversion." Women's myths and rituals tend to explore a state of being; men's tend to build elaborate and discrete stages between self and other (Bynum, Harrell, and Richman 1986). Contemporary pantheism, I am suggesting, accords well with each of the ways Bynum identifies as "women's mode."

CONCLUSION

A final way of posing the God-question in an age of science is to ask whether any of the three models described here carries explanatory power in the interpretation of human culture, or merely a valuational use with respect to what we already know and do. Few have posed the problem as starkly as the philosopher John Post, who concludes his ardent and careful book *Metaphysics* by confronting "the thinking theist" with the following dilemma:

> Either God is a God-of-the-gaps or not. If God is a God-of-the-gaps, then Ockham's razor is very keen, in view of the enormous and growing explanatory power of the sciences and, the sciences aside, of other nontheistic accounts of the world. On the other hand, if God is not a God-of-the-gaps, hence not a matter to which Ockham's razor could apply, then it is hard to make sense of the theist's own talk about God in connection with miracles, creation, and much else. Whether there is some way out of this dilemma lies at the heart of one of the great issues of our time: how to reconcile belief in God with the growing explanatory power of the sciences and with the naturalistic view of things this growing power may imply. (Post 1991, 187)

The supernaturalism of classical theism easily qualifies that model for Ockham's razor. But naturalistic models of God such as

panentheism and pantheism, as I have tried to suggest, do not entirely escape the dilemma that Post sketches. By assimilating *God* to *Nature* in order to avoid insinuating a God-of-the-gaps, they raise the suspicion that one of the two terms is semantically superfluous.

The difficulty is not removed or even relieved by recent proposals from theologians that God-language functions in our time, not as an explanatory account, nor as a referring expression, but as a humanizing and relativizing *focus imaginarius* ("imaginary focus"). This hardly serves as a sufficient recommendation for the continued use of so ambivalent a symbol, for it invites the obvious rejoinder that the same symbol functions also to express and reinforce superstition, irrationality, fanaticism, sexism, infantilism, and eschatological abstentions from the real social and political tasks of our times. When contemporary theologians point approvingly to a number of the benign functions that the God-symbol performs, such as orienting human life around that which is supremely valuable, or providing a focus for commitment and worship, or promoting a compelling world-picture, they manage to ignore the abundant evidence of other, more malignant ways in which the symbol *God* functions. Functional theories of the God-question are for this reason inherently inconclusive and descriptively incomplete. Furthermore, functional and pragmatic constructions of a God-concept are hampered by the defect that, psychologically, the very act of designating something as a construct tends to deprive it of the pragmatic efficacy or functional utility that is claimed for it. One cannot induce oneself to believe it simply for the sake of accruing certain benefits.

A similar tension attends the rise of social constructionist theory in gender studies. We are now discovering about traditional gender categories what we once discovered about *God:* there is no essence that is given as natural or empirical, so none that can be said to be either revealed or repressed apart from variable and historically specific sets of social relations. But insofar as the social constructionist paradigm replaces essentialist assumptions by showing that gender identity itself is not something given as a fixed consequence of biology, but is constructed by cultural and historical factors, it tends to deprive individuals of various satisfactions or roles widely assumed to be "real" or "natural." By denaturalizing the sex gender system and raising up for view its contradictions, we may loosen its lingering grip on our organization of social life, but we also forfeit certain satisfactions. Cooking dinner for the family was more fun before we understood it as unpaid domestic labor upon which capitalism is systematically parasitic.

Both productions, the theological construction of God-concepts

and the social construction of gendered subjectivity, converge on the interrogation of the extent to which something that is socially and historically constructed, and known to be so, can also be personally appropriated and lived out with a measure of authenticity. If I have returned intermittently in these pages to the question of the crucial status of female agency or, more generally, of human autonomy, it is because that is currently the theoretical cutting edge both of theological studies and of gender studies as they probe the human potentiality for transcending the ideological forces by which social life and symbolic systems are culturally constructed.

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