



UNIVERSITY OF  
GLOUCESTERSHIRE

This is a peer-reviewed, post-print (final draft post-refereeing) version of the following published document, This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedit version of an article published in Sophia: International Journal of Philosophy and Tradition. The final authenticated version is available at Springer via <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11841-014-0409-1> and is licensed under All Rights Reserved license:

**Raphael, Melissa R ORCID: 0000-0003-1623-4971 (2014) A  
Patrimony of Idols: Second-Wave Jewish and Christian  
Feminist Theology and the Criticism of Religion. Sophia:  
International Journal of Philosophy and Tradition, 53 (2). pp.  
241-259. doi:10.1007/s11841-014-0409-1**

Official URL: <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11841-014-0409-1>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11841-014-0409-1>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/2355>

#### **Disclaimer**

The University of Gloucestershire has obtained warranties from all depositors as to their title in the material deposited and as to their right to deposit such material.

The University of Gloucestershire makes no representation or warranties of commercial utility, title, or fitness for a particular purpose or any other warranty, express or implied in respect of any material deposited.

The University of Gloucestershire makes no representation that the use of the materials will not infringe any patent, copyright, trademark or other property or proprietary rights.

The University of Gloucestershire accepts no liability for any infringement of intellectual property rights in any material deposited but will remove such material from public view pending investigation in the event of an allegation of any such infringement.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR TEXT.

# **A Patrimony of Idols: Second-Wave Jewish and Christian Feminist Theology and the Criticism of Religion**

**Melissa Raphael**

**Abstract** This article suggests that second-wave feminist theology between around 1968 and 1995 undertook the quintessentially religious and task of theology, which is to break its own idols. Idoloclasm was the dynamic of Jewish and Christian feminist theological reformism and the means by which to clear a way back into its own tradition. Idoloclasm brought together an inter-religious coalition of feminists who believed that idolatry is not one of the pitfalls of patriarchy but its symptom and cause, not a subspecies of sin but the primary sin of alienated relationship. The first moment of feminist theology's criticism of patriarchal power is not that it is socially unjust, but that it has licence to be unjust because it is idolatrous. Yet, neither opponents of feminist theology who dismiss it on the grounds that it is a secular import into the tradition, nor feminist students of theology and religion, have paid sufficient attention to feminist theology's counter-idolatrous turn as the religious ground of women's liberation. Here, the freedom and becoming of women is dependent on the liberation of the religious imagination from captivity to a trinity of idols: the patriarchal god called God who is no more than an inference from the political dispensation that created him; the idol of the masculine that created God in his own image *and* the idol of the feminine worshipped as an ideational object of desire only as the subordinated complement of the masculine and as a false image that becomes a substitute for the real, finite women whose agency and will it supplants.

**Keywords** Feminism · Women's liberation · Idolatry · Feminist theology · Religion and gender · Patriarchy

## **Second-Wave Feminism and the Criticism of Theology**

For those whose university tutors had never even entertained the idea that gender might be used as a category of analysis, reading and writing feminist theological texts and

---

M. Raphael (✉)

School of Humanities, University of Gloucestershire, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, UK  
e-mail: mraphael@glos.ac.uk

studies of religion during the 1980s and the very early 1990s felt startlingly new. The sheer ‘peculiarity of imaging God solely through one gender’ had not yet been widely recognised, and few had remarked on the silence of women in the scriptures and the invisibility of women in the sanctuaries.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, at the same time, second-wave theology’s hermeneutic of suspicion and protest were also oddly familiar. Perhaps this was hardly surprising: second-wave feminists came of age in an era still afflicted by totalitarian dystopias whose leaders had an absolute power that accorded them the obedience granted to gods and where new religious movements or cults had brought fears of religious ‘brainwashing’ into popular consciousness. Figures such as Jim Jones had become bywords, in the late 1970s, for men who bring suffering and death to their followers by appointing themselves, effectively, as their gods.

Feminist scholars of theology and religion also came of age in a partially radicalised academy where the Death of God movement had already sought to kill off a moribund idea of God for the sake of the living one and where, by the second half of the 1980s, a number of historians of religion, not just self-identified feminists, were expressing their growing discomfort with the traditions’ practical and textual religious misogyny. The possibility of a female face or element within the divine, even if such usually remained, by default,<sup>2</sup> male rather than female in character and so constructed to serve male religious needs, was already being explored in some quarters of the theological counterculture as a legitimate spiritual turn.<sup>3</sup>

More immediately, much of the perspective, tone and motive of second-wave feminist theology were familiar to its first students and practitioners in being continuous with the criticism levelled against patriarchy in the consciousness raising and political campaigns of the women’s liberation movement, which was itself indebted to older ‘masters of suspicion’. Broadly atheistic political theorists, philosophers, sociologists and psychologists who regarded the criticism of religion as the presupposition of all criticism had been using Feuerbachian theories of projection to engage in reductive criticism of religious delusion and toxicity since the late nineteenth century.

But while reductive critics of religion had variously claimed that the gods were a product of ignorance and fear of the awful forces of nature, feminist theologians would have thought Feuerbach wrong to dismiss God altogether as a projection (if such he did). The central thought that all critics took from Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* was that superhuman deities are actually projections and perfections of certain finite attributes of human nature, including its spirit: ‘Man—this is the mystery of religion—projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object to

---

<sup>1</sup> Rosemary Radford-Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1983, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g. John B. Cobb, ‘God and Feminism’, in J. B. Cobb and David Tracy (ed.), *Talking about God*, New York: Seabury, 1983 p. 79. In 1967, without contesting classical Jewish monotheism, Raphael Patai, in *The Hebrew Goddess*, Detroit, Michigan, Wayne State University Press, 1990, had noted the centrality of female divine hypostases within the history of Jewish religious experience.

<sup>3</sup> Eleanor McLoughlin, ‘Feminist Christologies: Re-Dressing the Tradition’, in Maryanne Stevens, ed., *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Christology*, Paulist Press, 1993, pp. 118–149, p. 140.

this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject.’<sup>4</sup> But while religious feminist critics of religion such as Rosemary Ruether did not deny that their own images of the unimaginable were also projections, they insisted that these were at least good projections that refused to diminish the humanity of the oppressed and promised justice and the restoration of just relationships.<sup>5</sup> For religious feminists, it was the patriarchal projection of God that was an idol, not God in God’s self. They argued that in a modern era where nature is less feared than it is mastered, it is, to the contrary, mastery of finitude through mastery of women (the very emblem of the finite) that has created the idols.

Certainly, elements of reductive explanations for patriarchal religion as the sacralisation of its own ideology were gendered in second-wave feminist theology, as when Rosemary Ruether used existing feminist theories of male envy of female power to give birth to and sustain life (such as that of Elizabeth Gould Davis in her 1971 *The First Sex*) to interpret rituals such as baptism and the Eucharist.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, feminist theologians’ hermeneutic of suspicion did not reduce religion to human self-validation or to a product of fear and resentment of nature’s arbitrary wastefulness and its power to give and take life, as more or less atheistic critics of religion had suggested. The existence of God as such was not the cause of female alienation from its own possibility. Feminist theologians were not making post-Feuerbachian claims of the sort that theology is merely a grand anthropology or that religion is *only* a way of medicating or policing the hearts and minds of the fearful and credulous, an empty and illusory projection by which to access absolute power and its rights. They did, however, believe that the reform of religion required something more systemic than the ordination of women priests and the introduction of gender-inclusive liturgies or gynocentric historiographical and hermeneutical methods.

The necessity of a full-scale idoloclasm was clearly articulated as early as 1968 in the early reformist Catholic feminism of Mary Daly’s book *The Church and the Second Sex*. Here, Daly observed that while no serious male theologian regards God as biologically male, there is a direct causal connection between an exclusively male idea of God and women’s low status and self-esteem. Daly lamented women’s failure ‘to recognize what a powerful grip such images have on the imagination even after they

---

<sup>4</sup> *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot, New York: Harper & Row, 1957, pp. 29–30. After Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion had all expressed influential concerns about the human tendency to create God in our own image. Jean-Luc Marion regards the God of ontotheology as an idol—a mirror to ourselves in which we see not God’s face but our own (*The Idol and Distance, Five Studies*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2001, p. 18); ‘man’ is the original model of his own idol (*God Without Being*, University of Chicago Press, 1991, pp. 9–10, 16). See further, Bruce Ellis Benson, *Graven Ideologies: Nietzsche, Derrida and Marion on Modern Idolatry*, Madison, WI: Intervarsity Press, 2002; Van A. Harvey, *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Cf., Georg Lukács *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans Rodney Livingstone, London, The Merlin Press 1971, [1923], pp. 83–110, where knowledge is not a ‘reflection’ of an external reality to be known as an object of pure cognition. Bourgeois ideology mystifies and realizes its own self-interest and projects its false consciousness on the proletariat by its reification or conversion of an abstract idea into a concrete and apparently timeless and natural model of human relations.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Feminist Hermeneutics, Scriptural Authority, and Religious Experience: The Case of the *Imago Dei* and Gender Equality’, in Werner G. Jeanrond and Jennifer L. Rilke (eds.) *Radical Pluralism and Truth: David Tracy and the Hermeneutics of Religion*, New York: Crossroad, 1991, 95–106, p. 103.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Renewal or New Creation? Feminist Spirituality and Historical Religion’, in S. Gunew (ed) *A Reader in Feminist Knowledge*, London: Routledge, 1991 [1986], p. 298.

have been consciously rejected as primitive and inadequate'.<sup>7</sup> Daly intensified her critique in 1973, in *Beyond God the Father*, where she described women as 'the essential victims of the archaic God-projection'. A feminist idoloclasm necessitated, for Daly, 'smashing images that obstruct the becoming of the image of God' in women.<sup>8</sup> The idol of the Father God, the god called God, has been set up in the high places to preside over an oppressive social hierarchy. Modelled after the patriarchal ruling class, this idol exists to sanction and normalise its own system. Daly's infamous syllogism, 'if God is male, then the male is God',<sup>9</sup> was the slogan of a theory of projection, not the literal syllogism it has been widely misunderstood to be. This projection, consisting of internalised images of male superiority, had first to be exorcised from women's consciousness and only then from the cultural institutions that had bred them. Idoloclasm—'the dethronement of false Gods—ideas and symbols of God that religion has foisted upon the human spirit'—was to precede reform.<sup>10</sup>

At this stage of Daly's thinking, it was not so much the monotheism as the monosexuality of theological orthodoxy that, in reinforcing the normativity of a masculine hierarchy, harms women's minds and interests. But she was confident that as the women's liberation movement progressed, 'women's growth in self-respect will deal the death-blow' to the 'demons dressed as Gods'.<sup>11</sup> It is precisely from their position on the prophetic margins that women have the 'opportunities for dislodging this deity from its revered position on the scale of human delusions'. Using language with Tillichian overtones, Daly urged women to summon the 'courage to be': to achieve a 'creative political ontophany' or 'ontological hierophany' whose power will enable them to break free and create 'a counterworld to the counterfeit "this world" presented to consciousness by the societal structures that oppress [them]'.<sup>12</sup>

In 1973, Elizabeth Farians' article, 'Phallic Worship: The Ultimate Idolatry', argued (without citing Daly) that what Christian theology worships in God is its own phallus;[fn: <http://www.veganearthus.org/APE-Connections/Writings/Phallic%20Worship%201973.pdf> and in 1984, in more measured tones but also far from reductively, the Catholic feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson also properly summarised feminist theology as a prophetic idoloclasm:

The critique brought by women theologians against the exclusive centrality of the male image and idea of God is not only that in stereotyping and then banning female reality as suitable reference points for God, androcentric thought has denigrated the human dignity of women. The critique also bears directly on the religious significance and ultimate truth of androcentric thought

<sup>7</sup> Boston: Beacon Press, 1968, pp. 181. See also pp. 180–183 and *passim*.

<sup>8</sup> *Beyond God the Father*, London: The Women's Press, 1973, p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> *Beyond God the Father*, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> *Beyond God the Father*, p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> *Beyond God the Father*, p. 31. When the later Daly broke with reformism, she increasingly feminised Nietzsche's criticism of monotheism as a nihilistic vitiation of natural energy by urging women to reclaim the divine energy manifest in the sacrality of sisterhood itself.

<sup>12</sup> *Beyond God the Father*, pp. 34–35.

about God. The charge, quite simply, is that of idolatry.<sup>13</sup>

Johnson noted that patriarchal theology had 'lifted up the male way of being human to functional equivalence with the divine.' The 'male substratum of the idea of God cast in theological language and engraved in public and private prayer' had become 'more solid than stone, more resistant to iconoclasm than bronze'. While casting the image and name of God as exclusively female would be equally idolatrous,<sup>6</sup> she affirmed that feminist hope lies in faith that 'what has been destroyed as an idol can return as an icon, evoking the presence of God.'<sup>14</sup>

Foremost among liberal Jewish feminist theologians of the period, Judith Plaskow offered more or less the same critique as Johnson's, writing that 'where a religious tradition makes the masculine body the normative bearer of the divine image of a God imagined in male language and values alone, its anthropology should be considered idolatrous.'<sup>15</sup> Other Jewish feminists agreed with her.<sup>16</sup> As Athalya Brenner, a feminist scholar of the Hebrew Bible, would summarise it, 'man creates his god in his father's image through the statement that god created man in his own divine image.'<sup>17</sup>

For those, like Johnson, advocating an inter-religious, inter-denominational feminist reformation, the judgement of idolatry at least intimidated the possibility of God behind and beyond the god called God. The liberation of God was never confused with the abolition of God. The venomous bite that had inflicted the wound religion itself was also to be its antidote. Certainly, to a significant degree, feminist theology naturalistically historicised or otherwise reduced prevailing religions to cults of masculinity that absolutised the particular cultural forms of the dominant group to make an idol of masculinity and idolise the feminine as the secondary creature and complement, or dark obverse, of the primary, mediating male one. But religious feminism was not a repudiation of religion as such, still less of

---

<sup>13</sup> 'The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female', *Theological Studies* 45 (1984), pp. 441-465. This article would later be expanded into *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, New York, Crossroad, 1992.

<sup>14</sup> Johnson, 'The Incomprehensibility of God', pp. 443-5. Cf. Virginia Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female*, NY: Crossroad, 1983.

<sup>15</sup> *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*, New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991, pp. 147-8. Plaskow's more recent notion of a transgendered God is also continuous with her earlier Jewish feminist theology as a correction of idolatry (See Lecture 3 of her Sherman Lectures, 'The Sexuality of God', given at the University of Manchester, 2000). Other Jewish feminist theologians contemporary with Plaskow such as Tikva Frymer-Kensky refused fixity within our idea of the unity of God by adverting, for example, to the Hebrew Bible's succession of non-static images for God running from a rock and father through to a mother eagle, birth-giver and warrior in 'On Feminine God-Talk', *The Reconstructionist* 59 (1994), 48-55. Marcia Falk, in 'Toward a Feminist Jewish Reconstruction of Monotheism' *Tikkun Magazine: a Bi-monthly Jewish Critique of Politics, Culture and Society*, 4 (1989): 53-6 and *The Book of Blessings: New Jewish Prayers for Daily Life, the Sabbath, and the New Moon Festival*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) similarly expressed her counter-idolatrous sense of the unstable, permeable, dispersive boundaries of the human, natural and the divine through the composition of new prayers and new translations of traditional texts.<sup>16</sup> See Ellen Umansky's contribution to Carol P. Christ, Ellen M. Umansky and Anne E. Carr, 'Roundtable Discussion: What Are the Sources of My Theology?' *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 1 (1985), pp. 119-131, 124.

<sup>17</sup> 'The Hebrew God and His Female Complements', in J. Martin Soskice and D. Lipton (ed.), *Feminism and Theology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 156, 155-174.

spirituality.<sup>18</sup> As a reformist critique, feminist theology did not repudiate the male imagery for God, only the epistemological presumption of its monosexual exclusivity.

It was theology, after the publication of Naomi Goldenberg's *Changing of the Gods* in 1979,<sup>19</sup> not feminist theology, that would reject Judaism and Christianity on the same, if now gendered, grounds as non- or anti-Christian critics of religion. For theologians, there was no God behind his idol: the projective Father-idol of masculinity *is* God, and the Judaeo-Christian tradition that mediated him was regarded as an essentially, not contingently, dangerous abjection of female vitality to its own ends. But most Jewish and Christian theologians considered post-Christian claims exaggerated and recognised that even if theology was not offering a merely feminised monotheism, their Christian and Jewish political obligation to a gender-inclusive truth made it impossible to instate an equally projective, but gender-reversed, 'God in a skirt'. Nor did Jewish and Christian feminists feel inclined to reinstate, with the Great Mother, vestigial pagan idolatries that their own traditions had unequivocally rejected. Cynthia Ozick considered any Jewish feminist's turn to the Goddess (even one located in the ancient history of Israel or 'buried' in classic Jewish texts) to be a retrograde reversion to an idolatry that Judaism existed precisely to break.<sup>20</sup> Leading theologians such as Judith Plaskow and Rosemary Ruether both drew back from Goddess feminism as theology's neo-paganism became more pronounced.<sup>21</sup> In this and other senses, feminist theology's idoloclasm did not spare religious feminism itself.

What then was most familiar to students of theology precisely because it *was* inherently theological was second-wave feminist theology's idoloclastic turn. It is not that second-wave feminist theology in the 25 or so years from 1968 to around 1993 presented an extended critical discourse on idolatry.<sup>22</sup> But it is its Catholic, Protestant and liberal Jewish idoloclasm that seems to me to be the heuristic theological-political key by which to understand the nature and dynamic of its reformism as a way back into the tradition and the means to create a new one. Of course, the substantive issues and targets were far from identical for Jewish and

---

<sup>18</sup> Viktoria Lee Erikson made a Durkheimian split between women as practitioners of religion and the possibility of a feminist spirituality: 'feminist sociology of religion might do well to make a distinction between religion which is created by masculine forces and spirituality which is the life experience of women and other excluded people who are offered only a socially constructed 'god' in place of a 'God' beyond the socially produced 'god'. 'Back to the Basics: Feminist Social Theory, Durkheim and Religion', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8 (1992), p. 46, pp. 35-46.

<sup>19</sup> *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1979, esp. pp. 29-30, 33, 36, 38.

<sup>20</sup> 'Notes Towards Finding the Right Question', in Susannah Heschel (ed.), *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, pp. 121-2, 120-151. It should, however, be noted that Ozick, always hyper-sensitive to the possibility of idolatry, considered even her own literary inventions to be, by their nature, at risk of descending into such. See 'The Riddle of the Ordinary', *Moment* 2, 1983, pp. 55-59.

<sup>21</sup> Emergent tensions between reformist theologians and radical theologians are alluded to in the editors' preface to Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ (ed.), *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1989, p. v, v-vii.

<sup>22</sup> During the 1980s, brief but explicit feminist theological charges of idolatry against Christianity and Judaism included those by Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, pp. 22-27, 66-67, also her 'The Female Nature of God,' *God as Father? (Concilium* 143; New York: Seabury, 1981), p. 66; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Feminist Spirituality, Christian Identity, and Catholic Vision', in C. Christ and J. Plaskow ed., *Womanspirit Rising*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979, p. 139; Rita Gross, 'Female God Language in a Jewish Context', *ibid.* 169-70; Anne Carr, 'Is a Christian Feminist Theology Possible?' *Theological Studies* 43 (1982), p. 296, 279-297, and Mary Ann Stenger, 'Male Over Female or Female Over Male: A Critique of Idolatry', *Soundings*, 4 (Winter, 1986), pp. 464-478.

Christian feminists. Jewish women, for example, did not have to engage the feminist soteriological and Christological problem of Jesus' masculinity as the incarnate son of God and how that presses towards the potentially idolatrous worship of a fully historical finite male human being as also fully God. Nonetheless, this broad coalition of feminist theologians used feminism and theology to mutually advance the cause of both: idol-breaking constituted the liberation of religion and the liberation of women as a single process. Feminist criticism of religion funded a liberation theology, not only as an inter-religious prophetic call to protect the interests of the vulnerable—the widow, orphan and stranger—from the indifference and abuse of the powerful—but as a classic call for the liberation of the imagination from cognitive captivity to idols.

Studies of feminist theology and religion and gender have not paid sufficient attention to idoloclasm as a foundation of women's liberation. As early as 1910, Emma Goldman had urged that before there could be women's emancipation—before women could 'become human in the truest sense'—each woman would have to clear her mind of 'every trace of centuries of submission and slavery'. Emancipation begins 'neither in the polls nor in the courts. It begins in a woman's soul, with liberation from 'internal tyrants',<sup>23</sup> namely idols. By the time second-wave feminist theology came into the academy, the liberation of the religious imagination had become the theological ur-praxis that would liberate women from enslavement to the empty and oppressive ideas of themselves and God that inform and are reinforced by their social enactment. Yet, seldom is it noted that the charge being levelled at religion by feminists is not only that it unfairly discriminates against women and privileges men, but that it promotes a false consciousness that sanctions an infinitisation of the power of the agents of their oppression. The first moment of feminist theology's diagnostic criticism of patriarchal religion as oppressive to women is therefore not that it is unjust, but that it permits itself the liberty to be unjust because it is idolatrous. Women's liberation was to be, most fundamentally, liberation from an oppressive fantasy or false idea of what God is and what a woman should be because that idea prevents the becoming of both.

Reformist feminist theologians, as self-identified theologians, believed that their own traditions were essentially liberative as the revelation of an ethical countermand to its own patriarchy. They shared with all religious critics of religion the reformist assumption that authentic religion has existed and will exist again in ethico-political conditions that permit encounters with the true God. However, for Christian feminists, their particular target was not the generic fallen 'man'. For Christian feminists, the immediate target of criticism was an exclusively male priesthood and theological professoriate presiding over a cult of masculinity in the name of the male saviour they claim to represent, and for Jewish feminists, it was the male rabbinical caste's exclusive interpretative and legislative access to the Torah. Feminist theology denied men the sole rights to mediation between God and the world. It did so because men, having denied women access to those roles, were doing precisely what idols do, namely replacing the divine object they had appointed themselves to mediate with themselves, with their own 'heartless forms'. Judged to be systemically compromised by its idolatry, feminist critics urged that theology, and the whole social and conceptual order it underpins, would need to be re-imagined, rather than merely corrected and improved. In this, second-wave feminist theology was truly an inter-religious—Jewish and Christian—rejection of all natural theology that infers its content from its own androcentric scheme.

---

<sup>23</sup> 'The Tragedy of Women's Emancipation', in Emma Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays*, New York: Cosmino, 2005 [1910], 219–232.



In its conviction that the quintessentially religious task of theology is to break its own idols, religious feminism's theorisation of patriarchy was one that gendered a far older religious criticism of natural theology. 'Man's sin', as Calvin famously put it, was to have dared, 'in his pride' to 'imagine according to its own capacity', an 'unreality and an empty appearance as God'. Calvin had described 'man's nature as 'a perpetual factory of idols'.<sup>24</sup> But for feminists, idolatry was not natural to the human condition. It was a historically and politically constructed unreality, where God had been imagined according to the limits of specifically male, not female, power, and the owners and managers of that factory of idols were men, not women.

In arguing that patriarchal religions replace God's power and word with men's and are therefore in revolt against God, second-wave feminist theology therefore refined, by its gendering, a tradition that regards the God of natural theology as an idol. Patriarchal theology is no more than a virulently destructive form of natural theology that reads God's nature and will off from a world it has itself created and in doing so glorifies a projection—a larger, better reflection of the masculine subject that is its author and whose self-aggrandising scheme does not defer to—indeed obstructs and distorts—the non-natural interruption or crisis of God's self-revelation. The incarnation of human (read, masculinist) mores as God contravenes what Kierkegaard would call the 'infinite qualitative distinction' between God and the human. But where second-wave feminist theology was original was in making patriarchy—including the sexism of all previous great reformers themselves, not least Barth and Tillich—the sinful hubristic scheme that must take responsibility for the primary alienation that is idolatry. A God who can be known directly through 'his' self-appointed mediators, men who regard God's attributes and purposes as analogous only to their own, was judged more forcefully by feminists than any other reformers to be paradigmatically idolatrous, as prescribing counterfeit worship because its object is its subject.

Therefore, conservative religionists were, and remain, wrong to accuse religious feminist criticism of religion as having its primary motive and impetus in modern secular values that put women's self-actualisation before all other goods, as being too rooted in the secular Enlightenment project to be taken seriously by the religious traditions it confronts. Religious feminism belongs squarely within a long history of theological criticism of religion as idolatry. By virtue of their theological training and prophetic faith, second-wave Jewish and Christian feminist theologians were far more sensible of their situation in the critical theological tradition than the mainstream believed them to be.

Judith Plaskow, for example, began her academic career, like me, with the study of Protestant theology. In her doctoral thesis on the work of Reinhold Niebuhr,<sup>25</sup> Plaskow gendered Niebuhr's standard modern Protestant account of sin as the

---

<sup>24</sup> John T. McNeill (ed), *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, Louisville, Kentucky, Westminster John Knox Press, 2006, p. 108.

<sup>25</sup> *Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980.

human aspiration to transcend its own finitude towards unbounded power<sup>26</sup> and demonstrated that this primary sin cannot be attributed indifferently to women and men alike.<sup>27</sup> Plaskow, following Saiving, claims that women have experienced the very reverse. To be properly feminine is to be self-effacing and self-sacrificially enabling of everyone but yourself. Women's particular religious challenge is therefore precisely to grasp the opportunities of freedom and becoming after breaking the bonds of subordination.<sup>28</sup> And more than addressing the problem of female self-actualisation, Jewish feminists were engaged in the quintessentially Jewish project for the avoidance and criticism of idolatry. *Avodah zara* (literally, in Hebrew, service to alien things) is, after all, widely considered to be Judaism's defining moment: the very activity that the rabbinic literature claims defines a Jew.<sup>29</sup> Judaism's rejection of idols is not only a rejection of deified earthly political and military power;<sup>30</sup> its counter-idolatrous tradition is exemplified in Maimonides' apophatic theology where even to say that God is the wisest or most powerful thing that exists is to imply, impermissibly, that God's wisdom or power bears some likeness to ours.<sup>31</sup> If, as Kenneth Seeskin puts it, 'the litmus test for being a Jew is seeing things in the created order for what they are: natural objects of finite value and duration',<sup>32</sup> then Jewish feminist theology was doing the critical task demanded of all Jews on behalf of all women.<sup>33</sup>

Or again, when Ruether wrote: 'to the extent that images of God suggest that God is represented by the patriarchal leadership' they 'incarnate unjust and oppressive relationships' and so become 'sanctions of evil',<sup>34</sup> she and those who agreed with her joined a prophetic tradition spanning the history of Judaism and Christianity that criticises the deification of self and culture and the domestication of God as the ally of both, that knows its culture to be guilty of exchanging the glory of an incorruptible God for images resembling the corruptible (Romans 1:18–25). Like all reformers, feminist theologians

---

<sup>26</sup> Like other theologians writing during and after the Second World War against one of the most self-glorifying regimes the world has ever seen, Niebuhr's account of idolatry as the originary sin in which 'man's' 'vain imagination' gives a relative and contingent reality the appearance of an unconditioned one naturally lent itself to the feminist project. See Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man. Volume 1: Human Nature?*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997 [1941], pp. 178, 137–8.

<sup>27</sup> See "Male Theology and Women's Experience" 1978, republished in J. Plaskow and D. Berman (ed.), *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism and Sexual Ethics 1972–2003*, Boston: The Beacon Press, 2005, pp. 40–55.

<sup>28</sup> *Sex, Sin and Grace*, p. 67.

<sup>29</sup> See Sanhedrin 93a. Maimonides knows that all 613 commandments are a means to fulfil the first two—affirmation of the existence of God who is unlike anything in the created order and the rejection of idolatry—the other 611 existing only to support a physical and intellectual environment conducive to monotheism (*Guide of the Perplexed*, 3.27–28).

<sup>30</sup> The imperial machismo of the insignia used on Roman and then Nazi banners—especially the eagle and portraits of its respective emperor-gods—are repugnant to Jews on both cultic and historical grounds.

<sup>31</sup> *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1.56–57.

<sup>32</sup> *No Other Gods: The Modern Struggle Against Idolatry*, West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1995, p. 20.

<sup>33</sup> Modern Jewish thinking on idolatry is of broader philosophical relevance than the traditional Orthodox halakhic (legal) view of idolatry found in the Mishnah, Talmud and other rabbinic texts where idolatry is represented as a set of permissive socio-cultural practices from which Jews should set themselves apart.

<sup>34</sup> *Sexism and God-Talk*, p. 66.

sought to break the mastery of God by ‘man’; they too expected theology to refuse to ‘assist at the birth of the No-God at the making of idols’ and ‘let God be God’.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, where atheistic criticism of religious idolatry had argued that with insight into idolatry as ‘an aberration of reason and imagination’ one will cease to be religious,<sup>36</sup> reformist feminists insisted that one could only *begin* to be a Christian or a Jew with insight into this aberration. What conservative critics found objectionable was the corollary of that, namely that one can also only begin to be a feminist with insight into what precedes the subordination of women to men: namely, the idolisation of the masculine—an alienation of men from their own humanity that is at the same time an alienation of God from God’s own divinity. In arguing for the abolition of gods that had been created by men to confer the power and authority they had arrogated from God on their own dispensation, feminists were arguing that idolatry is not one of the pitfalls of patriarchy but its very symptom and cause. Idolisation of the masculine is not a subspecies of sin. It is the primary sin of alienation that estranges men and women as well as men and God.<sup>37</sup> Breaking the cognitive and political idol of masculinity was to be the precondition of justice for women and of reconciliation through the entire created and cosmic order.

Of course, there can be little doubt that idol-breaking is more often associated with religious vandalism and the violent derogation of everyone’s religion but one’s own than it is with feminist spirituality, which is notably eirenic. And for most religious feminists (other than the minority of those from Orthodox Jewish and Christian evangelical denominations), idol-breaking has been virtually tantamount to the erasure of the divine feminine, this being all too often the first victim of patriarchal monotheism’s gynophobic, and ecocidal equation of paganism and idolatry. Yet, second-wave feminism could be no less idoloclastic than any other religious reformation. For when idol-breaking has a proper object: dead and deadening idols that serve the purposes of a necrophilic dispensation, its acts of destruction are fundamentally liberative, making way for the freedom, equality and love that are the chief constituents of human becoming.

## **The Idolisation of the Feminine as the Dehumanisation of Women**

Feminist theology’s idoloclastic turn cannot be fully appreciated without seeing how it combined a prophetic tradition of criticism of social injustice and natural theology with secular second-wave feminist theorists’ criticism of patriarchy as a system whose primary problem is not its manifold discriminations and injustices but its alienation of women from their very selves. Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949, translated into English in 1953) incited the first secular feminist idoloclasm, and Daly’s first book reformulated de Beauvoir’s and incited the first religious one. De Beauvoir had speculated that: ‘terrified

---

<sup>35</sup> Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968 [1919], pp. 49–50, 96. See also Serene Jones, ‘This God Which Is Not One: Irigaray and Barth on the Divine’, in C. W. Maggie Kim, Susan M. St Ville, and Susan Simonaitis (eds.), *Transfigurations: Theology and the French Feminists*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993, 109–141, pp. 129–30, on the theological confluences in Barth and Irigaray’s attempt to ‘jam’ liberal discourses that elide the difference between the human and the divine.

<sup>36</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 1, iii, 135.

<sup>37</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, p. 32.

by the dangerous magic of woman, [man] sets her up as the essential, [though] it is he who poses her as such and thus he really acts as the essential in this voluntary alienation.' 'Man's' attribution of fertility to 'woman' compels men to worship the women they desire, but since 'all idols made by man [] are in point of fact subordinate to him', 'he will always have it in his power to destroy them.'<sup>38</sup> De Beauvoir knew that women's destruction of patriarchy's feminine idols would destroy the ideational grounds of their subordination. Women were called to destroy their idols before the idols destroyed them.

When, in 1974, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, she spoke for those women of the time who sensed that the life they were leading was actually a form of death: a vacuous or perfected replica more real to them than the real one that laboured beneath its pleasantly pretty suburban surface. Friedan, like Goldman, de Beauvoir and others, was protesting the internalisation of a coercive, deterministic, biologised idea of a woman that had become a substitute for who or what women could become.<sup>39</sup> Real, resistant, intractable, importunate women had been replaced with the pliant surrogate of the housewife whom women had been taught to aspire to as the end and measure of their attainment. As de Beauvoir, quoting Frazer, had written, "'men make gods" but "women worship them". Men cannot kneel with complete conviction before the idols they have made; but when women encounter these mighty statues along the roads, they think they are not made with hands and obediently bow down."<sup>40</sup> While de Beauvoir's supercilious remarks may have been in danger of under-estimating women's critical intelligence, her view that 'the American woman, who would be men's idol, makes herself the slave of her admirers; she dresses, lives and breathes, only through men and for them,'<sup>41</sup> gained traction in the women's liberation movement in the argument that a phallic patriarchal wand had put women under a spell that had turned them into (i)dolls brought to life only by the paradoxical sexual desire of their masters to become their 'slaves'.

It was recognised that the ideology of masculinity required a complementary ideology of femininity by which an image, idol or phantasm (in Greek, *eidōlon* connotes phantom-like ideas) would haunt women's minds as a controlling feminine ideal. If they failed to live up to the idol of the feminine, whether by ageing, less than perfect physical endowments, unbiddable personalities or the recalcitrance of difference itself, they would be beset by feelings of exclusion and, at the very least, low self-esteem. The extent to which their bodies and dispositions were obedient to that idea(l) was the extent to which they would be found acceptable by themselves and marriageable to others. As Daly had written: 'it is only when a totalled woman worships a man that she becomes beautiful to him.'<sup>42</sup> But a woman's totalisation was also the end or death of her subjectivity. Just as Feuerbach had suggested that, in worshipping the impossible ideal of the virgin Mary, men could 'more easily dispense with the real woman in proportion as an ideal woman was an object of love to them',<sup>43</sup> Shulamith Firestone, brought up in a traditional Jewish household, knew an idol when she saw one and criticised patriarchal love as a false or idolatrous counterfeit love because it is the desire for an idea of woman, not any real and particular woman herself: a man may

---

<sup>38</sup> *The Second Sex*, Harmondsworth, Middx., Penguin, 1972, pp. 104-5.

<sup>39</sup> New York: Dell, 1974.

<sup>40</sup> *The Second Sex*, p. 611.

<sup>41</sup> *The Second Sex*, p. 651.

<sup>42</sup> *Wickedary*, p.232.

<sup>43</sup> *The Essence of Christianity*, p. 26.

have let a woman into his heart, 'not because he genuinely loved her, but only because she played so well into his preconceived fantasies.'<sup>44</sup>

Firestone knew that 'to be worshipped is not freedom.' The idolisation of women is no better than their demonisation. Indeed, it is the obverse of the same process. Both have their origins in gynophobic disgust. It had therefore become ever more important to show women the truth of what real femaleness—not its idea—actually looks and smells like. It was no coincidence that the book *Our Bodies Ourselves*, published by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, became a bestseller in 1973.<sup>45</sup> This book rejected the sanitised patriarchal fantasy of the feminine with its frankly demystifying catalogue of the genital discharges and ailments that are a normal part of real women's experience of embodiment. Indeed, what characterises much of the feminist art and literature of the period was its insistence that women were, as such, neither angels nor demons, but ordinary, fallible, sometimes angry and often profoundly tired people undertaking too much unpaid and undervalued biological and domestic labour.

The women's liberation movement's first and most radical act therefore had to be the breaking of the cognitive idol of compliant femininity which, as Andrea Dworkin had notably argued in her study of pornography—effectively a study of the dehumanisation of women—was a fetish to which women under patriarchy had been forced to sacrifice their freedom and dignity, not to mention their intra-female difference.<sup>46</sup> Patriarchal culture was argued to have replaced real women with what Daly called 'fembots'—creatures of the socialisation of women into patriarchal womanhood,<sup>47</sup> but who are no more than human dolls, that is to say, dead idols, whose female form attains a parasitic life of its own only in having evacuated the mind of its own reason and will.<sup>48</sup> Like any image, the manufactured idol of the feminine becomes a surrogate appearance, subsisting independently of actual, immanent subjects. An idol of the feminine is a carefully made-up substitute for real female presence that makes women its puppet and men the devotees of an appearance alone—a devotion constituted by sexual-aesthetic desire rather than moral love. Women could not, then, become the subjects of their own experience until they had destroyed their own idol. They could not come alive until they had killed off their own death.

As Elisabeth Lenk observed in an article first published in 1976, the feminist movement had begun with women exposing false consciousness and reclaiming the subjectivity of women who had existed only as an object for the male gaze.<sup>49</sup> Lenk argued that for a woman to be in the women's liberation movement was to begin to take

---

<sup>44</sup> *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, Farah Straus Geroux, 2003 [1970] Cf. *The Second Sex*, p. 201.

<sup>45</sup> See also Anja Meulenbelt, *For Ourselves: Our Bodies and Sexuality from Women's Point of View*, trans. Ann Oosthuizen and Marij van Helmond, London, Sheba Feminist Publications, 1981, esp. pp 46–8 and 72–8, which supply numerous photographs of genital and bodily differences among women of all ages.

<sup>46</sup> *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, London: The Women's Press, 1981, pp. 103–109. On the patriarchal feminine as the essence of 'woman', see Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, pp. 15–37. Queer theology would later move to prevent the idolatry of gender through its attack on essentialist models of gender that fix or fetishise particular attributes and qualities as the necessary, normative, defining attributes and qualities of a biological sex.

<sup>47</sup> Mary Daly and Jane Caputi, *First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*, New York, HarperSanFrancisco, 1987, pp. 198 and 232.

<sup>48</sup> Cf., de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 373.

<sup>49</sup> In *God Without Being*, Jean-Luc Marion famously distinguishes idols from icons on the grounds that the former are no more than the opaque objects of the gaze.

possession of her own imagination over and against the patriarchal hierarchy whose fictitious presences had structured and peopled her whole 'internal architecture'. Lenk, quoting Flaubert, wrote: 'In the heart of every one of us there is a Hall of the Kings. I have walled it up but it is still not destroyed.'<sup>50</sup> That the King had not yet been destroyed left her in a state of existential nothingness. For 'woman' either does not yet exist for herself, but only self-sacrificially for others, or, having been inducted into narcissism, beautiful women are turned into purely passive objects for whom no one else is real—she is loved, but does not herself love; she is seen but she herself does not see.<sup>51</sup> A woman was still, for Lenk, precisely as de Beauvoir had pointed out, 'in large part man's invention.'<sup>52</sup> When she had succeeded in becoming his all, she had also found herself on the way to being nothing.

Yet, Lenk believed that it was possible for an idol-woman to stop 'being that strange, alienated being who can be circumscribed by the gaze.' A woman could become 'many', occasionally melting into 'pure movement.' The 'new woman' is someone fluid, threatening, yet to come: 'Before they have even considered whether there can be such a monster, such a cross-breed, such a deviant creature, [women] have started to film, paint, write and dream her.'<sup>53</sup> But like any birth, its labour would be traumatic. Lenk reported that the process of destroying her own idols left her feeling depleted and vulnerable—'Perhaps it is all the false gods in me which I'm accusing as I write'. After all, it is these that have previously constituted her whole sense of self: 'I have felt a great sense of achievement when I've managed to live up to my idols, and devalued when I did not.'<sup>54</sup> And even when a woman has rid herself of the patriarchal idea of a woman, 'there are still the terrible moments when woman searches for herself in the mirror and cannot find herself. The mirror-image has got lost somewhere, the gaze of men does not reflect it back to woman', and she thinks that she has gone mad: 'But this apparent madness is no madness; it is the first step towards sanity.'<sup>55</sup>

At this psycho-political juncture, the religious and secular wings of the feminist academy were ready to hear what the other had to say about alienation. Religious feminism offered a key insight, which was that the women's liberation movement could not afford to ignore the role of theology in the construction of ideologies of femininity. Feminist theology was able to show how and why androcentric theology, with its exclusively masculine divine object and female natural object, was making women feel

---

<sup>50</sup> 'Die sich selbst verdoppelnde Frau' was first published in English as 'The Self-Reflecting Woman', in Gisela Ecker (ed.), *Feminist Aesthetics*, London: The Women's Press p. 56, 51–58. It was no coincidence that the epigraph to Christine Battersby's feminist philosophical study of female selfhood, *The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1998, cited Shakespeare's Sonnet 53: 'What is your substance, whereof are you made, that millions of strange shadows on you tend?'

<sup>51</sup> Lenk, 'The Self-Reflecting Woman', pp. 56–7.

<sup>52</sup> *The Second Sex*, pp. 228–9.

<sup>53</sup> Lenk, 'The Self-Reflecting Woman', pp. 52–3. Theologians were especially enthusiastic in the replacement of feminine idols by populating the feminist imaginary with new female supernatural creatures and monsters. See my *Theology and Embodiment: The Post-Patriarchal Reconstruction of Female Sacrality*, pp. 183–219; Jane Caputi, *Gossips, Gorgons and Crones: The Fates of the Earth*, Santa Fe: Bear and Co., 1993.

<sup>54</sup> Lenk, 'The Self-Reflecting Woman', p. 54.

<sup>55</sup> Lenk, 'The Self-Reflecting Woman', p. 57. It is possible that Firestone's battle with schizophrenia was triggered by the struggle to destroy a normative idol of femininity that had set up a competing and irreconcilable duality or split within her own consciousness.

less than human.<sup>56</sup> It had become clear to feminist theologians and scholars of religion that patriarchal gender ideology requires a trinity of idols: the presiding Lord, man his regent or agent and woman as the pleasing, reproductive companion and servant of man. Feminist theological idol-breaking could not therefore not be confined to patriarchal models of God, for in making women the derivative, non-normative Other to God and men, patriarchy also makes an idol of the feminine, whether as an object of erroneous worship or as a demonic force of chaos produced when women, Lilith-like, refuse to submit to the socio-psychological control that is their idealisation. Either way, whether represented by Mary, *theotokos* or bearer of God, or the Great Goddess, pagan mother of chaos, women are denied the historicity, subjectivity and redemptive agency that are the prerogative of men and the God they have created in their image.<sup>57</sup> Not one of the world religions, claimed many feminist students of religion, fully affirms women's personhood.<sup>58</sup>

Christian feminist theologians of the time were asking how existing Christian institutions could affirm the humanity of women when their tradition does not teach that women normatively or fully image God. Augustine's *On the Trinity* XII was regularly cited as evidence that Augustine—reading Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 11:7 that a man is the image and glory of God, while woman is the glory of man—believed that 'woman was not theomorphic; in other words, she could not image God.'<sup>59</sup> Similarly, in 1979, the Jewish feminist novelist and critic Cynthia Ozick pointed out that the whole point of the Torah is to countermand the ways of the world, yet its ethic does not extend to the dehumanisation of women. This gaping ethical omission led Ozick to propose a 614th commandment, 'Thou shalt not lessen the humanity of women'. With this new commandment she was, in effect, charging the masculine order to refrain, not least in the name of its own humanistic and humanitarian theological ethic, from turning women into another of its idols.<sup>60</sup> Ancient and modern religious and philosophical denials of the full rational and moral agency of women had prevented women from becoming the speaking subjects of their own thoughts and experiences. Irigaray knew that a woman can awaken from the dehumanised state of being an object (or what might better be called an idol), but still she had to ask what might happen if and when that object began to speak.<sup>61</sup>

It was this symbiosis between secular and religious feminist discourse that allowed conservative commentators to dismiss feminist theology as sub-religious, but which also allowed second-wave feminist theological criticism of theology to do something more interesting than merely add the use of gender as a category of analysis to existing

---

<sup>56</sup> Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods*, p. 18; Daly, *Church and the Second Sex*, pp. 186–70, 150

<sup>57</sup> The publication of Elizabeth Clark and Herbert Richardson's *Women and Religion: The Original Sourcebook of Women in Christian Thought*, New York: HarperCollins, in 1977, followed in 1993 by Serenity Young's similar compilation of generally misogynistic texts from a range of the world's religious traditions (*An Anthology of Sacred Texts By and About Women*, London: Pandora) made these and other gendered dualisms of the religious 'eternal feminine' well-known.

<sup>58</sup> Sarah Nicholson, p. 20. 'Neither God nor Goddess: Why Women Need an Archetype of the Self', *Journal of Integral Theory and Practice* 7 (2012) 19–29.

<sup>59</sup> Rosemary Ruether, 'The Liberation of Christology from Patriarchy' in *New Blackfriars*, 66, 1985, p. 326, 324–335. See Edmund Hill's response to her article in the same volume, p. 503. Ruether's reply to him was published in *New Blackfriars*, 67, 1986, p. 92–93.

<sup>60</sup> 'Notes Towards Finding the Right Question', pp. 146–150.

<sup>61</sup> *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 135.

religious and non-religious criticism of religion's moral and epistemological deficiencies. For Jewish and Christian feminists alike, the Father-god had to be abolished not only because he ordained women's derivative and subordinated status, but because a god created in the image of men alone produces a false account of woman as made only in the likeness of the idol 'woman' that men had created.

In masculinising the spirit and feminising the flesh, religious dualism had animalised or dehumanised women and made men representative of the fully human. A counter-idolatrous theology always entails a counter-idolatrous anthropology and vice versa. However, the feminist anthropology would not be a fixed anthropology of 'woman' but of female becoming. Feminist theology invited each woman to inaugurate all women's liberation by breaking the unelected image that represented, defined and exhausted her being by conformity to an ideology of femininity ordained by God precisely to prevent the exercise of her own freedom and becoming and facilitate that of the men in her family instead.

In the name of its own egalitarianism, feminist soteriology had to start with breaking the idol of the feminine by the liberation of its own imagination as itself a political praxis. That feminist theologians believed the fixation of women and God into idols to have prevented women searching for God in themselves or their world, confirmed what religious philosophers had long asserted, namely that idols are first a problem of cognitive captivity: their power resides in the head not in pieces of stone or wood. In its rejection of the idea of 'he', as Milton would put it, 'for God and she for God in him', women needed to know what it might mean to be made in the image of God, not that of her husband, to be liberated from the spectre of the feminine that haunted women's consciousness and prescribed their every desire. For if they did not (and this explains the increasing urgency of Daly's tone), the fantasy woman and the fantasy God who created her would come to exist in-stead of her: ousting her from her own space, more real to her, and a great deal more desirable to her, than her own self.<sup>62</sup> That is, an idol that exists by making real, living, different women into something unreal, turning them into a dead, homogenised thing that is more of the feminine same. The prophetic biblical literature was in this sense right in its polemical equation of idolatry and spiritlessness or death. Idolatry is a hardening of the heart: a carrier of death or the prevention of becoming. An image of an idol makes dead material look alive, and an idolatrous image of a woman is a gynophobic means to turn a living woman into the appearance of a dead one.<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> The (i)dollification of women has only intensified since the introduction of digitally manipulated images and the growth of mass access to surgical and non-surgical cosmetic alteration of the human appearance since the end of the twentieth century. See Natasha Walter, *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*, London: Virago, 2010; Melissa Raphael, 'Idolatry and Fixation: Modern Jewish Thought and the Prophetic Criticism of the Cosmetically and Technologically Perfected Female Face in Contemporary Popular Culture', in *The International Journal of Public Theology*, 7 (2013), pp. 135-156. Women may have idolised men in possession of physical, economic and political power, but they have not had the power to trifle with them as mere objects of desire, other than when unusually physically or economically desirable women are permitted to do so in the short pre-matrimonial period of ritual courtship.

<sup>63</sup> Compare Roger Scruton, *Modern Culture*, Continuum: New York and London, 1998, pp. 55-67, where Scruton rightly describes the pornographic model as 'an imaginary object which leaves nothing to the imagination'. Like a waxwork, she is 'absolutely life-like and absolutely dead'. Not real or vulnerable, 'my wanting and her doing are one and the same' (p.58).



## Second-Wave Feminist Theology's Counter-Idolatrous God

Second-wave feminist theology urged a dual idoloclasm, in which the destruction of divine and human idols was one and the same bid for freedom and equality. Only by the demystification of gender—female as well as male and divine as well as human—would cosmic inequalities be exposed as those of the social order writ large. But a theology without mystery is a sociology. Second-wave feminist theology sought to liberate the freedom and truth of God and women by destroying their idols, but had to do so without leaving their transcendence in jeopardy. It therefore broke old idols neither by replacing them with new ones nor by creating a destructive ideational vacuum. It refused to accept or make authoritarian distinctions between orthodoxy and heresy and used playful provocations to serious ends. It showed a marked preference for plural, provisional, shifting models of God (including the early proposal of androgynous models of God that never really took root in the collective religious feminist imagination) and rejected all scandals of particularity and closed canons. Methodologically committed to addressing the transcendent only from the situation of the immanent (which was why its critics believed it to be more concerned with women than God), feminist theology practised a kind of tactical agnosticism. It insisted on a God who is both experientially available to women and apophatically incommensurate with anything yet known or knowable. In this, and all related strategies, second-wave feminist theology was perhaps the most radically and systematically counter-idolatrous theology of modern times.

In her 1986 essay 'Divine Women', Luce Irigaray, for example, offered a positive reading of Feuerbach that allowed her to conceive of God not as 'a rigid objective of One immutable postulate' but as the 'idealized, projected other of women's emerging subjectivity'. She proposed a theology in which both God and woman are together a moment of becoming—an open 'field of production', a projection of the sexed subject onto a figure of perfection, a material process of completion and integration without completion or finality. Divinity was to be the condition of female sovereignty, but still, God and woman (if they can be separated into two nouns) would remain an 'uncertain and unpreempted field', knowable only in the long shadow of one's own form. In making God a horizon for women's fulfilment and each woman's self-idealisation, Irigaray sought to create not a Goddess over and against God, but a 'passage' between the past and future, the condition in which women would always retain the autonomy of their own conception.<sup>64</sup> By its counter-idolatrous nature, the divine feminine was a feminine sensible-transcendental dimension that exists within the female collective as no more than an indefinite figure of female subjectivity: a perspective from which femaleness can be transfigured. As an open threshold she herself must cross, 'woman is neither open nor closed. She is indefinite, in-finite; form is never complete in her.'<sup>65</sup> Here, idoloclasm is not the inauguration or overture to becoming divine but the process itself.

Or for Daly, Paul Tillich's critique of idols as ideas that have elevated or absolutised a preliminary concern or conditioned reality (such as the nation state) to an ultimate

---

<sup>64</sup> Irigaray, 'Divine Women', trans. Stephen Muecke, Sydney: Local Consumption Publications, Occasional Papers 8, p. 4 and *passim*; Elizabeth Grosz, 'Irigaray and the Divine', in Kim et al. (eds), *Transfigurations*, pp. 207–8, 212, 199–214

<sup>65</sup> *Speculum*, p.229

one, was directly applied as a criticism of patriarchy. Daly drew on Tillich's early thinking about 'the unconditioned' (which he later identified as 'being-itself' or the power of being) to envision the power of new female being as that which would propel women towards freedom: unconditioned goodness and truth. The (ever longer) voyage into femaleness was to become the meaning of meaning itself. Daly developed the prevailing existentialism of her formative theological years to propose, for women, an inherently counter-idolatrous notion of becoming divine, which cannot by its very nature exist as an idea or thing that stands over and against women, but which is their existence itself as a Verb or Being. As part of the existentialist reversal of the old philosophical order in which essence preceded existence, there was to be no essential idea of the feminine or the divine.<sup>66</sup> The hope, courage and daring of human choice were now in the kinesthesia of female becoming.

Although it is arguable that the feminist counter-idolatrous turn never amounted to much more than the self-actualisation—the wholeness and autonomy—that is the customary goal of many modern white, elite, western philosophers, it is at least the case that as an active verb, the transcendent—femaleness and divinity as a single process—can no longer be left to languish in the stagnant illusion of their own idea.<sup>67</sup> Yet, reformist feminists never broke with ethical monotheism for it was this that funded their prophetic criticism. The practical object of their activist religious politics prevented second-wave feminist theology from descending into a nihilistic post-structuralist breaking of idols that subverts and discards every idea of the good and of God including, finally, its own. As a constructive theology of liberation, whose living God exceeds the whole history of its theological representation, feminist theology did not fall prey to other postmodern theologies' deconstructions of God that were at risk of becoming a merely negative idolatry that limits divine possibility almost as much as a positive one.<sup>68</sup>

Even so, the feminist rejection of patriarchal natural theology entailed that analogical accounts of the divine where the nature and will of God are read off from the prevailing conditions of any given polity could no longer be justified. As Catherine Keller recently noted, 'in its attention to its own aporias, feminism at points resembles a mysticism or negative theology suspended between knowledge and ignorance' whose 'prolific manifold' will always queer its own truth claims.<sup>69</sup>

Second-wave feminist theology was characterised by this apophatic element from its inception. Sallie McFague, in *Metaphorical Theology* (1982), equated literalism and idolatry and reminded her readers of an older mystical 'symbolical mentality' that knew metaphors to be just that: non-identical with their object, both expressing and not expressing something of the reality of God in human experience.<sup>70</sup> McFague advocated

---

<sup>66</sup> *Beyond God the Father*, pp. 33-40

<sup>67</sup> Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 26. That, by feminism's third wave, after the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* in 1990, women believed themselves to have taken command of their identity as women by its plural, fluid performance in multiple spaces, was a direct result of the second wave's breaking of the fixed, essentialist, idols of super-human masculinity and sub-human femininity.

<sup>68</sup> Hugh Rayment-Pickard, *Impossible God: Derrida's Theology*, Aldershot and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2003, p. 151

<sup>69</sup> Catherine Keller, 'The Apophysis of Gender: A Fourfold Unsayings of Feminist Theology' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 4 (2008), pp. 905-933

<sup>70</sup> *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, London: SCM, 1983, pp. 167, 145-192

the use of non-personal and relational models of God rather than descriptive ones as a way of avoiding the possibility of a new feminist idolatry.<sup>71</sup> Or again, Elizabeth Johnson cited Hans Urs von Balthasar's insistence on the necessity of an unknown and unknowable God to develop the argument that women's human dignity can only be affirmed when it is first affirmed that there is no necessary or exhaustive relationship between God's self-revelation and gender-exclusive analogical language for God, or the philosophical categories that have shaped the history of Christian theology.<sup>72</sup> While Ruether and others were aware that traditional, apparently gender-neutral, apophatic theology can conceal androcentric assumptions beneath its dualistic abstractions,<sup>73</sup> their own deployment of the deliberately awkward term 'God/ess' made God literally unsayable and unthinkable—the interruptive slash between the genders rendered every theological conception and articulation impossible and incomplete. The introduction of provisionality and plurality into theology was still being proposed in 1990, when Mary Ann Stenger noted that 'a first step toward reform is to recognize that patriarchal theology is relative to time, culture, and most importantly God. If God alone is absolute, then all theological expression, as human and finite, is subject to change and correction in relationship to God.' Feminist theology, as much as any other theology, had to reconcile the ultimacy of the reality of God and the relativity of its conceptual and historical development.<sup>74</sup>

It was by a combined movement into unknowing and becoming—both movements into the not-yet—that the patriarchal idol of God could be dislodged and broken, but even then with only the greatest difficulty. For idoloclasm cannot, in fact, be presented as a ready solution to alienation. Many, perhaps most, reformist feminists felt that if they were not to relinquish all ties with their past, or erase all the categories and texts that defined their identity and made Jewish or Christian knowledge possible, they were going to remain, at least vestigially, 'stuck with' the god called God. The Jewish feminist biblical scholar Athalya Brenner, for example, wrote in the mid-1990s that the Jewish God who demands that idols be broken is himself an idol. And it is an idol that she—a divorced, non-religious Israeli woman—cannot escape: "This is my heritage. I am stuck with it. I cannot and will not shake it off. And it hurts."<sup>75</sup> But it was the character of Shug, in Alice Walker's 1982 *The Color Purple*, who provided best-known lines for the arduous and uncertain ends of feminist theological idoloclasm when she exclaimed in a letter to Nettie: 'Well, us talk and talk bout God, but I'm still adrift. Trying to chase that old white man out of my head... But this hard work, let me tell you. He been there so long, he don't want to budge'.<sup>76</sup>

Yet, by presenting an activist, positive, constructive theology at the same time as a critical agnostic one, feminist theologians nonetheless wrote in hope that the act of idoloclasm itself would open women's imagination to a forgotten and as yet

---

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 174–6

<sup>72</sup> 'The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female', p. 443. See further, 'The Unknown God' in M. Kehl and W. Löser (ed.), *The von Balthasar Reader* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) p. 184.

<sup>73</sup> *Sexism and God-Talk*, p. 67

<sup>74</sup> 'Feminism and Pluralism in Contemporary Theology', [www.erudit.org/revue/LTP/1990/v46/n3/400553ar.pdf](http://www.erudit.org/revue/LTP/1990/v46/n3/400553ar.pdf)

<sup>75</sup> 'The Hebrew God and His Female Complements', p. 172, 155–174

<sup>76</sup> New York, Washington Square Press, 1983, p. 179

unforeseeable woman made in the image of the forgotten or not-yet-known God. For this, the God of the invisible, marginal and unnamed is none other than the God once proclaimed to the Athenians by Paul in Acts 17:23: 'For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.'<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> See further, Johnson, 'The Incomprehensibility of God', p. 461.