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PANDORA'S JAR IS OPEN: FEMINIST THEOLOGIES AND MANY FUTURES

**SE ABRIÓ LA CAJA DE PANDORA: LAS TEOLOGÍAS FEMINISTAS
Y LOS MÚLTIPLES FUTUROS**

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Abstract: The article considers how feminist theologies have impacted our understandings of sexuality, gender, ecology and materiality and how this may further develop in the future. It considers and counters criticism and asks if the ideologies unpinning feminist theologies are sufficient for its further development.

Keywords: Ecology, Feminism, Gender, Materiality, Sexuality.

Resumen: El artículo toma en consideración cómo las teologías feministas han impactado nuestra comprensión de la sexualidad, el género, la ecología y la materialidad y cómo este impacto puede desarrollarse aún más en el futuro. A su vez, considera las críticas con el fin de contrarrestarlas y se pregunta si las ideologías que interpelan a las teologías feministas pueden o no favorecer su desarrollo futuro.

Palabras clave: Ecología, Feminismo, Género, Materialidad, Sexualidad.

In recent years feminist scholars have reassessed many of the stories told about women in antiquity and Pandora is one of them. The story we hear most often is about the woman who opened a box and let out all the evils in the world. However, in the hands of feminist classical scholars we hear more of the literature and the story becomes somewhat different. Some early versions of the tale said the box did not contain evil but rather good, of course this narrative has not been heard perhaps suppressed by men who prefer the wicked woman narrative. In the hands of Natalie Haynes¹, Pandora, not the box, is seen as the real issue, she is carefree and as one of the early texts tells she is *kalon*, *kakon* both beautiful and ugly, good and evil. She is in any story an agent of change in the world but in the hands of Haynes examining early texts she is much more, she brings complexity into a world that had perhaps seen things in black and white, particularly where women were concerned. When Pandora is released on the world she, or her box, banish the notion that things are simple, there is much more than can be imagined.

Why do I open with this tale from long ago? Well because in Pandora I see the unleashing of feminist theologies on the world. The very presence of women in all that they are, no stereotypes of beauty or virtue and no Eve's or Lillith's either, just women with all their complexity being present in the re-telling of biblical narratives and the creation of emerging theologies is a whole new way of being in the world. Something has been unleashed that cannot and will not be put back in the box and the theological world is no longer the same, change is embodied in the women.

During its brief history feminist theology has undergone many changes not least its title from 'theology' to 'theologies' which speaks of the ever widening circle of women finding their voice in matters of theology and religion. What it also clearly signals is that the days of global sisterhood that drove some of the early theological reflection has matured within that same circle and rich tapestry of experiences that empower and enliven such debates and has become the explosion of contextual, enfolded and relational theologies that we call feminist/womanist/mujerista/minjung and so many more. It is this continuing engagement with varying contexts and the remarkable flexibility of feminist method to sit easy with a wide range of theological opinion that is, in the eyes of its critics, the fundamental weakness of feminist theology, while those who advocate it see this as its immense strength. Its practitioners have given up the grand illusion of unchanging orthodoxies in favour of openness to the divine that grows within and between

¹ Natalie Haynes, *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths*, (London, Picador, 2020).

us, a journey forged from at times bitter experience. It was the clash between orthodoxy and experience that was for many women the starting point for their questioning.

Of course as women of faith there was no simple heading out on gut experience alone but rather elaborate networks emerged of women within different contexts and as might be expected the role of women theologians was overturned, their job was to listen, to engage with grassroots groups and to take these experiences back to the texts or the doctrines with which they worked. Every aspect of religion was now under experiential scrutiny which actually required some courage from those who offered the experiences and those who did the work of academic theology. The former because much that was offered was deeply personal and therefore exposing while for the latter, in addition to much of the experience resonating with them, their jobs were in many cases placed on the line or their positions in the academy undermined for dealing with experience, or as it was often called kitchen table thoughts. Women in these early days faced a great deal of opposition in academy and church and in many areas still do— so there are a lot of weary women around but they remain fuelled by a passion for justice for women.

There was a great deal of early work on texts and stemming from that the doctrines they were said to underpin. There are great names involved in this work such as Phyllis Trible who showed us clearly how many biblical texts are abusive to women. In her work 'Texts of Terror'² she does not brush over those texts that speak of awful terror and torture of women by speaking of the glory of God as many interpreters had done. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza³ is a giant amongst biblical scholars providing us with a hermeneutical way of reading that exposes the patriarchal underpinnings of these texts and opens up new ways of understanding as well as ways to retrieve the lost women in the texts. Her political understanding also opens the way for her famous notion of kyriarchy not hierarchy and the discipleship of equals. All this ground breaking work enabled women to approach texts in a new and exciting ways no longer wedded to the male interpretations but opening texts to the wealth of women's experience. Their legacy can never be underestimated as they gave theologians a more open field of interpretation with which to create theology together.

² Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (London, SCM, 1992).

³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone. The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1984. New edition 1995).

Amongst the many who engaged with scripture but also created a new and exciting pathway in theology was Carter Heyward⁴. Her original work was rooted in a close analysis of Mark's gospel and a rereading of the meaning of *exousia* and *dunamis* as used in that gospel. She concluded that this gospel shows Jesus resisting *exousia* or power over at every turn, even when brought before Pilate he rejects the power being asserted over him while not denying the outcome. Heyward also demonstrated that the power of *dunamis* which is understood as a raw dynamic, innate energy is the transforming power that Jesus points us towards through his life and engagement with just such a passion. It is also she concludes the power that Jesus highlights as our birth right not just his and so the Christic energy that he embodied is also available for us if we embrace what is part of our innate nature. Heyward and I differ very slightly here, she would I believe wish to see a slightly lesser degree of divine nature within people. I, on the other hand, see in the life of Jesus a process of divine⁵ becoming which I feel sure is also available to all who embrace it.

I have total confidence that radical incarnation, that is taking incarnation seriously without the comfort of metaphysics and delayed parousias, is the key to our living this profound reality. This is an understanding of incarnation based in empowerment and the shared heritage of *dunamis*, that raw energy which is our birthright, the energy that attracts us to the world and those in it. This is the concept spoken of by Jesus in the gospels urges those who come after him to claim their empowerment to live in vulnerability, mutuality and relationality. The raw dynamic energy that exists between and within us is, according to a feminist reading of Mark's gospel, the power of incarnation— it can also be seen as the cosmic explosion that still resonates through the universe, that raw dynamism that empowers all that lives. In calling it divine we have perhaps enabled ourselves to shape our understanding of who we are and how we should live but we also run the risk of disempowering its wild and challenging core by attempting to capture it in systems and dogmas. However, incarnation as the Christian story illustrates is a risky business because it throws us into any number of possibilities. It seems then that risk and potentiality go hand in hand in radical incarnation as was clearly evident in the life of Jesus. With both we are wrenched from fixed and static certainty, from the

⁴ Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God. A Theology of Mutual Relation* (New York, University Press of America, 1982)

⁵ Lisa Isherwood, *Liberating Christ. Exploring the Christologies of Contemporary Liberation Movements* (Ohio, Pilgrim Press, 1999).

Alpha and Omega, the unchanging and propelled towards greater complexity, creativity and becoming, towards ever new possibilities. It is this ground that many contemporary feminist theologies occupy making and making again in the face of unmaking as we hear one another to speech and joyfully dance theologies on the earthquakes of becoming.

Returning to Heyward's we see that her original grounding of passion, and erotic power within the Christological arena opened the way for much creative and revolutionary sexual theology and with it rethinking of women's sexuality which has been vilified in much traditional theology. If the central core of Christian belief, Christology is indeed rooted in the erotic, which has some expression through the sexual, then Christian theologians will have to think again about their naïve division of these deeply human, deeply divine elements of humanity. Heyward stunned the theological world when a preface to her book noted that she could not write theology unless she was grounded in sensuous pleasures including making love to one of her women lovers who would bring her forth to herself and the world and in so doing to God. Strong words in so many ways for an Episcopalian priest. This feminist engagement with Christology and ways of interpreting actually gave female sexuality ways in which women could lift their bodies and sexuality out of the mire of male clerical dictate and once again declare the sacredness of their sexual lives. For Heyward and many following her work a significant move was made in this reimagining of the divine as erotic and indwelling, it opened the theological debate to those on the sexual margins which no longer needed to understand themselves as outside the WORD of God but rather as carriers of incarnational empowerment. This work has continued with not just gay and lesbian theologians speaking of the reality of their previously condemned lives but now we hear of trans lives, inter-sexed lives and many more as carriers of incarnate possibility.

Traditional theology has it that the only enfleshment required to satisfy the whisper of desire came in the shape of Jesus. This brings us to the implications of the WORD dwelling amongst us, well again what about these words, if only we paid attention to the actual words— this 'being'/WORD pitched its tent amongst us which allows for an entirely different meaning from a pre-formed almighty divinity coming amongst us and bombarding flesh as it inhabits it, or stamping itself on the world. A tent is not a fixed structure with immovable sides but rather a moveable structure which even blows and changes shape in the wind, it is moved and carried to different locations with ease. Divinity imagined in this way has multiple sites of becoming rather than a fixed being and location, the flesh thus carried and

placed amongst different realities, is softened and appears more malleable rather than rigid, static and unyielding. It is expansive and embracing therefore Christians may not project the abject or consume difference but should rather be open to change through the adventure of expanding incarnation; an incarnation that is breaking out from the heavens and the narrowing dictatorial voice. It goes without saying then that politics is not an added extra for people of incarnate faith but rather radical, countercultural politics is the skin we put on as we spiral in incarnate living.

Althaus-Reid⁶ gave an example of this counter cultural politics as she reflected on the incarnation in the flesh who, in her eyes, became god in community/God in society/God in creation. Looking at the gospel accounts she concluded that we see Jesus becoming the Messiah through walking with, being affected by, marginalized communities and individuals which she understands to be a political act. Those the man Jesus engaged with were in many cases the outcasts not simply the marginalized and were unclear in some cases according to the laws of the day. I would like to add to Althaus-Reid's insights by saying that even the genealogy of the man Jesus shows that his incarnation was entangled with many marginalized persons, prostitutes, foreigners and others not seen fit by the creeds and words of the day. Marcella Althaus-Reid believed, as do I, that the life of Jesus, one of the enfleshed divine, presents us with a communitarian reading of rupture, that is, it challenges us to move beyond a nostalgic dwelling place from where we remember pre-lapsarian utopias or promised kingdoms and perfect eschatons and propels us instead into an ongoing process of imagination and creative engagement with even those considered to be on the margins or even the unclear. It is not the task of theologians to heal the rupture that the divine incarnate makes but rather it is our task to continue the discontinuity, to make the rupture bigger, as we embrace our own incarnate flesh. This is a very different understanding to the one that traditional theologies have upheld as they seek to close down and control the divine energy that flows in our veins and pulsates in every fibre of our being.

Of course this talk of Jesus as not the only possible incarnation of the divine in flesh pushes against traditional understandings and opens the whole range of human experience to positive theological exploration, no longer to be side lined as fallen flesh and sinful humanity but to be seen as God bearing in its multiple forms and expressions. I have always understood the

⁶ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London, Routledge, 2003).

rupture that Althaus-Reid⁷ speaks about as that between heaven and earth, no longer separated by notions of absolute divinity and further the rupture in what is considered normal and acceptable in religion and society as the outpouring of the human/divine engages with and unfolds the multiple possibilities that lie in each moment of existence pressing always for wider vistas and encompassing understandings. I may understand this but against the centuries of traditional hermeneutics there has to develop a way to see otherwise— to use words [THE WORD] but to disrupt all they have contained over centuries.

My approach to this has been to understand the flesh made word/s rather than the reverse, once we acknowledge the innate indwelling of *dunamis* as our birth-right then indeed our flesh and that of others does become the outpouring of incarnation possibilities. The flesh made word enables us to find a voice and to make our desires known. There are any number of examples of how this vision transforms the landscape of our lives, those who are starving present themselves as moral imperatives for the rest of us, those who are poisoned by toxic waste challenge the ethics of business and profit. When the flesh is word there can be no talk of reward in heaven, the bodies of those who suffer are calling for new ways now and embedding ourselves in our flesh, together in our communal birth-right, emboldens us to find creative alternatives. The flesh as word also demands that absolutes be placed to one side and listening take the place of unilateral dictation. Reality is constantly changing and what is required is the liberation of empowered speech and hearing not the misplaced confidence of eternal answers. The flesh has been silenced by metaphysics, hierarchy and once and for all incarnation. Incarnation speaks but not just from the head, through the whole body, and it is this voice that returns power to people. Multiple disciplines, including philosophy and certain branches of theology are now telling us that matter is already discursive and so we can also say that incarnation opens the conversation/discussion rather than being held captive to the booming Word that drowns out all others. Incarnational living translates the babble through engaging us in commitment to one another, this illuminates the landscape through the power of intimate connection. Of course, the fact that we hear and see does not guarantee that we will achieve the required outcome it does commit us to the struggle. By taking the incarnate flesh seriously we open up a new landscape of possibilities through the power of incarnation.

⁷ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology. Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London, Routledge, 2001).

Many may think that the inclusion of the erotic in the work of theology, enabled by Carter Heyward, is actually a new phenomenon but this would be a mistake. The work of Richard Rambuss⁸ highlights how throughout Christian history the iconised body of Christ is the desirable object, the body that is not there for reproduction but is nonetheless lusted after and penetrated. This body becomes fully eroticised through the desire that those worshipping it direct towards it and receive from it. What is interesting is that this iconised body of Christ is very changeable and does not in any way at all hold fast to or fix sex, gender or sexuality either in itself or in those who adore it. It is flesh with multiple possibilities held within it and calling forth from others many fleshy responses. Catherine of Sienna marries Christ who crosses genders and Catherine eventually becomes engaged passionately with, sinking into the flesh of, a female Christ. Catherine is but one example of many littered throughout Christian history who engaged with the body of Christ only to experience a crossing of gender either for Christ or for them. Many writings and art works show the body of Christ as very fluid at times even appearing as physically female and feeding people from her breasts or her wounded side. It is then not unusual to see gender destabilized in erotic devotional life and it is perhaps here that we can ask if we do indeed need to take back concepts such as the feminine or rather refuse them as we delight in the fluidity of our multiple selves. I find myself torn as I reach this point, the queer theorist in me applauds such a stance and the feminist liberation theologian is appalled asking what happens to embodied women, abused in so many ways both societally and religiously, if we do away with words that signify them? No one ever said incarnational living would be easy— indeed we see how risky it can be in the example given us by Jesus the man.

The theme of divine rape is carried on in the work of Traherne⁹ who in a poem entitled ‘Love’ imagines himself drenched in and impregnated by Christ’s ‘sweet stream’. He goes on to say that he offers himself to Christ as ‘His Ganymede! His Life! His joy!’ whereupon Christ comes down to get him and takes him up that he may be ‘his boy’. In this work Traherne sees himself as a rent boy for the divine and at that his ‘boy’, that is the submissive partner in a BDSM scenario. The life of devotion is made strange once more and the sexual emerges as the jouissance of exploded limits, limits that are falsely placed and do not allow for the multiple possibilities that

⁸ Richard Rambuss, *Closet Devotions* (London, Duke University, 1998).

⁹ Rambuss, *Mito*, 45.

the radical gospel declares. Sexuality and the erotic are parts of our natures, fundamental parts and it seems strange that we have ever conceived of boxing such power and divine grace into limited categories and restrictive rules. Rambuss insists that closet devotion is the technology by which the soul becomes a subject, a space in which the sacred may touch the transgressive and even the profane. I would suggest it is where the sacred is the transgressive and the profane- and all is well.

Of course it is not simply gender categories as contained arrangements that we see disrupted in the body of the man Jesus. Graham Ward¹⁰ argues that right from the start materiality itself is becoming metaphorical and this is expanded throughout the gospel accounts where the man walks on water, is transfigured, ascends bodily into heaven and is said to be present in the breaking of bread. In each of these scenarios the body of Jesus is displaced and, according to Ward, the sexed body becomes problematized and eroticized. Ward suggests that the body of Jesus is malleable and capable of transposition and that the gospels chart this course of increasing destabilization and many transformations. Each of these makes manifest more of the divine glory and the important point to notice, for Ward, is that it is not the gendered body that does this but the body that demonstrates how these boundaries can be pushed. Ward not only challenges gender but corporeality itself noting that the gospels see no limits for it. This is a challenging point of view if linked with radical incarnation and the suggestion that corporeality, then, perhaps has no limits for us either. What this may mean for those embracing their divine becoming may best be examined through mystics of old who in some way it may be said experienced their lives beyond their own corporeality if only in fleeting moments. Ward does not focus on incarnation as the point of examination and so does not move his debate into the realms of cosmic entanglement as we shall see others do.

Feminist theologies have engaged with ecojustice for many years and the approach for many is grounded in an affirmation of our bodies as part of the sacred body of the earth meaning our relatedness to the human and non-human alike is also earthy and does not rely on some transcendent reality. The real world does not act as though it were a metaphysical construct it is rather messy and imperfect, full of contradictions and above all else in need of human support. Jesus stands as a symbol of orthopraxis and as a

¹⁰ Graham Ward, 'On the Politics of Embodiment and the Mystery of All Flesh, The Sexual Theologian ed by Marcella Althus-Reid & Isherwood, Lisa (London, T&T Clark, 2005).

participatory dialogical partner not as a predetermined icon of salvation for us, Ivone Gebara¹¹ tells us dogma has made a prison out of an invitation to freedom. We see then that under the weight of real and pressing issues such as the plight of people and the planet our Christological ponderings become changed, opened to new possibilities and feminist theologians would argue greater understandings.

Ivone Gebara in Brazil is compelled to search for answers to the ecological crisis, which show the connections between pollution, hunger and unemployment and the patriarchal image of God. This is a feminist liberation project because the poor and women do not make the greatest amount of waste or have the biggest carbon footprint yet they bear the greatest burden of both. Given this situation she argues that women, the poor and nature should be included in the process of knowledge making. We have to think differently and this has to originate from the margins. If we begin from the earth as a margin we find that we even think differently about war. She argues that ecological cost is great in war yet it is never considered even though nature is used as both a weapon and a victim. While we count the dead we rarely, if ever, count the ecological cost. Our patriarchal way of knowing denies what we see in favour of preconceived ideals into which what we observe has to fit. This is as much the case with theological knowing as with ways of counting the cost of war. Gebara argues that an ecofeminist way of knowing is not based on denial and manipulation rather it acknowledges that all objects are contained in the subject and the subject is both subject and object. There is interdependence in knowing that male logic denies. We cannot then divide humans and the earth as though they were separate thought categories but should rather approach both as fundamental and integral to ecological questions and answers.

The idea of new possibilities can be seen clearly in feminist theological engagement with the new cosmology. Starting from our enfleshed cosmic story moves us away from a search for perfect origins and back to beginnings. This suggests that there is no place from which we were cast out but rather a place that grew us, that nurtured us and generously gave and gives us life. The creator who tradition tells us sits apart with all the power is challenged and we are thrown back to cosmic beginnings, to void and chaos and asked to make our theology from that ground. To understand who we are and who we might be from *tohu vabohu*, the depth veiled in darkness. Once we give agency to void and chaos there can be no creation out of nothing as our power laden dualistic origin. The divine speech in the pages of Genesis

¹¹ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1999).

is no longer understood as a command uttered by the Lord who rules over creation, but as Catherine Keller¹² tells us 'let there be' is a whisper of desire and what comes forth emanates from all there is rather than appearing from above and beyond. In this shift we also see the possibility for incarnation to be understood as the rule rather than exception of creation because the whisper desires enfleshment.

Keller's approach also enables us to move from monotheism which recent feminist theologians have named as a stumbling block to true relationality and inclusion. By starting with the Deep situated in the cosmos itself Keller claims we see that *creatio ex nihilo* is neither possible nor desirable and this opens before us the God who is of intimate/infinite entanglements.¹³ The God who is the All in All of Corinthians, not beyond, not distant but entangled. Keller visits Paul's writings in 1 Corinthians on the body of Christ and reminds us that in the Greek *energeia* is used in 12:4-6 when he tells us that there are differences but it is the same God who is in all. For Keller this disables any theology of distance and separation God is not above, nor is the divine simply androcentric but rather the very bible itself declares God to be eco-centric, All in All. Energy then is not something we have but something we are and it is the same energy that gives life to all, it is the stuff of entanglement. This is the energy of eternal delight which comes from the free flow of these energies uninhibited by repression, exploitation and denial and a desire to see distinctions between it and God. Keller suggests that exploitation and denial of entanglement blocks energy which leads to depression and lack of meaning. The Mono-God of religions who has dragged us from our cosmic home and embeddedness in the natural world in order to find salvation in a heavenly realm, has done us no favours by repressing the rhythms of the human body and pulsations of desire this leaves us adrift in our own bodies and the world. So what happens to all that Christian theology has placed in heaven? Heaven is understood as the earth's becoming with all energy being eternal and the human, non-human and divine acting reciprocally. I believe taking incarnation seriously without the comfort of metaphysics and delayed parousias, is the key to our living this profound reality of cosmic relationality and eternal wonder.

¹² Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep. A Theology of Becoming* (London, Routledge, 2003).

¹³ Catherine Keller, 'The Energy We Are: A Meditation in Seven Pulsations' in *Cosmology, Ecology and the Energy of God*, ed by Donna Bowman & Clayton Crockett (New York, Fordham University Press, 2012) 11-25.

We see that following the strand of incarnation theology without a metaphysical overlay and engaging in the examination of beginnings has brought us a long way but of course faces us with a question about the monotheistic God who has been so central in Christianity. Right from Heyward speaking of *dunamis* shared with all as a birth-right on to Keller speaking of entanglement the idea of one solid God has become a question in the minds of some theologians. It is answered differently of course even in feminist theologies some seeing a mono-God as essential to the very foundation of theological anthropology, who we are is tied in with our relationship with this creator God. While others who see connections between this idea of the divine and the discriminatory divisions in church and society and the disregard for the physical world would prefer to make an argument for a more entangled divine.

Laurel Schneider¹⁴ is one such theologian who looks for alternatives. She argues that even in the gospel narratives themselves we begin to see what she calls ‘monotheistic eschatologies that fantasize the end of all difference in the truth of God’ are being challenged. For example, in the temptation stories we see that the incarnate Jesus refuses the Almighty power over things in favour of a life of experience and struggle with the people. Bodies tend to disrupt the perfect logic of the ONE as they signal only too graphically the presence of, and engagement with, ‘others’ in this perfect picture. The Church Fathers too realised that bodies are untidy, even the incarnate body of Jesus and so they turned him into the body of Christ, a body that could exactly reflect the ONE, the ideal type who could control and regulate all other bodies throughout history. The divine/human incarnation disappeared in the hands of the early theologians and instead became a bill of exchange and in so doing Jesus was delivered into the systems he appeared to reject, the flesh and blood man living in incarnational relation was overlaid with a metaphysical concept and solidified for centuries. If we theologians are to take seriously incarnation then we have to lessen our grip on solidifying absolute monotheism and give space for chaotic multiple human and non-human bodies and lives to be narrative realities in our creation of theology, to be more uncertain about everything, to be more risky, than we have previously dared to be. After all the bible tells us to live in the world but not of the world, this seems like a call to be bold and embody alternatives.

Schneider reminds us that without incarnation there can be no Christianity yet with the logic of the ONE there can be no incarnation . So again for her

¹⁴ Laurel Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism. A Theology of Multiplicity* (London, Routledge, 2008).

the choice is clear do we settle for the world of categories and abstractions that the ONE presents us with or do we embrace what she calls the multiplicity which is the diverse nature of embodiment. This embodiment refuses categories, as bodies do not tend to come as general despite what fashion, medicine and the like try and tell us. Schneider points out that a fundamental gospel principle of love and peace cannot be satisfied under the regime of the ONE. In accordance with other feminist theologians she suggests that love needs another, it cannot be without encounter and it cannot be ethical unless it recognises the presence of others as they are. Heyward spoke powerfully of this saying that it was the desire to love and be loved that drew the divine from the heavens and into relation through incarnation.

For Schneider incarnation that signals love is a willingness to show up and fully risk, nothing less will do. The ONE brings safety as we have seen but incarnation changes things. Schneider speaks plainly saying that to follow God who became flesh is to make room for more than One it is a posture of openness to the world as it comes to us, of loving the discordant, plentipotential worlds more than the desire to overcome, to colonise or even to same⁷ them. Thinking beyond the One makes room for difference, for the stranger and for strangeness. This requires that we face imaginatively the ONENESS erected in our own minds, cultures, religious systems and environments and overcome it through the power of our birth right of *dunamis* and intimate connection with the multiplicity of difference we see and experience all around us and within us.

Of course this is not what we have done and the consequences have been dire in many circumstances. Using the disembodied nature of the ONE God we have set in place the Western masculinist symbolic, which stops the world, both physical and symbolic, at its own narrow vistas. Mayra Rivera¹⁵ of course is aware that falling into the untouchable, vertical transcendence that usually follows on from the ONE WORD is no place to go for those who sit beyond the vista of the western mind, those who have not been seen or acknowledged as inhabiting land and ways of life that fall beyond. It is precisely because of this that she sees the need for a form of transcendent theology that breaks down the western stranglehold. For her there is nothing abstract about transcendence as in the hands of the powerful it even controls the creation of time and our spatial perceptions. Her argument is that western industrialism needed to move beyond the rhythms of natural

¹⁵ Mayra Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence. A Postcolonial Theology of God* (London, Westminster John Knox, 2007).

time and impose a universal time in order to maximize the profits it wished to extract and to disconnect people from their land and their natural ways of being. This view of time derives from the salvation history that much western traditional theology operates under in which we see a movement towards ultimate perfection in linear time, a time that can be regulated and controlled. The control of space Rivera argues is seen in the separation of the public and private sphere with the private time being seen as feminized and trivial while public time was of the greatest importance, the masculinized time of uninhibited production and detached transcendence. She argues that horizontal transcendence has divided space itself with what is north as being understood as closer to God while the south is nearer the depths of stagnation and even depravity. She believes that such overarching systems of knowledge produce, rather than discover all-encompassing foundations, they create the illusion of totality just as their origin, the Word, does. Rivera does not wish to go as far as the elimination of transcendence but rather to understand it as part of history since it is the possibilities lying in the living of history in the material body that allows for the great hope of human kind.

Myra Rivera approaches the theology of transcendence through a postcolonial theology of God, although she does speak of the touch of transcendence. Right from the start she makes her position plain: God is beyond our grasp but not beyond our touch just as we find that in human touch we touch, but can never fully grasp, the other, creating what she suggests is a 'intimacy of transcendence'. Situated as her argument is in postcolonial theology she demonstrates how the dominant imperial theology of the West has never acknowledged anything beyond itself. Rivera refuses to understand transcendence as the theological category which identifies God with the status quo. She understood God to be in history and the possibilities lying in the living of history in the material body that allows for the great hope of human kind, things may happen that have never happened before. Rivera claims that this notion of historical transcendence is dynamic, allowing for contextual structural difference without implying dualism, and for intrinsic unity without strict identity categories imposed. Jesus can be said to be the supreme form of historical transcendence as he is present in material form as the dynamic outpouring of God, signalling that divine transcendence is not distance and absence but actual material presence. It could be said that in the material existence of Jesus what Christians are claiming is that God is touching the very limits of its own divinity in and through the untouchables and outcasts that Jesus interacted with. Incarnation requires that even the divine itself moves beyond its own

limits through material realities. Theology then should be touched by lived realities that transcend its theoretical borders and thus be transformed by the infinite creativity of life and move deeper and wider, not higher.

Incarnation tells us that our bodies are our homes, that is to say our divine/human dwelling places, therefore our journey is home, to the fullness of our incarnation pitched as it is in diverse bodies both human and non-human. This is no individualistic 'pitching' but rather the multiple sites draw our attention as we need to engage with the ruptures that this multiplicity by its existence creates in what we otherwise have thought of as mono-reality or monotheism. Our attention is drawn since this multiplicity is what we understand as the divine within and around us, to the places of our becoming. We are drawn into the conversation that is the way of our discursive matter, but we are drawn to listen intently not simply to speak and certainly not to hear dictation from beyond corporeality. This approach is easier for me to argue than if I had used Christology since this has over the years gathered far more meaning than incarnation. Indeed, Christology for many makes suffering and sacrifice spring to mind as central doctrines associated with the divine than the divine abandoning itself into flesh. Incarnation allows for the entanglement of all that exists in a more passionate and entwined way than phrases such as putting on Christ. Many theologians would argue that in putting on Christ, or suggesting that not I but Christ lives in me, we do indeed embody the divine but I wish to suggest that this is too much like the stamping of the divine on flesh. There is permanence, stability and encapsulated nature to this here that I have argued is not in the nature of incarnation. Incarnation allows for the questioning of who 'I/we' are, its free flowing desire makes it difficult to speak of edges and ultimate 'me-ness'.

Should this passionate embrace simply be a good idea and felt in moments of universal oneness so easily fallen into in times of hyper-religiosity? No of course not incarnation and embodiment requires so much more from us. We have at the centre of Christian practice a sacrament that demands more, the Eucharist is one that places the feeding of all central to a Christian life. This is not an inward and otherworldly feeding but one that must occur in a fundamentally different social order from the one we have where millions go hungry in order to feed the profits of the few. Figures demonstrate the wealth of 385 individual billionaires exceed the total income of poor countries which hold 45% of the human race. Incarnational theology and living should make us indignant when people say the poor exist due to their own ways of life, their cultures, their systems, as an act of destiny. We should feel the passion rise in us and the connection to those in

dire situations because they are not living in some divine act of destiny but rather in a system in which we live and for which we are responsible. We are not called to simply modify the system but rather to change it to join our passion with others and declare another world is possible. To understand things in this way in a profoundly unequal society/world marked by injustice and exploitation means that the process of making justice reign will be a conflict ridden one. One can imagine the fight involved in taking on global corporations such as Monsanto whose intervention in India has been devastating. An intervention enabled by the World Bank's structural adjustment policy that forced India to let such corporations in. Farm saved seeds were replaced by corporate seeds which needed fertiliser and pesticides, they often failed and could not be saved— poverty, suicide and the selling of organs in order to keep family farms alive has resulted— and of course millions of profit for the corporations.

Against such corporations and politico-economic systems individual action can only go so far, which is no reason to discourage it, but the underlying principles need also to be addressed and demolished. Jung Mo Sung¹⁶ in analysing how materialist economy works believes that what a product is and what its use is comes second to what consumers' think of it and importantly what others think of people who possess it. This demonstrates the symbolic and even spiritual value of the economy and, in this case, the engine of economic growth is the desire of people to imitate those who have 'things'. Capitalism then is a social construction of appearances which rests on the fetishization process and relies on the strength of its idols and the desire they enliven in people. However the bible shows that idols are Gods of oppression which need sacrifices and in our contemporary world the sacrifices are the poor whose lives are sacrificed to the market. So theology that combats this should be a process of critical discernment examining how these idols are created through the 'truths' of politics, economics and even theology. Capitalism, then, does not just exert power by extracting labour and production but by capturing and distorting the fundamental human power of desire. It seems we have an almost obsessive need for the market to keep feeding us things that actually do nothing but proclaim our non-identity, non-uniqueness and our addiction to our own oblivion believing as we do that 'things' signal something of significance about a self, a self we actually have trouble articulating without the stuff of capitalism to adorn our bodies.

¹⁶ Jung Mo Sung, *The Subject, Capitalism and Religion. Horizons of Hope in Complex Societies* (London, Palgrave, 2011).

In the light of this capture of desire it can be argued that there is a need for the urgent recovery of desire in Christian theology, desire rooted in this world not aimed at a transcendent God and the next world.

The rooting of the divine within and between us is a foundational act of resistance to markets which take advantage of our uprooted desires – we should it seems embody the dance of the seven veils, removing layers of false consciousness that tell us we are sinners and only God can change the world, as we remove each veil of theological and societal overlay we will I believe find that we more deeply immersed in our own empowered Christic natures which is the only way to halt the advance of genocidal capitalism. It is the only way since critics of the present economic system tell us capitalism can flourish in a society of selfish or cut off people, it is also immune to changes in societal morality and even to those who dream of a better world. Where it falls down is when people's desires and passions engage with other ways – when people enmesh alternate values. According to some this requires a shift in theological understanding as at the very heart of Christian theology lies a debt economy which is intimately linked with desire. The one who died for us, who places us in eternal debt due to a sacrifice which can never be paid off, is also the one we are to desire above all else. We are placed in an 'economy of redemption' which many theologians are now beginning to see is having damaging effects. Traditional theologies see the life and death of Jesus as simply a bill of exchange and Marion Grau¹⁷ has demonstrated how in the west the notion of salvation for the few rather than abundant life for all has been at the heart of political and economic systems. It is a scarcity model of salvation that leads to the same in economic theory and ultimately to the savage form of capitalism we have where people grab for as much as possible as there is not enough to go round. Notions of individual salvation and advanced capitalism are good bed fellows she claims – the prosperity gospel being a good example.

Following a similar path Marcella Althaus Reid reflected upon the meaning of the lunch time crucifixions¹⁸ that people underwent in the squares of Buenos Aires as a protest against the crushing realities of globalisation in their lives. They stand tied to crosses for hours in the public spaces of their cities with their names and the social problems they are

¹⁷ Marion Grau, *Of Divine Economy. Refinancing Redemption* (London, T&T Clark, 2004).

¹⁸ Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Queering the Cross: The Politics of Redemption and the Eternal Debt" *Feminist Theology* 2007 15(3): 289-301.

experiencing tied to the cross. This is the 21st century Golgotha the real crucifixions of people at the hands of the markets, the consequence of actual eternal debt and disregard for the lives of people. Althaus Reid wished to strike at the heart of this debt economy by going against the grain of the Christian doctrine of Redemption (from the Latin meaning to purchase or buy back). She wishes to rethink redemption as an economic metaphor for salvation as this lays the foundations in society for a commercial culture of oppression. How could it be otherwise with God the supreme good and giver of life versus humanity subjected to a violent ontological debt. Althaus Reid wondered if this was an early Christian attempt to sacralise a patriarchal economic order based on debt. Even if we say the debt has been paid it is in blood and this arrangement demands the same from humanity. Those in poor countries are indeed paying in blood and human sacrifice and as such are the tortured divine on a cross.

Althaus Reid asks how different the economy would be if it was based in gift and love and I would add divine entanglement. This is not such a strange idea as we are told that God gave himself to the world in the form of Jesus as an act of love and desired mercy not sacrifice. In case we think that what we have here are modern fanciful ideas about theology it can be demonstrate that the foundations of Christianity did celebrate this central notion of love, gift and beauty. Rita Brock & Rebecca Parker¹⁹ spend some time examining the Eucharistic practices of the early church which their thesis suggests did not take place within a theological frame of blood sacrifice for the best part of 1,000 years. They note a change when crusades and the financial gain from them became of importance within Christendom. What came to the fore then was destruction of others, the environment and the sacrifice of oneself became God given and glorious activities producing what was considered to be societal advancement and of course the spread of the gospel. In short hand this can be called ‘empire building’ and not, as the gospels point to, life in abundance.

Kathryn Tanner²⁰ also shows how a capitalist model of economics is tied in with a God who made and owns the world. Christians are encouraged to be grateful for this and to feel indebted and thus owe God service and worship. This she argues has been translated into human relations since church and state have been so close over the centuries and people delegate property

¹⁹ Rita Brock & Rebecca Parker, *Saving Paradise, How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Boston, Beacon Press, 2008).

²⁰ Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2005).

rights from God to others through private economic contracts and public ones. She asks what if God were more gracious then this and does not make a world in order to justify his ownership of it. What if he does not offer us the world on a contractual basis or if he does not have exclusive ownership? Perhaps God is just a gracious giver who wants us to live accordingly. She is aware that there are societies in which unconditional giving such as she imagines God's giving to be, do exist. These are societies in which gift exchange is based in the social relation of the exchange rather than the material and status is linked to the graciousness of one's giving rather than the goods one acquires. These exchanges form the very fabric of the society and exchange of gifts is the fundamental way of relating. Relationships don't end when a gift is returned rather the need to continue the exchanges is developed. Objects are in this exchange personalised which suggests they can't be alienated from the giver. This is an economy of gift not one of debt. Tanner points out that Christians could have a similar economy since the cross saves us from a debt economy rather than throwing us into one and suggests the theology behind it is an extension of that of the Jubilee in the Hebrew Bible where debts are cancelled, debtors freed and goods returned which were taken because of unpaid debt. She claims that Christians should therefore wish for a theological economy that is unconditional and non-competitive. She asks us to demand a mutually beneficial financial system rather than the win/lose one we have now with a few getting very rich and the many getting more and more impoverished.

We should then stand against the depression of wages worldwide as well as the unaffordable schedules for foreign debts. And of course the markets should not be alienated from the workers –gift from givers– which allows for fictitious global economic markets generating billions of capital that never has to be returned to the market. Capital is increasingly divorcing itself from the workforce everywhere yet we are still told that the market is the answer to all. When we can sell loans over and over again there need be no worry about productive investment let alone gracious giving!! In this way unregulated financial markets block the development of a win/win economy and just help make the gap between winners and losers ever wider. Tanner calls for a theological economy based on the least sacrifice not the most. For this to happen one step would be to place change in the hands of communities on the ground which could diminish the power of multinational corporations as they devise ways of living together based in shared humanity and divinity. The sacrifice of people to markets is irrational since market laws of total capitalism destroy society and the natural environment. A move to-

wards divine human and non-human entanglement and away from redemptive sacrifice and debt economy must surely be a major step to undermining the soulless monster that is advanced capitalism. This takes communities not just individuals and perhaps churches if they too moved their ways of thinking could be great supports in this realignment to incarnational thinking. Christian incarnational theology after all does call us to be imaginative, challenging and to continue the rupture in what is seen as reality and to birth new ways of being in ourselves and societies.

Feminist theologies have come a long way and the developing ideologies springing from them can take us further as the glorious reality of the divine incarnate dance goes on and is ever more illuminating and inclusive. This will not be without its critics both within the churches and the academy although it has to be said that many academics have adopted the methodology and language of feminist theologies but rarely credit these as such. As an example, relationality appears in non-feminist theological writing with no credits given. Criticism from within the churches comes in many shapes and forms from the most conservative who feel women should not have a voice at all in theology and religion, to the continued desire to control women's reproductive health and rights and the exclusion of women from clerical roles and with it a reduced voice in matters of theology and by extension liturgy. Most often church members see no reason to change tradition and indeed even the most liberal churches can imagine that doctrine has never developed since the 1st century. It is interesting to note that some feminist theologians spend space when writing to address Church Fathers in an attempt to prove their credentials as 'real' theologians. While I understand this I would urge courage and belief in their own ideas and feminist methodologies to create legitimate and far sighted theology that propels us onward.

So where could we be going? There is no doubt that the 21st century has as many challenges to be faced as were faced by our sisters in the 19th and 20th centuries. Recognition of the capabilities of women can still be hard fought for and women's voices, while so crucial to society going forward are often silenced. This silencing can take physical forms with violence to women being on the rise in many countries, the UK has seen during the COVID lockdown an increase in number and severity of attack. Work has of course been done on this but there is still much to do. I believe that as well as working with violent offenders we need to change the societal and theological stories which set out the place of women and men in society. Research some years ago found that when violence occurred in conservative homes where the bible is taken more literally the problem was not only what men

felt they deserved and could therefore punish if they were dissatisfied but women also took the sin of Eve on themselves and believed they deserved the treatment they received and their secondary place in the household. There is then in my opinion much more work to be done in this area around behaviours but also around systems of belief.

While much work has been done in relation to gender it is my belief that we have a long way to go in understanding how gender identity is formed and implications for a radical incarnational theology. Trans issues are now to the fore and not before time as there has been too much suffering in those communities of people. Marcella Althaus Reid and I gathered the theological/spiritual thoughts of a group of trans folk and published them as 'Trans/Formations'.²¹ It is obvious that all that has been said about radical incarnation and the power of *dunamis* is as true in a trans body as any other but churches are having problems deciding how to deal with trans folk— just as they had, and many continue to have, problems with gay and lesbian people. There is no issue trans people have the outpouring of the divine life within them and to reject that is in my mind blasphemous. That is not to say I do not have some questions arising from trans experience that I will explore going forward.

I have no evidence but I wonder if the focus on trans gender has played into what I see as butch/phobia – there have been a number of acquaintances who have lived perhaps 30 or more years as masculine women who have in later life transitioned. Yes it is easier now than 30 years ago but I would like to ask deeper questions about why now. I do understand that there is a vast difference between living as a butch female and a trans man, neither of which is greeted with open arms in much of society, but does the appearance of one have to increase the hostility to the other?

As we know Rosi Braidotti²² has spoken in depth about techniques of resistance such as *figurations* by which she means politically informed accounts of alternate subjectivity. This is a way of living 'as if' and is a technique of strategic relocation in order to rescue what we need of the past in order to create transformations in the future. I find an interesting theological and philosophical question therefore to be— If the 'as if' becomes the 'is' – through gender reassignment—what happens to techniques for alternate subjectivity where do they become located and what power to resist is in them?

I am of course always concerned about the media images placed before us of women and men and this also applies to trans people and appears to

²¹ Lisa Isherwood & Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Trans/Formations* (London, SCM, 2009).

²² Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance* (London, Polity, 1991).

at times reinforce strict gender stereotypes and hetero desire. On the work with early Christians who might be understood a trans people Marcella and I wondered if this was more to do with moving across boundaries in order to more fully take on the biblical mantra that in Christ there is neither male nor female. If this was indeed the case then perhaps we could encourage, not just in trans people, but in all of us, a fluid boundary crossing in gender identity as one way to increase the divine reality.

I think a very interesting reality for theological reflection is the way in which bodies transition and the experiences that emerge from that experience. As we know transition take many different forms some people go for full transition, others for partial while for others it is a non-operative transition. Is transition understood as one change or is it open to many transitions across gender and desire? It seems to me that much could inform theology from these embodied experiences of incarnate life.

Any engagement with radical incarnation must take very seriously materiality, this is the stuff of incarnation, the place where the divine dwells. There is so much more to learn about human materiality, who we are in all our enfleshment and of course this cannot be divided from who we are as animals in the rest of the ecological order. Dualistic metaphysics and the imposition of the spiritual life as above that of the physical has encouraged us for centuries to believe that we are not animals, one amongst many. Of course eco-theology of all kinds, not just feminist, is beginning to close that gap and allows us to glimpse the beauty of that placing of humans as it we also realise more and more about our non-human brothers and sisters. We are all one family and I have argued therefore all have *dunamis* as a birth right, the divine within asks us to pay attention, to be present to all that lives. We live in a world, a cosmos, that is alive and as such demands subjectivity. Much more exploration of this truth needs to be done by theology and who knows what a change may come to our present beliefs. We have brought this beautiful planet to the edge of extinction as we slowly wipe out our fellow beings and in most cases not even noticing this blasphemy let alone mourning the diminishment of the divine amongst us. In my view this calls for a radical change in behaviour and belief, the idea that the whole of the created order is here for our use is no longer a story that can be tolerated nor can the notion that a new world will be created by the return of Christ. Feminist biblical scholars have done much work on this and it needs to come through in theological terms too. My view is that any doctrine, dogma or church practice that speaks of separation from the rest of creation and exploitation of any living being, human and non-human alike, needs to be expunged

from Christian belief, our God is incarnate. There is so much more for theologians to do in this area as exploitation is still all around us.

Materiality and the question of who we are as embodied beings is facing new questions in the light of the technological advancements that we are living amongst and indeed engaging with every day. It is quite usual to open a computer site and be asked if we are robots and having to prove that we are in fact human. The advances in technology do impinge on our everyday lives and feminist theologians have yet to examine this phenomenon in detail. Our sisters in philosophy have made some inroads but of course they are not faced with the notion of incarnation or indeed radical incarnation. Can we say that AI is incarnate or that the robots who care for the elderly who have dementia are relational? In a world where work is becoming more automated and less reliant on humans what might the future be for the poorest in society? When feminist theologians have been fighting for economic equality from their early days how are we to address this new technological question? Machines have always been seen as industrial advances and their adoption has had employment consequences but we are on the verge of an entirely new and far reaching technological era. There are a number of issues raised by this understanding one is in relation to what has become known as cognitive capital where it can be shown that computers have the edge, they can deal with vast amounts of data far quicker than the human mind, as yet though only if presented in a suitable manner. The human mind can deal with complexity in a way that computers have not been able to but AI is beginning to close the gap. A more worrying issue for me is how the idea of the perfection of humans through scientific intervention is no longer a dream. The Oxford Institute for the Future of Humanity speaks freely of transhumanism by which it means extending the perfectibility of humans through emphasis on industrial robotics and an artificial intelligence programme aimed at human enhancement.²³ It is not difficult to understand that this is not a programme, dreadful as it seems, for the health and well-being of humans and the planet but rather for the advancement of capitalism, a system fully endorsed and applauded by the director of the Institute. So here in Oxford we perhaps see the move to the Capitalocene from the Anthropocene.

As materiality is pressed by the technological there is a huge danger that diversity will be lost and the white, heterosexual, able bodied male will be the model for all that is enhanced humanity, techno-humanity or post-humanity.

²³ Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (London: Polity, 2019) 59.

This of course has to be something to which feminist must be alert and push back at all stages. Some might suggest that the colour, gender and ethnicity of robots is of no importance but I would argue this is a dangerous oversight. So am I arguing that feminist theologians should be anti-technological advancement, no of course not just sounding a note of caution from battles long fought.

Medicine is an area that poses many questions about robotics and implant technology as there are many thousands if not millions of people walking around with some form of non-human implant in their bodies. What were once often animal implants which raised their own questions, we now find that mechanical devices have largely replaced them. The heart that for centuries has been viewed by philosophers and theologians alike as the beating centre of human emotion can now be a mechanism, how does that change how we view things or indeed how things actually become? There is no doubt that many technological advances have made life easier and indeed in some cases prolonged life, for example scientists in Singapore have developed a computer that can predict whether one is likely to have a heart attack simply by looking in the eyes. I am sure that insurance companies will value this invention and scientists are delighted because they never knew that AI could do this. But there is the issue for feminist theology, even the scientists did not know that their invention could do what it actually does, in a very real way a new world is coming about, one in which human evolution has been the start and is part but not necessarily the end product of this new age.

The ecologist James Lovelock²⁴ who in most of his 100years on the planet has been concerned about its material continuation in his most recent work imagined a world not too far off in which AI takes the place of human minds since AI is close to being able to develop its own thought patterns based on experience and new data. Also a world in which mechanical animals eat mechanical fruit, now solar powered batteries from solar powered mechanical trees. Lovelock speculates that a new age which he calls the Novacene may be able regulate the chemical and physical conditions on earth in order to keep it habitable for cyborgs. He says Gaia will be wearing an inorganic coat and its regulation of earth will not be focussed on whether organic matter, humans and non-human, can survive. He imagines that cyborgs will not mourn human passing as we do not mourn the passing of many ancestor species. This is Lovelock's projection of how AI and other technological advances will develop as time goes on he does however have concerns about technological

²⁴ James Lovelock, *Novacene: The Coming Age of Hyerintelligence* (London: Allen Lane, 2019) 82-83.

capacity at the present time in the arena of military hardware. It is no longer necessary to face your enemy to kill him so it is a small step to programming drones to target individuals who they hunt and kill on sight. Feminist theologians dealing with ethics and the old notions of a Just War have new challenges which I have no doubt they will meet.

Feminist theologies have laid very sound foundations for further challenging work to continue in all the areas considered in this paper. I would encourage my sisters in theology to be as brave as our early foremothers were and not to feel the need to justify what they know to be true from their engagements with their communities. There is so much more to do that time should not be wasted attempting to align with a history that is in so many ways dysfunctional. That is not to say I seek a break from the broader tradition but rather I encourage an embrace of *dunamis* which compels us towards our fellow beings on the planet and empowers our engagement with them in order that new understanding of the entangled divine may emerge and the passion of that encounter propel us on in our work for justice and our search for life in abundance for all.

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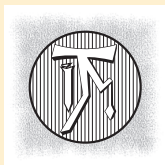
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