

SECULAR FEMINIST RELIGIOUS METAPHOR AND CHRISTIANITY

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Two years ago I responded to the views of radical feminist Emily Erwin Culpepper during a philosophy symposium at California State University at Fullerton.¹ At the time I was struck by the strength of the secular feminist presence in the university. Almost ninety people attended the Culpepper session alone. Out of nine religious studies philosophers chosen to participate, three were radical feminists: Mary Daly, Emily Culpepper and Charlene Spretnak.

I discovered that radical feminist views on metaphor, symbol and myth were not new ideas. Some of the feminist presuppositions on myth and metaphor are a common offering in religious liberal academic fare. Symbol, myth and metaphor function almost as an intellectual hook to draw women into feminism. There is a growing need for Christians to respond to this secular radical feminist presence in our society.

This study will investigate some current influential views on secular feminist religious metaphor.² I will contend that the religious metaphors

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¹ B. Talbert-Wettler, "A Critique of Symbolism, Myth and Oral Tradition in Dr. Emily Erwin Culpepper's Feminist Methodology" (lecture delivered on March 12, 1993).

² Although feminism is a worldwide movement, only American feminism will be dealt with in this paper. Some feminists, such as Carol P. Christ, Adrienne Rich, Starhawk, Charlene Spretnak and Alice Walker, identify with traditions of goddess worship, witchcraft and pantheism. This brand of feminism focuses on woman's supposed interrelationship with the earth and nature. Essays by these authors are found in several collections. Cf. e.g. *The Politics of Women's Spirituality* (ed. C. Spretnak; New York: Doubleday, 1982); *States of Grace: The Recovery of Meaning in the Postmodern Age* (ed. Spretnak; San Francisco: Harper, 1991); *Womanspirit Rising* (ed. J. Plaskow and C. Christ; San Francisco: Harper, 1979); *Weaving the Visions* (ed. Plaskow and C. Christ; San Francisco: Harper, 1989). Feminists such as Mary Daly, Emily Culpepper, Jane Caputi and several French feminists (e.g. Julia Kristeva and Helene Cixous) focus on the importance of creating a new women's language as a method of recreating women's reality. They are heavily influenced by existentialism. In Daly's work one can find traces of Sartre, Heidegger, Eliade, Buber and Tillich. Cf. M. Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973 [reprint 1985]); *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon, 1978); *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon, 1984); M. Daly and J. Caputi, *Webster's First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language* (1987). Cf. also H. Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?", *Signs* 7/1 (Autumn 1981); J. Kristeva, "Women's Time," *Signs* 7/1 (Autumn 1981); E. Culpepper, "Contemporary Goddess Theology: A Sympathetic Critique," *Shaping New Vision: Gender and Values in American Culture* (ed. C. Atkinson; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan); "The Spiritual, Political Journey of a Feminist Free Thinker," *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions* (ed. P. M. Cooley; New York: Orbis, 1992) 146-165;

developed and used by secular radical feminists are insufficient to express the complexity of the nature of God. The radical existential feminists examined include Daly and Culpepper. Representative of the goddess and witchcraft tradition are Carol P. Christ, Charlene Spretnak and Merlin Stone. These women claim to have a better description of religious reality than Christianity does.³ Nevertheless Christian revelation expresses the complexity of the nature of God better than the myth and metaphor of the radical secular feminists.

The women and the philosophies dealt with in this paper claim no allegiance to any Christian beliefs. Thus the views of radical feminist Christians are excluded from this examination.⁴ I use the term "feminist" in this study with reservation. I concur with Ruth Tucker's statement that the definition of feminism "depends on whose book you read and to some extent what year it was published."⁵

Contemporary views of secular feminist religious metaphor for God are rooted deeply in both existentialist and neopagan religious philosophy. The use of the phrase "secular feminist religious philosophy" limits the subject to deal with those feminists who accept the following presuppositions: (1) Christianity is at its core a patriarchal system that oppresses women.⁶ (2) "Masculine symbolism for God reinforces sexual hierarchy, placing men

"Amazon Philosophy: A Radical Feminist Politics of Metaphor" (unpublished paper, March 1993). Minority feminists Audry Lorde, Alice Walker, Gloria Anzaldua and Carol Lee Sanchez also contribute to the radical feminist vision and theory. "Shug and Celie's dialog on God in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is one of the most widely quoted feminist theological texts" (*Weaving the Visions* 5). For an overview of categories of differing feminist theories see J. Donovan, *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions of American Feminism* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1985); *A Reader in Feminist Knowledge* (ed. S. Gunew; New York: Routledge, 1991). Not many Christians have written refutations of radical feminism. Material that contains responses to secular feminism from a Christian standpoint includes E. Achtemeier, "Female Language for God: Should the Church Adopt it?", *The Hermeneutical Quest* (ed. D. G. Miller; Allison Park: Pickwick, 1986); E. Achtemeier, *Nature, God and Pulpit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); D. Bloesch, *The Battle for the Trinity: The Debate over Inclusive God-Language* (Ann Arbor: Servant, 1985); P. Jones, *The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992); *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (ed. A. F. Kimel; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); R. H. Nash, *Great Divides* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1993); R. A. Tucker, *Women in the Maze: Questions and Answers on Biblical Equality* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992).

³ "The diversity of explications of the meaning of the goddess symbol suggests that symbols have a richer significance than any explications of their meaning can express. . . . The phenomenological fact suggests that theologians may need to give more than lip service to a theory of symbol in which the symbol is viewed as the primary fact and the meanings are viewed as secondary. It also suggests that a theology of the goddess would be very different from the theology we have known in the west. But to spell out this notion of the primacy of symbol in theology in contrast to the primacy of the explanation in theology would be the topic of another paper" (C. P. Christ, "Why Women Need the Goddess," *Reader in Feminist Knowledge* 295).

⁴ Included here are Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott.

⁵ Tucker, *Women* 214.

⁶ E. Culpepper, "Is Christianity a Sexist Religion? Why Radical Feminism Says 'Yes'" (unpublished lecture, March 1990).

in an unbalanced position of authority over women."⁷ (3) Christ is a distinctly male image, symbol or metaphor for God.⁸ Christ as a male symbol, metaphor, or role model is incompatible with women's religious needs. (4) Women must be "liberated" from an oppressive male society and theology. Therefore women must create a new society based upon different values than those traditionally offered by "male philosophy" or "male religion."⁹ Use of religious metaphor, symbol and imagery is integral to feminist beliefs on the nature of "ultimate reality" or a "supreme being."

A common definition for metaphor or symbol is difficult to establish.¹⁰ At times radical feminists seem to be using these terms according to usual language distinctions. (A symbol usually resembles the object it describes, and a metaphor consists of figurative language that can only describe by implicit comparison or analogy.) The religious symbols and metaphors of many feminists change with their differing life contexts and issues. Since this is the case, it is doubtful that the feminists themselves could clearly delineate what these terms mean. This fact must be kept in mind as we investigate feminist religious thought.

I. GENERAL OVERVIEW OF SECULAR FEMINIST METAPHOR

Use of religious metaphor is prevalent among feminists. The necessity of this metaphor is a key area of agreement among the varied feminist belief systems. Metaphor is a theological tool with which women can realize their individual religious potential to shape their own reality and idea of God.¹¹ These women use and/or construct feminist metaphor as the basis of their religious development.

Certain feminists draw their presuppositions on the meaning of myth and metaphor from nineteenth-century theories that visualized "myth as the disregarded but fundamental truth of human nature."¹² Freud's Oedipus complex is an example of the use of myth to describe a truth of human nature. Jung developed archetypal theory and the concept of the collective unconscious. He also believed that "mythic stories contained universal truths."¹³

⁷ Daly, *Beyond* 4.

⁸ *Ibid.* 5.

⁹ "The becoming of women in sisterhood is the countercultural phenomenon *par excellence* which can indicate the future course of human spiritual evolution. As I have pointed out, none of the methods acceptable to male philosophers and theologians can begin to speak to this task. Women are not merely 'rethinking' philosophy and theology but are participating in a new creation" (*ibid.* 11).

¹⁰ Bloesch gives some examples of different definitions of "metaphor" in *Battle* 13-21.

¹¹ Culpepper suggests that the literary writings of women of color be added to the list of sources from which theological metaphor may be drawn ("Contemporary" 153; see also "New Tools for Theology Writings by Women of Color," *JFSR* 4/2 [Fall 1988] 2-9). See also in *Politics* (ed. Spretnak) the following: C. Christ, "Why Women Need the Goddess"; C. Christ, "Rethinking Theology and Nature"; N. Goldenberg, "Feminist Witchcraft: Controlling Our Own Inner Space"; B. Starrett, "The Metaphors of Power." See also N. Morton, "Goddess as Metaphoric Image," *Weaving the Visions*.

¹² *The Feminist Companion to Mythology* (ed. C. Larrington; London: Pandora, 1992) 441.

¹³ *Ibid.* 442.

Other writers who echoed and built upon these ideas included J. Frazer, J. J. Bachofen, F. Engels and R. Graves.¹⁴

Most of the feminists discussed herein would reject Freud and Jung's evaluations of human nature. Nevertheless they would give credibility to the notion that myths and the metaphors produced by them in some sense promote or express fundamental aspects of human nature.¹⁵ As a result these myths and metaphors would influence the nature of both the individual and society. Thus the rewriting of myths, and the development of metaphor and symbolism that is strictly female, is an attempt to change civilization's status quo by describing the truth of "women's nature" through poetic and creative means.

Discovering the true nature of women's identity and experience is found through "patriarchal myth-smashing" and "women-identified myth-making." "Patriarchal myth-smashing" consists of the rejection of myths created by men.¹⁶ For these feminists, Judaism and Christianity are manmade myths. "Women-identified myth-making" is the phrase coined to describe the feminist method of creating new myths or recreating old myths. Women-identified myth-making is supposed to be one means of improving the self-esteem and position of women in society.¹⁷ Such myths are intentionally designed to contain what such feminists consider fundamentals about women's nature and identity.¹⁸

Mythological metaphor is considered crucial to this process of discovering women's identity. Women-identified myth-making is found in the goddess and witchcraft movements and in the radical existentialism and "psychic activism" of Mary Daly.¹⁹ Psychic activism as pioneered by Daly redefines new meanings for all mythic terminology. She also attempts to create new terms and theories to use in women's quest for "the ultimate." Some goddess and witchcraft feminists attempt to reconstruct mythology for the sake of

¹⁴ See J. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*; M. Murray, *The Witchcult in Western Europe and The God of the Witches*; J. J. Bachofen, *Myth Mother: Right and Religion*; F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*; R. Graves, *The Greek Myths* and *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*.

¹⁵ "The personified gods and goddesses also are seen as archetypes, primal urges and forces residing deep within the collective conscious of humankind. Connecting with these archetypes and bringing them into consciousness is part of the spiritual development pursued by many Witches" (*Feminist Companion to Mythology* 417). See also Daly, *Pure Lust* 78-122.

¹⁶ Definitions of women-identified myth-making and patriarchal myth-smashing are found in J. Caputi, "Psychic Activism: Feminist Mythmaking" (*Feminist Companion to Mythology* 427).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ "That is the first time I experienced a female deity. I had conceptualized one before, but I had not experienced one directly. It was also the first time I realized how deeply I had internalized the maleness of the patriarchal god and that in so doing I had evoked cosmic support of male rulership of the earth and had *reneged on my own woman identity*" (Morton, "Goddess" 112; italics mine).

¹⁹ The term "psychic activism" is used of feminists who create metaphors in "the quest to . . . refigure the female self from a gynocentric perspective, to discover, revitalize and create a female oral and visual mythic tradition and use it, ultimately, to change the world" (Caputi, "Psychic" 425).

building rites around them.²⁰ Both feminist camps seek to refashion myth and metaphor to speak to the religious experience of women.²¹

A significant difference is found between the metaphor theories of goddess feminism and the feminism of the radical existentialists. "Goddess" feminists such as C. P. Christ, Starhawk and Spretnak value the "goddess-centered ritual magic" that takes place in witchcraft circles.²² The goddess and witchcraft tradition creates worship and ritual around differing mythologies. But the triple goddess is the most common representation of the woman's connection with nature.²³ The triple goddess is associated with three life stages of the women: virgin, mother, crone.²⁴ These aspects reflect a cycle of youth, maturity and age.²⁵ As C. P. Christ states: "The female body is viewed as the direct incarnation of waxing and waning, life and death, cycles in the universe."²⁶ Study of the goddess is frequently referred to as "goddess theology."

Despite the bipolar (male/female) nature of the "supreme being" in witchcraft, "emphasis is given to the Goddess over the God."²⁷ According to feminist Rosemary Ellen Guiley, "the emphasis on goddess is a deliberate effort to address what Witches perceive as a grievous imbalance preached in the patriarchal religions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam."²⁸

On the other hand Daly's use of metaphor is infamous among feminist theories.²⁹ She redefines formerly negative mythic metaphors of women

²⁰ "Many times myth is examined and reconstructed for the purposes of conducting rites around them" (*Feminist Companion to Mythology* 417).

²¹ "The stories celebrated in culture are told by men. Thus, men have actively shaped their experiences of self and world, and their most profound stories orient them to what they perceive as the great powers of the universe. . . . Since women have not told their own stories, they have not actively shaped their experiences of self and the world nor named the great powers from their own perspectives" (C. P. Christ and C. Spretnak, "Images of Spiritual Power in Women's Fiction" [*Politics* 328]).

²² C. P. Christ, "Why Women Need" 298.

²³ "Both God and Goddess are in turn personified by various pagan deities. The Craft draws primarily upon the mythologies of the Egyptians, Greeks, Celts, Babylonians and Sumerians. Some covens give emphasis to Teutonic mythology. Goddess is 'She of a Thousand Names' who can be worshipped and petitioned in any of her numberless guises. Some covens . . . draw upon Native American mythologies, and even upon the religions of Hinduism and Buddhism in recognizing names and aspects of goddess. Witches study the mythologies of interest and construct rituals around them. . . . Above all, goddess is seen as the Triple Goddess" (R. E. Guiley, "Witchcraft as Goddess Worship" [*Feminist Companion to Mythology* 417]).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ C. P. Christ, "Why Women Need" 297.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Guiley, "Witchcraft" 417.

²⁸ Ibid. 415.

²⁹ See Daly, *Pure Lust*. Daly developed a complex and almost incomprehensible system. One must read most of her previous material to understand her current position. Her earlier book, *Beyond God the Father*, lays the foundation for her later works. This book is accepted as a significant contribution by most in the cultural ecofeminist tradition, including C. Spretnak. She states: "In 1973, Daly's *Beyond God the Father* both reacted irrefutably against the Church's philosophy and pioneered postpatriarchal spirituality" (*Politics* xxi).

such as "witches," "gorgons," "nags," "hags" and "crones" into "positive" metaphors for her system.³⁰ Daly believes that the metaphoric process of describing ultimate reality (or God) must continually change. Creating a permanent ritual based on a goddess metaphor is as forbidden for her as is Christian ritual and imagery.³¹

So we find that understanding the use of feminist religious metaphor and myth is crucial to compare and contrast feminism's competing theories. The goddess and witchcraft tradition on the one hand and radical existentialist feminism on the other contain differing methodology and language in describing their myth and metaphor theories.

1. *Existential feminists.* How do feminists define religious metaphor? Culpepper points out that "there is no agreement among feminists as to just what the name 'goddess' means."³² For Culpepper herself, symbolic language is "a tool for recreating and changing our Selves and the World."³³

Nelle Morton's "goddess" does not refer to "an entity out there" (i.e. "a creator goddess") or "a goddess back there" (i.e. "an ancient religion").³⁴ For her the goddess is a "concrete image" or "event" that draws her attention to the present.³⁵ Morton's goddess draws her into a process that underscores the sacredness of her own "female" experience.³⁶ This goddess helps her to recognize her own identity as a woman³⁷ and "call up her own energy" to invoke change in her life.³⁸ Morton uses metaphor to make herself the sovereign authority over her life. Creating new metaphors and focusing on them "causes old images to shatter" so that she can live life from a "more mature perspective."³⁹

Daly also accepts this autonomous view of human experience and existence. Daly believes that metaphors "open up levels of reality otherwise closed to us."⁴⁰ According to her, "there can be no One Absolutely Right symbol for all . . . for we . . . have great individual diversity."⁴¹ She uses the term "metaphor" because she believes that metaphors "participate in that to which they

³⁰ "Happy Hags and Harpies, divested of hope for 'heavenly happiness,' focus attention beyond the 'afterlife' to Life. . . . Nags gallop through galaxies while Sirens sing to the stars" (Daly, *Pure Lust* 387). (Irregular capitalization is common among feminists who create new terms and expressions.)

³¹ "There is every reason for women to celebrate our becoming and the discovery of our history, but in ever new ways, not encrusted in stagnant, repetitious ritual" (Daly, *Beyond* 146). See also Culpepper, "Contemporary," for an in-depth view of radical existentialist conflicts with goddess spirituality.

³² Culpepper, "Contemporary" 54.

³³ Ibid. 68.

³⁴ Morton, "Goddess" 111.

³⁵ Ibid. 110.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid. 112.

³⁸ Ibid. 113.

³⁹ Ibid. 115.

⁴⁰ Daly, *Pure Lust* 25.

⁴¹ Ibid.

point." Quoting Paul Tillich, she believes that metaphors "grow when the situation is ripe for them, and they die with the situation changes."⁴²

The key to understanding Daly's concept of metaphor is that "metaphors evoke action, movement."⁴³ For Daly a metaphor is "associated with transforming action"⁴⁴ in one's life. A static or stagnant life is a state of bondage.⁴⁵ Constantly changing one's metaphors helps the existential feminist "transcend" the current social conditions through destruction of inauthentic roles and stereotypes. Such women strive to create "authentic" identities in women. An authentic identity stresses individual freedom and "autonomy."⁴⁶ For Daly, constant change and growth in metaphor that leads toward autonomy and freedom is the goal. Metaphors are necessary for Daly's philosophy. They are the vehicles Daly uses to search for God.⁴⁷

2. Goddess and witchcraft feminists. The goddess tradition that encompasses neopagans and ecofeminists is also diverse. The meaning of "goddess" to Starhawk depends upon how she feels.⁴⁸ C. P. Christ desires a theology without truth claims or dogma where varying interpretations of a symbol are acknowledged.⁴⁹ She also feels that women's theory of symbol and theology "must be congruent with their experience."⁵⁰ Symbols are supposed to "create the inner conditions . . . that lead people to . . . accept social and political arrangements that correspond to the symbol system."⁵¹ In essence, symbol systems shape the culture and values of a society.⁵²

Naomi Goldenberg believes that "witchcraft is the only Western religion that recognizes woman as a divinity in her own right."⁵³ For Goldenberg, witchcraft elevates the image of women in religious symbolism and consequently improves the idea of woman in secular culture.⁵⁴

This pluralistic language of the feminists creates entire systems of undefined terms that mean different things to different women. The character and nature of their supreme being can be changed at a whim.

II. TRUTH AND GOD-LANGUAGE

1. Feminist pluralism. Goddess and witchcraft feminists and existentialist feminists believe that the reality beneath the metaphor is so complex

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid. 26.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 25.

⁴⁵ Daly, *Beyond* xviii.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 156.

⁴⁷ Daly, *Pure Lust* 26.

⁴⁸ C. P. Christ quoting a conversation with Starhawk ("Why Women Need" 294). See also Starhawk, "Witchcraft as Goddess Religion" (*Politics* 49-51).

⁴⁹ C. P. Christ, "Why Women Need" 295.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid. 291.

⁵² Ibid. 290.

⁵³ Goldenberg, "Feminist Witchcraft" 217.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

that it cannot be expressed in one set of symbols or metaphors. Daly states that "there can be no One Absolutely Right symbol for all."⁵⁵ C. P. Christ believes that "the diversity of explications of the meaning of the goddess symbol suggests that symbols have richer significance than any explications of their meaning can express."⁵⁶

Descriptions of feminist symbols and metaphors are generally expressed in either pantheistic or panentheistic terms. Daly uses a dialogue from radical feminist Alice Walker's book *The Color Purple* to illustrate pantheism as Shug Avery describes God as "it."⁵⁷ To Daly, "it" is ultimate reality "who is in women and all Elemental creatures."⁵⁸ *The Color Purple* is the current theological rage among feminists. In *Weaving the Vision* both goddess and radical existentialist feminists quote Shug's soliloquies on the nature of God. The natural extension of the myth and metaphor process is this type of "literary theology." In feminist theology anyone can write an inspired text.

According to Culpepper, radical feminist "goddess theology" embraces "meanings that include both deity and soul, and the divine within Self, World and Beyond."⁵⁹ Culpepper suggests that goddess language also "functions as a name for a women's spirit or fullest sense of Self."⁶⁰ In this sense goddess language improves the woman's self-worth and is intended to be "self-affirming."⁶¹ There is yet another class of feminists who "prefer to leave open . . . the question of whether 'goddess' means an external Divine being."⁶²

2. Linguistic absurdities. Linguistic absurdities result from attempts to reconcile the above statements. The epistemological issue underlying this type of religious pluralism is addressed by H. Netland:

Any epistemologically acceptable theory of religious truth must recognize that beliefs are integral to religion and that truth in religion, just as in other domains, must include the notions of propositional and exclusive truth.⁶³

⁵⁵ Daly, *Pure Lust* 25.

⁵⁶ C. P. Christ, "Why Women Need" 295.

⁵⁷ *The Color Purple* is the most commonly quoted piece of so-called feminist "womanist" theology. Alice Walker's "womanist" theology is reviewed by D. S. Williams: "The concept is presented in Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, and many women in church and society have appropriated it as a way of affirming themselves as black while simultaneously owning their connection with feminism and with the Afro-American community, male and female. The concept of womanist allows women to claim their roots in black history, religion and culture" ("Womanist Theology," *Weaving the Visions* 179). "Christian womanist theological methodology needs to be informed by at least four elements: 1) a multidialogical intent, 2) a liturgical intent, 3) a didactic intent, and 4) commitment both to reason and to the validity of female imagery and metaphorical language in the construction of theological statements" (ibid. 184; italics mine).

⁵⁸ "The true Archimage behind the simulators . . . is the Great Original Witch, who is in women and all Elemental creatures. . . . She is power/powers of be-ing within women and all biophilic creatures. She points toward Metabeing, in which all Witches/Hags/Wierds participate, and in which we live, move and have our being. . . . She is shimmering Substance—Real Presence—that shines through appearances" (Daly, *Pure Lust* 86–87).

⁵⁹ Culpepper, "Contemporary" 55.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ H. A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 150.

Feminist language regarding the nature of ultimate reality becomes confused. If, as feminists claim, there is no truth or falsity in religious understanding,⁶⁴ then a patriarchy will be found just as acceptable and legitimate as a feminarthy. There is also no case for rejection of Christianity.

3. *Symbolic awareness or true reality?* D. G. Bloesch identifies another linguistic issue in relation to the use of feminist metaphor. He questions whether the purpose of such god-language is to "give a true knowledge or merely a symbolic awareness of the ultimate reality we call God."⁶⁵

Daly's awareness of this ultimate reality tells her that "all presently envisaged goals, lifestyles, symbols, and societal structures may be transitory."⁶⁶ Consequently Daly built a linguistic theory concerned with the finiteness of language and its limitations in describing God.⁶⁷ For Daly, to envision God as an unchanging person in the sense Christianity does makes him into a static object.⁶⁸ And this supposedly results in conceiving of God in finite terms.⁶⁹ This is one reason she and other feminists may choose to stress metaphorical statements over propositional statements.

For feminists like Daly, propositional use of religious language means making God into an object, thus limiting him within time and space. She believes Christianity limits God by expressing his unchangeable nature in propositional statements and male metaphor. When such feminists promote metaphorical language as the primary means to describe God they do not expect that one can understand the reality beneath differing concepts of God. Therefore they are left with an impersonal presence or awareness of reality rather than a personal and sovereign God. These feminists are also left with no acknowledgment of propositional truth that can describe the reality beneath these differing ideas.

4. *Linguistic theory of Mary Daly.* Daly attempts to deal with the inherent limitation of metaphorical language. She develops a theory of ever-changing metaphors in the context of women's experience. Nevertheless her theory cannot evade the descriptive limitations of language. Certain

⁶⁴ In C. P. Christ's words, "doing theology in a way which would not require theologians to say definitively that one understanding is true and the others are false" ("Why Women Need" 295).

⁶⁵ Bloesch, *Battle* 13.

⁶⁶ Daly, *Beyond* 28-29.

⁶⁷ "Part of the challenge is to recognize the poverty of all words and symbols and the fact of our past idolatry regarding them, and then to turn to our own resources for bringing about the radically new in our own lives. It is this living that is generating the new meaning context for God" (ibid. 21-22).

⁶⁸ Daly's goal is the dethronement of what she considers the "false . . . ideas and symbols of God" that Christianity represents. She writes to her feminist readers: "Our concept of God must be changed from 'the supreme being.'" The quest of women is "rooted in the intuition that the Powers of Be-ing are constantly unfolding, creating, communicating Be-ing more. The Be-ing is described in the sense of an intransitive verb which suggests constant movement and change. Therefore the symbols and the God of Christianity are considered stagnant and finite because he is explained as unchanging" (ibid. xvii).

⁶⁹ "The various theologies that hypostatize transcendence, that is, those which is one way or another objectify 'God' as a being, thereby attempt in a self-contradictory way to envisage transcendent reality as finite" (ibid. 19).

elements in metaphorical language contain nonnegotiable propositions despite her theory. For example Daly's metaphorical Archimage is defined as a

root of connectedness in the female Elemental Race. In mythic terms, Archimage names the Triple Goddess. This image is not reducible to mathematical equations. Rather, she signifies unity and harmony in Diversity.

By stating in unequivocal terms that her diverse god or goddess is "not reducible to mathematical equations" she has introduced a nonnegotiable proposition. Daly assumes truth while ascribing specific attributes to this Archimage.

The Archimage consists of the abstract ideas of "root of connectedness" and "harmony in Diversity." These attributes exclude monotheism. Daly's contradictory statement that "there can be no Absolutely Right Symbol for all" is a dogmatic statement regarding reality. This statement excludes monotheistic symbolism and metaphor. Her wording is metaphorical and her concept is an equivocation while promoting a propositional nonnegotiable.

Daly's attempts at changing metaphors obscure the fact that human language will always objectify, quantify and limit our understanding. Such feminists arbitrarily reject propositional god-language in favor of metaphorical language. On what basis do these feminists decide that god-language cannot be both metaphorical and propositional? Human language is limited, but does this necessarily mean that language cannot reveal truth?

III. FEMINIST METAPHOR AND WOMEN'S LIBERATION

Liberation of women in the sense that Mary Daly espouses in her early book *Beyond God the Father* hinges upon a presupposition that a "worldwide sexual caste exists."⁷⁰ This system is based upon "sex role segregation."⁷¹ The controlling principle for Daly's social, religious and political decisions is found in women uniting to oppose oppression.⁷²

The presupposition of a need for liberation is integral to most radical secular feminist religious philosophy. Many women in the existentialist and the goddess and witchcraft tradition assume this position.⁷³

Daly believes that societies' "symbol systems and conceptual apparatuses have been male creations."⁷⁴ Both metaphor and myth are considered male creations. "Exclusively masculine symbolism" in theology is considered damaging to women and oppressive.⁷⁵ Women break through this oppres-

⁷⁰ Ibid. 2.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² "Faith can come to be understood in a non-authoritarian and universalist sense. Hope, rather than being restricted to expectation of rewards for conformity, can come to be experienced and understood as creative, political, and revolutionary. Love will mean uniting to overcome oppression" (Daly, "The Spiritual Dimension of Women's Liberation," *A Reader in Feminist Knowledge* [ed. Gunew] 339).

⁷³ These include Spretnak, *Politics* xii; C. P. Christ "Why Women Need" 74. See also Culpepper, "Spiritual, Political Journey" 146-165.

⁷⁴ Daly, *Beyond* 7.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 4.

sion by redefining themselves over and against the patriarchal values inherent in male theology.

Most of the feminists discussed here attempt to create a society that reflects the opposite of a so-called male system. The natural outcome of the rejection of this male system locates sinfulness in the patriarchal worldview itself.⁷⁶ Sheila D. Collins suggests that patriarchal metaphors are "summed up in a series of dualisms the two halves of which are related to each other as superior to inferior, superordinate to subordinate."⁷⁷ Feminists reject these dualisms as an "adversarial concept of power."⁷⁸

Defining patriarchy as a dualism proves disastrous to the feminists' own theory. In branding monotheism and Christianity as patriarchal the radical feminists themselves have set up a dualistic social and religious category for "politically correct" metaphors. Many who believe in a feminist rendering of ultimate reality assert that they are more spiritually aware than those who believe in monotheism or Christianity. Asserting this proposition results in both a hierarchy and a dualism, a superior and inferior, a superordinate and subordinate. Radical feminists do not practice what they preach. Such feminists have sinned within their own worldview. Their system explodes upon impact in a critical analysis of their own presuppositions.

This superior to inferior dualistic feminist system imports goals and values through presuppositions drawn from women's experience and intuition. In this system women's superior experiences are favored over men's inferior experiences.

Advocacy of a primarily feminine metaphor and symbol contains an assumption that religious language is less meaningful to women when expressed in terms of the male gender. Ultimately a particular definition of what it is to be female, liberated and autonomous controls the feminist conception of God. Thus God becomes a projection of their own psyches. This self-fulfilling prophecy is achieved through circular reasoning. One finds a Feuerbachian presupposition at work here. "Symbols for god" are considered merely human projections and not propositionally descriptive of God's nature, unless of course one believes she is god.

Many feminists expect that use of female imagery and metaphor will be a key element in fighting male oppression in society. Daly believes that the "collective imagination" in society can be changed through her metaphorical manipulations.⁷⁹ By changing the religious metaphors and archetypes in society, Daly and other feminists feel women will gain the ability to re-create society's view of itself and women's view of herself in that society. This in turn will give women the power to fight oppression.

What is the ultimate criterion for judgment of feminist metaphor? If metaphor is "grounded upon one's own experience" and "metaphors drawing on

⁷⁶ "By locating the source of human sinfulness in the patriarchal worldview, we are able to find metaphors which help to explain and to connect the various manifestations of sin, both personal and corporate, in a way that was not possible before" (S. D. Collins, "The Personal Is Political" [*Politics* 364]).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ B. Starrett, "The Metaphors of Power" (*Politics* 188).

⁷⁹ "Women's 'collective imagination' must be transformed so that the current 'distortion' of the human aspiration to transcendence will lose its credibility" (Daly, *Beyond* 19).

ancient sources" are the criteria as some suggest,⁸⁰ then feminist metaphor and imagery are as potentially dangerous as the so-called patriarchal symbolism of Christianity. How do feminists determine their values of good and evil, right and wrong, in the fight against oppression? How do we know that the process of metaphor itself, so highly touted by feminists, is not the result of the sin of oppression? Perhaps no religious metaphor is appropriate.

The goddess feminists advocate another solution for fighting oppression. Their solution is not so much found in creating linguistic metaphor as in the reconstruction of myth and storytelling. These processes provide special insight into the nature of women, which again should provide the impetus for a change in society and among women themselves. C. P. Christ and Spretnak believe "the expression of women's spiritual quest is integrally related to the telling of women's stories. If women's stories are not told, the depth of women's souls will not be known."⁸¹

C. P. Christ and Spretnak build a faulty methodology based upon personal bias. When one reconstructs ancient myths, bias must be read into the texts in order to extract anything that is pro-woman or historically verifiable. Feminist historian Linda Gordon reveals some of the difficulties in reconstruction of history and myth.

Among the particular constraints on the activity of producing history which embodies both truth and myth is the finite, capricious, mottled nature of the evidence. . . . Moreover, we are not at ethical liberty to pick and choose among the shards available. . . . These are neither outmoded nor unrealizable standards; nor are they standards inappropriate for feminists.⁸²

Feminists like Spretnak and C. P. Christ accuse men of creating biased myth and metaphor that has oppressed women. So why are they choosing to duplicate this method unless they ultimately seek the same autonomous power that they see in the patriarchal system?

In summary, the feminist methods I have discussed assume (1) that human beings have projected "God" in their own image, (2) that the language of religious metaphor functions only to serve the interests of woman and man rather than describe a sovereign, personal, unchanging God, and (3) that the purpose of religious metaphor is not expected to literally describe an absolute concept of God.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

1. *The result of feminist metaphor.* One cannot describe the nature of God in a feminist system that encompasses such diverse symbols and metaphors. The above feminist theories confuse God-language. Their knowledge of a supreme being inevitably rests on a type of gnostic belief in one's per-

⁸⁰ "First is its beginning with experience. Metaphoric process begins constructing new meaning by starting with known terms, the familiar ground from which we depart into previously uncharted territory. Grounding in experience is continually cited by feminists as a necessary starting point for uncovering and presenting women's stories, the record of female existence" (Culpepper, "Amazon" 4-5).

⁸¹ C. P. Christ and C. Spretnak, "Images" 326.

⁸² L. Gordon, "What's New in Women's History" (*Reader in Feminist Knowledge* 75).

sonal revelation of God. The resulting pantheism and panentheism proclaim a knowledge of God that is incoherent to the masses. Ironically, many of those who seek to undermine logic and rationality in religious language are educators with multiple degrees who are using a logic that defeats their own arguments.⁸³ They either cannot or will not see the implications of their own arguments.

Such feminists proclaim a diverse and complex god, but they include no truth test outside of personal experience. There is no evidence that their knowledge of God is true. Inspiration is creative and literary but not necessarily true. The result of this thinking is that there is no basis for value judgments. Anarchy becomes the natural extension of this individual autonomous state of being.

Truth regarding the nature of God is the ultimate source of contention between Christians and feminists. Elizabeth Achtemeier identifies one critical issue as the feminist refusal to differentiate Creator from creation.

As soon as God is called female, the images of birth, of suckling, of carrying in the womb, and, most importantly, the identification of the deity with life in all things become inevitable, and the Bible's careful and consistent distinction between Creator and Creation is blurred and lost.⁸⁴

This distinction is critical when one places the male imagery in the Bible in the context of the surrounding cultures that practiced fertility rites and goddess worship.⁸⁵ God reveals himself in the OT to the Israelites so that they might be set apart for God and that God might be revealed in their midst. He claimed to be the true God in the midst of pagan idols.⁸⁶

For God to reveal himself in primarily female metaphor would result in a misconception about his nature. God is neither male nor female (Num 23:19). He is spirit (John 4:24).⁸⁷

Occasionally God does use female imagery, as in the case of Jesus mourning over Jerusalem.⁸⁸ But female birth imagery is not used to describe God's nature.

There is only one God (Isa 44:6-8). He is the Creator. He is not part of his creation (Genesis 1-3; Ps 148:3-5). God is transcendent, existing apart from

⁸³ Daly, Spretnak.

⁸⁴ Achtemeier, "Female Language" 109.

⁸⁵ "Asherah, the goddess of fertility, represented the Babylonian Ishtar in her love-goddess aspect. . . . In the Ras Shamrah texts Asherah is the consort of El, the supreme god. She is mentioned as 'creatress of the gods' and as 'Lady Asherah of the sea,' titles that are given to the most important goddess of the pantheon" (*ISBE* 317-318). Baal worship was also prominent. Ahab and Jezebel figure prominently in the acceptance of Baal worship in Israel (1 Kgs 16:29-18:21).

⁸⁶ "To you it was shown that you might know that the Lord, He is God; there is no other besides Him" (Deut 4:35 NASB). "When you enter the land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. . . . But as for you, the Lord your God has not allowed you to do so" (18:9-14).

⁸⁷ "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24).

⁸⁸ "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing" (Matt 23:37).

the material universe.⁸⁹ He reveals himself in personal terms as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, not simply as an impersonal force.

The nature of Biblical linguistic metaphor is to reflect essential truths without purporting to encompass the complete meaning of those truths. Metaphorical analogies are only partially applicable to God's nature. God reveals his attributes in many ways and at many times to insure that there are no misconceptions about his nature.

2. Biblical revelation versus feminist metaphor. Biblical revelation contains a better reflection of the real world and the nature of human sin. The feminists discussed lay the blame for sin on patriarchy. But men and women are equally culpable to God, for "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23).

Biblical revelation details both God's triune manifestation and humanity's relation to him in both metaphorical and propositional language. This also is a better reflection of the world at large. Language may limit our understanding, but even metaphors contain implicit propositions that express truth.

Biblical revelation assumes that both men and women can understand the clarity of the revelation.⁹⁰ Men and women do not need separate revelations based on gender distinctions. God is infinite and acts in history to identify himself to his finite creatures. Because of God's infinite nature, Scripture consists of both clear propositions and mysteries.⁹¹ As finite creatures, Christians understand that both paradoxes and clear thinking can be reflective of reality. God provides the answers to life's paradoxes and reveals clear standards for doctrine and conduct.

Biblical revelation is based on historically reliable texts.⁹² The resurrection of Christ is not a myth that grew up amid patriarchal symbolism. Christ is an historical person who prophesied about his own bodily resurrection.⁹³ Christ's resurrection publicly demonstrated his claims to be God incarnate.⁹⁴ Because of Christ's testimony in these historically accurate Biblical documents, the Christian has true knowledge of God's nature and his intervention in history. Because of the Biblical and historical evidence we can also have confidence that Biblical language has meaning.

⁸⁹ "Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than the heavens—what can you do? They are deeper than the depths of the grave—what can you know?" (Job 11:7–10).

⁹⁰ "The unfolding of Thy words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple" (Ps 119:130).

⁹¹ In the NT, Paul refers to "the mystery of Christ . . . which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit" (Eph 4:3). God retains mysteries for himself: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law" (Deut 29:29).

⁹² See G. L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1974); F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint 1987); C. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987).

⁹³ J. W. Montgomery, *History and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1973); *Where is History Going?* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1969); *The Shape of the Past* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1975); G. Habermas, *The Verdict of History: Conclusive Evidence for the Life of Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984).

⁹⁴ W. L. Craig, *Knowing the Truth About the Resurrection* (Ann Arbor: Servant, 1988); N. L. Geisler, *The Battle for the Resurrection* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992).

The radical secular feminists have told us what they feel about ultimate reality, life and nature. They construct their complex goddesses to reflect contradicting aspects of unity and diversity. But these theories are insufficient to express the complexity of the nature of God.

God has powerfully revealed himself through records of historical persons and national events, in meaningful language, through both fulfillment of prophecy and the resurrection of Christ. Because of this, Christian revelation expresses the complexity of the nature of God better than the contradictory myth and metaphor of the radical secular feminists.

3. *The purpose and goal of feminist metaphor.* Finally, the purpose and goal of feminist metaphor will be contrasted with the purpose and goal of Biblical metaphor.

Metaphor functions in the following ways for various feminists: (1) to clear away theological mystification of various "male religions";⁹⁵ (2) to promote autonomy;⁹⁶ (3) to promote women's community in female-based ritual;⁹⁷ (4) to foster positive evaluation of the female will;⁹⁸ (5) to develop self-esteem and positive female role models;⁹⁹ (6) to assist in active participation in the being of God, which in most cases asserts the divinity of woman herself.¹⁰⁰

The radical feminist revolution has unabashedly asserted its godhood. Feminist metaphor and symbol are simply several means to this end.

There are two major goals in the use of religious metaphor. The first goal is to create a distinctly female religious system based on women's experience.¹⁰¹ In such a system women create their own philosophy and theology, which is expected to result in growth and self-esteem.¹⁰² The ultimate purpose of these religious systems is to experience the "web of life" in the context of women's experience.¹⁰³ In most cases, the so-called web of life is worked out within a pantheistic or panentheistic worldview.

The second goal of feminism is to create a new world order through changing the current culture. Daly utilizes the term coined by Nietzsche, advocating a "transvaluation of values."¹⁰⁴ Feminist values are expected to eventually replace the so-called male morality in society.

⁹⁵ Morton, "Goddess" 116.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ "Some women are meeting or living together in rural settings, trying to find what-can-be from remembering women's rituals" (*Politics* 276).

⁹⁸ C. P. Christ, "Why Women Need" 298.

⁹⁹ M. Stone, "Ancient Mirrors of Womanhood" (*Politics* 91).

¹⁰⁰ Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 111; Goldenberg, "Feminist" 217; Morton, "Goddess" 113.

¹⁰¹ This presupposes that women's experience has been radically different from men's. Women's social evolution is supposed to have created different values and needs for women. Thus the experiences of men and their religious convictions are not seen as valid for women. For more on this see Daly, *Beyond* 11-12.

¹⁰² Goldenberg, "Feminist" 217; Daly, *Beyond* 158.

¹⁰³ Daly, *Pure Lust* 26-27.

¹⁰⁴ "Intrinsic to the re-creative potential of the women's movement, then, is a new naming of values" (Daly, *Beyond* 100). Regarding the source of these values, "to do this it will be necessary

4. *The purpose and goal of Biblical metaphor.* The purpose of Biblical metaphor in revelation is to communicate truth to believers through an analogical and propositional understanding of God's nature. Metaphorical language and titles for God reflect truth regarding his nature, as do propositional statements such as "God is not a man."¹⁰⁵

The nature of metaphor in the OT is worked out within the context of creating a believing society set apart from pagan societies. Such metaphor glorifies God, representing his truth and power to both the Israelites and their surrounding neighbors.

Use of Biblical metaphor is also intended to communicate his love and concern for men and women in everyday examples that people could understand.¹⁰⁶

The goals of Biblical metaphor are relationship with God and a clearer understanding of God's revelation of himself. This relationship between God and man is worked out on this earth through personal relationship with Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. We have abundant life on earth in Christ. But eternal life in the presence of our God is the ultimate goal.

Ultimately, feminist myth and metaphor are insufficient to express the complexity of the nature of God. The feminist claims cannot compare with those of Christianity. God's grace was demonstrated in history through revelation and culminated in the resurrection of Christ with his offering of salvation to all of humanity.

The first-century Roman caesars committed blasphemy when they proclaimed no difference between God and Caesar. In the twentieth century, feminists have sought a Caesar's autonomous power and proclaimed themselves goddesses. "Professing to be wise, they became fools. . . . For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen" (Rom 1:22, 25).

to understand the dynamic of false naming that has been encased in patriarchy's definitions of good and evil" (ibid. 106).

¹⁰⁵ "God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?" (Num 23:19).

¹⁰⁶ The pain of a broken relationship can be understood by metaphors that focus on a broken marriage covenant between Israel and God. Hosea reflects the love of God and the reality of condemnation and pain that result from an adulterous relationship. Another powerful metaphor speaks of God's protection of us: "He will cover you with His pinions, and under His wings you may seek refuge; His faithfulness is like a shield and bulwark" (Ps 91:4).