

FEMINIST THEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY: TOWARD A KALEIDOSCOPIC MODEL

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[In feminist theology the theoretical subject of method is a relatively recent enterprise. Because of the multiplicity of approaches, the variety of sources, and the complexity of norms, a viable schema is needed to consider the pluriformity and particularity of the mystery of God and the God-world relationship in dialogue with the unity and diversity of women's experiences. A kaleidoscopic model may prove responsive to the challenge of feminist theology and applicable to the broader enterprise.]

SOME FIFTEEN YEARS AGO Mary Daly articulated her well-known critique of method: "One of the false gods of theologians, philosophers, and other academics is called Method. It commonly happens that the choice of a problem is determined by method, instead of method being determined by the problem. . . . The tyranny of methodolatry hinders new discoveries. It prevents us from raising questions never asked before and from being illumined by ideas that do not fit into pre-established boxes and forms."¹ Notwithstanding this conviction, the history of feminist theological methodology reveals that it is precisely the problems being addressed and the questions being asked that have determined the methods of feminist theological investigation. Nevertheless, the theoretical subject of method is a relatively recent enterprise of feminist theology. Rather than determining an a priori model for research, the feminist theological movement in its first decades yielded a substantial body of material through a variety of approaches, assessed on the basis of their results.² A consideration of those approaches reveals that feminist theology has been guided by methodological principles and processes, albeit in shift and flux, and that these have

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¹ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon, 1985) 11.

² Anne Carr, "The New Vision of Feminist Theology," in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine La Cugna (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993) 8.

been applied effectively to the variety of endeavors in the field of feminist theology. Engaging a discussion of feminist theological methodology, however, is a task of vast proportions. In reflection upon a means by which to organize this undertaking, the image of the kaleidoscope emerged as a viable metaphor. It will provide the schema to consider the complexity of the subject, the multiplicity of approaches, the variety of sources, and the diversity of norms through which the mystery of God and the God-world relationship are studied, understood, and articulated in dialogue with the unity and diversity of women's experiences.³ Furthermore, it will be proposed that this organizational schema may also serve as a functional model for feminist theological methodology. Therefore, a brief introduction to this metaphorical framework is in order.

The kaleidoscope (Greek: "beautiful-form-to-see") is a contoured structure that, through the use of mirrors and lenses set at different angles, creates a multiplicity of symmetrical patterns from fragments of various materials, illuminated by a source of light.⁴ The materials that produce the patterns are commonly shards or fragments of shattered stained glass. However, while these shards are the stuff of which the image is formed, the mirrors of the kaleidoscope are its heart. These mirrors or modes of reflection vary in quality, quantity, and angles of placement. The better the quality of the mirror, the sharper and clearer the ultimate reflection; the greater the number of mirrors, the more diverse the shape of the image; and the narrower the angle of placement of the mirror, the greater the number of reflections produced. When directed toward an external entity and rotated, the object case, which contains the shards of various forms, colors, and densities, produces, in interaction with the mirrors, a "beautiful form to see." As a result, a *mandala* is created, a circular design of concentric forms, a "sacred circle with a centerpoint" that is a universal image of oneness and wisdom.⁵ Obviously, while each of the elements of the kaleidoscope can be defined and discussed independently, it is only in their collaboration that the beauty, clarity, and variety of patterns can be produced. While open to the possibility of expansion to deeper levels of sym-

³ Throughout this article, when speaking in my own voice, I will use the term "women's experiences" in the plural, rather than in the singular form, "women's experience." This seemingly slight linguistic variation is intended to address the larger issue of normativity concerning the experiences of women. By using the plural form, I signify the particularity of women's experiences that does not admit of universalization nor generalization.

⁴ Similar to the kaleidoscope, and also potentially useful as a metaphor for this discussion, is the teleidoscope. Utilizing a lens, rather than an object case with shards and fragments, the mirrors at varied angles in the teleidoscope fragment, reflect, and combine elements of an external object to create its varied patterns.

⁵ Joyce Rupp and Judith Veeder, *The Star in My Heart: Experiencing Sophia, Inner Wisdom* (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1990) xii.

bolism, it is hoped that this image of the kaleidoscope functions to express the complexity of the methodological enterprise under consideration.⁶

The task of this exploration is to deconstruct and examine the interrelated elements of feminist theological methodology. An introduction to the structural contours of the theoretical, theological, and normative foundations of feminist theology will be followed by an examination of the pluriform shards and fragments of its multiple sources of revelation. These are subsequently viewed through various modes of reflection that constitute the various strategies of the feminist theological method, and that, like the mirrors of the kaleidoscope, form the heart of this discussion. Both the quantity of modes employed in feminist theological methodology and the angles of reflection specific to particular feminist ideologies are reviewed. While the attempt is made to consider these areas separately, the interrelation of sources, strategies, and ideologies will undoubtedly confound this effort. And, although feminist theological issues pervade the majority of religious traditions across the temporal, spatial, and cultural boundaries—and my desire for inclusivity is compelling—this woman's accountabilities and particularities necessarily narrow her perspective and affect her perceptions. I write as a white, middle-class, middle-aged, American, Roman Catholic vowed religious woman, living through the end of one century and the beginning of another. I passionately search for ways in which to recover and articulate meaning within the traditions I claim, despite discouragement with and ambivalence toward the present state of ecclesial affairs. In engaging this search through a kaleidoscopic feminist theological method, it is hoped that the diversity, pluriformity, and particularity of the mystery of God and of all things in God will be disclosed as "beautiful forms to see" for the women and men who seek them.

FOUNDATIONS OF THE FEMINIST THEOLOGICAL ENTERPRISE

Regina Bechtle has asked: "Is it possible to be both a woman and a Christian at the same time? Is the Christian message good tidings or bad news for women? Can a feminist theologize as a Christian? To increasing numbers of women, these questions are not trivial, nor are the answers self-evident."⁷ Feminist theologies arise from a confluence of biological, ideological, sociocultural, philosophical, and religious streams of consciousness that converge in the search for and articulation of the mystery of God

⁶ This expression is an adaptation of Elizabeth Johnson's dictum, "The symbol functions." See Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Trinity: To Let the Symbol Sing Again," *Theology Today* 54 (October 1997) 238–311, at 307.

⁷ Regina Bechtle, "Theological Trends: Feminist Approaches to Theology 1," *The Way* 27 (April 1987) 124–31, at 124.

and the God-world relationship from the perspective of women's experiences. They are situated at the intersection of two great movements of thought and practice in this confluence—those of feminism and of theology. Therefore, the basic theoretical and theological foundations of this field of study must be considered as background to the principles, perspectives, and processes they produce.

Theoretical Foundations

It has been postulated that one is born a female, is raised feminine, and chooses feminism. In such a suggestion, several foundational issues in the discussion of feminism and the feminist consciousness are brought to the fore. The term “female” is defined as one's sex, determined by biology and anatomy. In contrast to biological sex, gender is a cultural construct of traits, behaviors, and expectations stereotypically defined and fostered by a particular society.⁸ The imagination that has formulated these gender constructs of specifically “feminine” characteristics, as opposed to “masculine” characteristics, in disservice to both sexes, is the institution of patriarchy. In its broadest definition, patriarchy may be regarded as any system—social, religious, economic, philosophical, or familial—that rests upon male privilege and power and that perpetuates a model of relationship built upon domination and subordination.⁹ From this perspective, the institution of patriarchy has existed since the third millennium B.C.E. through the writing of the Hebrew Bible to the present day.¹⁰ The ideological correlate of patriarchy is sexism, the system of beliefs that supports and sustains male supremacy and superiority in tandem with female subordination and inferiority. This system has deprived women of equality of status, participative voice, and access to opportunity in every sphere of public and private life, including economic, educational, political, sexual, and religious.

While patriarchal power relations extended organically from their origins in the family to civil society and its systems, the impact of Western Semitic religions on this “rule of the father” legitimized as divinely ordained the hierarchical status of the male and his dominant place in societal structures. The reciprocal impact of the patriarchal imagination and religious thought was compounded by Greek philosophy's conceptual dualisms of mind/body, reason/passion, and transcendence/immanence. These dichotomies strongly influenced the patriarchal imagination in toto. Through successful enculturation and over successive millennia, the ontol-

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. 238–39.

¹⁰ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University, 1986) 238–39.

ogy of the male as “normative” and the female as “other,” the cultural constructs of the masculine as the reasonable and powerful, and the feminine as the passionate and weak, and the power relations of dominance and submission became rooted in both societal and human self-consciousness, seemingly beyond question or choice. But the question and the choice did arise. To return to the postulate that introduced this section, if one is “born a female,” and is “raised feminine,” what emerged to disrupt the presuppositions of the patriarchal imagination and the ideology of sexism to enable and empower the choice of feminism?

Sandra Schneiders delineates three “waves of women’s movements” that progressively and cumulatively disrupted the stability of the patriarchal imagination and the ideology of sexism.¹¹ The first wave crested for the equality of women in the 1920s with the passage of the 19th Amendment granting women’s suffrage. This wave represented the cumulative effects of efforts in the United States dating back to the mid-19th century.¹² It was amplified by the critique of patriarchalism by Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the late-19th century, culminating in the composition of *The Woman’s Bible*.¹³ Rather than accepting the normativity of Scripture, Cady Stanton argued that the Bible was not neutral in its composition or interpretation. She claimed, moreover, that it was a political weapon wielded against women’s struggle for liberation and, therefore, advocated that a feminist interpretation of the Bible was politically necessary.¹⁴

In Schneiders’s schema, the second wave of the women’s movement broke in the emancipation of women in conjunction with their participation in the struggle for civil rights in the 1960s and their identification of the connection between gender and racial oppression.¹⁵ In addition, at the beginning of that decade, a foundational work in feminist scholarship was written by Valerie Saiving entitled “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” which provided a groundbreaking analysis of women’s experience of otherness from a theological viewpoint.¹⁶ These developments ultimately precipitated the third wave of the women’s movement, that of the liberation of women. This liberation involves not only equality with men,

¹¹ Sandra Schneiders, *With Oil in Their Lamps: Faith, Feminism, and the Future* (New York: Paulist, 2000) 8.

¹² *The Original Sourcebook of Women in Christian Thought*, ed. Elizabeth A. Clark and Herbert Richardson (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) 237–46.

¹³ *Ibid.* 246–58.

¹⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1998) 7.

¹⁵ Schneiders, *With Oil in Their Lamps* 8.

¹⁶ Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (New York: HarperCollins, 1992) 25–42.

but also “a fundamental re-imagination of the whole of humanity in relation to the whole of reality, including non-human creation.”¹⁷ Schneiders’s classic definition of feminism captures this combination of critique, transformation, and action well: “Feminism is a comprehensive ideology, rooted in women’s experience of sexually-based oppression, that engages in a critique of patriarchy as an essentially dysfunctional system, embraces an alternative vision for humanity and the earth, and actively seeks to bring this vision to realization.”¹⁸

Theological Foundations

“Feminist theology results when women’s faith seeks understanding in the matrix of the historical struggle for life in the face of oppressive and alienating forces.”¹⁹ In the approximately 35 years of its existence as a discipline, feminist theology has been part of “women’s faith seeking understanding” through its quest for reconstruction of the meanings of religious traditions in order to liberate and promote woman’s full humanity.²⁰ It is here that the focus of the kaleidoscope with its shards and fragments, its mirrors and angles, directs its gaze and revolutions toward God and all things in God. It does so with the purpose of revisioning “religious mystery from a stance that makes an a priori option for the human flourishing of women.”²¹ This theological revisioning stems from the recognition that the system of patriarchy and the sin of sexism have been integral in the development of the formative texts, symbols, rituals, language, ethics, and structures of the majority of religious traditions. Based upon this insight, feminist theologies engage in methodological processes of critique, retrieval, and reconstruction to expose patriarchal bias, seek alternative sources, derive fresh interpretations, and produce novel articulations of theological constructs that are rooted in and expressive of women’s experiences.

In doing so, feminist theologies take a deliberate stance of advocacy, which has been subject to wide criticism from academic and ecclesial quarters. However, such criticism exposes either naiveté or denial of the historical and cultural context of all reflection upon and articulation of human reality, even that which touches Divine mystery. No theology is neutral. Economic, political, philosophical, and ideological influences impact the

¹⁷ Schneiders, *With Oil in Their Lamps* 8.

¹⁸ Sandra Schneiders, *Beyond Patching: Faith and Feminism in the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist, 1991) 15.

¹⁹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1993) 17.

²⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983) 18–19.

²¹ Johnson, *She Who Is* 17.

community of believers out of which and on behalf of which theologians speak. Moreover, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, from her stance in the critical theology of liberation, asserts that “all theology, knowingly or not, is by definition always engaged for or against the oppressed.”²² It takes its position of advocacy either to uphold or to challenge the power relationships in the community from whom its articulations are derived and to whom its articulations are addressed.

The religious expression of patriarchy is particularly insidious in that it understands itself to be established and exercised through the will of God. As such, it is particularly resistant to critique and conversion. Biblical interpretation, theological tradition, ecclesial structures, and liturgical language and ritual have historically confronted women with a relentlessly patriarchal religious tradition. The androcentric bias of the male as normative led to the articulation of theological concepts such as sin, love, and redemption from the perspective of male experience, presumed to be universal. Furthermore, since all questions and conceptions of self are ultimately drawn from and lead to questions and conceptions of God, primary manifestations of patriarchal imagination and sexist ideology are found in discourse about the Divine. Although the theological tradition has never assigned a sex to God per se and has consistently indicated that even trinitarian concepts of God are based on relation and not essence,²³ the overwhelming preponderance of imagery for God, in Unity and Trinity, is drawn from the male experience. Without exception, such conceptual imbalance, considered to be deceptive and destructive of the well-being of woman and of all creation, provides the impetus for feminist theological criticism.

In her text *Sexism and God-Talk*, Rosemary Radford Ruether makes the salient point, however, that “One cannot wield the lever of criticism without a place to stand.”²⁴ One place upon which feminist theologians stand is upon an acknowledged accountability determining their questions and projects; another is upon their critical normative principle; and a third is upon their sources of theology. This “place to stand” is seldom one that is either a rock or a hard place, but rather a fragmented, shifting, and dynamic footing in a variety of theological, biblical, literary, human, and nonhuman resources. Whether this precarious foothold militates against a unified and consistent feminist theological position from which to wield the lever of criticism toward patriarchy and sexism is a question for consideration.

²² Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1984) 26.

²³ E. R. Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954) 3.171.

²⁴ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* 18.

However, such a position surely provides the footing from which a revisioning of theological concepts and “a proliferation of images and a variety of names” responsive to “the very incomprehensibility of God”²⁵ and of the God-world relationship have been and continue to be kaleidoscopically generated.

Proposed by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, one’s stance of accountability is an acknowledgement of that segment of the women’s movement to which one deems oneself accountable and which determines one’s research questions and projects.²⁶ It is determined by a variety of particularities of theological and social location that include racial, ethnic, class, cultural, and religious sensitivities and affiliations. Examples of such stances are the different descriptors of “feminist,” including lesbian, radical, Jewish, Buddhist, Christian, Latin American, Asian American, as well as various designations of theology, such as womanist, *mujerista*, and theological—with combinations thereof. These accountabilities and affiliations provide access and/or presuppose adherence to a variety of formative traditions and texts, symbols and rituals, events and experiences that are considered foundational revelations of the mystery of God and the God-world relationship.

The critical normative principle in methodology guides the critique of one’s revelatory sources. As defined by Pamela Dickey Young, a norm is “a specific criteria or set of criteria by which theological sources or formulations are judged to be adequate or inadequate for theology in general or for the type of theology being done, and which is used as the structuring principle for one’s own theology.” In the Protestant Christian tradition from which she writes, examples of such norms may be Scripture, the magisterium, the “historical Jesus,” “women’s experience,” or human reason. In her normative schema, she suggests that the adequacy of these normative constructs may be judged according to a criterion of appropriateness and a criterion of credibility. The first criterion asks, “Is the formulation or articulation Christian, based upon a proper reading of these sources?” while the second questions, “Is the formulation or articulation both intellectually and practically credible to the feminist theological imagination?”²⁷

As suggested above and as articulated by other theologians,²⁸ this normative principle fundamentally determines which aspects of one’s sources

²⁵ Elizabeth A. Johnson, “The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female,” *Theological Studies* 45 (1984) 441–65, at 444.

²⁶ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and others, “Roundtable Discussion: On Feminist Methodology,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1 (Fall 1985) 73–91, at 76.

²⁷ Pamela Dickey Young, *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology: In Search of a Method* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990) 20, 76.

²⁸ While sometimes stated directly by the theologian, this critical principle is

are deemed revelatory and/or in what ways they are so. Generally, those who situate themselves within religious traditions such as Christian, Jewish, or Buddhist have recourse to a usable foundation of communal texts, traditions, and teachings in which to ground their normative principles. However, those feminist theologians who claim “women’s experience” as a primary or sole normative principle—as well as a revelatory source—are confronted with a quandary of definition and applicability because of the particularity of women’s experiences. Since these experiences originate in specific historical and social milieux, their appropriation as criteria of adequacy or inadequacy has caused considerable methodological and philosophical difficulties. The “insight into difference” that was originally directed toward the critique of the universalization of male experience has, in the move from critical to constructive feminist theology, illuminated another form of universalism within feminist theology itself. This manifestation is the theoretical generalization of the experiences of white, Christian, middle-class, heterosexual, European-American feminists as representative of “women’s experience” on the whole. In the generalization of such theory, however, Jewish feminists questioned evidence of anti-Semitic sentiments in some Christian formulations. “Third world” feminists criticized the privileged positions of class and race of “first world” feminists. Moreover, women of color in the womanist and *mujerista* traditions challenged the presumed normativity of the experiences of “white feminists.”

This disputed move toward universalism, according to Sheila Greene Davaney, is “no more accurate than that of patriarchy” because of the perspectival character of all human experience. Therefore, claims to certitude or ontological grounding for a universality of “women’s experience” must be abandoned along with similar patriarchal claims. This leads to the recognition of “the limits of the appeal to women’s experience” as a normative construct, in Greene Davaney’s opinion. Because of these limits on the normativity of women’s individual experiences, Greene Davaney is moved to favor pragmatic, ethical foundations for critical norms rather than ontological foundations and to focus upon the relativized experiences of communities rather than of individuals.²⁹

frequently only discernable through a questioning of the underlying theological or anthropological positions on which interpretations or constructions are based. See Carr, “The New Vision of Feminist Theology” 13. An example of this may be found in the work of Sallie McFague in metaphorical theology. The underlying theological presupposition is the incomprehensibility of God. Therefore, all language for God is metaphorical, which makes the limiting or reification of symbols or images inaccurate at best and idolatrous at worst. See Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

²⁹ Sheila Greene Davaney, in Linda Hogan, *From Women’s Experience to Feminist Theology* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1995) 170.

The dilemma of attempting to put “constructivist nonessentialized understandings of women” at the center of theological reflection is dealt with at length and in depth by Serene Jones in her study of methodological issues “between the rock and the hard place” of using of women’s experience.³⁰ In reviewing the work of nine theologians representative of the feminist, womanist, and *mujerista* theological perspectives, Jones notes two divergent tendencies. Those theologians whose stance is on the “rock” utilize universalizing, ahistorical frames of reference to structure accounts of human experience. Their analytical measurements are solid in foundation, comprehensive in scope, and generalizable in character. Illustrative of this position are the phenomenological approaches of Elizabeth Johnson and Catherine LaCugna, the process/analytical approaches of Rita Nakashima Brock and Catherine Keller, and the literary/textual approaches of Delores Williams and Sallie McFague. While the advantage of such categories of approaches is their ability to generate theological images that are resilient and visionary, these approaches, according to Jones, suffer from the disadvantage of losing what “does not fit”—the incommensurable experience and the marginal theological voice, that defy the general and universal.³¹

Those theologians who find themselves in Jones’s “hard place” self-consciously avoid generalizations and focus on descriptions of experiences that are historically localized and culturally specific. Kathryn Tanner and Ada María Isasi-Díaz, employing the tools of anthropology to examine the cultural functions of religious beliefs; and Rebecca Chopp, utilizing post-structuralist strategies to explore the role of power and language in identity, produce from their endeavors formulations that are less conceptually stable than those on the “rock.” The challenges, therefore, to those in the “hard place” are formidable and involve those already critiqued by Greene Davaney—the basis of normative claims, the limits of immanent critique, the strength of deconstructive discourse, and the relation of derived “truths” to doctrine. While Jones favors the methodological approaches of those in the “hard place,” despite their normative challenges, she nonetheless affirms the substantial theological vision of those feminist enterprises grounded on “rock.”³²

This critique of the normative value of “women’s experience” notwithstanding, many feminist theologians have deliberately centered their critical principles upon embodied experiences of “sexually-based oppression”

³⁰ Serene Jones, “Women’s Experience between a Rock and a Hard Place: Feminist, Womanist, and *Mujerista* Theologies in North America,” in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 33.

³¹ *Ibid.* 33–34.

³² *Ibid.* 34.

of women or upon an “alternative vision of humanity” for women. In claiming as her critical principle the “advocacy stance for the oppressed” of liberation theology, Schüssler Fiorenza states “critical evaluation of (the biblical tradition) must uncover and reject those elements . . . that perpetuate, in the name of God, violence, alienation, and patriarchal subordination, and eradicate women from historical-theological consciousness.”³³ Situating her normative principle in “the promotion of the full humanity of women” and rooting it in the principle of *imago Dei* / *imago Christi* and the biblical prophetic principle, Ruether holds that “whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine.”³⁴ Johnson in *She Who Is* advocates “the human flourishing of women” as a “center of gravity that unifies, organizes, and directs” the attention of feminist theological reflection.³⁵ In the formulation of *mujerista* theology and in the decision of naming, Isasi-Díaz points out the experience of *mujerismo*, the struggles of Hispanic women to liberate themselves and their community from oppression, as the normative principle of that movement.³⁶ Speaking from the womanist tradition, Williams asserts that its critical principles are grounded in literary sources that contain “codes which are female-centered and point beyond themselves to conditions, events, meanings, and values which have crystallized in the Afro-American community around women’s activity and formed traditions.”³⁷

In addition, Ruether and Schüssler Fiorenza propose normative communities such as Women-Church³⁸ and the *ekklesia gynaiikon*³⁹ as locus and magisterium for adjudicating theological claims.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, it is critical in closing this discussion to assert that “the goal toward which (the) theological effort” of accountably Christian feminist theology “passionately journeys is transformation into (a) new community” of the human and

³³ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* 32–33.

³⁴ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* 18–19.

³⁵ Johnson, *She Who Is* 17.

³⁶ Ada María Isasi-Díaz and others, “Roundtable Discussion: *Mujeristas*: Who We Are and What We Are About,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8 (Spring 1992) 105–25, at 105–7.

³⁷ Delores Williams, “Womanist Theology: Black Women’s Voices,” in *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, ed. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (New York: HarperCollins, 1989) 180.

³⁸ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Woman-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).

³⁹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Will to Choose or Reject: Continuing our Critical Work,” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 126–28.

⁴⁰ Dickey Young, *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology: In Search of a Method* 26.

nonhuman based upon liberation, mutuality, and harmony.⁴¹ The concept of this community is that of a community of equals modeled both on the relationality of the Trinity and in the “*basileia* vision of Jesus as the praxis of inclusive wholeness.”⁴² On this winding journey with its often shifting footing, feminist theologies endeavor to correct the past, to convert the present, and to create the future in wholeness and equality for all creation, human and nonhuman, fully alive to the glory of God.

METHODOLOGICAL SOURCES OF FEMINIST THEOLOGY

To return to Ruether’s metaphor of “a place to stand” to wield the lever of criticism, the third footing of feminist theological methodology is upon its sources of revelation of God and the God-world relationship. This third leg of the methodological stool is figuratively and literally dependent on the stances of accountability and the critical normative principles just discussed. In adherence to a particular tradition and/or in allegiance to the primacy of women’s experiences, feminist theologians exercise selectivity in determining their sources of revelation. In addition, they establish the means by which and extent to which these sources are considered truly revelatory of God and the God-world relationship. Anne Carr, a Christian feminist theologian within the Roman Catholic tradition, focuses her study upon sources in the biblical tradition, the history of Christian thought and practice, creeds and conciliar statements, and symbol systems. In doing so, she endeavors “to suggest connections, correspondences, contradictions in the relationship between Christianity and the situation of women in Church and society.”⁴³ To these sources, Ruether would add as “usable” the marginalized or “heretical” Christian traditions, themes of classical Christian theology, non-Christian Near Eastern and Greco-Roman religion and philosophy, and critical post-Christian world views.⁴⁴ In also including the use of “women’s experience” as a revelatory source, Ruether critiques the notion that doing so is somehow unique or novel to the feminist theological approach, when those Judeo-Christian sources generally regarded as “objective,” namely Scripture and tradition, “are themselves codified human experience.”⁴⁵

While Madipoane Masenya indicates that most African women identify with the Christian Bible, as an African womanist she specifies the need to

⁴¹ Johnson, *She Who Is* 31.

⁴² Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* 118–30.

⁴³ Carol Christ, Ellen M. Urmansky, and Anne E. Carr, “Roundtable Discussion: What Are the Sources of My Theology?” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1 (Spring 1985) 120–31, at 127.

⁴⁴ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* 21–22.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 12–13.

find a message in the text which is liberating and hopeful, accountable to the culture and to its multiple oppressions, and revelatory of the experiences of black women.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the womanist effort in the United States analyzes social, anthropological, and literary sources, such as slave narratives, autobiographies, and testimonies, to elucidate conditions, events, meanings, and values in the African American community as the basis for discourse.⁴⁷ Recognizing the inherent interaction between her cultural and religious identity, Jewish feminist Ellen Urmansky utilizes “retrieved stories” from midrash or haggadah, adding narratives and legends from her own experience in response to her reading of the Jewish tradition.⁴⁸

Affirming the centrality of the Roman Catholic Christian tradition in the Hispanic culture, Ada María Isasi-Díaz specifies from the *mujerista* perspective that traditional sources must be dealt with in terms accessible to the Hispanic community. Centering upon experiences of Hispanic women in their struggle against oppression, *mujerista* sources include praxis, reflective action with the goal of liberation.⁴⁹ As Asian American theologians, Naomi Southard and Rita Nakashima Brock envision their sources of theology as pairings drawn from their Asian and American backgrounds—personal experience and biblical faith, religious practice and global consciousness, Christian teaching and universal religious experiences—grounded in the interconnectedness of all life. Of particular importance are their experiences of the “ministry of relationships based on suffering” that, when reflected upon from a theological perspective, reveal the participation of God in the struggle and the emergence of God’s redemptive action.⁵⁰

While these theological perspectives maintain connection to the Judeo-Christian tradition in dialogue with women’s experiences and praxis, accounting must be given of those feminist theologies that have rejected this religious tradition as thoroughly sexist and patriarchal, and therefore, unredeemable and unusable for promoting the full humanity of women. Among these are the radical feminist perspective espoused by Mary Daly, the theological perspective represented by Carol Christ, and the lesbian

⁴⁶ Madipoane J. Masenya, “African Womanist Hermeneutics: A Suppressed Voice from South Africa Speaks Out,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 11 (Spring 1995) 147–55, at 149–53.

⁴⁷ Williams, “Womanist Theology: Black Women’s Voices” 180.

⁴⁸ Christ, Urmansky, and Carr, “Roundtable Discussion: What Are the Sources of My Theology?” 125.

⁴⁹ Isasi-Díaz and others, “Roundtable Discussion: *Mujeristas*” 105–7.

⁵⁰ Naomi Southard and Rita Nakashima Brock, “The Other Half of the Basket: Asian American Women and the Search for a Theological Home,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3 (Fall 1987) 135–50, at 135–36.

feminist perspective of Carter Heyward and Mary E. Hunt. All are firmly rooted in women's personal and communal experiences, especially those of embodiment, and find usable resources in the goddess traditions. "Listening to women . . . is an important and specifically feminist part"⁵¹ of Mary Daly's manifesto *Beyond God the Father*. In it, she advances her argument for a process theology in the naming of God the Verb; "in hearing and naming ourselves out of the depths, women are naming toward God, which is what theology always should have been about."⁵² In voicing the basis for her own theology, Carol Christ "judge(s) everything I learn from the past on the basis of my own experience as shaped, named, and confirmed by the voices of my sisters."⁵³ From their particular view of embodiment as lesbian theologians, Heyward and Hunt draw from the merging of three sociohistorical currents—the power of female friendship, women's sexual pleasure, and heterosexist oppression, an oppression often rooted in and reinforced by the Judeo-Christian religious tradition.⁵⁴

Despite its "lack of novelty," the according of primacy to women's experiences as a revelatory source by most feminist theologians, has, in the viewpoint of Linda Hogan, "effected a methodological revolution."⁵⁵ This revolution has not been without its share of casualties, however. The reality of the particularity of women's experiences, affected by social location, economic status, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, and religious tradition, has confounded methodological and theological presumptions of universal normativity. In fact, this "insight into difference was the iceberg tip that ineluctably has drawn us into the realization of the complexity of our own particularity."⁵⁶ The question of how to name "women's experience" has confirmed the recognition that gender constructs change descriptively and normatively according to the impact of woman's particularities upon the category of "women's experience." This recognition has effectively dismantled any presumption of the generalizability of interpretative or theoretical frameworks. "The problem of gender constructs and narratives, and the language in which they are embedded sometimes leaves one wondering

⁵¹ Mary Jo Weaver, *New Catholic Women: A Contemporary Challenge to Traditional Religious Authority* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986) 171.

⁵² Daly, *Beyond God the Father* 33.

⁵³ Christ, Urmansky, and Carr, "Roundtable Discussion: What Are the Sources of My Theology?" 130.

⁵⁴ Carter Heyward and others, "Roundtable Discussion: Lesbianism and Feminist Theology," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2 (Fall 1986) 97.

⁵⁵ Linda Hogan, *From Women's Experience to Feminist Theology* 10.

⁵⁶ Ann O'Hara Graff, "The Struggle to Name Women's Experience: Assessment and Implications for Theological Construction," *Horizons* 20 (1993) 215–33, at 217–20.

whether we can speak at all of women's experience since the distortions are so great."⁵⁷

In an effort to provide some inroads toward common ground, Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ distinguish between two poles of women's experiences, those of "women's feminist experience" and of "women's traditional experience." The pole of "women's feminist experience" includes any experience that is a source of oppression and is thus subject to critique and transformation. The consideration and response to "women's traditional experience" is the affirmation and celebration of the unique experiences of women—primarily embodied—analyzed and disentangled from patriarchy and reclaimed as a source for personal and sociocultural wisdom and transformation.⁵⁸ Pamela Dickey Young also offers a schema in which she delineates five types of "women's experience" that factor into this construct.⁵⁹ The first is woman's *bodily* experience, which needs to be considered both in nonsensuous relation to one's body as well as in socialized reactions to bodily experiences. This latter distinction presupposes that there are some social attitudes that encourage and reinforce particular embodied experiences of women and some that do not. In particular, woman's bodily experience is adversely affected by the socialized concept of "ideal body image" that impacts her own self-image and self-worth.

A related category of woman's experience is that of *socialized* experience, which, Dickey Young asserts in concert with many other feminist voices, is largely defined by the prevailing patriarchal imagination. This source of definition outside woman's sense of self has led to devastating effects on women's psychological, social, historical, and theological experience, which is well documented in feminist literature cited here. As a response to this socialized experience, Dickey Young describes the category of woman's *feminist* experience, which is akin to the conceptions of Plaskow and Christ, as well as to those of Ruether and Schüssler Fiorenza alluded to above. This category includes women's experiences of dominance and control by men, of exclusion from jobs and financial independence and security, and of lack of agency in making genuine choices about their lives. "Women's feminist experience is the experience of questioning all that we have been told about being a woman. It is the experience of refusing to take at face value anyone's definition of what it means to be a

⁵⁷ Ibid. 222.

⁵⁸ Christ and Plaskow, "Introduction: Womanspirit Rising," in *Womanspirit Rising* 42.

⁵⁹ Dickey Young, *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology: In Search of a Method* 53–56.

woman. It is the experience of redefining what “woman” means by redefining whose experience counts as valuable.”⁶⁰

Dickey Young proceeds to define the category of woman’s *historical* experience. This is comprised of what one may know and learn of women in the past whose experiences inform and impact women’s present lives. This experience may involve the exercise of historical retrieval since women have often not known their past because of its exclusion from much of recorded history. Finally, Dickey Young defines the category of woman’s *individual* experiences, some of which may be included in the schema above, but which cannot be presumed to be so. According to Dickey Young, these individual experiences, as well as the preceding categories of women’s experiences, may act as catalysts for fruitful theological reflection and dialogue.

In addition to these attempts at delineating usable classifications of women’s diversity of experiences, other theologians have addressed the concerns of meaning by offering specific definitions of “women’s experience” in their writings. In *Sex, Sin, and Grace*, Plaskow asserts that “Women’s experience means simply this: the experience of women in the course of a history never free from cultural role definition.”⁶¹ Writing from a “Canadian and feminist perspective,” Ellen Leonard indicates that in experience “I include all that contributes to our situation, both our political and personal contexts and our near and distant histories,” with the intention that her understanding of experience is “open-ended and flexible rather than definitive.”⁶² On the struggle to name women’s experience, Ann O’Hara Graff states that “there is no unified body of women’s experience, but rather there are multiple forms and multiple dimensions of women’s experience” that require theologians to continually question “whose experience?” is the basis for any claim.⁶³ In the same vein, Linda Hogan warns against using the term “women’s experience” in a way that might imply homogeneity or agreement. Rather, she perceives that “The category of women’s experience is essentially a celebration of the plurality and diversity of women’s lives, choices, and values.”⁶⁴

Despite such efforts, issues surrounding particularity and diversity in women’s experiences continue to provoke critique. Toinette Eugene challenges white feminist theologians not only to acknowledge difference but also to move toward a “radical alteration in the present format of our dialogue.” Claiming that the interactive step is omitted when “description

⁶⁰ Ibid. 55.

⁶¹ Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace* 11.

⁶² Ellen Leonard, “Experience as a Source for Theology: A Canadian and Feminist Perspective,” *Studies in Religion* 19 (Spring 1990) 143–62, at 143.

⁶³ O’Hara Graff, “The Struggle to Name Women’s Experience” 230.

⁶⁴ Hogan, *From Women’s Experience to Feminist Theology* 11.

and prescription” are proposed by white feminist theologians, Eugene questions, “How is one who stands outside the limits of the discourse to correct the prescription?”⁶⁵ In addressing the same concerns from a conciliatory perspective, Ada María Isasi-Díaz advocates embracing the insight of difference as gift.⁶⁶ She too calls upon theologians in the various “feminist” ideologies to be intentional in relating to others by entering into another’s worldview to open themselves to new perspectives. Such engagement is the opportunity to realize that those whose experiences are different from one’s own “are mirrors in which you can see yourself as no other mirror shows you. . . . It is not that we are the only faithful mirrors, but I think we are faithful mirrors . . . What we reveal to you is that you are many.”⁶⁷

METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGIES OF FEMINIST THEOLOGY

While feminist methodologies draw from the wide resources of traditional theological methods,⁶⁸ their overall framework includes the basic elements of critique, retrieval, and (re)construction.⁶⁹ The fundamental tasks of these elements are to analyze inherited oppressions through a deconstruction of texts and formulations, to search for women’s alternative wisdom and suppressed history, and to risk new interpretations in conversation with women’s lives.⁷⁰ The work of various theologians reveals that these elements are variously named and “weighted” in their application and are frequently supplemented by the specific tools of the systematic, historical, biblical, or literary trades.

Critique in the feminist theological process begins with a “hermeneutics of suspicion” that is wary of underlying prejudices and presuppositions that exclude women’s perspectives.⁷¹ During this stage of the process, oppressive texts are demythologized, exclusive male symbolism for the divine is

⁶⁵ Toinette Eugene, “On ‘Difference’ and the Dream of Pluralist Feminism,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8 (Fall 1992) 91–98, at 96–97.

⁶⁶ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “Viva la Diferencia!” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8 (Fall 1992) 98–102, at 100.

⁶⁷ Maria Lugones, “On the Logic of Pluralist Feminism,” in *Feminist Ethics*, ed. Claudia Card (Lawrence, Kans.: University of Kansas, 1991) 41–42.

⁶⁸ Christ, Urmansky, and Carr, “Roundtable Discussion: What Are the Sources of My Theology?” 130–31.

⁶⁹ The term reconstruction implies that a particular feminist theological effort is directed toward the change or transformation of an existing interpretation or construct. The bracketed prefix acknowledges that there are theologians, for example, like those in Jones’s “hard place,” who are more constructionist than reconstructionist or revisionist.

⁷⁰ Johnson, *She Who Is* 29.

⁷¹ Bechtle, “Theological Trends: Feminist Approaches to Theology 1” 125–28.

exposed, dualisms of body and spirit are rejected, and hierarchical understandings of power are destabilized.⁷² Having thus exposed the insufficiency of the biblical and theological tradition at face value, the process moves below the surface of texts and beyond traditional sources to a retrieval of women's experiences found between the lines, in the silences, and from alternative sources. In the movement to (re)construction, feminist theology enters into the task of reshaping key religious symbols, especially those that are problematic from the Christian feminist perspective, through strategies elaborated from the critiques outlined above. Among such concepts are Christology and soteriology, particularly as regards the maleness of Jesus. Posing particular difficulty is the doctrine of the Cross, with its conflicting symbolism of victimization and violence, as well as empowerment and solidarity. Ultimately, the mystery of God articulated in predominantly male imagery and trinitarian symbolism based upon hierarchical gender models is fundamentally challenged as subversive to the reality of woman as *imago Dei* and *imago Christi*.⁷³

It is frequently at this point of (re)construction that further questions of normativity arise with respect to biblical traditions, theological concepts, and ecclesial structures. As framed by Sandra Schneiders in relation to Scripture, can ancient texts—or concepts or structures—speak normatively to a people who have criticized their underlying ideologies and found them morally wanting?⁷⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza responds to this question in her methodological classic on feminist biblical hermeneutics *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. After explicating three traditional hermeneutical approaches with regards to their methods and goals, Schüssler Fiorenza advocates a fourth, the liberation theological method, for feminist hermeneutical purposes. As noted earlier in this text, the underlying premise of this approach contends that theology is never neutral and, thus, is always engaged for or against the oppressed. Since the Bible functions to legitimize such exploitation of women through codified religious and ecclesial patriarchy, the feminist liberative stance seeks to particularize and relativize biblical authority. It does so through the application of its critical normative principle, “the advocacy stance for the oppressed,” that judges the adequacy of the salvific truth claims of particular texts.⁷⁵

A different method of critique, retrieval and (re)construction, of the

⁷² Sharon Welch, *Communities of Resistance: A Feminist Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, (1985) 68.

⁷³ Elizabeth A. Johnson and others, “Feminist Theology: A Review of the Literature.” *Theological Studies* 56 (1995) 327–52, at 341–49.

⁷⁴ Sandra Schneiders, “Feminist Ideology and Biblical Hermeneutics,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 19 (January 1989) 3–10, at 4.

⁷⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza also outlined the doctrinal approach, the positivist histori-

tradition is proposed by Sandra Schneiders in response to those who would discount particular portions of the tradition as nonrevelatory. Her method is an appropriation of Paul Ricoeur's notion of distanciation for feminist biblical hermeneutics. In the movement from oral to written tradition, the discourse is enriched by a "surplus of meaning" that makes it susceptible to multiple valid interpretations. After inscription, the text assumes a "relative semantic autonomy" from its author's intention and transcends its conditions of production. In doing so, the text no longer refers solely to that which the original author intended or the original audience understood, but can be decontextualized and recontextualized in successive readings by the community that is grounded in the same historical consciousness, in this case the Christian tradition. In the interaction between reader and text, one's personal ideology is criticized, which in turn leads to a critique of the societal ideology embedded in the text.⁷⁶

A response to the question of biblical normativity has also been delineated in a typology by Carolyn Osiek. This typology, which is admittedly stereotypical, nonetheless, is not only illuminative of the range of responses to the biblical tradition, but also applicable to other patriarchal structures and traditions as well. The response of the *rejectionist* indicts the tradition as unredeemable and therefore not authoritative or useful. The *loyalist*, to whom the authority of the tradition is in its revelation of divine will, holds that the tradition cannot truly be oppressive except in the mistaken estimation of the critic. Recognizing the patriarchal and androcentric bias of the tradition, the *revisionist* categorizes this distortion as historical and not theological, and, thus, reformable by inquiry and reinterpretation. The *sublimationist* chooses to search for and glorify the "eternal feminine" in the tradition, focusing upon the maternal imagery and female symbolism present. Ultimately, the *liberationist* rejects that portion of the tradition that denies or diminishes the full humanity of women as neither revealed nor revelatory.⁷⁷

Aside from biblical hermeneutical techniques, strategies arising from theological critique, retrieval, and (re)construction may be exemplified in the work of several theologians from different theoretical stances, using the example of Trinitarian relation and language. Margaret Farley utilizes the interplay of "active receptivity" and "receptive activity" to critique hierarchical and gender-exclusive notions of trinitarian relationship and to

cal approach, and the dialogical approach before discussing the liberation theological approach. See *In Memory of Her* 4–13.

⁷⁶ Schneiders, "Feminist Ideology and Biblical Hermeneutics" 6–8.

⁷⁷ Carolyn Osiek, "The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives," in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Chico, Calif.: Scholars, 1985) 97–99.

advocate egalitarian and inclusive metaphors for the three Divine Persons.⁷⁸ Following the Wisdom trajectory and appropriating the Sophia tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures, Elizabeth Johnson proposes a way to speak about God that critiques and neutralizes exclusively male images of the Trinity. Taking as her starting point the active presence of the Spirit of God in ordinary experience, “pervading the world, quickening creation, and working toward the renewal of all creatures, both human beings and the earth,” Johnson posits Spirit-Sophia, Jesus-Sophia, and Mother-Sophia as viable ways to speak about God in history.⁷⁹ Recognizing the fundamentally metaphorical nature of theological language, Sallie McFague employs the heuristic processes of metaphorical theology to deconstruct the trinitarian model and to propose a nonmonarchical, relational revisioning of the Trinity in the metaphors of Mother, Lover, and Friend.⁸⁰ Finally, drawing on the symbolism of Rublev’s icon of the three heavenly visitors to Abraham and Sarah, Catherine LaCugna critiques the notion of the “self-contained and closed divine society” of the Trinity. Instead, she envisions the inner life of the Trinity as that of radical relationality in *perichoresis*, an interweaving dance in which there is permeation without confusion.⁸¹ In this doctrine, as in all feminist theological (re)construction, it is by attending to the “voice from the margin,” as does Rebecca Chopp in *The Power to Speak*, that woman’s “eclipsed theological voice” disrupts “theological order and meaning and celebrates difference as it moves and dances on the borders of time and space.”⁸²

As indicated, the feminist theology is not immune from having its own critical methodological strategies employed within itself. The womanist theological movement arose as a critical response to the perception of racism that women of color experienced in relation to feminist theological formulations not representative of their personal and communal experiences. In pursuing theology from the distinct perspective of black women, womanist theology affirms its connections to African American communities, celebrating and emphasizing black women’s culture and ways of being. It affirms black women’s shared struggle for survival and the importance of the categories of mothering and nurturing as criteria for justice and models of authority.⁸³ Delores Williams discusses womanist methodology in terms of three “intents.” The *multidialogical* intent advocates participation in

⁷⁸ Margaret Farley, “New Patterns of Relationship,” *Theological Studies* 36 (1975) 627–46.

⁷⁹ Johnson, *She Who Is* 122–87, at 123.

⁸⁰ McFague, *Models of God* 91–181.

⁸¹ Catherine LaCugna, “God in Communion with Us: Trinity,” in *Freeing Theology* 83–114.

⁸² Jones, “Women’s Experience between a Rock and a Hard Place” 51.

⁸³ Williams, “Womanist Theology: Black Women’s Voices” 182–83.

dialogue and action with diverse groups concerned about human survival and quality of life for the oppressed. The *liturgical* intent impacts critically upon the foundations of liturgy based upon the principles of justice and prophetic challenge. Finally, the *didactic* intent calls for new insights on moral life based upon an ethics for justice, survival and a productive quality of life, influenced by the authoritative wisdom of black folk literature and morality. In constructing womanist theology, Williams voices a commitment to the necessity and validity of employing female imagery and metaphor in the articulation of theological statements, bringing black women's history, culture, and religious experience into the interpretive circle of Christian theology as an instrument of social and theological change.⁸⁴

Mujerista theology was also born from the struggle against ethnic prejudice, sexism, and classism. Marginalized from feminist theology because of its critique of ethnic prejudice and from the Hispanic community because its interest in feminism was perceived as an "Anglo" concern, *feminista hispana* struggled to name its conceptual framework and point of reference. In doing so, its efforts focused upon the experience of *mujerismo*, the struggles of Hispanic women against oppression, as a means of identification that was alive, flexible, and organic in definition and method. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, therefore, defines the theological task of *mujerista* theology as a liberative praxis which is two-pronged: to enable Hispanic women to understand oppressive structures and to define a preferred future for themselves and for their communities. Thus, Hispanic women are drawn to discover and affirm the presence of God in the midst of their communities and their daily lives and to understand the centrality of eschatology in Christian life as an inbreaking of God's future into their present experiences of suffering and oppression.⁸⁵

Considering the variety of patterns produced by the mirrors and angles of reflection just discussed, there is little doubt that the diverse, complex and developmental nature of feminist theological methodology will continue to expand. Rather than acceding to the possibility of nihilism and relativism in feminist theological articulations, the insights of Karen McCarthy Brown may be useful in closing to enable a tolerance for "conceptual instability."⁸⁶ She encourages her students to adopt four basic attitudes: (1) to hold truths lightly, (2) to develop a high tolerance for conflict and contradiction, (3) to balance concern for precision and clarity with an equal concern for complexity and wholeness, and (4) to take responsible action consistent with one's learning without claiming such knowledge in

⁸⁴ Ibid. 183–85.

⁸⁵ Isasi-Díaz and others, "Mujeristas" 105–8.

⁸⁶ Hogan, *From Women's Experience to Feminist Theology* 177.

an absolute sense.⁸⁷ With such attitudes, feminist theological methodology may continue to gracefully accommodate the ever-widening circles of insight which come from the variety of strategies contributing to its kaleidoscopic potential.

TOWARD A KALEIDOSCOPIC MODEL FOR FEMINIST THEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

In closing this examination, the image of the kaleidoscope returns with fuller meaning and imaginative potential. For it is not philosophical telescoping or ideological microscoping that serves feminist theology's revisioning of the mystery of God and the God-world relationship. These approaches cannot accommodate the variety of sources and modes of reflection that feminist theology appropriates. These methods will not respond to the voice that does not fit or to the congruencies that may emerge. These strategies do not yield the diversity of interacting patterns and relationships that feminist theology, women's experiences, and the incomprehensibility of God demand. With its sources of women's experiences and its lens of women's flourishing, feminist theology must develop a facility for kaleidoscoping its selected shards and fragments with its multiple mirrors and angles to produce from its diversity and complexity a "beautiful form to see."

As indicated in the introduction, the organizational schema of the kaleidoscope has the conceptual and symbolic capacity to serve as a functional model for feminist theological methodology. Like the optical instrument from which the model is abstracted, however, the various elements of which it is composed will remain separate, disengaged, and limited in scope unless the assemblage is taken in hand, brought to a level of vision, and actively operated with a degree of skill. In like manner, the structural contours of the accountabilities and norms, the shards and fragments of the revelatory sources, and the mirrors and angles of the coreflective interpretive strategies of feminist methodology must be actively engaged with one another in a systematic fashion. Only in doing so will feminist method yield the myriad forms and patterns that befit the mystery of God and the God-world relationship. The beauty of the kaleidoscopic model is in its capacity to accommodate the variety of contours, sources, and strategies of feminist methodology and to accord to each its appropriate influence in the outcome of the process. This mutuality can only be achieved, however, by addressing certain underlying issues.

The first issue is that the incomprehensible mystery of God and the particularity of humanity limit and relativize all theological perspectives,

⁸⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza and others, "Feminist Methodology" 76-79.

interpretations, and propositions-patriarchal and feminist. One can only see from where one stands—sexually, historically, culturally, and ideologically—and therefore, one’s “truth” is constrained in vision and in scope. To address this issue, feminist theological method is challenged to resist both universalization (“telescoping”) and myopia (“microscoping”) as it continues to engage in its tasks of interpretation and (re)construction based upon experiences of women in their particularity. In a search for a “place to stand” together, feminist theological method must move toward greater collaboration and dialogue among its various voices. Through such interaction, the diversity of its truths may be expressed and engaged, without splintering and diminishing the impact of its critique. Although “conflict is our actuality, conversation is our hope.”⁸⁸

The second issue involves the contention that primordial theological and anthropological revelation is grounded in the very particularity of human experiences. Since the “turn to the subject,” the mysteries of divinity and humanity, in se and in relation, have been recognized as being inextricably entwined.⁸⁹ “Life itself with all its complexities, abundance, threat, misery, and joy becomes a prime mediation of the dialectic of presence and absence of divine mystery.”⁹⁰ Therefore, while neither unique nor novel to feminist theology, this locus of data and discourse in the human experiences of women has returned theological reflection to the focal point of revelation. Although there is controversy concerning the nature of women’s experiences and questions as to which of women’s experiences may be considered revelatory, innumerable philosophical and religious traditions give witness that it is in the myriad quotidian experiences of human beings that the Divine is self-disclosive. If Judeo-Christian Scripture can in any way be considered normative and revelatory while relentlessly patriarchal, it is in this. Scripture reveals that every kind of human experience of woman or man has the potential to be revelatory of God and the God-world relationship. Accessing the revelatory aspect of women’s experiences necessitates personal and communal reflection, collaborative dialogue, and provisional interpretation, all under the influence of divine grace. Nevertheless, such an unequivocal appropriation of women’s experiences encourages inclusivity and fullness of expression, while it discourages the development of another type of dualism, that of the sacred and profane. In

⁸⁸ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 363.

⁸⁹ The “turn to the subject” has been extensively discussed by philosophers like Descartes, Hume, and most notably Kant. For its application to feminist theology and anthropology, see Mary Ann Hinsdale, “Heeding the Voices,” in *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology*, ed. Ann O’Hara Graff (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995) 22–48.

⁹⁰ Johnson, *She Who Is* 124.

moving beyond conceptual stasis and codified norms to the dynamic authenticity of women's human experiences, feminist theological methodology finds a great strength and a formidable challenge.

The final and perhaps most contentious issue for this method is this question of the normativity of religious texts and traditions that undeniably inhibit the full humanity of women. Despite the inherently patriarchal character of the Judeo-Christian tradition, feminist hermeneutical methods must continue to retrieve and reclaim, from word or silence, the legacy of women within these traditions that have been formative sources for countless numbers of women seekers throughout recorded history. While particular feminist theologians and communities have rejected Scripture and tradition as revelatory, the option of disowning this history, however androcentric, is tantamount to admitting that women had no "place to stand" from the outset and to abandoning the biblical and theological traditions to their patriarchal past. Instead, women's biblical and theological heritage in its expression and in its silence, with its sufferings and its struggles, must be reclaimed through the power of the "remembered past," rather than allowing women's oppression to become total when their history is destroyed.⁹¹

Implementation of this methodological model would require that those engaged in the theological enterprise openly acknowledge their locus of accountability, in terms of both the support that a particular stance provides and the specificity that it entails. The critical normative principle that judges the adequacy of revelatory sources, critiques, and claims is specifically articulated in order that dialectical differences may be discussed within a well-defined horizon of meaning.⁹² Since the sources, strategies, and angles of reflection are multiplicitous in a method that insists upon collaborative interaction and dialogue, the terms of engagement must be clear. Nevertheless, "Method is not a set of rules to be followed meticulously by a dolt. It is a framework for collaborative creativity . . . in the context of . . . historicity, collective practicality and coresponsibility."⁹³ In this kaleidoscopic model, such collaborative creativity, collective practicality, and coresponsibility would be enacted not only in dialogues among scholars engaged in their academic tasks, but also within the community of believers. This practice of reflection and dialogue that draws upon the consensus fidelium or consensus ecclesiae for theological wisdom is em-

⁹¹ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* 29–32.

⁹² Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1999) 235–37.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, xi. For a discussion of the possibilities of dialogue between Lonergan's theological method and the insights and goals of feminist theology, see Cynthia Crysdale, "Lonergan and Feminism," *Theological Studies* 53 (June 1992) 234–56, and Crysdale, ed. *Lonergan and Feminism* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1994).

bodied in the phenomena of sisterhood, circles of women, and base communities in feminist, *mujerista*, womanist, and liberation theology and enjoys a historical precedence in the religious tradition. It attests to the belief that the Spirit of God operates within a community of faith to deepen previous understandings and to produce new insights.⁹⁴

Moreover, it is this creative collaborative praxis that is modeled by the interaction of the separate elements of the kaleidoscope through repeated revolutions. As a model of the interactive engagement of sources, strategies, and experiential particularities, the symbol of the kaleidoscope functions toward the goal of theological formulations that reflect the dynamic mystery of God and the God-world relationship in a variety of cultural-linguistic contexts.⁹⁵ Therefore, practicing neither methodolatry nor methodicide, feminist theology is challenged to continue to engage the theoretical questions of its method in a way that is responsive to the issues, the accountabilities, the norms, and the data that define its enterprise. A kaleidoscopic model of methodology may be one such response. Subsequent scholarship may be well advised to take this assemblage in hand, bring it to a level of vision, and actively operate it with a degree of skill. Perhaps in doing so, the structural contours of the accountabilities and norms, the shards and fragments of the revelatory sources, and the mirrors and angles of the coreflective interpretive strategies of feminist methodology will be actively engaged with one another in a systematic fashion that yields “beautiful forms to see.”

⁹⁴ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 99–101.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, passim.