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CHAPTER 20

OMNIPRESENCE IN THE FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

VERA TRIPODI

C20P1 The philosophy of canonical religion has not sufficiently taken into account and made explicit, many feminists argue, the role that gender plays on religious symbolism and the way it shapes religious concepts. Although the Bible includes several significant female figures (such as Deborah or Tamar), feminists generally agree that the Old Testament primarily depicts a patriarchal society, in which women are severely restricted in their freedom by the law, and espouses a negative view of the feminine (Coakley, 2002, 2005; Hampson, 1996; Harrison, 2007). It is legitimate, therefore, to ask whether God—a major subject of discourse among churchpersons, theologians, and philosophers—has ever been the God of women (Muraro, 2003, 10; 2001). More precisely, in what terms does a gender issue arise in theology? In what ways does gender affect religion?

C20P2 As we shall see, the issue of gender arises in theological questions—and in particular the sexual difference—when the masculine is elevated to the status of the universal human. Historically, several feminist scholars have attempted to dismantle the sexist framework of religions and to subject historical religion to critical scrutiny. Faced with the realization that androcentric and patriarchal values are deeply rooted in religion, feminist theologians have analysed and criticized the sexism that is inherent in religious scriptures, texts, teachings, rituals, forms of worship, institutional hierarchies, the construction of religious language, and symbolism.

C20P3 In this chapter, I focus on feminist philosophies of religion and theology, concentrating on their critique of the androcentric and cultural biases inherent in the traditional notion of God. The general issue which I will discuss is the feminist reactions to the notions of omnipotence and transcendence of God as male projections of masculine attributes; I will do this by (i) exploring the arguments according to which the concept of God does not transcend gender and is not politically innocent and (ii) showing how feminist philosophies offer an account of omnipresence that moves beyond traditional

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approaches and rejects the omnipotent God of traditional theologies. To this end, I shall first discuss feminist attempts to revise the concepts of omnipresence and divine transcendence; in the second part, I shall discuss Mary Daly's notion of Quintessence and her proposal to project a 'female divine' that would be fully immanent.

C20P4 Before proceeding further, I should clarify three issues. First, the feminist philosophy of religion is a relatively recent research field that has yet to be systematically articulated. Therefore, it is not easy to reconstruct in a rigorous manner its fundamental aspects and the arguments developed concerning, for instance, the concept of God, or that of transcendence or omnipresence. Second, we shall exclusively examine the monotheistic religions of the Jewish and Christian traditions, on which the feminist debate has centred. However, the key challenge for those who propose a gendered approach to religion is to scrutinize different religious traditions (see the chapter by Jea Sophia Oh, Ch. 26 in this volume). This attention to other traditions is paramount if one intends to overcome the predominant Western ethnocentrism in the philosophy of religion; to foster religious pluralism; and to develop new models for interpreting religious beliefs and religious disagreement that are no longer exclusively associated with the European white male. As various feminist philosophers have pointed out, it is indeed necessary to consider the specific cultural components of religious symbolism: the relationship between the symbolic structure, on the one hand, and the construction of gender, on the other, cannot be explained using a single explanatory model. The meanings of religious symbolism vary in accordance with social and cultural context and historical period. In fact, gender distinctions construct religious symbolism in a culturally differentiated manner. Moreover, the image of God as Father, for example, is not necessarily used to reinforce a given social order. Before examining the revised concept of omnipresence and the proposal of a female divinity, let us first probe the image that the Jewish and Christian traditions offer of women and the critique that feminist theologians raise against it. Third, and finally, most feminist theologians do not aim to offer an analysis of divine attributes comparable to that carried out by Scholastics in the Middle Ages and contemporary analytic theologians. Moreover, feminists often understand the analytic method as an expression of male rationality. Feminist theologians therefore pay less attention to ontological implications and focus more on the ethical-political implications of some stereotypical notions. However, there is a genuine disagreement among feminists on how to evaluate the entire philosophical and theological tradition and what criteria to use for an evaluation of it. Consequently, there is no consensus on what exactly this revision is. Philosophers of continental and analytic orientations, in fact, interpret the theological/philosophical tradition from two distinct perspectives and adopt methodologies of inquiry that are not always reconcilable (Rorty et al., 1984). It is possible, however, to identify at least two different attitudes in feminist philosophy toward the issue. According to some feminists, our philosophical and religious views are distorted by the failure to recognize the 'feminine', and the male characterization of some canonical concepts reflects biases against women. That is, the Western philosophical and religious tradition is allegedly conditioned by the fact that most philosophical/theological notions embody gender

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stereotypes and have strong misogynistic implications. Otherwise, while agreeing with the idea that the history of philosophy is to be reinterpreted within a gendered perspective, that is, within a vision in which gender is the primary element, philosophers closer to the analytical orientation consider many of the canonical concepts to be valid tools of inquiry. Even when misinterpreted or distorted by a certain philosophical and theological tradition, these concepts are not tendentious per se and are not irredeemably male-biased notion. In other words, they do not inevitably have inherent misogynist consequences. Rather, a careful examination of these notions can be of great help in unravelling and dissolving the (eventual) misogynistic foundation on which the philosophical and theological tradition often rest. Canonical concepts therefore can also be employed for (and be consistently functional to) feminist purposes. So, concepts from the philosophical and theological tradition need not necessarily be rejected and eliminated from the canon.

C20S1

The Critique of the Androcentric and Cultural Biases of the Traditional Notion of Woman in Religious Texts

C20P5 The two main monotheistic religions—or at least the way in which the sacred texts on which they are based have been interpreted or translated—are strongly pervaded by misogyny and sexism, feminists say. The cosmological narrative of the Old Testament, for example, relates that God first created man followed by woman, having shaped her from one of man's ribs (Gen. 2:22). The book of Genesis presents the creation of Eve as an act that was solely functional to Adam's existence. Of the opinion that Adam was alone, God created Eve to be of help to him (Gen. 2:18). Later, having betrayed God by eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Eve became guilty of transgression and of introducing sin into the world (Gen. 3:6). It is because of this original sin that both Judaism and Christianity often portray woman as a seductress and sinner. Original sin also marks the institutionalization of gender roles. After the expulsion from Eden, in fact, man is assigned the task of providing food and working the land, whereas the woman is assigned to procreate and care for her children. In addition to her role as mother, Eve's destiny is one of submission: in fact, God says to her, 'Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you' (Gen. 3:16).

C20P6 Religion and the philosophy of religion, many feminists claim, have thus largely ignored the issues of gender ideology and hierarchy. In its various articulations, religion has not only provided the basis on which gender ideology was culturally organized but—with its set of prohibitions and norms—vigorously reinforced, consolidated, and institutionalized the hierarchy that this ideology establishes.

C20P7 Women's subordination to men finds its justification in certain passages of the Old and New Testaments. Christian ideology, in particular, 'has contributed no little to the

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oppression of woman' (Beauvoir, 1953, 120), and 'the Church is notably hostile to all measures likely to help in woman's emancipation' (Beauvoir, 1953, 591).[1]

C20P8 According to Julia Kristeva (1987, 2009), Catholicism has caused the idea of the 'woman-mother' to become ingrained in our culture and in the female mindset—not least through the model image of the Madonna and child—in sharp contrast to the independence of women. Historically, the Catholic Church ensured that women did not evade male guardianship while prescribing demeanour and humility. In Judaism and Catholicism, menstruating women were traditionally perceived as impure, and the impurity of menstruation served as a basis for sexual prohibition. From the perspective of firm condemnation of carnal pleasures, such as that espoused by Catholicism, woman was also considered to be a source of temptation associated with the devil because she was culturally identified and reduced to a body or because she was found guilty of having induced the first man to breach the divine prohibition. According to some Church Fathers, it is precisely because of this guilt that a woman must recognize as master the one she has induced to sin and live under his dominion. For this reason, in the Christian and Jewish communities of the late antique period, women were allowed to participate in worship only on a secondary level and were permitted to perform only secular roles, such as those related to caring for the poor and the sick. Women were precluded from rabbinical duties and were not entitled to celebrate Mass.

C20P9 However, the Christian tradition seems to offer two contrasting images of woman, with, on the one hand, the image provided by some passages of the Gospels that appear to contemplate and defend equality between the two genders to some extent and, on the other hand, that offered by the Church Fathers, which instead considers that woman should be submissive. The canonical Gospels indicate that Christ is close to women as well as society's weakest, the sick, and children. We are told of Jesus' defence of an adulteress (John 8:7), of his conversation with a Samaritan woman (John 4:41), and of the fact that he allowed a sick woman to touch him and healed her (Mark 5:21–43). It is to two women that the resurrected Christ reveals himself. In the Apocryphal Gospels, Mary Magdalene is described as Jesus' wife (*Gospel of Philip* 64:5), and it is reported that Jesus 'used to kiss her often on her mouth' and that he 'loved her more than all the disciples'. In the *Gospel of Mary* (17:18), after the crucifixion, Magdalene even teaches the apostles. Nevertheless, conventional Judeo-Christian discourse is replete with gender metaphors: God is Father, King, Lord, Bridegroom, Almighty, Husband, or Judge. The male characterization of God's attributes is reiterated and confirmed even in the formulation of the dogma of the Trinity: God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This religious tradition has attributed to God traits that are marked as 'masculine' (e.g., strength, wisdom, uprightness) and taken as corollary (or negative) those stereotypically applied to women (e.g., weakness, ignorance, sinfulness; Lloyd, 1985; Stanton, 1885; McGhee, 1992).

C20P10 Among the Christian tradition's most eminent theologians, Thomas Aquinas devoted a particularly extensive discussion to the role of women. He addresses the problem

[1] According to Simone de Beauvoir, religion confirmed a certain social order by condemning women to resignation.

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of the origin of woman in question 92 of the *Summa Theologiae* in a discussion that is structured around four questions: (1) 'Whether the woman should have been made in the first production of things?'; (2) 'Whether woman should have been made from man?'; (3) 'Whether the woman was fittingly made from the rib of man?'; and (4) 'Whether the woman was formed immediately by God?' Woman is, Aquinas specifies, the last being created by God and—unlike all other creatures—is not created from nothing. Woman was not—he emphasizes—created in the first production of things (Aquinas, 2014, 1037; I pars, q.92, a.1). If one accepts as valid the Aristotelian thesis that the female is 'a misbegotten male', then in the first constitution of the world, 'nothing misbegotten or defective should have been made'. Given that God could not have been unaware that 'woman would be an occasion of sin to man' (Aquinas, 2014, 1037; I pars, q.92, a.1), why, then, did God create woman? Aquinas specifies that the answer to this question may be found in the book of Genesis: woman was created to be of help to man, a kind of help that was exclusively functional to cooperation in reproduction. It would be more appropriate, in fact, for man to be assisted in other activities by individuals of the same sex, and Aquinas notes that this is why the human sexes must be separated. In the plant world, the male and female sexes are united because, for plants, the noblest function is reproduction; in human beings, by contrast, the two sexes must be distinct because the 'intellectual operation' is the noblest human activity (Aquinas, 2014, 1037; I pars, q.92, a.1). Therefore, the union between man and woman must last only as long as is necessary for mating and sexual reproduction. As mentioned above, Aquinas believes that woman is destined for procreative activity, an activity prescribed by God himself. Moreover, Aquinas points out that the woman's condition must be one of submission. The reason for such subservience lies in the very nature of man, who is capable of more vigorous rational discernment than woman (Aquinas, 2014, 1037; I pars, q.92, a.1); in man, in fact, 'the discretion of reason predominates'. Augustine shares the same view regarding female subordination. He specifies that a woman must be subject to her husband's power because the 'subject who acts [the male] is nobler than the one who receives [the female]' (Aquinas, 2014, 1037; I pars, q.92, a.1). Aquinas further specifies that the creation of Eve from Adam was an opportune act intended to confer greater dignity on the first man (*homo*) and indissolubility on the bond of love between man (*vir*) and woman (*mulier*). The origin of the 'first woman' from the 'first man' has meant that men and women of future generations were henceforth inseparably united (Aquinas, 2014, 1039; I pars, q.92, a.2). Regarding the appropriateness of the creation of woman from man's rib and not from other parts of his body, Aquinas states that Eve could not be created from Adam's head because the purpose of her creation was not to dominate man (Aquinas, 2014, 1041; I pars, q.92, a.3) nor could Eve have been shaped by Adam's feet because she was not to be despised by him as a slave (Aquinas, 2014, 1041; I pars, q.92, a.3). Given that it is the woman who derives from the man and not vice versa, Aquinas reiterates in question 93 (a. 4) that if man is the image of God, then woman is the image of man. More precisely, 'as God is the principle of the whole universe, so the first man, in likeness to God, was the principle of the whole human race' (Aquinas, 2014, 1050).

C20P11 Turning now towards contemporary debate, the past thirty years have witnessed the proliferation of texts aimed at highlighting the role of the feminine and its

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affirmation in spirituality. Many feminist theologians believe that certain traits assigned to women and some of their experiences might be considered revelatory for all creation (Slee, 2013, 17). Feminist writing on the religious canon does not necessarily intend to assert and defend the thesis that all women experience their bodies as relational or fluid or that all women have certain essential traits. Rather, the theological question posed by feminists aims to highlight the fact that some women experience their bodies in this way or express certain traits. Such a perspective also proposes (i) to value those traits that are traditionally associated with women to which religion has attached a negative connotation and to reverse the denigration of women that has been perpetrated through this very association (King, 1995), and (ii) to affirm the values associated with women's bodies. The innovative quality of this approach lies not so much in the assumption that women's experiences of embodiment are inherently distinct from men's and that they can therefore say something that men cannot, but in the realization that eschatology has not appreciated—indeed, has actively discredited—certain aspects of existence by associating them with women's bodies. According to Nicola Slee, therefore, to focus on women's experiences rather than men's is not to deny male sphere or the ways in which men and women interact. Rather, Slee argues, it is 'to engage in the process of reclamation, of naming, of making visible women's lives, needs and experiences, in a way which is simply normative for men' (Slee, 1985, 234–235).

C20P12 One of the most significant and influential texts in the feminist critique of religion is Mary Daly's *The Church and the Second Sex* (1968). Inspired by and based on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), Daly's book argues that Christianity has perpetuated the oppression of women and that to overcome the conservative/patriarchal view of society and human relations would require a renewal of the Catholic Church. Daly's contribution fostered and promoted feminist reactions to religion. Five years after the publication of this text, Daly's position became more radical. In a book that has become a classic of early feminist theology, *Beyond God the Father* (1973), Daly defends a radical feminist spirituality that is disconnected from patriarchal religion. In this book, Daly argues that the predominantly male imagery invoked to represent God in the Judeo-Christian tradition inevitably leads to a patriarchal society—a society in which women are largely disadvantaged. The appropriate ethical response to this imagery, in her view, is to reject all Judeo-Christian religious traditions as immoral and unworthy of faith. Daly thus abandons all hope of change and concludes that the church is thoroughly permeated by sexist attitudes.

C20P13 More precisely, Daly asserts that, 'If God is male, then the male is God' (Daly, 1973, 19) and argues that assigning a gender to God inherently means to assign value to men above women: 'If God in "his" heaven is a father ruling "his" people, then it is in the "nature" of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male dominated' (Daly, 1973, 13). In this picture, it is the male who defines God, and diversity becomes inequality. Institutional religions are thus unreformable, and hope for women's liberation can be found only in Christian feminist theology, from a perspective that accentuates not Jesus' divinity but his actual life. This perspective foregrounds

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personal experience (and with it, corporeality, sexuality, relationships) in the search for the transcendent.

C20P14 Daly defends a feminist retrieval of the tradition that holds that the negative way serves as a resource with which to counter patriarchal oppression by discovering and disposing of the androcentrism inherent in the language of God. This negative way goes hand in hand with the decision to exclude oneself from patriarchal societies that reflect such androcentrism, making explicit the link between negative theology and liberation/religious, cultural, and political emancipation.

C20P15 Daly writes, 'The realization of our exclusion from the world-building process is a neo-negative way, in that we are discovering our previously unknown being, which points our consciousness outward and inward toward as yet unknown Being, that some would call the hidden God' (Daly, 1973, 38). According to Daly, this approach entails the rejection or denial of any androcentric designation. From this, she derives the need to free oneself from the figure of God the Father, as a figure of authority who conditions the collective imagination and deforms the human aspiration towards transcendence, focusing on the transcendental character of the God of liberation. Daly (1973) offers a view of God as the 'Verb' and as a dynamic process in the making that energizes all things (Frankenberry, 2018).

C20P16 The debate surrounding the revision of the religious canon has engaged not only feminist philosophers but also theologians, biblical exegetes, and ethicists. This dispute places the problem of God at the centre of exegetical reconstruction and discussion. In the feminist articulation of the relationship between God and the world or between God and female subjectivity, divinity is largely represented as a continuum with the world rather than as a transcendent entity. From this perspective, as we shall see in the following paragraphs, divinity is largely understood as omnipresence and immanence. As I shall demonstrate, many of these feminist theories affirm God's closeness and involvement in relationships with fluid (Slee, 1985), embodied beings and focus primarily on the present. Let us now consider how feminist theology and philosophy has developed the concept of divine omnipresence with the additional aim of supporting the liberation of women's bodies from patriarchal oppression. In what follows, I will focus exclusively on some feminist theological and philosophical perspectives that have raised some objections to the traditional notion of omnipresence. It should be emphasized, however, that not all feminist theologians and philosophers share the view that this notion is problematic or sexist and misogynistic (see for example Soskice, 2023).

C20S2

Omnipresence as Embodied Proximity: 'The World as God's Body'

C20P17 The problem of omnipresence is a major concern in feminist theology. Many feminist theologians posit that divine omnipresence is an expression of God's involvement in and

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with creation. To clarify this, for example, Grace Jantzen and Sallie McFague propose the metaphor of the construction of the world as God's body. In *The World as God's Body* (1988), McFague explains three defining features of the metaphor of the body to speak of God. First, she claims that, although God's body is not deemed identical to ours, this metaphor affirms embodiment. She writes, 'The world is the bodily presence, a sacrament of the invisible God' (1988, 672). According to this way of thinking, God is also our bodily being; the being-in-itself, the one in whom we live, move, and have our being. The model of the world as God's body suggests that God is therefore is not just as spiritual, unembodied being.

C20P18 Although God's body should not be thought of as ours, our perception of the world as God's body brings us closer to God and leads us to conceive of God not as a king who looks down on us from above but rather as a being who is here as a visible presence, namely as a presence mediated by and manifest in God's incarnation in the world. According to McFague (1984, 83), divine knowledge takes the form of intimate understanding. In this picture, therefore, God is a being whose epistemology is based on an embodied, experiential, and relational closeness with creation.

C20P19 The second defining feature of the metaphor 'the World as God's body' is that this approach to thinking about God allows us to overcome a crucial dualism in the Christian tradition—namely, the division between spirit and body, and the view that salvation is totally about the former. Nevertheless, if the world is a manifestation of God's body, then bodies are important to God, and salvation is as concerned with basic needs (such as food, clothing, and shelter) as it is with matters of the spirit. According to this framework, salvation is a social, political, and economic issue and not merely a matter of the spirit's eternal existence (McFague, 1988, 672).

C20P20 The third defining feature of the metaphor of the body concerns God's vulnerability and the degree to which divinity depends on creation. As an embodied being in the world, God is 'at risk'. According to the metaphor under analysis here, far from being a totally invisible and distant entity, corporeity renders God dependent. As God's body, the world can be devastated and destroyed at the hands of human beings. Vulnerability, shared responsibility, and risk become key notions for understanding the God–world relationship as considerably different from that of the monarch–realm metaphor. The God–world relationship, thus understood, emphasizes God's willingness to suffer for and with the world, even to the point of risking his bodily integrity. McFague specifies that it is not really in our power to destroy God. Nevertheless, the incarnate God is a God at risk. It is our responsibility to take care of God's body—that is, our world. Therefore, to conceive of the world as God's body entails thinking of it as something to be guarded and protected rather than as something to be used and abused. This metaphor heightens our awareness that, as corporeal beings, we are in the presence of God and God is with us here and now. This perspective is based on the perception of the divine as visible and present, accompanied by an awareness of the world's vulnerability. The world is a body that must be assiduously cared for and loved because, like us, it is an expression of God. In addition, as mentioned above, the image of the world as the body of God is a way of articulating and imagining the

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God–world relationship that differs significantly from that of the 'monarchic' model (which speaks of a God and his Kingdom). This latter image imposes a vast distance between God and the world. Otherwise, the image of the world as God's body perceives God and the world as intrinsically related. These two different images and ways of speaking about God encourage different attitudes. While the monarchical model encourages dualism, violence, oppression, and militarism and has nothing to say about the non-human world, the model of the world as God's body pushes towards attitudes of responsibility and care for the vulnerable and of the oppressed; it is a non-hierarchical image and a pithy commentary on the body and nature. God's existence as a world is closely linked to the idea that God takes care of that world and prevents its destruction. According to McFague, God depends on creation to care for the world. This view has led some to suggest McFague's theology is a form of panentheism. According to some, her panentheistic reconstruction of the God–world relationship is based on eliminating dualistic hierarchies and understanding of the spirit of God as the ground-of-being contrasted with a God who hierarchically rules over the world. Furthermore, the model of the world as God's body view agrees strongly with a feminist stress on God as the source of all relationship, and the feminist view of omnipresence/immanence expressed through the body metaphor makes such a view fit into a form of panentheism.

C20P21 It is a common and shared practice among feminist theologians to imagine God as embodied and relational. Theologians including Jantzen, McFague, and Carol Christ, redefine, for example, omnipresence in terms of 'embodied proximity' (McFauge, 1997, 8). Carter Heyward (1989, 132) states that 'being really present' is what characterizes the 'right relationship'. This means not only power in mutual relation with one another and embodied proximity but also authentic availability, attentiveness, and commitment to others. It is thus an active rather than a passive presence, a way of relating that is capable of leading us to 'full relationality'—namely, a relationality that is not hindered by rejection and suffering. Heyward defines 'mutuality' as 'right relation' grounded in love, as 'the basis of whatever is most creative and sacred in our life together' and God as 'our power in mutual relation' (1989, 188). From this perspective, a relational God is to be understood exclusively as an intimate relationship with creation in the present—rather, as a final aid to creation.

C20P22 This model of omnipresence is common in feminist discussions. Soskice describes it as 'continuous presence' (1997, 24–25), while Suchocki speaks of God in her process view as 'the everlastingly concrescent entity, [who] must be related to the occasions of every epoch' (1988, 149). Soskice and Suchocki link relationality and eternity, an eternity that is framed as an everlasting presence rather than a power or knowledge of all times, events, and creatures therein. Jantzen rejects the ancient/medieval doctrine of omnipresence and argues more radically that God's omnipresence does not indicate a timeless and spatially unconstrained God who transcends the world, his being everywhere, his knowing everything, his power that creates and governs all beings, his substance, which is present everywhere without resolving itself into any particular being. Rather, that God is omnipresent means that God's care 'extends

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infinitely beyond the boundaries of our own little individual worlds' (Jantzen, 1984, 49–50). God is simultaneously infinite and intimate. Jantzen maintains that knowledge of God can only be obtained through a process of acquisition that moves from intimate relations with creation. She writes that 'God has intimate personal knowledge of each of us and our circumstances' (Jantzen, 1984, 83). God's ability to understand those feelings and experiences that are truly important to us is what matters (Jantzen, 1984, 83). Jantzen specifies that 'it becomes far more significant that God should understand our feelings, not just in the sense of knowing about them from some lofty untouched plane like an eternal bystander, but really sympathizing, "feeling with us" '. Compared with a God who impersonally contains all knowledge in a factual and timeless way, a God who is capable of knowing creation through an intimate and compassionate relational presence will be considerably more capable of relating to creation. According to this view, God becomes immanent in every single actual event: omnipresent rather than omnipotent; dynamic, pluralistic, a continuum with the world, rather than a transcendent entity. It emerges from this brief examination how such an idea of omnipresence positively embodies characteristics that are traditionally thought of as feminine (care and vulnerability in the first place) and far removed from God Almighty. As noted above, one of the main feminist attempts to revise the concept of divine transcendence has sought to synthesize two different traditions: that which originates with Aquinas—namely, the ontology of being—and that which is based on Whitehead's ontology of processes (Tripodi, 2018). The first tradition is based on Aquinas's concept of 'being' (*esse*); the second is influenced by Whitehead's concept of 'creativity'. More precisely, many feminists embrace Whitehead's view of the universe as a physical and spiritual reality—namely, a 'pluralistic' reality characterized by relations of complexity between real entities. As we shall see in the following section, this view of omnipresence goes hand in hand with a new way of understanding the transcendental. But a comprehensive review of the main feminist attempts to revise the concept of divine transcendence is beyond this essay's scope. In that which follows, therefore, I shall focus on how Luce Irigaray rephrases this concept.

C20S3

Transcendence in Irigaray

C20P23

As noted above, feminist theologians are engaged in the project of rejecting God's transcendence in favour of a wholly immanent God in favour of the Goddess (Martin Alcoff & Caputo, 2011; Anderson, 2003; Perkins Gilman, 1923; McClintock Fulkerson, 1994). Traditionally, the idea of omnipotence has primarily been regarded as a form of perfect power associated with a certain ideal model of masculinity. That is, divine omnipotence reflects an idealized image of certain qualities conventionally attributed to males. Thus understood, the concept of omnipotence is an incoherent, superfluous, and morally offensive concept because it is based on the idea of divine

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power culturally associated with patriarchal power. As noted in the previous section, the Judeo-Christian tradition has interpreted the relationship between God and the world as being governed by the glorification of an imperturbable entity that is unrelated to human reality. Within this framework, God not only occupies a privileged place but also gives identity to creatures who are in a subordinate position to his omnipotence. Thus, many feminists have developed an alternative form of transcendence. Let us consider in greater detail the idea of transcendence that emerges in Irigaray's texts.

C20P24 Contrary to Beauvoir (1953, 581), Irigaray believes that women are capable of transcendence and are not destined to be relegated to a dimension of immanence. She also argues that women need a God of and for their gender and that woman's divine becoming is thus possible and realizable, provided the repressed feminine is recovered in the spiritual dimension. For Irigaray, the construction of a God 'of her [woman's] sex' comprises two stages: (i) questioning the idea of the divine in the Judeo-Christian tradition as an expression of the masculine imaginary that fits poorly with the dimension of women's becoming, and (ii) elevating the feminine to a divine dimension. Here Irigaray captures and interprets, from a feminist perspective, two lessons of Ludwig Feuerbach's philosophy of religion. According to Feuerbach, humanity must elevate themselves to God to show his true essence, while at the same time, God must be dissolved in humanity—that is to say, the divine must be anthropomorphized.

C20P25 In the religious sphere, Irigaray's reflection is mainly concerned with two theses: feminine spirituality is an expression of the sensible transcendental and is a necessary requirement for the elaboration of a feminine subjectivity. As with the divine feminine, the sensible transcendental is both 'flesh' and Word (Irigaray, 1993, 115, 129). Irigaray thus proposes a doctrine of incarnation in which the 'flesh becomes Word' and the 'Word becomes flesh' (this evokes the biblical expression, which has come to designate the event of the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth). In her words, 'but if the Word was made flesh in this way, and to this extent, it can only have been to make me (become) God in my jouissance, which can at last be recognized' (Irigaray, 1985, 199–200). Within a framework in which sexual difference is a paradigm of difference itself, Irigaray seeks to give voice to a divine otherness by imagining a transcendence that goes beyond Christian theology's conceptualization of the transcendental—that is, as that which escapes our sensible perceptions.

C20P26 Irigaray understands the spiritual relationship between women and men as a progressive exchange of energy aimed at harmonizing the human and divine dimensions that patriarchy, with its distortions, has separated (Frankenberry, 2018). This transmission of energy is a gesture of love that allows everyone to transcend himself or herself to welcome difference and recognize the Other. Only in this way can woman or man access their own individual divinization. This process of divinization is thus deeply immanent in nature. By 'divine', Irigaray means 'sexual difference itself', that is, a new form of ethical relationship that can exist between women and men. Only in this dimension, for Irigaray, can women affirm their subjectivity. Therefore, transcendence for women

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depends on the possibility of this radical, relational immanentalization of the divine (Frankenberry, 2018).[2]

C20P27 According to Irigaray, therefore, transcendence can also be sensitive and embodied or may emerge through gestures and words. This requires the cultivation of a desire for spirituality and a reconsideration of the dimension of piety. As his own experience testifies, underlines Irigaray, Jesus addresses simple, sensitive words to those who approach him; he shows himself close to their needs and desires. When his disciples want to turn away from him the ignorant, the poor, women or children, Jesus admonishes them. He also heals the body and soul of those who humbly accept the gift of love. Within this framework, Irigaray also re-evaluates the value of silence. Only a word rooted that is in silence can be an embodied word. It is therefore a silence that is not imposed; that is not merely a return to self but rather a place of preservation and intimacy with self. Silence, however, is not to be understood as the absence of words but rather as a reserve of future words or events whose manifestation has not yet been revealed. Mary's silence bears witness to a higher form of communication that is dense with content. According to Irigaray, silence is, metaphorically, the guardian of the threshold between the visible and the invisible and between the material and the immaterial; it is also that which allows us to recover our physical and mental integrity or virginity. Silence is, in fact, that which makes us willing to listen and welcome what is not yet known, that which allows us to approach the Other as Other and to foster dialogue between different cultural or religious communities while respecting the contribution that each tradition can make.

C20P28 Irigaray also emphasizes the importance of breath as an essential component of divine incarnation. Breath is an expression of the breath of God and the Holy Spirit. A love without breath (or a breath without love) is something sterile. This idea of the spirit as breath or breath as an element of life force has many elements in common with Hindu religions (Irigaray, 2002). Some have objected, however, that Irigaray's gynocentric religious project presents several tensions (Frankenberry, 2018). Some feminists have criticized it for being too closely related to the Western model of autonomy and self-determination. So, let us see another possible model.

C20S4

Daly's Notion of Quintessence

C20P29 In formulating her divine theory, Daly's point of reference is the line drawn in religious reflection by Ernest Bloch (1972) and Ludwig Feuerbach (1972). Daly's intent is

[2] Drawing upon Irigaray, Catherine Keller also defends in *Face of the Deep* (2003) a panentheistic conception that all is in God. Keller proposes what she calls a theology of becoming or 'tehomic theology' (ibid., 159) according to which a not domineering God is immanent in the world even as the world is immanent in her/him/it.

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twofold: to work out a spirituality beyond God the Father and a conception of ultimate reality that is no longer conceived exclusively as Verb or Being.

C20P30 In developing the latter point, Daly holds firm to Feuerbach's idea of the illusory nature of the distinction between divine and human. According to Feuerbach, it is unhappiness and suffering that drive humanity toward God and make that of God a necessary idea. However, Feuerbach writes, 'religion is the consciousness of the infinite' (1972, 21). The infinity referred to in this passage has to do not with a deity but with humanity. Religion is in fact 'man's consciousness of *his* own essential nature'; a nature not as 'finite or limited, but as an infinite' (1972, 21). Feuerbach thus reduces all attributes of the Christian God to attributes of humanity. Revisiting this thesis, Daly asserts that reality is ultimately something in which all beings participate. Daly takes up a central theme in Feuerbach's critique of religion, arguing for the need to recover the 'women's stolen energy' (1978, 367), 'our stolen original divinity' (1978, 41). Women are thus defined as 'generators of energy' (1978, 319), while men have lived by exploiting them. Finally, inspired by Feuerbach, Daly asserts that 'we are divinity'.

C20P31 In her investigation, Daly affords particular attention to the female desire for transcendence and women's participation in being. For Daly, this desire for transcendence rises to the cosmic level. Daly's prophetic reading of the Bible is accompanied by a feminine vision of peace, justice, and ecological harmony. In this mystical vision, the 'Quintessence' is 'the unifying Living Presence that is at the core of the Integrity Elemental connectedness of the Universe' (1998, 11). More precisely, she writes, the 'quest for Quintessence is the most Desperate response I know to the call of the Wild. It means throwing one's life as far as it will go' (Daly, 1998, 4). According to Daly, the term 'Quintessence' articulates the unifying, living presence that is at the core of the elemental wholeness and connectedness of the universe.

C20P32 Daly explains that, according to Pythagorean mysticism, Quintessence is 'the spirit that fills the universe and gives it life and vitality' (1998, 11). In ancient and medieval philosophy, meanwhile, it is the name of 'the fifth and the last or highest essence, above fire, air, water, and earth, that permeates all nature' (1998, 11); it is 'the Source of our power to Realize a true Future—an Archaic Future' (Daly, 1998, 11). Quintessence is thus the Original Element (Daly, 1998, 29): an essence that has been thwarted, opposed, or partially destroyed by patriarchy and androcentrism and pornography and gender violence, as well as factors such as sexist education, poverty, racism, exploitation, nuclear threats, environmental change, and cultural manipulation. Daly thus recovers the Hegelian theme of the expropriation and deprivation of the divine element. Hegel (1972, p. 320) describes human beings as robbed of their spirit, their eternal and absolute element, arguing that this deprivation has driven them to take refuge in God and forced them to seek and wait for happiness in heaven.

C20P33 Analogously to Hegel, Daly (1998, 11) speaks of a 'stolen feminine energy' and of 'our [women's] original stolen divinity'. The diabolical and 'terrible war' waged against women's souls by the patriarchy weakens women's spirits, intelligence and passion, visions and dreams. It is thus necessary to have the 'Courage to Be' (1998, 15) and overturn patriarchal spirituality to alert women to the misogyny in which Christianity is

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steeped and to defend them from the seduction of Eastern religions. Likewise, we must be wary of symbolism that proposes a 'triune god that would keep us trapped in a three-dimensional world' (1998, 23). Therefore, Daly invites women to embark on a journey to 'the Fifth Spiral Galaxy' in the interest of 'Discovering the Light of Quintessence' (1998, 23). Indeed, it is only in contact with Quintessence that women are free 'to expand and participate in the creation of the universe' and become 'more than ever like trees and like angels' (1998, 230)—that is, of a dimension of harmony with the animal and natural worlds, in hope of which communication occurs more rapidly in time and space, in which one acts in Sisterhood. Quintessence is thus the measure of transcendence since it is 'the key to the revelatory power of the Feminist revolution' (1998, 45).

C20P34 Daly's theory of the divine replaces the 'power of being' (singular and masculine perspective) with the 'powers of being' (plural and feminine perspective). In her intentions, this theory is supposed to realize a trans-cultural myth reminiscent of Bloch's revolutionary Prometheanism. When 'a man discovers his superiority to the gods', Bloch states, he 'may be preoccupied with the legend of Prometheus' (1972, 26). In his interpretation of the Bible, Daly is inspired by Bloch's reading, presented in *Atheism in Christianity*. The latter text proposes a de-theocratization—that is, a reading that eliminates everything attributed to God as a transcendent entity from the sacred texts. According to Bloch, the irreconcilability of the contrast between God and man recounted in the Bible can be overcome by eliminating all depictions of divine transcendence from the sacred texts. Inspired by Marx in formulating his theology of hope, for Bloch, it is necessary to overthrow every relationship that sees man humiliated and subjugated. Bloch is a spokesperson for a form of humanistic atheism in which man's absoluteness is incompatible with the divine transcendent and it is man who is supreme. In his reinterpretation of sacred texts, the episode of the 'serpent'—the Prometheus of the Bible—for example, is re-evaluated in a positive light as an important stage in humanity's path to independence and autonomy from God.

C20P35 Moreover, Bloch particularly exalts the figure of the risen Christ as a symbol of the advent of the 'new man'—that is, the man who wishes to be 'like God' without God to achieve his total liberation. Daly thus revisits the myth of Prometheus and explicitly circumscribes it to the feminine dimension. Daly's theory of the divine has been criticized (Frankenberry, 2018) as separatist: the divine can be embodied only in the many feminine selves. Moreover, owing to the devil's current power to co-opt women (which finds expression in patriarchy), only a few women are able to attain Quintessence. Nevertheless, Daly is confident in women's ability to escape male domination someday. Paradise for women is, Daly urges us not to forget, beyond the confines of patriarchal paradise.

C20P36 As we have seen, Daly (1990, 37) describes patriarchy as a social system centred on myths of 'processions within the godhead, which is triune'. The Son proceeds from the Father; the 'Holy Spirit' proceeds from the Father and the Son, and all creatures participate in this procession. Daly calls this mythical paradigm of the Trinity the product of Christian culture and recognizes it as expressive of a patriarchal society. According to Daly, Christian myths share several parallels with antecedent androcratic myths,

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but Christianity has twisted and distorted the older myths and symbols. For Daly, the Christian concept of 'Trinity' is comparable to the Triple Goddess in ancient mythology (1978, 38 and 75).

C20P37 Trivia (also known by her Hellenic title, *Hekate/Hecate*) was one of the names of the Triple Goddess, who is considered to be both One and Triune, and this concept is similar to the notion of the Catholic Trinity. Goddess of the streets and crossroads, she was assigned the epithet *Τριοδῖτις* (lat. *Trivia*, crossroads), and aedicules were erected to her on the streets. She was considered the lady of shadows and nocturnal ghosts as well as the goddess of magic and spells. Hecate's triple aspect (terrestrial, lunar, and chthonic) is reflected in her iconography, which often depicts her with three heads or three bodies. In pre-Catholic times, her mysticism was of no concern; for Christians, however, the figure of Hecate became associated with that of the devil. Women without husbands, who were unattached or simply different from the 'canon', were considered to be Hecate-worshippers and burned at the stake accordingly. Recognizing that that which is paramount in women's lives tends to be relegated to the margins of history and patriarchal thought, and dismissed as 'trivial', Daly conceives of Trivia as a place at the crossroads at which women's ideas can assume their original power and meaning. Daly analyses the contemporary meaning of the term 'trivia' as 'common, ordinary . . . of little worth or importance: insignificant, flimsy, minor, slight' (Daly, 1990, 78). Daly explains how in a patriarchal society, common values are of little value, while in a hierarchical, competitive society, that which is scarce is inherently more valuable. The Christian 'Trinity' is seen as omnipresent through its dogma and is not associated with triviality. According to Daly, this is a contradiction: androcracy renders scarcity an intrinsic requirement of great value but nonetheless finds it appropriate to conceive of the infinite, perfect, and supreme 'God' as omnipresent. This apparent contradiction flounders, Daly explains, when we reconsider the implications of patriarchy being the 'Religion of Reversals'.

C20P38 According to Daly, the 'omnipresent' God is not a 'commonplace' because he has no place. His omnipresence is 'omniabsence' (1990, 78), and referring to his absence as presence is false. She writes,

C20P39 > His absence everywhere is named as 'presence' everywhere, and the 'presence' consists precisely in this false naming. The ubiquity of false naming masks the ominous Absence which is the essence of the patriarchal god. It confers upon him infinite worth in the rarified realm of Reversal Religion's value system. The infinite absence of divinity in the patriarchal god is the ultimate scarcity rarified to the point of Zero. (Daly, 1990, 79)

C20P40 The essence of the patriarchal God is absence, and the infinite absence of divinity in the patriarchal God is ultimate scarcity. Daly believes that in this lies the hidden meaning of his being Omega, which she decodes as 'Ultimately Nothing' (Daly, 1990, 79). Trivia, Daly argues, should serve as a constant reminder of the reduction of patriarchal religions to the real, multidimensional presence of 'Nothingness', created by fathers in their own image. Moreover, Trivia should remind women of the omnipresence of

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Reversal. By 'Reversal', Daly means the reversal of life-engendering energy, symbolized by the Goddess, 'into necrophilic Nothing-loving' (Daly, 1990, 79). In this picture, hag women may live freely in the time/space of banality and find their own cosmic triviality and creative power (Daly, 1990, 79).

C20S5

Concluding Remarks

C20P41 The philosophical concept of omnipresence (dynamically understood) is employed by some feminist theologians to provide an alternative meaning to transcendence, and to interpret other metaphors of religious symbolism (such as 'divine reality', 'sacred mystery'). God becomes immanent in each actual event, as that spontaneous creative process that gives energy to everything; He is dynamism and plurality. From this perspective, the notion of omnipresence is therefore dialectically correlated to that of immanence. The Being (as actual and dynamic) is no more real than worldly objects. As a dynamic being, God is the actuality of everything and the creative action that is common to all things. In the various feminist theologies, reality and the world become the outcomes of an organic, relational, dynamic, and embedded process. As we have seen, Daly elaborates on a radical religious feminism that rejects the male characteristics of God as Father. Irigaray (1985) also suggests an immanent divinity: a female self as the expression of a sensible transcendence. According to Daly and Irigaray, because God-Father is a purely idealized projection of male identity, the elaboration of a female deity is the condition for the development of a feminine subjectivity. According to both perspectives, the deity is mostly understood as immanence.

C20S6

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