

FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION An Inclusive Perspective

Jaya Babu Thulimelli*

Abstract: Feminist philosophers of religion such as Pamela Sue Anderson and Grace Jantzen have endeavoured to identify masculine bias in the concepts of God found in the scriptures of the world's religions and in other religious writings and practices in which religious beliefs are proposed and assessed, and to transform the Philosophy of Religion, and thereby the lives of women, by recommending new or expanded epistemologies and using these to re-vision a concept of the divine which will inspire both women and men to work for the promotion of a just and compassionate society. It is argued in this paper, that the epistemologies of Jantzen and Anderson are not distinctively feminist, except by emphasising the inclusion of women. This might mean being more open to the concepts of the divine which are not, even in a metaphorical sense, masculine, and enhancing awareness of the ways in which abstract arguments about the divine could be relevant to the practical aspects of human life which have traditionally been the preserve of women. Insofar as these are increasingly also the responsibility of men, however, a feminist Philosophy of Religion might now be more appropriately characterised as an inclusive Philosophy of Religion.

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1. Introduction

There is a need for an Inclusive Philosophy of Religion for more meaningful, critical and creative Philosophy of Religion. The

•**Jaya Babu Thulimelli** is a priest of Apostolic Society of Heralds of Good News graduated from Andhra University. At present he is pursuing his research in the Philosophy at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bengaluru.

Philosophy of Religion as classically conceived predominantly by masculine thought is of no much relevance for women as claimed by Pamela Sue Anderson and Jantzen who in turn adventured into feminist Philosophy of Religion. It is of my view that even feminists who attempt to make a distinctive feminist Philosophy of Religion will be of again the same result as of masculine biased Philosophy of Religion. Therefore what we need is not distinctively feminist Philosophy of Religion or masculine biased thoughts on religion but inclusive Philosophy of Religion that will serve both women and men. We need to move towards the view that seeks to attain a standpoint from which the needs of everyone may be taken into account.

A feminist Philosophy of Religion could be distinctively feminist by taking into account of women's experiences and concerns. It is argued in this paper, that the epistemologies of Jantzen and Anderson are not distinctively feminist, though they argue for the inclusion of women. They aimed to transform the discipline, thereby the lives of women perhaps by recommending new or at least expanded epistemologies. It is also argued that the differences between the positions of these key contributors in the field of feminist Philosophy of Religion may be better characterised as differences of emphases rather than as differences of approach. The inclusion of women in the Philosophy of Religion could pave way to an inclusive Philosophy of Religion. The revision of the concept of the divine through an inclusive Philosophy of Religion will inspire both men and women to be more open to the concepts of the divine, which are not, even in a metaphorical sense, masculine or feminine, and enhance awareness of the ways in which abstract arguments about the divine could be relevant to the practical aspects of human life and work for the flourishing for the whole of humankind.

2. Origin and Scope of Feminist Philosophy of Religion

As a rough guide, feminist Theology has developed predominantly since 1968,¹ feminist Philosophy began in the early 1970s,² and Feminist Philosophy of Religion, incorporating insights from both fields, began in 1994 with an issue of the feminist philosophy journal *Hypatia* dedicated to the new discipline. In 1998, Pamela Sue Anderson’s *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion: The Rationality and Myths of Religious Belief* was followed within a few months by the publication of *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* by Grace Jantzen. Both books remain central to the field, and have been joined more recently by two collections of papers – *Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Critical Readings* by Anderson and Beverly Clack,³ and *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion* by Anderson.⁴

Precise definitions of these disciplines and their relationships with each other are also somewhat elusive. In the sphere of Theology, feminism involves “critical analysis and constructive re-reading and re-writing that involves a commitment to transformation.”⁵ In Philosophy, feminists investigate the bias against women in the writings of canonical authors, in branches of contemporary Philosophy, particularly Epistemology and Ethics, and in the imagery used in both past and contemporary philosophical writing; they use philosophical tools to expound and assess particular feminist claims – e.g., that pornography is harmful to women; and they focus on new topics for debate –

¹Rosemary Radford Ruther, “Feminist Theology,” in *A new Dictionary of Christian Theology*, eds., Alan Richardson, John Bowden, London: SCM Press, 1983, 210.

²Alison Stone, *An Introduction to Feminist Philosophy*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007, 1.

³Pamela Sue Anderson, and Beverley Clack, eds., *Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Critical Readings*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003.

⁴Pamela Sue Anderson, ed., *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Contestations and Transcendence Incarnate*, New York: Springer Netherlands, 2010.

⁵Natalie K. Watson, *Feminist Theology*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003, 2.

e.g., essentialism (the theory that there is something which all women, or all men, have in common).⁶

Feminist philosophers of religion tend to focus primarily on methodological issues; but they also consider the topics that are, or should be, discussed within the discipline – although these are often intertwined. Like feminist theologians and feminist philosophers, feminist philosophers of religion engage in critical analysis of relevant texts both the scriptures of the world's religions and other writings in which religious beliefs are proposed and assessed. Thus, they might attempt to identify 'the philosophical imaginary' (the web of images employed by philosophers in communicating their ideas), drawing attention to the use of images which convey a negative view of women. Or they might, perhaps, endeavour to show that the deity described in both religious and philosophical texts divinizes masculinity, or that discussions within the discipline have given insufficient attention to the implications of human embodiment, or the importance of human relationships. Feminist philosophers of religion also aim to transform the discipline, and thereby the lives of women, perhaps by recommending new, or at least expanded, epistemologies, and using these to re-vision a concept of divinity which will inspire both women and men to work for the promotion of a just and compassionate society.

3. The Feminist 'Problem of Reason'

Anderson suggests that the central problem for a feminist philosopher of religion is "the erasure of female identity and sexual difference" as a result of "the privileging of male identity in philosophical representations of God's ideally male attributes," and that this is caused by "the exclusive use of reason"⁷ as it has historically been understood. Anderson suggests that the capacity to reason has been regarded as masculine from the time of the ancient Greek philosophers

⁶Stone, *An Introduction to Feminist Philosophy*, 1-3.

⁷Anderson, Pamela Sue, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion: The Rationality and Myths of Religious Belief*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998, 7-8.

onwards. Aristotle thought that human beings differ from other animals in possessing the ability to reason in the context of a community; but Anderson suggests that, since only men were able to participate in the life of the community at the time of Aristotle, only men could be regarded as rational animals.⁸ Aristotle also gives a table of opposites, ascribed to Pythagoras, which has been re-stated by philosophers, perhaps most notably Hegel,⁹ across the centuries. The left-hand column in Pythagoras’ table includes ‘male’ and ‘good’, while the right-hand column includes ‘female’ and ‘bad’.¹⁰

Jantzen notes that Aristotle spells out the implications of this: “The male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled.”¹¹ In several of Plato’s Dialogues, the items in the left-hand column are more clearly associated with mind or spirit, while the right-hand column is more clearly linked with body and matter.¹² Jantzen claims that the rational method came to be used in an attempt to provide justified, true belief in a God who is described by terms taken from the left side of the binary division.¹³ The God of the west is therefore the Divine Father who is disembodied and eternal, omnipotent and omniscient. These attributes demonstrate the qualities which are regarded as the most valuable and the concept of God therefore, “serves to valorize (to value) disembodied power and rationality.”¹⁴

Both Anderson and Jantzen think that this view of God is a male projection¹⁵ which serves the interests of men, and that

⁸Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, 8.

⁹Michele Le Doeuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary*, Colin Gordon, trans., London: The Athlone Press, 1989, 113.

¹⁰Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999, 266.

¹¹Aristotle 1132; quoted in Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 268.

¹²Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 267.

¹³Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 267.

¹⁴Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 10.

¹⁵God is, indeed, often portrayed as masculine by artists – perhaps most notably by Michelangelo (1475–1564) and William Blake (1757–

there is no reason why the divine should be conceptualized in this way. Jantzen notes Jerome Gellman's suggestion that it is theologians who determine what is appropriate to say about God, though he offers no argument for appealing to such an authority. Other philosophers appeal to revelation; for example, both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament portray God "in overwhelmingly masculine terms, as Lord, King, Father, Judge, Mighty Warrior, and so on."¹⁶ Jantzen argues, however, that unless God has also revealed a method of interpretation, we are no closer to understanding what has been revealed.¹⁷ Thus, philosophers who describe God in such terms rely on a circular argument (an argument which already assumes what it attempts to prove); they claim that revelation enables them to attain a limited understanding of the meaning of religious language, but they claim to understand the content of that revelation only on the basis of their limited understanding of the meaning of religious language.¹⁸ Anderson also suggests that belief in an omnipotent, omniscient deity is commonly justified by means of circular arguments.

Both she and Jantzen reject the concept of a God who represents, in the words of Thomas Nagel, a perspectiveless "view from nowhere,"¹⁹ and Anderson claims that belief in this deity is supported by arguments which already assume that a perspectiveless position is possible; thus, "God ensures the idea of objectivity at the same time as objectivity ensures the idea of the theistic God."²⁰ Some feminist philosophers of religion also object to the use of reason to construct theodicies that are callous toward the inordinate and innocent suffering of women throughout western history, due to unacknowledged material

1827). See, for example, <http://www.vatican.va/various/cappelle/sistina_vr/index.html> (3.7.2016).

¹⁶Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 181.

¹⁷Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 179.

¹⁸Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 180.

¹⁹Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, 36, 78; Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 146.

²⁰Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, 78.

and mental conditions of inequality and injustice – particularly those generated by western philosophy and theology.²¹

4. Three Feminist Epistemologies

Anderson identifies three types of feminist epistemologies, which may be used to evaluate existing belief-systems and to transform or replace them: feminist empiricism, feminist poststructuralism, and feminist standpoint epistemology.

Feminist empiricism attempts to attain knowledge of an objectively-existing reality on the basis of evidence and arguments but, in so doing, “to eliminate any unacknowledged biases of androcentrism or sexism.”²² Anderson suggests that, applied to the philosophy of religion, a feminist empiricist might, for example, seek “to purge the sexism and androcentrism” from Richard Swinburne’s *The Existence of God* by showing that women appear only occasionally in his examples, and then only as possessions of men or passive items for other men’s seduction.²³ By contrast, the feminist empiricist would use inclusive language, and offer “more fair and objective examples in which women are not just passive objects to be controlled or harmed, desired or rejected, suffered or silenced.”²⁴

For Anderson, however, feminist philosophers of religion cannot simply appropriate a sanitised version of empiricism because such a strategy embodies the assumption “that epistemology is strictly about justification of truth claims and not about the subjects who formulate the claims, nor about the context from which hypotheses about beliefs emerge.”²⁵ It also aims to eliminate all social values and interests from “the process and result of knowledge production”²⁶ when some values and interests – e.g., democracy-advancing values – might

²¹Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, 17; Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 146.

²²Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, 43.

²³Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, 43.

²⁴Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, 44.

²⁵Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, 75-76.

²⁶Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, 76.

lead to less partial and distorted beliefs than those which are justified by the most privileged members of society. These reasons for rejecting feminist empiricism form an important part of the background to the development of feminist poststructuralism and feminist standpoint epistemology and will therefore be discussed in connection with those epistemologies.

Feminist poststructuralism aims to identify masculine bias in the rationality and language which have been handed down to us, and to move beyond these in order to focus on the nature of female desire. In the field of feminist philosophy of religion, Jantzen's book *Becoming Divine* offers, perhaps, the most notable example of the use of poststructuralist methods, although Jantzen claims to adopt a 'hybrid' methodology, employing both 'Anglo-American' and 'continental' techniques.²⁷ For Jantzen, we should aim to deconstruct existing conceptions of the divine, but deconstruction is not demolition. Rather, it is a double movement, starting with the careful dismantling of particular structures of thought in order to reveal their underlying but unacknowledged assumptions, and then using that destabilization to create new possibilities.²⁸

Following the work of the philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray, she suggests that this means that both women and men should identify the respects in which masculine concepts of the divine have led to the oppression of womankind and aim, themselves, to "become divine."²⁹ Jantzen suggests that, in order to understand this, we must be aware of "the psychoanalytic background deriving from Freud (1856–1939) and mediated to French thought by Jacques Lacan (1901–1981)."³⁰

For Jantzen, one of their most important insights is that human subjectivity is not a given; human persons are not souls put into bodies by God. Rather, personhood is something which is achieved. We begin life with many conflicting desires, and some of these – especially those which do not conform to the

²⁷Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 4

²⁸Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 8.

²⁹Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 8.

³⁰Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 8.

norms of the “heavily masculinist and heterosexual”³¹ society must be repressed in order to achieve personhood. For Freud, as interpreted by Lacan, desires are repressed in accordance with “the Law or Name of the Father”³² – i.e., by entering into the language and social world of patriarchy. This is “the symbolic,”³³ which, in French thought, includes not only symbols but language, music, art and ritual – i.e., the conceptual patterns of civilisation. The symbolic is divided into discourses, of which religion is one.

Again following Irigaray, Jantzen claims that the religious discourse is “the linchpin of the western symbolic.” In order to achieve subjectivity there must be a ‘horizon’, “an ideal wholeness to which we aspire”³⁴ and the idea of God and the symbolic of religion have provided this horizon by giving us an ideal of perfection. To become human, we must aspire to become divine. But, even in a largely secular society, the western imaginary “is saturated with images, values and symbols derived from the Judaeo-Christian heritage,”³⁵ and this symbolic does not help women become “free, autonomous, and sovereign.”³⁶ It therefore needs to be deconstructed to make way for the construction of myths which support human flourishing. Jantzen argues that philosophers of religion should focus their attention not only on the justification of existing beliefs; they should consider the possibility that the function of philosophy of religion might also be “to project or imagine new religious ideas, a new God or gods as female, or as couple(s).”³⁷

Feminist standpoint epistemology draws on Marxist ideas, particularly in the work of György Lukács (1885–1971), and aims both to acknowledge the social situatedness of the very best beliefs which any culture has arrived at and to use the

³¹Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 9.

³²Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 9.

³³Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 9-10.

³⁴Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 12.

³⁵Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 14.

³⁶Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 14.

³⁷Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 18.

knowledge of one's historicity and social situatedness as a resource for generating less partial and less false beliefs.³⁸ Anderson is the most notable feminist philosopher of religion to employ the methods of feminist standpoint epistemology. She suggests that feminist philosophers of religion can try to gain less partial knowledge that can be obtained from their own, privileged standpoint by studying "the lives of those others such as racial and ethnic minorities who are encountered in their everyday world,"³⁹ and that they must then "be willing to be transformed by this knowledge."⁴⁰

Anderson's view is sometimes presented as contrasting with that of Jantzen; indeed, Jantzen herself describes Anderson's approach as "quite different from mine."⁴¹ For example, it is suggested that, while Jantzen largely rejects 'masculine' rationality, Anderson accepts the need for reasoned argument but recommends that our concept of rationality should be developed and expanded. As I suggested above, however, Jantzen, too, thinks that our understanding of rationality should be expanded. Thus, it may be that the difference between them in this respect lies largely in the imagery which is employed to make the point, and in the degree of emphasis which is placed upon it.

Anderson's use of feminist standpoint epistemology is often thought to justify a sharper contrast between her position and that of Jantzen; but Jantzen, too, adopted a form of standpoint epistemology in an article published only two years before the publication of *Becoming Divine*,⁴² in which she recommends a re-appropriation of standpoint theory, re-worked to take into account objections to earlier versions such as those of Nancy

³⁸Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, 44.

³⁹Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, 179.

⁴⁰Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, 79.

⁴¹Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 2.

⁴²Victoria S. Harrison, "Feminist Philosophy of Religion and the Problem of Epistemic Privilege," *The Heythrop Journal* 48 (2007), 685–96, 121

Hartsock and Sandra Harding.⁴³ Thus, she notes that, for example, there is no reason why the oppressed should have better knowledge than their oppressors⁴⁴ and suggests that the standpoint for which we should struggle is "one from which people work together towards new structures and relationships which are liberating for everyone."⁴⁵ Yet Anderson does not suggest that the perspective of the oppressed must be regarded as privileged, either, a point which, as Coakley notes, becomes clearer in work which followed *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*.⁴⁶

Thus it may be argued that Anderson's use of feminist standpoint epistemology is not, after all, a feature which distinguishes her view from that of Jantzen since both scholars require us to listen to those whose experience of life is different from our own, discern their genuine grievances, and work with them in order to identify and promote justice and human flourishing for all. Anderson follows, in particular, the work of bell hooks (1952-) in suggesting that, in attempting "to think from the lives of others,"⁴⁷ feminist philosophers of religion aim to identify 'yearning', an intense but rational desire for radical social change which will end domination and oppression. This is analogous to the desire to experience pleasure of various kinds, and may be discerned "in the devotional lives and beliefs of individual women and in marginalised communities."⁴⁸ Like Jantzen, however, Anderson suggests that women should "seek to become divine."⁴⁹

⁴³Harrison "Feminist Philosophy of Religion," 121.

⁴⁴Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 215.

⁴⁵Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 122

⁴⁶Sarah Coakley, "Feminism," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, eds., Philip L. Quinn, and Charles A. Taliaferro, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, 601–606, 515.

⁴⁷Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, 131.

⁴⁸Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, 174.

⁴⁹Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, 158.

5. Conclusion

New or expanded epistemologies of feminists like Anderson and Jantzen, though very strong in its critique of classical masculine predominant thoughts of philosophy of religion, are in need of further exploration in providing objective knowledge. They need to work for objectivity or universality of truth without compromising on diversity and subjectivity. Despite initial appearances to the contrary, the feminist philosophies of religion of Jantzen and Anderson have a number of significant features in common. Both claim that, while we cannot dispense with rational argument, our methods for attaining wisdom have traditionally focussed too much on abstract reasoning at the expense of practical reasoning, and they have been too narrowly conceived. Both endeavour to learn from the standpoints of those whose perspectives are different from their own. And both recommend the interpretation and/or construction of narratives as a further, and important, way of attaining the practical knowledge, which will enable women to work out how to 'become divine'. They reject the concept of God as classically conceived, on the grounds that it privileges attributes which have been traditionally associated with the masculine, and propose, instead, a concept of the divine which will function more effectively as an ideal for both women and men. Thus, the differences between the positions of these key contributors in the field of feminist Philosophy of Religion may be better characterised as differences of emphases rather than as differences of approaches.

The broader and perhaps more important question which remains, however, is whether it is possible to construct and engage with a philosophy of religion, which is, in any significant sense, distinctively feminist. In order to avoid by now much-discussed difficulty of identifying a specifically feminine experience of human life, both Jantzen and Anderson have moved towards the view that we should seek to attain a standpoint from which the needs of everyone may be taken into account. Although the main focus of feminist Philosophy of Religion thus far has been to examine the methods which the

discipline employs,⁵⁰ methods regarded as inappropriate are criticised because they lead to a concept of God which is unhelpful for women, and allegedly more appropriate methods aim to help women with their project of 'becoming divine'. While Anderson is clearly correct to claim that "We would not uncover the unrecognized wisdom of Eve, or Cassandra, by debating the abstract question of an eternal God's foreknowledge,"⁵¹ she does not thereby show that there is no value in considering the nature of divine knowledge.

It could, perhaps, be argued that a Philosophy of Religion might still be regarded as feminist if it maintains an emphasis on the inclusion of women. It might, however, mean not only being more open to the concepts of the divine which are not, even in a metaphorical sense, masculine⁵² but also becoming more aware of the application of apparently abstract arguments to the practical tasks and emotional engagement associated with birth and death and the many caring responsibilities which come in between.⁵³ Since these practical concerns increasingly are no longer the exclusive preserve of women, perhaps such a Philosophy of Religion would, after all, be better characterised as an inclusive Philosophy of religion.

An inclusive Philosophy of Religion accepts the need for reasoned argument whether be it masculine or feminine, and recommends that our concept of rationality should be developed and expanded. It recommends that the standpoint for which we should struggle is one from which people work together towards new structures and relationships which are liberating

⁵⁰Pamela Sue Anderson, "Correspondence with Grace Jantzen," *Feminist Theology* 25 (2000), 112–9, 112.

⁵¹Pamela Sue Anderson, "An Epistemological-Ethical Approach," in *Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Critical Readings*, eds., Pamela Sue Anderson and Beverley Clack, London: Routledge, 2004, 87–102, 91.

⁵²Nancy Frankenberry, "Feminist Approaches" in *Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, 13.

⁵³Pamela Sue Anderson, "Divinity, Incarnation and Intersubjectivity: On Ethical Formation and Spiritual Practice," *Philosophy Compass* 1, 3 (2006), 335–56, 340.

for everyone. Besides, an inclusive Philosophy of Religion has more scope of subjectivity and universality. An inclusive Philosophy of Religion might, more clearly than other philosophies of religion, ask philosophical questions about a variety of conceptions of the divine, both gendered and non-gendered, and ensure that its discussions never lose sight of the value of its arguments for the members of human societies in all their diversity, remaining ever alert to the possibility that there may be some whose concerns are poorly or unfairly represented.

Philosophy of Religion is essentially about the rationality of religious beliefs, and it should continue to be concerned with the rationality of religious beliefs but inclusively. An inclusive Philosophy of Religion has a crucial opportunity to supplement the epistemological framework of religious beliefs. The rationality needs to be deconstructed and its hegemony must be questioned and reformed. The approach must be inclusive for more critical and creative Philosophy of Religion, which takes into account experiences and concerns of women as well as men.