1

Toward a Feminist Unmasking of Feminism

1.1 "Postmodernism" and the Feminist Critique of Essentialism

During the last three decades, feminist theology has challenged biblical and Christian theological tradition regarding its so-called patriarchal features. In the process, it has produced a variety of alternative visions for the overcoming of patriarchy. From the beginning, feminist theology has sought to expose the patriarchal bias of traditional theology and to propose revisions which corresponded to the experience of women.

In its earlier stages, feminism attempted to provide an account of sexual difference, gender, woman's experience, and woman's situation that would be true for all women and to offer a perspective that would speak for women. In recent years, however, these attempts have come under criticism for the totalizing, essentialistic views of women they have promoted. The crisis is well summarized by Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson (1990) who show how these essentializing approaches to feminist concerns tended to attribute to all women characteristics of the racial, class, or cultural position of the feminist theorists.

Fraser's and Nicholson's thesis is that "postmodern" philosophy and feminism have complementary strengths and weaknesses. Postmodern philosophy, despite its allegedly "anemic" social criticism, offers a sophisticated critique of foundationalism

and essentialism. Feminism, on the other hand, while developing social criticism, is vulnerable to a naïve foundationalism and essentialism.

> It follows that an encounter between feminism and postmodernism will initially be a trading of criticisms. But there is no reason to suppose that this is where matters must end. In fact, each of these tendencies has much to learn from the other; each is in possession of valuable resources which can help remedy the deficiencies of the other. Thus, the ultimate stake of an encounter between feminism and postmodernism is the prospect of a perspective which integrates their respective strengths while eliminating their respective weaknesses. It is the prospect of a postmodernist feminism. (Fraser and Nicholson 1990, 20)

The critique of feminism as worked out by Fraser and Nicholson focuses on a kind of recurring essentialism effective, in their opinion, in feminist thought. Sexism, feminists agree, is a cross-cultural phenomenon. The cause of sexism, for most feminists, needs to be found in some universal factor in human life, something common to all cultures. In the various attempts to find a single cause of sexism across cultures, Fraser and Nicholson argue, Western presuppositions are implicitly applied to the situation and position of women in other cultures. The cost of such a procedure, in their view, is that other differences between women—for example, differences of race, class, culture—are repressed or, at best, treated as secondary to gender. The result of such an essentializing approach, Fraser and Nicholson maintain, alienates many women from feminism, or leads women who are excluded from such totalizing theories to develop approaches that clearly distinguish themselves from Western, white, middle-class feminism.

Fraser and Nicholson note that the theories developed by feminists in order to explain the cross-cultural causes of sexism present themselves as empirical studies. However, borrowing from Jean-François Lyotard, Fraser and Nicholson describe these theories as "quasi-metanarratives" in that

> They tacitly presuppose some commonly held but unwarranted and essentialist assumptions about the nature of human beings and the conditions for social life. In addition, they assume methods and concepts which are uninflected by temporality or historicity and which therefore function *de facto*

> as permanent, neutral matrices for inquiry. Such theories then, share some of the essentialist and ahistorical features of metanarratives: They are insufficiently attentive to historical and cultural diversity, and they falsely universalize features of the theorist's own era, society, culture, class, sexual orientation, and ethnic, or racial group. (1990, 27)

Surveying the development of feminist theory since the 1960s, Fraser and Nicholson identify a number of leading feminists who did construct theories which fall into the essentialist trap. These include Shulamith Firestone who, in responding to Marxist criticism, named gender conflict, rather than class and race, as the most basic form of human conflict; Michele Zimbalist Rosaldo, who argued that the oppression of women is based on a cross-cultural separation between a public, male sphere and a private, female sphere, a separation based on the fact that women have the responsibility for bearing and raising children; Nancy Chodorow, who located the roots of sexism in female mothering; and Carol Gilligan who, in responding to what she perceived as an androcentric bias in the model of moral development by Lawrence Kohlberg, advanced an alternative female model.

The difficulty of all essentializing theories, according to Fraser and Nicholson, is that these theories, in attempting to account for the cross-cultural pervasiveness of sexism, fail to do justice to the diversity of the forms of sexism. The result is that the experience and the culture of the theorist, through the essentializing features of the theory, is projected upon all women and all cultures. Thus, Rosaldo's theory of a cross-cultural separation of public and private spheres applies to all cultures what is true only of some:

> [Rosaldo's theory] posited the existence of a domestic sphere in all societies and thereby assumed that women's activities were basically similar in content and significance across cultures. . . . In effect, the theory falsely generalized to all societies an historically specific conjunction of properties: women's responsibility for early child rearing, women's tendency to spend more time in the geographical space of the home, women's lesser participation in the affairs of the community, a cultural ascription of triviality to domestic work, and a cultural ascription of inferiority to women. The theory thus failed to appreciate that, while each individual property may be true of many societies, the conjunction is not true of most. (1990, 29)

Fraser and Nicholson pay special attention, because of the extent of their influence, to the theories of Nancy Chodorow. For Chodorow, sexism has its roots in the gender identity fostered by female mothering: "Female mothering produces women whose deep sense of self is relational and men whose deep sense of self is not" (Fraser and Nicholson 1990, 29). This theory of gender identity, Fraser and Nicholson suggest, is based on three questionable premises:

> One is the psychoanalytic premise that everyone has a deep sense of self which is constituted in early childhood through one's interactions with one's primary parent and which remains relatively constant thereafter. Another is the premise that this deep self differs significantly for men and for women but is roughly similar among women, on the one hand, and among men, on the other hand, both across cultures and within cultures across lines of class, race, and ethnicity. The third premise is that this deep self colors everything one does; there are no actions, however trivial, which do not bear traces of one's masculine or feminine gender identity. (1990, 30)

Chodorow's theory accounted, according to Fraser and Nicholson, for the deep systemic nature of sexism. It did this, however, by projecting a modern Western understanding of private life, and the types of relationships typical of modern Western women, onto all cultures. The theory, then, has the effect of alienating women who do not share its cultural premises:

> While gender identity gives substance to the idea of sisterhood, it does so at the cost of repressing differences among sisters. Although the theory allows for some differences among women of different classes, races, sexual orientations, and ethnic groups, it construes these as subsidiary to more basic similarities. But it is precisely as a consequence of the request to understand such differences as secondary that many women have denied an allegiance to feminism. (1990, 31)

The problem raised by Fraser and Nicholson is the following: What feminists have called "patriarchy" has functioned to exclude and marginalize women. Feminism has attempted to respond to this exclusion by means of a critique of patriarchy which, of necessity, has had to pay close attention to the question of sexual difference. It has often dealt with the question of sexual difference by advancing theses which essentialized that

difference, by positing universal and essential characteristics to sexual difference in itself and/or to gender difference in its sociocultural manifestations. In so doing, Fraser and Nicholson suggest, feminism has reproduced the errors of patriarchy. Essentialist feminist theories have marginalized and excluded women by minimizing or trivializing the differences—ethnic, cultural, racial—between women themselves.

1.2 Feminist Theology, Essentialism, and Race According to Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite

The repetition of the errors of patriarchy by feminist theology is noted by Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite:

> Over the years it has been the genius of patriarchy to deal with difference by obliterating it, by projecting a white male face onto the definition of humanity. If white feminism replicates this process of obfuscation/suppression, it will never deal with patriarchy at its most fundamental level. (1989, 2)

Thistlethwaite makes this remark in her introduction to a study of the exclusion of black experience from the dominant North American white feminist theology. In her book, *Sex, Race and God*, Thistlethwaite shows how white feminist theology has implicitly projected the experience and social location of white middle-class women onto all women, how white feminist theologians have unconsciously universalized their own experience. The result, Thistlethwaite claims, is a racist theology that is unaware of the depths of its own racism.

White feminism has developed its analysis of the web that sexual difference weaves in all its personal, social, cultural, and ideological dimensions. It has avoided the analysis, or even the acknowledgment, of the question of differences *between* women. Indeed, Thistlethwaite claims, the social experience of white middle-class women predisposes them to avoid these differences: "As a white woman, socialized to harmony, my first impulse has been to try to smooth over the disharmony between us" (1989, 22). And yet, Thistlethwaite argues, differences between women—and especially, for her, *racial* difference—cannot be set aside if the exclusion of black women by white feminist theology is to be mended. Following Audre Lorde (1984), Thistlethwaite urges that the question of racial difference be addressed:

> Beginning from the differences in the lives of black and white women is not what leads to separation among women. What leads to separation and perhaps will ultimately lead to "war between us" is the obliteration of difference. "Assimilation within a solely western european herstory is not acceptable" (Lorde 1984, 69). There is no realm of metabeing directly accessible to the imagination; what is accessible is always fraught with class, race, and even sexual differences that, when obliterated in the name of true being, return as classism, racism, and sexism. (1989, 18)

Feminist theology is reacting to the exclusion experienced by women in patriarchal society. The difficulty, Thistlethwaite argues, is that in modern North American society, there are many forms of exclusions, and the sense of being marginalized is widespread. Yet, each exclusion is particular. The difficulty faced by feminism is that women have the tendency to universalize their own experience without acknowledging the many dimensions of marginalization in contemporary American society:

> In American society, the "that is not me" is usually "white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure." Those who stand outside one or more aspects of the norm (and, this spurred me to think, that is the majority experience: most people, even the supposedly most successful, doubt that they "measure up") focus only on their own exclusion and not on the ways in which they exclude. "By and large within the women's movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist." (1989, 19; quotation from Lorde, 1984, 116)

Among feminist theologians, Thistlethwaite is particularly critical of Mary Daly. Daly's feminist philosophy, Thistlethwaite argues, contains a covert and persistent racism. The difficulty is traced by Thistlethwaite to Daly's concern to focus her entire attention to the question of sexual difference in a way that excludes all other differences, particularly race:

> The limitation of Daly's work is that she does not apply her analysis of women's *(sic)* otherness to women *(sic)* themselves

> as a means of exploring the otherness of black women in white women's consciousness. She uncritically assumes that women-identified women have access to what she calls "true being," which is an undifferentiated fund for the truths of women's experience *(sic)*. (1989, 15)

The result of Daly's exclusive concern with gender difference, then, is a "dualistic, oppositional" ontology that repeats, in its own way, the excluding, alienating features of patriarchy:

> It is therefore ironic that Daly's views are, in fact, a sexual ontological dualism in which women's experience *(sic)* is undifferentiated access to "true being" and man's experience is undifferentiated alienation from true being. In practice this means that Daly is unable to turn her suspicions of the projections of patriarchy as a racist phenomenon on herself and her definition of experience. The person who gave white women a language with which to name their own experience has denied black women this same right because of her emphasis on the unitary character of "women's experience." This ironic reversal of Daly's intention illustrates Harding's point that any theories imported by feminists into their views carry with them unexamined freight—in this case the racial oneness of white-dominated Western society. Daly has failed to be sufficiently suspicious of the racial and class connotations of "true being." (1989, 17)

Like Fraser and Nicholson, Thistlethwaite makes a qualified appeal to "poststructuralist" analysis to assist in dealing with the essentialisms of feminist thinkers. Poststructuralism—here Thistlethwaite makes explicit reference to the work of Michel Foucault—provides resources to feminism that allow them to critique their own essentialism. Yet, poststructuralism must be used by feminists with care. Thistlethwaite is wary of the danger of an unrestrained relativism which she senses in poststructuralist method. While she sees the necessity of the kind of ideological unmasking of feminist universalisms and essentialisms, she is not ready to minimize the relevance of women's experience of violence.

> What concerns me is that as I employ poststructuralism to loosen the absolutist hold on "women's experience" that I have held as a white feminist (that is, as a dominant), I may be opening the door to a denial of the truths of my experience in

> the movement to end violence against women (as a nondominant). I find that postcritical theory does not always allow me to declare that violence against women is wrong in all circumstances. (1989, 14–15)

Thistlethwaite interprets her qualified use of poststructuralist theory, then, by agreeing with Sandra Harding's proposal in her article "The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory," (1988) that feminist theory needs to be "conceptually unstable," that feminism needs to understand that relativist theories have a different meaning for dominant classes than they do for the oppressed.

> The conceptual instability of white feminism means that some of what white women know from the truths of their experience as women needs to be kept in tension with the critical suspicions generated by poststructuralist theory. All experience is not an unmediated category, an immediate source of access to the "truths" of reality; yet the experiences of some white women have a high correspondence to the criterion of truth-in-action. This means that white feminist theory that takes account of the difference race makes needs both a poststructuralist critique of ideology and an affirmation of some of the truths of white women's experience. (1989, 15)

1.3 Foundationalism in Feminist Theology According to Sheila Davaney

Fraser and Nicholson, along with Thistlethwaite and Harding, point to the relevance of "postmodern" analysis to awaken feminist thinkers to the ways in which essentialism and foundationalism work against the proper aims of feminist theory. These feminist critics of feminism point to the alienating effect of essentialist and foundationalist thinking on women who are excluded by the totalizing thrust of essentialist thought. A somewhat different approach to feminist theory is taken by Sheila Davaney.

Davaney attempts to place contemporary feminist theology within the context of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment intellectual history. Drawing particularly from the work of Richard Rorty (1979) and Michel Foucault (1977), Davaney traces both the relationship and tension between the Enlightenment

ideal of reason and the emergence of historical consciousness. Davaney characterizes the Enlightenment as a movement seeking sure foundations of knowledge through the sovereignty of reason:

> Eschewing appeals to tradition and religious authority, Enlightenment thinkers proposed reason as the proper source of knowledge and adjudicator of truth claims. For them, reason was an autonomous means of understanding reality and discovering the structure of nature. Assumed to be substantially the same in all persons, reason offered a source of knowledge not tied to the privileged realms of revelation or ecclesiastical proclamation. The proper workings of reason were thought to provide several important steps to knowledge: universally valid criteria for assessing claims; objectivity, both in the sense of impartiality and adequacy to reality; and a means for the continued progress of humanity epitomized in the advances of the natural science. (Davaney 1987, 80)

The emergence of historical consciousness is characterized by Davaney as belonging to the Enlightenment; the search for rational certainty led to the development of historical methods. Use of these methods, paradoxically, had the effect of subverting the hegemony of reason:

> The foundations of what is now labeled as historical consciousness can be located within this age of rationality. A central example of this is the commencement of historical criticism in relation to biblical sources in the eighteenth century. During this period and later, many rationalists turned to historical analysis and criticism as an ally in their opposition to ecclesiastical authority and the appeal to revelation and tradition. . . . Furthermore, while reason and history were interpreted by many rationalists as allies, insofar as biblical criticism shared in the development of historical consciousness in general, it contributed not only to the undermining of traditional authorities, but also to the eventual historicizing of reason itself and thus to the erosion of reason's own claims to universality, neutrality, and objectivity. (1987, 81)

Historical consciousness has led to the recognition that all knowledge is perspectival, that "rationality" does not lift any claim to truth beyond the limits of particular historical perspectives. Yet, the rise of historical consciousness did not merely

lead to the qualification that all perspectives are historically relative. Under the impact of the thought of Marx and Nietzsche, disinterested objectivity as a central feature of rational knowledge was brought into question. Any perspective, along with its historical location, reflects the interests and power of those holding that perspective. The undermining of reason by historical consciousness leads, in the last analysis, according to Davaney, to the type of orientation suggested by Michel Foucault in *Power/Knowledge:*

> Foucault suggests that the search for a perspective beyond ideology, illusion, and error is fruitless and wrongheaded; indeed, it represents a kind of nostalgia, a false longing for innocence. Rather than truth being a pure, nondistorted reflection of "the way things really are," truth is that which in any given historical moment can make its will felt, can bring about its effects. The distinction between truth and falsehood is not a question of ontological validity but of which forms of discourse are *accepted* as truth, both by virtue of coercion and because of the possibilities such realms of discourse bring into being. (1987, 83)

For Davaney, the undermining of the authority of reason by historical consciousness has resulted in "the progressive loss of norms for evaluating claims to truth" (1987, 84). Yet, feminist theology, Davaney claims, has not adequately confronted such loss of foundations. In attempting to substantiate that claim, Davaney turns to an analysis of the work of three feminists: Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Rosemary Ruether, and Mary Daly. She attempts to show that despite the difference between the "reformist" approach of Schüssler Fiorenza and Ruether, on the one hand, and the "revolutionary" stance of Daly, on the other hand, all three share common assumptions "concerning the character of truth and the relation of reality and thought" (1987, 84), and these assumptions reveal a persistent metaphysical foundationalism.

Davaney notes how the historical relativity of all knowledge is acknowledged in the work of all three feminist thinkers. For Schüssler Fiorenza, both the biblical text and its present interpretation carry with them the perspectives and interests of a particular time and place. In the task of interpretation, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza explicitly acknowledges her own commitment to the struggle of women against patriarchal domination.

Rosemary Ruether, like Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "takes for granted that ideas, texts, and forms of human experience that have arisen within the confines of patriarchal history to some degree reflect the values of that socio-cultural context" (Davaney 1987, 89). Mary Daly, Davaney observes, shows "a sharp sense of the historical character of human world views, symbols, and belief systems" (1987, 89). Furthermore, Daly has interpreted the task of feminism as a constructive and imaginative one, a task that is described in the language of artistic creation. Thus, the work of all three feminists contains acknowledgments of the historicality and the interpretive nature of all thought.

As Davaney analyzes the work of Schüssler Fiorenza, Ruether, and Daly she finds a certain tension in their work. Each of them, Davaney maintains, attempts to avoid a nihilistic and relativistic conclusion. Feminist views are not simply alternative options to the patriarchal views they reject. In some way, Davaney maintains, each of the three feminist thinkers claim that the feminist perspective is truer to reality than the patriarchal perspectives it is called to replace.

In Schüssler Fiorenza, relativistic and nihilistic conclusions are avoided through emphasis on a "feminist scale of values" for answering the question of what contribution texts and interpretations make to support the struggle of women for liberation. The criterion of truth advocated by Schüssler Fiorenza is the extent to which a text or interpretation "allows for a vision of Christian women as historical and theological subjects or actors" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983, 30). What is the ground for this privileging of feminist values, Davaney asks?

> Why should this feminist scale of values be so normative? Is it because Schüssler Fiorenza believes this is the best human norm available at this historical point or simply that as a woman committed to women it is her stance? It is my contention that Schüssler Fiorenza assumes, though without explicit argument, that this feminist norm is not only historically compelling but also has ontological grounding; that is to say, it is also normative because it reflects divine reality and purposes and corresponds to "the way things are." In her work, Schüssler Fiorenza assumes the ontological reality of God and, further, that such divine reality is the source of the equalitarian possibilities she perceives in the Christian tradition. Alongside these assumptions, I suggest, is the implicit supposition that the principles or values that most closely correspond to

> this divine reality are the most normative and that it is precisely the feminist principle that fulfills this requirement. Hence the feminist principle is normative both because it reflects a commitment to women and because it corresponds to the nature and purposes of the divine. (1987, 88)

As in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Davaney finds in the work of Rosemary Ruether a similar denial of relativism and nihilism. In Ruether's distinction between true and false naming (Ruether 1983) feminist values are held to correspond more adequately to divine reality while the "misnaming" fostered by patriarchy is viewed as a distortion of reality.

> Thus it can be seen that the two representatives of the "reformist" perspective [Schüssler Fiorenza and Ruether] propose as a critical norm for evaluating truth claims the furtherance of women's full humanity, but that accompanying this norm and giving it ontological status is the assumption that such female becoming corresponds to and reflects divine purpose and will. Hence, visions supporting feminist aspirations are not simply compelling human views, conditioned and relative, but indeed "true" if not absolute in that they bear the mark of divine validation and reflect the "true nature of things." (Davaney 1987, 89)

In spite of the striking difference between Schüssler Fiorenza and Ruether, on the one hand, and Mary Daly's "revolutionary" feminism on the other, Davaney finds that Daly, even more than Schüssler Fiorenza and Ruether, betrays her own historical consciousness and ideological suspicion by falling back to a metaphysical legitimation of her feminism. Daly's dualistic split between women's and men's experience entails the assertion of the veracity of the former and the invalidity of the latter. Feminine experience and perspectives are not simply alternatives to male interpretations of reality; there is a correspondence between feminist interpretation and reality itself. Thus, Davaney suggests,

> Daly proposes her own correspondence theory of truth, with truth residing in the dynamic correspondence between the creative, life-loving minds of "musing women" and the "intelligible structures of reality" as women seek to live out their commitment to themselves, each other, and the earth. (1987, 90)

The corollary, in Daly, to the correspondence of feminist interpretation and reality is the denial of any such correspondence to reality in masculine interpretation:

> Finally, Daly stresses this notion of correspondence between radical feminist consciousness and Ontological Reality by *denying* that such a correspondence exists between male consciousness and Elemental Being. Throughout her work, Daly continuously refers to male visions, symbols, and beliefs as lies, deceptions, reversals, false perceptions, and fabrications. . . . Because they correspond to, reflect, and participate in nonbeing they are false in relation to true Be-ing, to Ontological Reality, and hence can make no claim to validity, truth, or certitude. (1987, 91)

In her analysis of Schüssler Fiorenza, Ruether and Daly, then, Davaney identifies a tension, or even contradiction, between their acknowledgment of the historicity, and therefore relativity of truth, on the one hand, and a certain metaphysical foundationalism on the other. Her article emphasizes and focuses on the importance, for feminism, of the interpretive nature of all knowledge. Why is this important for feminist theology? What is at stake in the question of whether there is a correspondence between feminist interpretation and reality, or whether feminism offers simply one interpretation among many?

For Davaney, a question of consistency, of epistemology, is at stake here. What she shows, she suggests, is that

> Feminist theologians, across the theological spectrum, continue to assume or make claims about the nature of truth and the character of ultimate reality, often without clear argumentation concerning the grounds upon which these assertions are based. Further, I would argue, many of these assumptions are in tension, if not outright contradiction, with the insights concerning the historicity of human experience and thought with which feminists have so strongly aligned themselves. That is to say, while on an explicit level these feminist theologians have embraced the canons of historical consciousness as a means of unmasking patriarchal claims to truth and validity, on another, often implicit level, they have continued to use the language of ontology and metaphysics, long in dispute in other arenas, as a way of contributing to the validity of the feminist vision. (1987, 91-92)

Davaney's proposal for feminist theology is to give up any claim to ontological privilege, or even exclusivism, for feminist perspectives. Instead, feminism should argue pragmatically and appeal to "the pragmatic grounds of what kind of existence these visions permitted or inhibited" (1987, 93). Along with the dismissal of metaphysical claims, feminist theology should give up any pretense that its symbols of the divine have any referential character.

> Instead, religious symbols would be interpreted, along with the larger world views or visions that they center, as solely the productions of human imagination and the projection of human values and desires. Hence, in place of a referential theory of religious symbolism, a revitalized projection theory would be developed. (1987, 93)

Davaney adds:

> The alternative suggested here will need to argue successfully that grounds for adjudication can be discerned within the pragmatic and projectionist approach if its claims for the normativity of feminist visions will not be interpreted as special pleading or ineffective attacks on the prevailing position of the powerful. (1987, 93-94)

In other words, religious symbols also have to be explained pragmatically in the first place, not semantically. However the question remains whether such a linguistic-pragmatic approach—for pragmatism qua utilitarianism has clearly nothing to do here!—should cope, or even be identified, with projection theory, albeit "revitalized." The parameters of such "revitalization" do remain all the more vague and are left by Davaney, to a great extent, in the dark.

For Davaney, feminists have tended to identify as "nihilistic relativism" the means used by those who have the power to coerce, to impose by sheer power their own interpretation as the truth. This is one of the factors that have led feminist theologians to assert the greater ontological validity of feminist perspectives.

1.4 Rebecca Chopp's Response to Davaney

Davaney's critique of what may be called a "residual metaphysical realism" in feminist theology has elicited a number of responses, among them articles by Rebecca Chopp and Morny Joy.

Chopp prefaces her critique of Davaney by recalling that feminist theology, following the orientation suggested by Karl Marx's famous eleventh thesis on Ludwig Feuerbach, is primarily concerned with change and transformation:

> Feminist theology, like many other forms of liberation theology, claims not merely to understand or "view" the world, but to try to change it, to participate in the intentional transformation of present reality. Theory, at least if this prior claim is credible, is not about viewing or seeing or interpreting, but about change, emancipation and transformation. (Chopp 1995, 47)

If transformation and change is the goal of theory in feminist theology, Chopp suggests that the epistemological and logical criteria used by Davaney are misplaced. By concentrating on logical and epistemological issues, Chopp argues, Davaney emphasizes the foundationalist elements in Schüssler Fiorenza, Ruether, and Daly at the expense of ignoring the transformationalist nature of their work. It is not that Davaney is wrong, Chopp suggests; it is, rather, that her approach obscures something central to the enterprise of feminist theology. In particular, Davaney's analysis is inadequate on three counts:

> First of all, though Davaney invokes Foucault and his notion of "regimes of truth," it is important to observe immediately that Davaney reads the thinkers she discusses not in terms of the movements they represent or broader cultural issues, but simply within their isolated texts. Secondly, though Davaney has created a kind of bifocal modern/counter modern epistemology, it is the focus on the modern which she is most concerned with in her critiques. She only hints at the critique of patriarchy that Ruether and Schüssler Fiorenza have so carefully constructed through the years, and she really doesn't explicate Daly's deconstructive readings of the Western philosophical tradition. Thirdly, what keeps cropping up in Davaney's argument, and what I find far more interesting and important than she does, are all the textual clues these thinkers give about the claims of transformation and the nature of reality as itself always transformable. (1995, 51)

While Chopp claims to be in "almost total agreement" with Davaney in her analysis of Daly, she criticizes Davaney for her treatment of Ruether and Schüssler Fiorenza. With reference to Ruether, Chopp repeats the interpretation that she had proposed

in 1989 in her book *The Power to Speak*. Chopp notes that Ruether's book, *Sexism and God-Talk* (1983a), works out a standard humanistic/modern argument introduced and followed by imaginative pieces: a midrash on the *kenosis* of God at the beginning of the book and an "icon of the divine" at the end (see chap. 6, 6.5). The result is that the imaginative pieces subvert the "modern ontological type argument" of the central parts of the book:

> Ruether's *Sexism and God-Talk*, when read as a whole, uses modern theological argument to correct the order and then, through two quite different textual genres, calls into question the tools of that correction. After all, it is difficult simply to leap out of such pervasive arguments as ontology in modern theology. Rather, one must, or so it seems in Ruether's text, stretch and twist the ontology, until it starts to give way to some new, creative spaces. (1995, 50)

According to Chopp, Davaney reads a metaphysical realism into Schüssler Fiorenza's work and credits her with an "implicit" ontology never to be found explicitly. Chopp points out Davaney's lack of evidence for making this charge. Rather, Chopp suggests, Schüssler Fiorenza and Davaney are closer than Davaney would admit:

> I have read Fiorenza in a different way, as assuming a kind of "pragmatist" position, quite similar to Davaney's own constructive quest. Schüssler Fiorenza, in my reading, is fundamentally concerned with envisionment and imagination, with the way things can be rather than the way things are in some relativized ontological fashion. (1995, 49)

The point Chopp wishes to make is this: Davaney uses logical/epistemological categories to interpret feminist theology. These categories fail to do justice to what feminist theology is really about. In the first place, following a remark by her teacher, Langdon Gilkey, Chopp maintains that, as a matter of fact, everyone has an implicit metaphysics, an understanding of the way things are. To uncover this implicit metaphysics in any thinker or group of thinkers is not particularly instructive (pp. 47–48). Second, if we understand feminist theology as primarily concerned with transformation, we will understand feminist theology as a kind of critical theory. Third, and as a kind of

critical theory, the task of feminist theology can be elucidated through categories drawn from the pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce.

Following David Kelsey's analysis (1992), Chopp locates feminist theology not as a form of *theoria* (Kelsey's second category) but as critical theory or praxis (Kelsey's fourth category). Therefore, feminist theology, according to Chopp, is not primarily concerned, as would be the case if it were a form of *theoria*, with "scientific knowledge," with explaining reality; it is concerned, as critical theory is, not just with the description of present reality, but with the future:

> A critical theory uses theoretical discourse to name the struggles of the day and to identify future possibilities. Critical theories, like the emancipatory and progressive movements out of which they arise, are oriented not to the past, but to the future. Critical theories are those theories which address the relation amongst interest, power and knowledge and thus understand knowledge as historical. (1995, 53)

The transformative action of critical theory involves both an unmasking of established interpretations of reality and the imaginative construction of new emancipatory possibilities:

> A critical theory, then, is the operation of knowledge for the deliberation of beliefs and activities within a particular community. As such, critical theories seek to uncover illusions, such as the socially constructed belief that it is natural for men to be superior to women. To state it even more strongly critical theories uncover how discourses construct regimes of domination, how the discourse of men's "natural" superiority and of women's "natural" inferiority has functioned to justify the oppression, including the physical battering and rape, of women. Critical theory takes as its departure point the reality of oppression and suffering in society and attempts both to display the origin, function and relations of structures that cause such oppression and also to anticipate possibilities for change. Willing to draw upon different theoretical and practical resources, critical theorists address particular historical problems. (1995, 53–54)

Locating feminist theology as critical theory rather than as *theoria* does not fully address the concern raised by Sheila Davaney. To identify the task of feminist theology with transformation does

not solve the question of the relation of feminist theory to metaphysical descriptions of reality. How are we to construe the place of "reality" in feminist theology as critical theory?

In order to address that question, Chopp turns to the pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce. For Peirce, as Chopp interprets him, knowledge

> is contextual and always in process of debate, critique, change and transformation. The knower is not one caught between the pure position of foundations and relativism, but a participant in the broader social process of inquiry and deliberation about the best ways to achieve the best goals of the community. Epistemology, in other words, is recentered with the social process of inquiry and signification. (1995, 60)

Peirce's epistemology helps to elucidate how it is that critical theory, and specifically feminist theology, relates itself to "reality." Present reality is of concern to feminist theology insofar as it offers possibilities for transformation and the creation of future reality:

> Using Peirce's categories we can suggest that what goes on in any critical theory is a kind of tracing out of the present and future signification of reality. It is a prospective activity out of the conditional possibilities, turning attention to what is in the present: the possibilities of future anticipation. Feminist theology thus begins within its particular context, interpreting and analyzing and attempting to pursue new discourses; and our discourses trace the possibilities, the "would be's" of transformation. (1995, 61)

This interest in the present for the sake of the future has been described by Chopp in an earlier article "Feminism's Theological Pragmatics" (Chopp 1987), as "social naturalism." Social naturalism, Chopp says, "incorporates both the way feminists create reality and the way reality ought to be named or, metaphysically speaking, a vision that weaves together both is and ought, fact and value" (Chopp 1987, 252). The term "naturalism" expresses the view that human beings need to be understood in close connection with their environment. The term "social" calls attention to the fact that the environment includes the historical, linguistic, and cultural as well as the biological environment. The view of reality expressed in social

naturalism, according to Chopp, involves mutuality, corporeality, and anticipatory freedom. Mutuality is the view that human beings exist in relationship with each other, with nature, and with God; corporeality means not only that human beings are their bodies, but that the separation of nature and history, common in traditional theology, must be rejected; anticipatory freedom is the capacity to anticipate life, the freedom not to be limited by present reality but to move toward what can be. It is the "ability and gift" in which "women take responsibility for their future and for the future of the world" (1987, 255).

Social naturalism, according to Chopp, does imply universal claims. Rooted in particular historical experience, it provides a vision of reality that is both descriptive and normative. "It argues that its universal claims are more true and more coherent to human experience than, for instance, the universal claims made in theology proper" (1987, 256).

A pragmatic approach for Chopp, unlike Davaney, does not mean giving up metaphysical claims. For Chopp, the nihilism that seems to be involved in Davaney's rejection of metaphysical claims does not commend itself to feminism. While Chopp and Davaney agree on the necessity of a pragmatic feminism, for Chopp it is the transformative dimension of feminist theology that must be understood as the sine qua non of the feminist enterprise. Such a transformation takes place not only through deconstructing and unmasking the metaphysics of patriarchy, but also by proposing a metaphysics, a new, less oppressive order of things.

1.5 Morny Joy's Response to Davaney

Rebecca Chopp's discomfort with the logical/epistemological nature of Davaney's critique of foundationalism in feminist theology is expressed by Morny Joy (1995), albeit from a distinctly different perspective. For Joy, theoretical debates among feminists concerning foundationalism and essentialism are counter-productive: they do not contribute to the advancement of the feminist cause. While Davaney's argument helps to focus the issue of how feminism should proceed, her nihilism does not commend itself to Joy as a productive option for feminist theology. Joy formulates the dilemma of feminism as follows:

> How are women today to understand themselves and establish a secure basis from which to take constructive action against past and present injustices? And how to revitalize God imagery and language? Should women necessarily subscribe to the principles of whatever is the fashionable theoretical postulate? Should they automatically follow the dictates of male-established norms of reflection, be they metaphysical, empirical or postmodern? How are women to stake their claims and avoid the pitfalls of relativism or essentialism? (Joy 1995, 130)

In "God and Gender," Joy responds to this dilemma by advocating a hermeneutical approach: hermeneutics suggests that foundationalist and essentialist approaches on the one hand, and relativistic and nihilistic approaches on the other, need not be understood as mutually exclusive; they can coexist. By ignoring the hermeneutics present in the work of Schüssler Fiorenza and Rosemary Ruether, Davaney misrepresents the status of "women's experience" in their thought. For the dissonance between women's experience and patriarchal views of reality is the starting point for a deconstructive "hermeneutic of suspicion" (Paul Ricoeur). "This is not a naïve adoption of experience *tout court*, but a balanced awareness that any experience is always historically conditioned" (1995, 131). Joy rejects Davaney's conclusion that Schüssler Fiorenza and Ruether are asserting metaphysical absolutes:

> It is obvious that neither Ruether nor Fiorenza believes there is an essential form of womanhood, but that behaviour is a result of cultural and historical circumstances. Though they both discuss women's experience and women's interpretations of scripture, they are not absolutizing these specific stances. They make very clear the respective positions on which they stand, aware that these will be subject to modification with the passage of time and further critique. (1995, 132)

Appeals to women's experience are not forms of essentialism; they belong to a hermeneutical circle:

> Within the framework of a feminist hermeneutic, a hermeneutic circle is established which incorporates our present self-understanding in a way that overcomes the subject/object split. Each movement of recovery of the past leads to a new discovery of who we are and what we can be; this recuperation in turn leads to a larger base from which to make richer