Laval théologique et philosophique

Feminism and Pluralism in Contemporary Theology

Mary Ann Stenger

Volume 46, numéro 3, octobre 1990

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/400553ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/400553ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)
1703-8804 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Stenger, M. A. (1990). Feminism and Pluralism in Contemporary Theology. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, *46*(3), 291–305. https://doi.org/10.7202/400553ar

Laval théologique et philosophique, 46, 3 (octobre 1990)

FEMINISM AND PLURALISM IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

Mary Ann STENGER

RÉSUMÉ. — Tant la critique féministe que la critique pluraliste incitent la théologie chrétienne à reconnaître la relativité de ses concepts et de ses symboles, de même que les effets négatifs de ses structures impliquant domination et exclusivisme. Sont considérées plus particulièrement ici les critiques de ces nouvelles théologies portant sur la question de l'absoluité et de la relativité, de même que sur la question de l'usage des expressions philosophiques vs les expressions théologiques. On soutient qu'il existe une tension irréductible entre d'une part l'absoluité de Dieu et d'autre part la relation plus personnelle avec Dieu, qui devrait être reconnue et maintenue tant par les féministes que par les pluralistes.

SUMMARY. — Both the feminist critique and the pluralist critique challenge Christian theology to recognize the relativity of its concepts and symbols and the negative effects of its dominating, exclusive structures. These critiques and new theologies are analysed in relationship to the issues of absoluteness and relativity and philosophical vs theological expressions. It is argued that there is an unresolveable tension between the absoluteness of God and the more personal relationship with God that should be addressed and maintained by both feminists and pluralists.

The feminist critique and the cross-cultural pluralist critique of Christian theology are often treated in different areas of the academy, by different scholars with different agendas. As one who participates in both critiques, I offer this essay as an attempt to bring together these two approaches for contemporary theology. I shall first focus on criticisms and issues common to both critiques and then move to a critical discussion of some recent theological and philosophical efforts to construct symbols inclusive of women and non-Christians. Finally, some constructive possibilities for future theological convergence on these issues will be explored.

I. CRITICAL THEOLOGICAL ISSUES ARISING FROM FEMINISM AND PLURALISM

1. *General Theological Issues*

Both the feminist and pluralist critiques of Christian theology share several important issues: a) relativizing theological concepts and symbols; b) challenging claims of universal religious truth (across history and across cultures); and c) criticizing dominating, exclusive structures.

a) *Relativizing Theology*

Feminist scholars have argued that many theological ideas and symbols perpetuate the values of patriarchal cultures which have dominated western Christian history. Analyses of biblical materials which show a reaction against matriarchal religion in the Hebrew Bible[1] or the growing influence of patriarchal household codes in the New Testament[2] support the view that much of our Christian theology is relative to its cultures rather than unchanging and eternally true. Analyses of theological language which suggest that the overwhelming patriarchal character is idolatrous[3] lead to arguments that theological language has absolutized particular cultural forms.

Past historians have argued for historical development of theology as have sociological scholars argued for cultural development of theology. But feminist scholarship is calling us to recognize not only the culturally and historically relative character of theology in general but also its tie to the dominant group within those cultures, perpetuating patriarchy through many cultures and historical periods. Its lasting power does not make it absolute but rather more difficult to change. A first step toward reform is to recognize that patriarchal theology is relative to time, culture, and most importantly God. If God alone is absolute, then all theological expression, as human and finite, is subject to change and correction in relationship to God.

Scholars of religious pluralism look at the global religious context and point out the diversity of understandings of the ultimate. They see religious traditions arising within and through cultures as well as adapting to diverse cultures as they spread to different parts of the world. Some thinkers, such as John Hick or Wilfred Cantwell Smith, have suggested that all of the diverse religious expressions are pointing toward one absolute transcendent reality with all religious expression relative to particular peoples and cultures.

Both the feminist and pluralist critiques, then, have broadened earlier understandings of historical and cultural relativity by focussing on aspects that had been accepted

1. For example, see J.A. PHILLIPS, *Eve ; The History of An Idea. San Francisco*, Harper and Row, 1984, p. 3 ff.
2. See Elisabeth SCHUSSLER FIORENZA, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York, Crossroad, 1983, p. 251 ff.
3. See Rosemary RADFORD RUETHER, *Sexism and God-Talk*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1983, pp. 66-67; Sallie MCFAGUE, *Models of God*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1987, p. ix; or Mary Ann STENGER, "Male Over Female or Female Over Male: A Critique of Idolatry", *Soundings*, LXIX, 4 (Winter, 1986), pp. 464-478.

as normative across history and cultures: patriarchal concepts and symbols and the absoluteness of Christian truth. This recognition allows for ongoing reform and development but also raises the issue of any absolute ground or direction for theological reflection.

b) *Challenging Claims of Universal Religious Truth*

Related to the awareness of the relativity of theological expression is the critique of universal religious truth claims. Traditionally, Christian theology has claimed that it expresses basic truths that are universal, i.e. true for all people. But as we now recognize, often these truths are couched in patriarchal concepts and symbols which ignore women's experience or subordinate it to men's experience. To claim that all people need to recognize the basic christian truths expressed in patriarchal form is to ask all people (including women, oppressed peoples, and non-Christians) to accept the truths and values of a predominantly western, white, male elite.

This issue becomes more acute when looked at from the perspective of the plurality of religious traditions. What does the Christian claim mean over against Buddhist or Muslim truth claims? In the past, the claim of universal truth was used to bolster missionary efforts around the world. Such efforts assumed that other religious traditions were false or at least inferior. Studies have suggested that it was not only religious understanding but also cultural biases which were passed on by the missionaries[4]. Christian missions sometimes participated in a form of imperialism, parallel to the political imperialism of their countries of origin.

But if religious truth is relative to particular peoples, cultures, and history, what does such an understanding do for our desire for universal truth? Does it mean that there is no universal truth, only truth for me?

c) *Criticizing Dominating, Exclusive Structures*

Both feminism and pluralism have been critical of exclusive, dominating structures and the theological concepts and symbols which support such structures. The focus of each critique differs, with feminism focussing on male/female power structures and pluralism concentrating on Christian/non-Christian relationships.

1) Feminist Critique

In the feminist critique, the issue is not only who has the power and how it is used but how that power is supported by theology. It is fairly obvious that men dominate the decision-making and public roles in most Christian church structures. But the ongoing legitimation of those structures by theological ideas and language is a more far-reaching and crucial issue. Even if women are granted the right to be ministers and priests, that will not necessarily change the basic patriarchal character of church structures or of theology. For example, imaging God as Father or King emphasizes a

4. See brief discussion of this topic by Rosemary RADFORD RUETHER in "Feminism and Jewish-Christian Dialogue", *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, ed. John Hick and Paul Knitter, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis, 1987, p. 138.

powerful male ruler asserting power over others, dominating his children and subjects. The theological model itself implies an inferior status for humans but has also been used to justify an even more subordinate status for females.

Many feminists have been critical of theological models which support a hierarchy with elite males dominating others. Mary Daly speaks of the "sexual caste system", supported by exclusively male symbolism for God, his divine incarnation in a male, and the patriarchal relationship of man and God[5]. Rosemary Ruether sees such models as leaving women, children and servants to be ruled over by the male members of the ruling class[6]. Sallie McFague's critique points out patriarchy, imperialism, and triumphalism in traditional metaphors for God[7]. But both Ruether and McFague see positive value in the Christian story because it holds the possibility of prophetic protest and critique.

Across as well as within religious traditions, women can share their experiences of living under religiously supported patriarchy. The experience of limited power in decision-making, minimal leadership opportunities, and few public roles can be found in religious traditions around the world. Many have had their concerns trivialized by the leaders of their religious traditions. Or their traditions have portrayed them as irrational, ignorant, tempting, passive, etc. Many also have had to overcome their internalization of the virtues of humility, obedience, faith and limitless courage after recognizing that some males mouth the virtues but then capture the prizes of authority, power and prestige. Such experiences lead women to demand justice and to reject the hierarchical, oppressive structures which serve a few at the expense of many.

Recognizing that theology influences people's conceptions of self, others, and the world, feminists search for symbols which express mutuality and complementarity rather than hierarchy, liberation and self-realization rather than domination, and inclusivity and interdependence rather than exclusivity. Balance in relationships not only among peoples but also with all creatures and things in our world has been called for as necessary for our physical, moral and religious future.

In summary, the feminist critique of dominating, exclusive structures focusses on the connections between power, language, self-understanding and theology.

2) Religious Pluralism

The conviction that non-Christians follow false or inferior traditions and need to be converted to Christianity also has led to dominating, exclusive structures. As with feminism, these structures involve issues of power, language, and unjust social structures legitimated by theology.

Whether intended or not, the understanding of Christ as unique savior was transmuted into the view of Christianity as superior to other religious traditions. From that assumed base of superiority, Christians looked down on people from other religious

5. Mary DALY, *Beyond God the Father*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1973, p. 4. (Further references will be in the form of BGF, page number).

6. Rosemary RADFORD RUETHER, *Sexism and God-Talk*, p. 53.

7. Sallie MCFAGUE, *Models of God*, p. ix.

traditions — seeing their beliefs and practices as pagan, idolatrous, unethical, and false. They were to be converted to Christianity, with their present religious beliefs and practices not taken very seriously.

In historical and often political and social connection with national imperialism, religious imperialism was the means for spreading Christianity. This meant that the people with political and social power were generally Christians while the people ruled over were mostly non-Christians (until converted). To what extent in the minds of Christians from ruling countries did their belief in the superiority of Christianity become a legitimation of the political and social imperialism?

Inter-religious dialogue and the study of world religions can easily lead to the recognition that Christian God-language is narrow and exclusive. But inter-religious dialogue can also make some non-Christians nervous about hidden agendas. Is inter-religious dialogue just a newly fashioned means of Western and often Christian imperialism? For example, it is possible that the word "God" can be understood universally enough to encompass ultimate nothingness. But that is not the usual understanding of the term "God", and non-Christians are rightfully wary of agreeing that their understanding of God is the same as their Christian dialogue partner's God.

Both the feminist and pluralist critiques, then, share a recognition that traditional Christian God-language brings much social and historical baggage with it, baggage which has been associated with patriarchal domination and imperialist missionary efforts. The power of language in defining and structuring thinking and reality cannot be ignored. To the extent that traditional God-language has devalued females, non-whites, and non-christians, it needs thorough re-working. Let us turn now to specific critiques of the concept of God and the understanding of Christ.

2. *Naming God*

One attempt to avoid patriarchal and imperialist language about God is to use more abstract symbols for God, such as Paul Tillich's ground of being or being-itself or Wilfred Cantwell Smith's the transcendent or John Hick's the Real. But some feminist theologians have been wary of abstractions since they may hide the underlying androcentric and patriarchal assumptions[8]. Abstractions have been more popular with philosophers of religion who are interested in expressing a basic reality underlying all religious traditions. But one can also ask whether such abstractions hide imperialist, western assumptions. It may be possible to have a philosophically neutral concept for ultimacy, but when it is filled out with theological content, it reflects more specific cultural and personal understandings.

Feminists have argued that traditional language does not do justice to the diversity of symbols within Scriptures and tradition, or to the present recognition of equality of males and females, or to a more balanced relationship of humans and their world. Pluralists call for metaphors which do justice to our global situation, to our affirmation

8. For examples, see Rosemary RADFORD RUETHER, *Sexism and God-Talk*, p. 67; or Sallie MCFAGUE, *Models of God*, p. xi.

of all persons, and to a non-imperial understanding which respects and listens to diverse religious traditions. With such demands, our contemporary theology cannot just use new language to restate or cover over old structures. Rather, we must imagine new metaphors which avoid the pitfalls of idolatry, patriarchy, exclusivism, and imperialism.

3. *The Christ*

In relation to Jesus as the Christ, feminists have been critical of the idolatry of the maleness of Jesus. While other finite characteristics of Jesus, such as his Jewishness or his first century worldview, are seen as incidental to his being born a finite human, the fact that he was a male is often elevated to absolute status. Perhaps the most public example of this is the Roman Catholic declaration that women cannot be ordained to be priests because as women they cannot image Christ[9].

Feminists have also criticized the traditional understanding of sin and redemption. The view of sin as disobedience to God or breach with God that cannot be overcome by further human action is connected with understanding salvation as coming through the atoning death of a divine-human savior[10]. At times, this view of sin focussed on Eve as the cause of all evil, leaving women with double guilt and subordinate to men except for Mary. This theology also includes a "once-for-all-time" understanding of original sin and of atonement through Jesus Christ.

Within the pluralist critique, several thinkers have recognized the exclusivism and narrowness of the claim that there is saving power in Jesus Christ alone. Some have opposed theocentrism to Christocentrism (Hick and Smith) as a means of opening Christian Theology to non-Christian religious traditions. Such a move may allow for the absoluteness of Christ within Christianity but make Christ relative to other means of salvation in other religious traditions. The claim of Jesus Christ as the center of history is seen as relative to particular cultures and histories.

Yet another approach to Christ in relation to the plurality of religious traditions has been to universalize the understanding of Christ. Operating with a Logos Christology, for example, can allow for truth and salvation in other manifestations of the Logos. Or, one can understand Christ as universal saving power; wherever there is saving power or religious truth, Christ is present (Barth/Tillich). These attempts to make Christ as universal as God or ultimacy are certainly broadening for Christian theology, but they may not be as easily workable or acceptable outside of Christianity. Even if unintended, the effort to include all saving realities under Christ smacks of a more subtle form of Christian imperialism. (I am not suggesting that such attempts be abandoned. Not only do they have value within the tradition, but they could have value in inter-religious dialogue with people who were proposing similar universalizing understandings within their own traditions — such as a universal understanding of

9. The Vatican Declaration: "Women in the Ministerial Priesthood", *Origins* 6:33 (1976).

10. RADFORD RUETHER, *Womanguides*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1985, p. 84.

the Buddha or the Hindu view of all gods, goddesses, and saviors as manifestations of Brahman.)

As with the understanding of God, these criticisms of traditional exclusivist understandings of Christ lead to the demand for new theological formulations of Christology.

II. CRITIQUE OF RECENT CONSTRUCTIVE EFFORTS

Recent constructive efforts to develop more inclusive understandings of God and Christ will now be critically compared and reviewed in relation to their inclusiveness, their contribution to inter-religious dialogue which includes feminists, and their avoiding of idolatries and their related injustices.

1. *Abstract Symbols for God*

One attempt to develop a more inclusive understanding of God is to propose an abstract symbol to express the underlying ultimate reality. The abstract character of the symbol at least appears to overcome the traditional patriarchy and Christian imperialism. In her early book, *Beyond God the Father*, Mary Daly reformulates some of Tillich's theological concepts in relation to women's experience. Tillich's "power of being" underlying all forms of courage, in Daly's philosophy, becomes God as unfolding Verb or Be-ing who is the source of women's experience of courage, transcendence, and hope[11].

In relation to the plurality of religions, John Hick proposes understanding the religious universe in terms of one divine Reality, around which revolve several diverse worlds of faith[12]. Hick's proposal is intended to relativize particular religious truth claims and dilute claims of religious absoluteness or superiority, while still allowing for truth within the various faith traditions. His earliest discussions of the ultimate in religious traditions used the word "God" while more recent discussion uses "divine Reality" or "the Real", a less theistic description. Hick recognized that the attempt to use "God" as both personal and non-personal could be misunderstood, and therefore he switched to "the Real" as a less problematic term[13]. In order to be more open to religious truth cross-culturally, Hick tried to be less definite about the ultimate and to use a less western, Christian term.

Although Wilfred Cantwell Smith's understanding of God is strongly personal, with God revealing Himself to humans everywhere, Smith does recognize that our global context may lead us to speak more generically about God[14]. As an alternative

---

11. See Mary DALY, *Beyond God the Father*, pp. 33-40. Also see my discussion of Daly and Tillich, "A critical Analysis of the Influence of Paul Tillich on Mary Daly's Feminist Theology", *Encounter* XLIII (Summer, 1982), pp. 219-238.

12. John HICK, "Religious Pluralism and Absolute Claims", *Religious Pluralism*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1984, p. 20.

13. HICK, "The Theology of Religious Pluralism", *Theology*, LXXXVI (September, 1983), p. 336.

14. Wilfred Cantwell SMITH, *Towards a World Theology*. Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1981, p. 181.

to "God", he suggests "transcendence" which can be open to both genders and to a variety of religious understandings[15]. "God" can be understood as a truth-reality transcending conception and yet conceivable as that to which human religious history has responded[16].

But as discussed earlier, many thinkers have been quite critical of the move to such abstractions. Not only can abstractions hide patriarchal and imperialist assumptions but such terms suggest that we can adopt a standpoint outside of our own particular traditions. Gordon Kaufman argues that we cannot find a universally human position through which we can understand or dialogue with all religious traditions. All of our positions are particular positions, connected to a particular historical, social setting and specific religious beliefs and practices[17]. Similarly, Langdon Gilkey argues that one cannot philosophically transcend the particularities of one's tradition and find a universal, neutral standpoint[18].

These critiques of abstractions are well-taken, but not all abstractions should be rejected. It may be especially helpful to develop neutral terms to express a basic category of religious experience, with the understanding that all religious traditions fill in that category according to their own experiences, histories, and cultures. For example, a term such as "ultimacy" can function as a formal, structural limit in cross-cultural discussions of religious truth. As a formal limit, "ultimacy" transcends and precedes any specific content of what is ultimate. "Ultimacy" is neither one or many, neither reality nor nothingness, neither personal nor non-personal. But it does make sense to talk about religious meanings being directed toward "ultimacy" or to suggest degrees of expression of "ultimacy". Claims of "ultimacy" can even be proved false when something ordinary or finite is elevated to absoluteness (critique or idolatry).

Although "ultimacy" or other abstractions may have formal, categorial use, they are inadequate theologically. If such terms are used with substantive content, then in fact they may be hiding androcentric, imperialist or other assumptions. As soon as we add content to "ultimacy", we are expressing content in relation to our own particular religious, historical, and cultural situations.

2. *Concrete Metaphors for God*

Reacting against abstractions, several thinkers propose concrete metaphors for God — metaphors which are intended to overcome patriarchal and exclusivist Christian language. Our brief consideration of a few concrete metaphors developed by feminist thinkers will focus not only on their effectiveness but also on the implications of metaphorical theology for feminism and pluralism.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

17. Gordon KAUFMAN, "Religious Diversity, Historical Consciousness, and Christian Theology", *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, p. 5.

18. Langdon GILKEY, "Plurality and Its Theological Implications", *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, p. 41.

In her later books, Mary Daly moves beyond her earlier abstract formulations to more creative metaphorical theology. In *Gyn/Ecology* she focusses on affirming the divine Spark in women's Selves as an alternative to Christian self-sacrifice[19]. Women's activities are expressed in terms such as spinning, sparking, spiraling, be-friending, etc. while the spiritual experience is expressed through various metaphors designed to carry "a woman further into the Wild dimensions of Other-centered consciousness — out of the dead circles into Spiraling/Spinning motion"[20].

Daly's metaphors are intentionally focussed on and provocative of women's experiences. I suggest though that the problem of exclusivity is in her application and in her ongoing blame of males but not necessarily in all of the metaphors that she chooses. Daly's celebration of women's becoming conscious of their potential, of women's creativity, and of the divine spark within those experiences could be broadened to include the liberation of other oppressed groups and the liberation of persons steeped in mainstream tradition from the narrowness of that background. Although not developed in this way, some of her metaphors could be applicable to the ongoing interaction of diverse religious traditions which leads to new religious awareness, really another form of consciousness-raising. Because Daly's metaphors are not strongly tied to traditional Christian formulations, some could be developed to be inclusive of people from a diversity of religious backgrounds and experiences.

The major deficiency in Daly's proposals stems from her absolutization of woman's experience. In her celebration of women's new ways of being, beyond traditional patriarchal structures, she leaves out men's experiences and formulates a new idolatry (now of women) which can lead to injustice against men. But this does not minimize her ability to name and describe feminist experience nor does it preclude application of some of her metaphors to other liberating experiences.

Sallie McFague's formulation of new metaphors for God is intended to overcome the traditional imperialist, monarchical, patriarchal character of theology. The metaphors of God as Mother, Lover, and Friend retain a trinitarian understanding of creator, redeemer, and sustainer but include all people and all the universe in their relationships. McFague argues for the importance of personal metaphors for God, applied universally and not just in a one-to-one relationship[21].

McFague's use of Mother as a metaphor for God is not merely a substitute of maternal images for paternal images but draws out implications of the metaphor Father that have often been ignored. She includes female aspects of mother but also broadens that in some areas to the parenting relationship. God can be imaged as male and as female and is beyond both genders[22].

God as Friend suggests a bonding of trust and commitment[23]. The choice of friends is large, and "one can, at least theoretically, be friend with anyone across the barriers

19. DALY, *Gyn/Ecology*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1978, p. 378.

20. DALY, *Pure Lust*. Boston, Beacon, 1984, p. 405.

21. MCFAGUE, *Models of God*, pp. 86-87.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

of gender, race, class, nationality, age, creed"[24]. McFague broadens that relationship even more to include our solidarity with non-human reality. Especially, this last metaphor is free and open to all of reality and to all people, regardless of religious background, and it suggests an interdependence that can be the basis of our working together for a more life-giving global future.

McFague's metaphors do succeed in opening up a vision of God that is non-hierarchical, non-imperialistic, and inclusive of all of reality. In relation to inter-religious dialogue, one can think of parallels in non-Christian traditions of gods, goddesses, saints, or bodhisattvas who convey some of the same relationships among divine, human and non-human realities, such as the compassionate Kuan-Yin who cares for the suffering or Kali as Mother-Goddess and destroyer of evil.

Her critique of idolatries and injustices makes her especially careful in her development of metaphors which serve justice. But she does recognize that one of the dangers of metaphors is that people can forget that metaphors both *do* and *do not* express the reality of God. When they forget the "do not", idolatry is possible. Thus, her metaphors and models are offered as imaginative constructs and not as descriptions of God.

Rosemary Radford Ruether calls for images of God/ess that include female roles and experience and do not reflect or validate the dominance of males over females or vice versa. But Ruether is more wary than McFague of the traditional Christian parental understanding of God (even if both Mother and Father are used) because it "suggests a kind of permanent parent-child relationship to God"[25]. Such imagery suggests that it is wrong for humans to become autonomous, independent and responsible for their own lives. She prefers instead language which focusses on God/ess as liberating us from such oppressive structures but also sees the importance of liberation rooted in the foundation of all being and our new being[26].

Although speaking primarily from within the Christian tradition, Ruether has long been concerned about inter-faith relationships, especially Jew and Christian. She sees more possible shared connections between feminists from historical traditions than with feminists from pagan traditions of nature-renewal, but she calls for recognition of the validity of both kinds of feminist religious quest and for respect and affirmation of the "basic presence of the divine in and through these several paths"[27].

It will be noticed that all of these examples come from feminist theology rather than pluralist thought. Metaphors for God or for "ultimacy" are necessarily concrete and tied to a particular religious context. That concreteness seems to run counter to the inclusivist, universal concern of many pluralists. Yet as we have seen, some pluralist thinkers reject the move to abstractions. Is there any way to pull together the seemingly legitimate quest for personal expressions of "ultimacy" with the more universalist concern of many pluralists?

---

24. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

25. RADFORD RUETHER, *Sexism and God-Talk*, p. 69.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

27. RADFORD RUETHER, "Feminism and Jewish-Christian Dialogue", pp. 147-148.

3. *God as Relative Absolute: Symbol and Concept*

Gordon Kaufman has been critical of efforts to find a universal position of deep unity underlying the diversity of religious traditions because he recognizes that each religious understanding is a particular religious understanding, related to a particular history, particular practices, and particular peoples. Although there may be similarities or parallels within the broad range of religious traditions, there is not a universal frame of orientation[28]. But Kaufman does recognize the importance of opening up and relativizing our particular faith tradition so that serious inter-religious dialogue is possible.

Recognizing the historical rootedness of all theology and the role of imagination in constructing theology, Kaufman suggests that modern theology must reflect on God, the world, humanity, and Christ by learning about past understandings of these four theological areas, their use and abuse, and considering what understandings hold promise for our contemporary world, with its difficulties and possibilities[29].

Kaufman suggests that our conceptions of ultimacy have two functions for human life: a "relativizing" function and a "humanizing" function. The relativizing function of the ultimate point of reference is that everything connected to us and our world is seen as finite and limited and as having its true significance only in its relationship to God[30]. The humanizing dimension of God understands God as a "humane being" who cares for all people through their miseries and their good times[31]. Kaufman calls for contemporary theology to construct a symbol for God "which can function both thoroughly to relativize and thoroughly to humanize our contemporary existence, institutions and activities"[32].

This effort to bring together the relativizing and humanizing functions of God is very similar to my concern to bring together the more abstract expressions of ultimacy which relativize all other expressions with the more concrete metaphors for God which personalize God. I would suggest that the tension between these two functions and between the absoluteness of God and the more personal relationship with God is a necessary and unresolvable tension in our expression of ultimacy. This tension is not a new difficulty in theology, resulting from the feminist and pluralist critiques. Rather, it is a tension related to the paradox of the transcendence and immanence of God and to the split and identity between philosophical and theological expressions of God.

Paul Tillich discusses this tension in terms of the relationship between the God of biblical religion and the god of the philosophers. Although biblical religion and ontology seem to be opposites, Tillich suggests that they share "an ultimate unity and

---

28. KAUFMAN, "Religious Diversity, Historical Consciousness, and Christian Theology", *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, p. 5.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

30. KAUFMAN, *Theology for a Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1985, p. 34.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

a profound interdependence"[33]. Ontology suggests a more impersonal ultimate — power of being, ground of being, or being-itself. Biblical religion affirms God as personal, involved in a living, personal relationship with individual people. Interestingly enough, it is the impersonal ultimate — the power of being — which can be experienced as an immanent part of everyday life while the personal god is set apart as transcendent revealer[34].

Although Tillich claims that "God is being-itself"[35], he finds the more important point of contact not in the objective statement but in the subjective experience of the believer. Tillich argues that the point of contact is the existential encounter with ultimate reality, whether expressed ontologically or in terms of biblical faith (BR, 65). "Religiously speaking, this means that our encounter with the God who is a person includes the encounter with the God who is the ground of everything personal and as such not *a* person" (BR, 83). But even with affirming such a point of contact, Tillich ends by suggesting that the tensions are not resolved but that one can live courageously in the midst of these tensions, thereby discovering "their ultimate unity in the depths of our own souls and the depth of the divine life" (BR, 85).

Similarly, I am suggesting that we may not be able to resolve the tensions between the more abstract expressions of ultimacy and the more concrete expressions of God. But both are needed to express the ultimacy and absoluteness of the reality or experience which underlies and empowers our lives and world as well as the more concrete personal relationship with God. Hindu philosophers who spoke of the more abstract Brahman and the more concrete manifestations of Brahman, or Buddhist thinkers who suggested a more transcendent body of the Buddha along with a more immanent body of the Buddha reflect this same tension. So also, within Christianity, the incarnation and the Cross contain the paradox of this same tension.

4. *Jesus as the Christ*

Some recent theological efforts to be open to truth in many religious traditions have suggested a move from Christocentrism to theocentrism (Hick and Smith). But such a move does not really do justice to the centrality of the Christ to Christianity. Yet some traditional approaches to Jesus as the Christ have been androcentric and exclusivist. Is there an understanding of Christ which is inclusive of all genders and open to people of diverse religious faiths?

The most common approach of all of the theological proposals that I have been analyzing is to reject a "once-for-all in Jesus" understanding of the Christ. Other people can bear this healing, reconciling reality, and such liberating, saving experiences can be found across religious traditions.

33. Paul TILLICH, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1955, p. 1.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 34. (Further references in the form of BR, page number).

35. TILLICH, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1951, p. 239.

For example, Mary Daly broadens Tillich's symbol of New Being beyond Jesus as the Christ because she doubts whether a male symbol can function adequately as bearer of New Being under the conditions of patriarchy (BGF, 72). She suggests that women are the bearers of New Being as they live on the boundaries of patriarchal space (BGF, 72). This application is developed further in her suggestion that "the symbol of a Second Coming may be emerging genuinely in the psyches of women" (BGF, 73). Thus, Daly does broaden the liberating quality beyond Jesus although her view is not fully inclusive of all people. But New Being can be expanded beyond Tillich's or Daly's usage to include people in various religious traditions. In fact, such a broadening almost seems demanded to avoid an idolatry of the person Jesus.

Sallie McFague's metaphor of God as Lover points to passion in the divine-human relationship and to the desire for union with what is loved. In her understanding, God is incarnate in Creation as a whole (the world as God's body) and in humans who are open and responsive to God. Jesus, then, shows such an open response to God that his life and death reveal God's love for the world[36]. Jesus' life, then, is a paradigm for what we can be, but is not a unique once-for-all salvific event.

After offering a critique of traditionally masculinist Christologies, Ruether explores other christological formulations, such as androgynous and spirit Christologies. But she recognizes that the connection of these Christologies to the male Jesus often results in limited possibilities for females. What she suggests, then, is a closer look at the characteristics and qualities of the person Jesus, including his attitude toward and relationship with women, so that the connection of the Christ to Jesus is not necessarily a patriarchal connection. But more importantly, she suggests that we not treat the Christ as fully embodied "once-for-all" in the historical Jesus but as continuing Christ's identity in the Christian community of redemption which calls us to "yet incompleted dimensions of human liberation"[37]. This Christ who calls us to new dimensions of liberation and redemption is far more inclusive and universal than traditional Christian views.

Similarly, in relation to Christ, Gordon Kaufman focusses on Jesus' reconciling, healing, and liberation of people through love — not once and for all but as a paradigm for human life. "All movements toward reconciliation and healing and liberation, toward overcoming oppression and alienation and deterioration, are to be understood as the activity of the salvific divine spirit — the spirit of Christ — at work in the world"[38].

In relation to Christ, John Hick suggests that there are "ample resources for the development of doctrine in ways that are compatible with the pluralistic perception"[39] of Christianity. Hick suggests that we look at Christ as showing "forth something of the love/compassion that lies at the heart of Reality" by bearing the hatred of so many[40]. Understandings of divine incarnation which suggest that "*all* moments of free

36. McFague, *Models of God*, p. 136.

37. Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, p. 138.

38. Kaufman, *Theology for a Nuclear Age*, p. 58.

39. Hick, "Rethinking Christian Doctrine in the Light of Religious Pluralism, *IRF*, III (Fall, 1988), p. 7.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

human response to divine grace or inspiration are, in their varying degrees, instances of divine incarnation" may still allow a central place for Jesus but also allow possibilities elsewhere in history[41].

Each of these views then proposes a more open understanding of Christ that allows for liberation, salvation, healing, and reconciliation in other persons and places than Jesus of Nazareth. Of course, each of these views assumes the centrality of Christ for Christianity without asserting Christ over against other religious mediators. The Christ then becomes one among many but does retain absoluteness *within* the Christian tradition. Langdon Gilkey calls such a stance a standpoint of relative absoluteness — absolute commitment to a viewpoint within one's own specific tradition but at the same time recognizing the relativity of that standpoint in relation to the absolute and to other religious standpoints[42].

CONCLUSION

We come full circle, then, to the relationship between absoluteness and relativity and the parallel relationship between universality and particularity. Both sides of the tension need to be maintained to do justice to the sense of ultimacy within one's particular tradition and to the plurality of religious faiths in our global context. Thus, I suggest that Christians can commit to truth in a Christian context but strongly relativized in relationship to other faiths and to the diversity of Christian peoples (male and female, rich and poor, etc.).

In some ways, our formal "ultimacy" is like pure water — transparent, tasteless, and shapeless. And like water, "ultimacy" can take on the forms and qualities of the vessels that contain it — from glasses to river banks to ocean floors, or from Father to Mother to Almighty to Friend. Also, as with God, in relationship to our lives, water becomes more substantive — connected with birthing or with death; sustaining and cleansing us. Perhaps, just as we need the purity of water, we need the "ultimacy" of God relativizing our lives and our theologies. But also, just as we need to have real water in order to live, we also need concrete, substantial understandings of and relationships with God. The Christ, then, paradigmatically in Jesus, is *one* such concrete relationship.

No one metaphor can encompass "ultimacy" just as no one vessel can contain all water. But perhaps just as there is a formal similarity of all water, "ultimacy" is expressed in a variety of religious peoples and traditions. The variety of metaphors like the variety of experiences of water enriches our lives through dialogue in a global context.

We must continue

— developing personal and non-personal metaphors to express "ultimacy" and liberation/reconciliation in our lives

41. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

42. Langdon GILKEY, "Plurality and Its Theological Implications", pp. 46-47.

— living creatively in the tensions between the absolute and the relative, between the universal and the particular

— trying to avoid and overcome idolatries and injustices

— forming theological language which empowers us to build a just, humane and inclusive world.