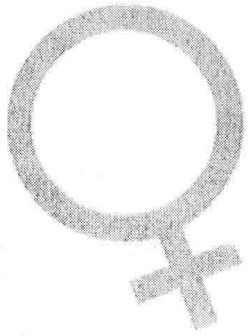
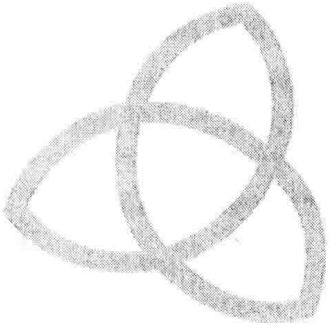
CHRISTIAN *feminist* THEOLOGY

DENISE L. CARMODY



CHRISTIAN *feminist* THEOLOGY

A CONSTRUCTIVE INTERPRETATION



DENISE L. CARMODY

BLACKWELL
Oxford UK & Cambridge USA

First published 1995

Reprinted 1996

Blackwell Publishers Inc.
238 Main Street
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142, USA

Blackwell Publishers Ltd
108 Cowley Road
Oxford OX4 1JF, UK

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Carmody, Denise Lardner, 1935–
Christian feminist theology: a constructive interpretation/
Denise Lardner Carmody
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 1–55786–586–8 (alk paper) — ISBN 1–55786–587–6 (pbk:alk paper)
1. Feminist theology. I. Title
BT83.C365 1995 95–14743
230'.082—dc20 CIP

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Typeset in Meridien on 11/13.5pt by CentraCet Limited, Cambridge

This book is printed on acid-free paper

Christian Feminist Theology

For Bernadette Proulx

PREFACE

This book is an overview of traditional Christian theology, written for college undergraduates and developed in the light of moderate present-day feminist sensibilities. As such, it combines two allegiances. The first is to the faith handed down through the Christian centuries – repeated, interpreted, brought up to date, reformed, practiced at the altar and in the workplace. In my usage, the designation "traditional" is a badge of honor. I want to pass along to students a representative specimen of how the mainstream of the Christian population (which is now the largest religious body in the world, numbering about 1.87 billion according to the 1994 Encyclopaedia Britannica *Book of the Year*) have thought about God, the world, and themselves – about "reality." Certainly, I want to make this traditional theology relevant to present-day concerns, but I do not want to offer anything merely modish, ephemeral, or idiosyncratic. That is not the sort of theology that traditional Christians believe renders well the gospel, the glad tidings, in which their forebears have delighted for nearly twenty centuries. That is not the sort of theology that takes the Bible as the regular starting point for Christian theological reflection. Certainly, we ought to use the Bible critically, with a properly sophisticated mind. But we cannot make another source more central without departing from the traditional mainstream.

This book is also "constructive," meaning integrated, organic, systematic. I am presenting the traditional major topics of Christian theology in what I hope is an orderly, connected fashion, so as to

make them emerge as a coherent worldview. Constructive theology is not a survey of current trends. It may draw on a variety of sources, recent or classical, but it labors to work them into a consistent, harmonious statement of the whole of Christian faith. In such a statement, the various parts or doctrines depend on one another and support one another mutually. As in a building, there is a floor, supporting walls, and a roof, all of which work together to make a whole. The construct here ought to leave the reader who works through it patiently with a solid first sense of the whole of traditional Christian doctrine, the full edifice.

Finally, perhaps it bears noting that this is *a* constructive layout. Just as different architects design different buildings, so do different constructive theologians design different orderings of the major components of traditional faith. Nonetheless, the theologians with whom I am allying myself all depend on the common Christian faith (creed) long handed down, and they all subscribe to the classical Augustinian–Anselmian description of theology as "faith seeking understanding." When we labor at constructive Christian theology, none of us traditionalists works in "religious studies," where faith should not call the tunes. All of us desire to render afresh the venerable teachings that first solicited our commitment regarding Jesus and then developed in each subsequent Christian generation.

My second allegiance in this work of traditional, constructive Christian theology for college undergraduates is to the current movement of women to gain recognition of their full equality with men in the possession of human nature. In this sense, I write as a "feminist," though hardly as a radical or separatist one. For I believe that feminists ought to be as concerned about claiming equal access to common human qualities as about showing what has been distinctive in women's experience. We ought to realize that the "existentials" of the human condition (finitude, death, sin, reason, work, love, prayer) determine more of our ultimate, religious meaning than the differences that gender develops.

This means that my understanding of a traditional, historically mainstream Christian theology makes it much more applicable to the needs and hopes of women than not. It means that I believe that women have as much reason as men, as much emotion, as much mortality, as much sin, as much holiness, and as much calling from God to live full, fruitful lives. For example, I believe that Jesus

directed his message to women as much as to men. When Jesus preached about the Kingdom of God he did not restrict it to men, as such scenes in the gospels as his instructing the Samaritan woman (John 4) show. Certainly, the gender of the woman shaped how Jesus interacted with her, as did her being a Samaritan. But in my view, and the view of what I take to be the historical mainstream, these particulars mattered less to Jesus, were more accidental, than the substantial fact that the woman was a human being in great need of God. Three models of recent constructive theology that I consider cognate to my own on this score, and that have encouraged me in my development of this textbook, are Elizabeth Johnson's *She Who Is*, Catherine LaCugna's *God for Us*, and Sallie McFague's *Models of God*.

Despite its conviction that women are as human as men, as much shaped by the common existentials of the human condition and as much addressed by religious prophets such as Jesus, the moderate feminism to which I feel loyal does not shrink from criticizing the many ways in which, throughout the history of the Christian church, women have not been treated as the equals of men in aptness for religious instruction, for serving as ministers of the gospel and leaders of the church, and for influencing how the gospel ought to be translated for given epochs, cultures, or geographical locales. What feminists call "patriarchy" and think of pejoratively has defaulted on the radical equality latent in the gospel of Jesus, often sinfully. The rule by men that has prevailed in most of the Christian churches in most historical periods has worked to the neglect of women's rights, freedoms, and joys.

Women have been the second sex in most times and places of Christian history, just as they have been in most of world history overall. The Christian church has not distinguished itself as the champion of women's rights as it would have had it been holier – better attuned to the Spirit of its Master. In this failing the church has been all too human, as it has been all too human when dealing with matters of racial justice, economic justice, respect for the natural environment, respect for indigenous cultures, and respect for sexual minorities. Certainly, many Christians have led reforms that have raised the awareness of their contemporaries and brought better education, medical care, working conditions, and the like for the underclasses. But too often the Christian church has been so aligned

with the status quo, the blocs of those holding economic, political, and cultural power in the Western nations, that churchpeople have perpetuated, even deepened, sinful, oppressive social structures.

While I hold no brief for the brands of feminism that repudiate the Christian gospel as a whole, or that fan among women a hatred for men, I do associate myself with what I take to be a broad, populist movement among feminists (male as well as female) who now think that women have often gotten a raw deal. This thought naturally prompts another thought: such injustice has to stop, both outside the churches and inside. Inasmuch as traditional Christian theology has abetted injustice toward women or colluded with a sexist depreciation of women, traditional Christian theology needs a reform, an overhaul. In calling this text a constructive *feminist* Christian theology I want to indicate my desire to contribute to such an overhaul, my intent to advance such a reform.

Practically, then, I want students to find in this book an exposition of Christian faith that is (a) loyal to what the mainstream of believers – the majority of the Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant and Evangelical members – consider their treasure and birthright, and (b) loyal to the desire of tens of millions of women to receive a better representation, a fuller justice, in both the speculative and the practical aspects of such a traditional Christian faith. I want to be moderate in my faith: generally acceptable to the 80 percent of Christians who are neither wild radicals nor mossbacked conservatives. I also want to be moderate in my feminism: generally acceptable to the 80 percent of women who neither hate men nor are blind to the injustices that women have suffered from patriarchal institutions, the Church included emphatically. This moderation renders what I think the realities of Christian faith, the realities of the human condition, the actual feelings of most women, and the actual good of most women and men dictate.

Finally, may I say that such moderation (striving for balance, concern not to err by either excess or deficiency) is also what twenty-five years of teaching college undergraduates (thousands of students, in eight different colleges) and writing more than a dozen textbooks for college courses have convinced me is most appropriate. What ecologists call the "commons" of the natural world has its analogue in theology. God is a "commons," as is the salvation that Christ offers and the flourishing of the human species through justice and love.

To refuse to elaborate one's theology or ethics in the light of this commons, preferring the shadows of partisanship or political (linguistic, conceptual, behavioral) correctness, is to make idols, heresies, and feckless combines doomed to failure. In my view, it is to be stupid and sinful, because it is to be unwilling to let the Spirit of God stretch one through her demanding love of the whole – all the earth, all the earth's people. So I ask you, my readers, for one boon: be hard on your stupidity and sinfulness, your narcissistic partialisms; and, if you read this on a good day, be merciful toward mine. Thank you.

My thanks go out to Alison Mudditt of Blackwell Publishers for inviting me to undertake this project, and to my husband, John Carmody, for working it through with me.

CONTENTS

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Constructive Christian Feminism

We embark on a work of construction, an enterprise of building. What are we setting out to construct, what is our building for, to house, to serve? We are setting out to construct a view of the world, of reality, indebted to, faithful to, in the service of, two principal sources or inspirations. The first is traditional, orthodox Christian faith. The second is moderate feminism, understood as "a commitment to the complete equality of women with men in the possession of humanity." Let us begin by elaborating this description and reflecting on the compatibility of the two principal sources or inspirations that it entails.

Traditional, orthodox Christian faith is the following of Jesus that has gone forward, marching through history for most of the past 2000 years, in the mainstream churches. If we date the life of Jesus to roughly the first forty years of what we now call the Christian era (AD or CE), then for nearly 1960 years followers, disciples, have structured their lives, constructed the world of the meanings by which they have interpreted their human condition, by reference to Jesus. All who have called him "Lord" and made him their most precious treasure have acted in this way. "Faith" is precisely this action, this treasuring, this living by reference to Jesus as the key interpretation of what is most important in life, of where we come from and where we are going, of how we can more nearly become what we long to become in our best moments, of how we can endure

the sufferings that seem to afflict all human beings, including the sufferings entailed in our certain deaths.

I emphasize that the Christian faith at play in this book is traditional and orthodox. "Tradition" is what people "hand on." It goes from one generation to the next, both formally and informally. Formally, a people's teachers instruct the younger generation explicitly, through classes of some sort, initiations, apprenticeships. Informally, the mainstream of the community reminds the membership as a whole of what they should believe, treasure, assume about the shape of reality, through the processes, the ordinary interactions, of daily life.

There is nothing peculiar to Christianity in my description of tradition to this point. One can find a fine example of everything mentioned so far in a good book on Jewish life in the Eastern European *shtetl* in the twentieth century prior to the Second World War.[1] Everywhere, traditional cultures have handed on, reworked, applied, updated, retrieved, reformed, and generally kept going their central convictions through the ordinary, largely unconscious, social dynamics that have constituted their cultures. In the measure that their cultures have been homogeneous, closer to uniform in their central convictions than pluriform or divided, traditional peoples have tended to be nearly unaware that their social dynamics might have been very different. How they have lived, what they have believed, has seemed almost as natural as the patterns of the sun and the rain, as the regular ways of the animals.

It is virtually impossible for a citizen of a present-day, modern Western culture to live in as traditional a fashion as I have just described. Indeed, what we mean by "modern" is in conflict with "traditional," inasmuch as modernity (for our purposes, beginning in the European West in the sixteenth century, with the takeover by the Reformation and the Renaissance) ushered in a new era of consciousness, because it split the relatively seamless sense of tradition and faith that had obtained prior to such epochal events as the Reformation, the Renaissance, and, in the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment.

In actual historical fact, of course, no human century or era has ever lacked diversity or challenge or at least a creative minority of the population who sensed the frailty, the contingency, of the cultural assumptions that the majority wanted, sometimes nearly

desperately, to the point of psychic distress, to make appear as natural as the rising and setting of the sun or the flow of the seasons. But modernity certainly broke with the pace of prior centuries, where change seemed slower and cultural assumptions less assaulted. In fact, modernity eventually placed diversity, pluralism, and so skepticism and doubt close to the heart of its "enterprise," its wholesale exploration of new physical and cultural frontiers. Modernity is where human beings became much more aware of their diversity than they had been previously, and also much more aware that they themselves create much of their meaning. Previously, human beings had felt deeply immersed in a nature obviously more powerful than they. In modernity, first through the rise of empirical natural science and then through philosophical reflection, human beings began to face the fact, both exciting and frightening, that they themselves construct, create, huge portions of their meaning – what their time under the sun will signify.

So, when I say that the Christian faith at work, under investigation, entering into the construction that we are attempting, is "traditional," I really mean that it is a modern, or post-modern (post-Second World War) version of what in prior, pre-modern ages apparently flowed along considerably less self-consciously than has been possible since the Reformation, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the other capital cultural events that separate our present era of Western Christian history from what prevailed 500 or so years ago, at the dawn of the sixteenth century. I also mean that a few capital convictions (such as that in Jesus the Christ one finds a complete humanity fully united with, joined to, but not mixed confusedly with a complete divinity: one person, two natures) continue to prevail in this constructive venture, giving the Christian faith that I am building in league with a feminist allegiance its basic shape.

(The two other capital traditional convictions that I should single out, at this juncture, are that (a) the Christian God is a Trinitarian community customarily named "Father-Son-Spirit," and that (b) "Grace," which is both the deathless life of this communitarian God and that God's particular helps for human beings, has been revealed in the life, the historical story, of Jesus the Christ to have prevailed over "Sin," understood as everything that opposes such a life. Moreover, the prevailing of grace over sin makes human existence a

comedy, in the profound sense of a dramatic success, rather than a tragedy.)

These doctrinal convictions are further indications of what I mean by the word "orthodox." "Orthodoxy" is "right opinion" and/or "right praise." It is what the mainstream churches, assemblies of disciples of Christ, and gatherings of the followers of Jesus for social life, worship, instruction in faith, political action, and other functions natural to communities of human beings have, sometimes with precision, more often in rough-and-ready fashion, considered to be sound, traditional, customary, reasonable, faithful to the understandings, allegiances, and values of their parents and grandparents, as well as to the commitments of other Christian communities, near and far both historically and geographically.

"Orthodox" faith is catholic, held by the many, ordinary rather than special or idiosyncratic. While it admits room for local diversity and individual interpretation, it prefers to stress the commonweal, the life of the whole rather than that of the part. Orthodox Christians run the danger of becoming mossbacked, conservative in a pejorative sense, rigid psychologically as well as intellectually. On the other hand, they are the great preservers of the tradition, the strong glue against fissiparous protests and sectarianism. To their mind, to what they consider right Christian opinion and praise, God hates heresy and schism, usually, though not always, attributing them to pride, singularity, individuals puffing themselves up and forgetting their immense debts to prior ages, and forgetting as well the utter necessity that individuals finally bow to those holding legitimate authority in the community, if that community, that church, is to survive.

So much for a first suggestion of the traditionally Christian character of our enterprise. The full suggestion, presentation, and rendering will unfold relatively leisurely through the chapters that follow. Let me now elaborate the sense of "feminism" at work in these pages. Just as I desire to present a Christian faith that is faithful to the mainstream, the median tradition that has come down through the past two millennia, so I desire to present a balanced, mature, moderate or median feminism. I am not a disciple of any feminist theory or movement that advocates the superiority of women to men, any more than I can accept any philosophical or theological anthropology (view of human nature) that subordinates women to men as inferior. Observation, historical study, cultural analysis, and