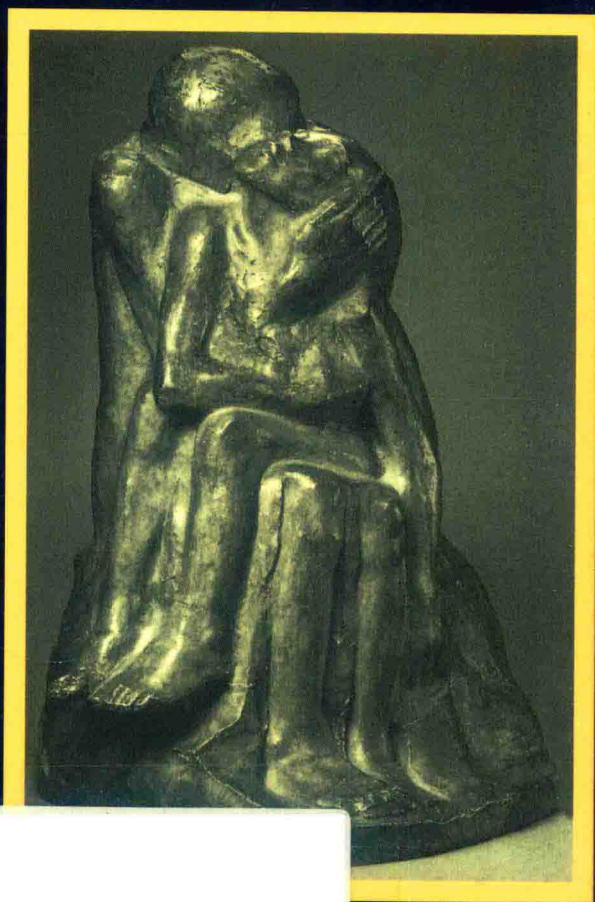


A \_\_\_\_\_  
Feminist Philosophy  
*of Religion*



*Pamela Sue* Anderson



# A Feminist Philosophy of Religion

The Rationality and Myths of  
Religious Belief

Pamela Sue Anderson

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# A Feminist Philosophy of Religion



*I go on a quest through an indefinite number of bodies, through nature, through God, for the body that once served as place for me, where I (male/female) was able to stay contained, enveloped. Given that, as far as man is concerned, the issue is to separate the first and the last place. Which can lead to a double downshift: both of the relation to the unique mother and of the relation to the unique God. Can these two downshifts come together? . . .*

*As for woman she is place. Does she have to locate herself in bigger and bigger places? But also to find, situate, in herself the place that she is. If she is unable to constitute, within herself, the place that she is, she passes ceaselessly through the child in order to return to herself.*

*. . . A place of place. Where bodies embrace? Both in and not in the same place; with the one being in the other that contains.*

Luce Irigaray\*

\* The epigraph is taken from Luce Irigaray (1993a, 34–5, 55), and might be read as a response to the reproduction of *The Lovers* (1913) by Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945) on the front cover of this book. In her diary entry of November 1913 Kollwitz also refers to her sculpture, *The Lovers*, as *The Mother and Child*; see Kollwitz 1989, 134.

# Preface

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In 1994 a special issue of *Hypatia* raised the question: Where are all the feminist philosophers of religion? In response, several feminist theologians, as well as some feminist philosophers, wrote articles. In this book, I offer another philosopher's response. My argument is addressed especially to philosophers who have been trained at or are working in institutions which limit philosophy of religion to empirical realist forms of theism, yet who are open to new perspectives from Anglo-American feminist epistemologies and Continental philosophy.

Without engaging directly in arguments for and against the central claims of the classical form of western theism, I intend to get behind debates about a personal deity which has ideal attributes such as perfect goodness and bodilessness. I will raise fundamental questions concerning the philosophical presuppositions underlying arguments for divine power and knowledge. In particular, I will investigate what has been assumed about religious belief in terms of reason, objectivity, and desire; assumptions about sex/gender feature in these investigations.

I question the picture of reality which is both assumed by empirical realist accounts of theistic belief and debated according to strictly formal, adversarial methods of reasoning. The concomitant lack of attention to substantive issues concerning objectivity and myth in philosophy of religion has resulted in a failure to recognize the ways in which formal accounts of our world, ourselves, our desires and passions have been biased against women; and this means variable biases against women who themselves differ by creed, class, race, and ethnicity. To fill this lack, I confront substantive issues while retaining a form of realism which still makes possible nonrelativist claims about truth and justice.

I find it unfortunate that the dominance of a naive empirical realist

approach to questions of theistic belief has left little room for the valuable contributions of Continental philosophy, and virtually no room for the increasingly significant issues of feminist epistemologies. The currently dominant form of classical theism seems to me too narrow on a variety of philosophical questions. Admittedly cumulative arguments are being used more frequently by philosophers of religion to justify theistic beliefs, with the intention of broadening the sorts of experience which can count as evidence for religious knowledge. However, the assumed standpoint of justification and the accepted form of this theism continue to prohibit a fuller picture of relevant issues in epistemology, ethics, metaphysics, and women's studies.

At the same time, I do not adopt the recently popular nonrealist approach to religious belief, even if it rejects empirical realist forms of theism and proposes alternative presuppositions for its philosophical framework.<sup>1</sup> The decisive problem for me with a nonrealist philosophy of religion is not being able to take a stand against real injustices or against biased and pernicious beliefs. By contrast, as a feminist I feel compelled to seek a means by which philosophers can legitimately recognize and acknowledge the falsehoods about women propagated by specific forms of theism, as well as injustices committed against marginalized men and women by powerful men and women (including myself) on the grounds of mistaken beliefs.

To avoid both the possible narrowmindedness of naive realist forms of theism and the potential dogmatism of nonrealist forms of theism, I would like to propose the framework for a feminist philosophy of religion. The focus of my proposal is the rationality of religious belief. A feminist approach to this issue of rationality involves more than justifying belief on the grounds of experience tested for its coherence, simplicity, unity, or design. It is my conviction that a feminist approach to the rationality of religious belief would offer the tools for thinking which is critically alert to fanaticisms, illusions, and patriarchal biases of all sorts.

Summarizing overall, I intend to supplement contemporary approaches to the philosophy of religion. My approach is reformist, reaching back to rebuild philosophy at the level of fundamental presuppositions. To cite a well-known statement by Willard van Orman Quine (1908- ) about rebuilding philosophy,

We can change [the conceptual scheme that we grew up in] bit by bit, plank by plank, though meanwhile there is nothing to carry us along but the evolving conceptual scheme itself. The philosopher's task was well compared by Neurath to that of a mariner who must rebuild his ship on the open sea.

We can improve our conceptual scheme, our philosophy, bit by bit while continuing to depend on it for support; but we cannot detach ourselves from it and compare it objectively with an unconceptualized reality. Hence it is meaningless, I suggest, to inquire into the absolute correctness of a conceptual scheme as a mirror of reality. (Quine 1953, 78–9)

I agree with the above point that philosophers cannot detach themselves completely from their conceptual scheme to achieve an absolutely correct representation of reality. But this does not imply that philosophers have to give up the search for objectivity or for true belief. In the picture of philosophy created by Otto Neurath (1882–1945), the planks of the ship include the mistaken beliefs which are necessarily part of our conceptual scheme; the point is that philosophers must rely upon both true beliefs and falsehoods when changing the planks of mistaken beliefs in order to stay afloat. For Neurath, to be without the ship is to be in the sea without any beliefs. But to qualify Quine's references to 'a mariner' and 'his ship on the open sea,' if these are taken to mean that the rebuilding of a philosophical framework is done by a lone man then they will also have to be supplemented with additional images from the feminist philosopher – for whom the subject of knowledge is not a discrete, simple self with its very own set of beliefs.

Modern, philosophical texts have frequently used images of the sea as outside the territory of rationality, in relation to the (rational) secure ground of an island. In particular, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) employs the stormy sea to represent the illusions which threaten and surround the land of truth.<sup>2</sup> In the Kantian picture, the definite line separating the philosopher or seafarer from the sea represents the limits of ordered rationality and pure understanding. But if this line is drawn by men alone and represents the limits to their reasoning, can and should it be pushed back? According to certain feminists, human rationality should seek to grasp the contents of the marine waters whose turbulence evoke images of desire, birth, and love. By emphasizing these additional images, feminists offer a more comprehensive, however complex, account of reality. And this means that at times I will deviate from Neurath's picture of philosophy in order to rethink pervasive Kantian imagery.

So, unlike Neurath, Kant uses the sea to represent the danger of false belief and illusion as contrasted with the true beliefs and secure reality of the island. The feminist objection to the latter contrast is that desire and disorder associated with water and fluidity are feared, while reason and order linked with stability and solidity are highly valued. The question is



whether unexplored possibilities are contained in the formerly devalued imagery of the open sea lying beyond the seafarer's pure understanding. The contents of these unknown waters are yet to be adequately acknowledged and articulated by male and, specifically, female philosophers as material potentially transformative of their rebuilding task. Ultimately Kant's possibly less prominent imagery of practical reason constructing an edifice or building may prove more compatible with the rebuilding of a philosophical framework.

Leaving aside for the moment the question of the correct imagery, I have divided my general argument into four parts in order to build the framework for, while also negotiating the content of, a feminist philosophy of religion. Part I on Background Matters begins a detailed discussion of the definition and symbolization of reason, with a focus upon the role of reason in the justification of religious belief. I move on to criticize a modern feminist attempt to degender reason, as well as to criticize an empirical realist attempt to justify theistic belief on the basis of formal reasoning alone. The last two sections of part I anticipate my presentation of feminist epistemological frameworks of belief, as well as the refigurations of those beliefs which have been configured by dominant, patriarchal myths.

Part II contains three chapters, addressing the question of the rationality of religious belief according to three possible, epistemological frameworks. Outlining these frameworks helps to introduce the valuable insights of recent feminist epistemologies. I am concerned with the epistemology of belief, especially substantive issues having to do with reason, objectivity, and desire. I leave the actual construction of particular doctrines about God or goddesses to theologians. Instead I consider the 'whose?' and the 'for whom?' of belief.

Part III consists of two chapters on the refigurations of belief. In these chapters, I use a combination of two feminist frameworks to illustrate the possibility of transforming the practice of philosophy of religion; this involves supplementing a formal justification of religious beliefs with a rational refiguration of beliefs which would include the significant material content of desire and sexual difference. I illustrate my refigurations of belief by taking two distinctive figures from patriarchal configurations: one from a nonwestern form of theistic belief, the other from a western form of civil belief. Both figures are women who dissent from privileged female roles, finding support for their actions in broadly construed religious beliefs. Ironically the memory of these female acts of dissent and the sexually specific content of their beliefs have been consistently reconstrued to support the philosophical limits of western patriarchy.

Part IV on Final Critical Matters picks up some of the critical issues initially raised in part I and variously addressed in parts II and III. The aim of part IV is to come to a general account of the philosophical imaginary, exposing the role of women, desire, and belief in modern philosophers' configurations of rationality. I touch on critical issues concerning the symbolic, Enlightenment reason and patriarchy. Here a special focus upon the images of death found in a philosophical text illustrates the destructive and creative significance of miming the figure of woman's living death.

The Summary reviews briefly the salient points about the rationality of belief explored in the preceding chapters for a feminist philosophy of religion. Amongst other points, it is imperative to see that the concept of reason sharply contrasted with desire is too formal or 'thin' to deal adequately with beliefs of embodied persons; that desire cannot be sufficiently understood as long as its content remains excluded by reason; and that philosophical analysis of and feminist concern with a combination of reason and desire, as found in expressions of yearning for truth, need to supplement contemporary approaches to philosophy of religion.

I would like to dedicate this book to the solitary woman who has been forced to struggle with pure thinking, at the expense of her own full embodiment as a female philosopher, in order to succeed in an academic discipline which insists upon the denial of desire, love, and any inordinate passion for true justice. But equally I hope that many other philosophers who seek institutional access to doing philosophy may be persuaded by the alternative proposed here. I propose that initially feminist philosophers may seek to gain coherence, unity, harmony for their lives and beliefs; but ultimately they will be persuaded to assess the very construction of rational beliefs, and even to refigure them.

### Notes

1. Basically these nonrealist philosophers of religion reject the propositional claims of empirical realist forms of theism; for them, God is not an object 'out there.' But depending upon the nonrealist point of view, the religious philosopher may still assume and analyze the same general forms of belief as the classical theist, while seeing no need to justify rationally the beliefs as objectively true. For example, one sort of nonrealist analyzes religious practices such as prayer and belief in the afterlife which are traditionally associated with the God of theism; these practices are analyzed as meaningful forms of life, and not defended as true or false. But the danger with the potentially indefensible relativism of a nonrealist philosophy of religion would be dogmatism.
2. The origin of this imagery in Kant will be discussed in part I.

# Acknowledgments

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I originally conceived the project for a book on feminist philosophy of religion in the spring of 1991, when I was a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Philosophy Department at the University of Delaware. At Delaware I had the absolute good fortune to work briefly with Professor Sandra Harding. I cannot forget that my initial inspiration to work on feminist philosophy came from Sandra who immediately gained my respect as a woman philosopher and a feminist. Now I only hope to have done justice to Sandra's brilliant work in feminist epistemology.

In Oxford in Trinity Term 1993, I was next given encouragement by Dr Graham Ward to pursue publication of *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* – and Alison Mudditt of Blackwell Publishers took on my project. However, starting a new job in Philosophy at the University of Sunderland in the fall of 1993 meant that work on my book was delayed. Yet I was greatly impressed, when I met Michèle Le Doeuff in the spring of 1994. Although I had written to Michèle to invite her to give a Royal Institute of Philosophy lecture at the Universities of Durham and Sunderland, she inspired me on the occasions when we met to talk about her lecture. She clearly increased my incentive to produce a piece of feminist philosophy of my own.

Then in 1995, Dr Grace Jantzen gave both encouraging words and critical comments on an early draft of the book. Grace, along with an anonymous Blackwell's reader, moved my thinking forward with some honest and helpful reports.

So over the years of work on this project, I have gained guidance from various sectors. And here I add acknowledgment to David Leopold for his longstanding friendship, his astuteness and support as a political philosopher. In the same breath, I want to thank Lucinda Rumsey and her brother Paul

for their excellent suggestions of works by women artists for the cover design – even if David's suggestion of Käthe Kollwitz's woodcuts led me in the end to choose one of Kollwitz's marvelous sculptures.

Others who should be given special mention include Dr Alison Jasper, who in the very early stages urged my work on Julia Kristeva, and Dr Bridget Nichols, who responded to my philosophical ideas with her characteristic patience and sensitivity, offering careful comments for my nonphilosophical readers.

In addition, during the past few years I had the good fortune of particular expertise from Dr Pamela Clemit and her impeccable editorial knowledge (as well as her thoughts on myth) and from Dr Adrian Moore and his philosophical acumen, especially with his analytic insights on Kant and on objectivity (despite first appearances, we found more ground for philosophical agreement than expected). Of course all the remaining lapses in style or form and philosophical precision are my own.

I would like to thank my ideal reader, Hanneke Canters, who read the whole manuscript bit by bit – and sometimes more than once – to give me the response I needed from a woman postgraduate who had already studied philosophy of religion and is currently engaging with feminist epistemology as part of her doctorate in philosophy. Hanneke's genuine enthusiasm, in fact her remarkable excitement, about *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* convinced me in the last stage of trying to complete this book that I could imagine my audience: the lived experiences of certain women philosophers would make them especially eager to read what I have to say.

Thanks to all the other people who in one way or another believed in me, allowing me to express both determination and conviction in what has been written here.

Finally, chapter 4 is adapted from my 'Myth, Mimesis and Multiple Identities: Feminist Tools for Transforming Theology', *Literature and Theology: An International Journal of Theory, Criticism and Culture*, 10:2 (June 1996), 112–30. Acknowledgment goes to Oxford University Press.

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**I**  
**Introduction**



