

Introduction

Some twenty years have passed since the publication of the first books dedicated explicitly to Feminist Philosophy of Religion. Published in 1998, Pamela Sue Anderson's *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* and Grace Jantzen's *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* set the tone for subsequent feminist approaches to the field. This Element builds upon their legacy, developing and extending aspects of their work for a much-changed contemporary context.

That this task is necessary reflects the absence of these two philosophers, whose lives were cut short and whose investigations were, as a result, nowhere near complete. Philosophical investigations, by their very nature, are rarely finished, yet the sense of these women dying in the middle of conversations they had opened up is palpable. Jantzen died in 2006 at the age of fifty-seven, the first in a series of six books she intended to write on 'Death and the Displacement of Beauty' having been published in 2004. Jeremy Carrette's memorial article (2006) offers a tantalising flavour of where she might have gone in her thinking had she lived. Anderson died in 2017 at the age of sixty-one. A dominant theme in her work at the time was human vulnerability. A piece by her, read in absentia at the British Academy conference on 'Vulnerability and the Politics of Care' a month before she died, reflected the ruthlessly honest eye she was bringing to this theme.¹

My enquiry is shaped by three aspects of their work.

The first is Anderson's unwillingness to throw over entirely the structures of philosophy of religion, which offers the possibility of an open feminist philosophy based upon a rich combination of sources. She conducts a philosophical conversation with a range of partners: some women, some men; some feminist, some not; some philosophical, some theological, some literary.

Expanding the range of conversation partners is reflected in the second aspect of her work that influences my approach. Anderson explores the ethical potential of philosophy of religion. Philosophy of religion is a form of critical practice concerned with the investigation of truth-claims. The established content of the subject clusters around arguments designed to establish (or reject) the reasonableness of belief in God; in its analytic form its account of religion is grounded in the investigation of theism and the attempt to establish (or to reject) the truth-claims attending to this concept. Anderson's feminist approach is significant as she takes this notion into the realm of practical living. Shaped by feminist concerns, philosophy of religion 'no longer focuses strictly on epistemological

¹ See 'Silencing and speaker vulnerability: undoing an oppressive form of (wilful) ignorance', in Pelagia Goulimari's collection (2021, 34–43) published in Anderson's memory.

questions to do with belief, knowledge, or the truth of a claim that “God exists”, or that “we are free agents” (Anderson 2009, 124). Rather, it is to be understood as a critical discipline that is also a practical endeavour. To adopt this approach is to expand the range of philosophers’ reflections on God and agency by ‘thinking freedom, acting virtuously and making reflective (aesthetic) judgements which would be creative spirituality’ (2009, 125).

This suggests something of the distinctive feminist approach to philosophy of religion, and leads to the third theme drawn from the work of these two foremothers. Philosophy of religion is shaped by both women as a form of practice that enables the flourishing life. The question of what it is to flourish is central to Jantzen’s approach. She argues that this involves attending to birth and natality (neglected as philosophical themes, she contends, because of their association ‘only’ with women). Taking seriously these features enables a different way of considering the focus and values of human life from one centred on death and mortality. Anderson, in similar vein, suggests that the aim of feminist philosophy of religion is to cultivate ‘the love of life’ (2009).

How to nurture the conditions for a flourishing life drives my enquiry. Rosemary Radford Ruether’s pithy definition of feminism as the promotion of that which affirms ‘the full humanity of women’ (Ruether 1983) is central to my philosophy of religion. It explains the necessary starting point – namely, the identification of and resistance to the structures and attitudes that historically denied women’s full humanity – and the development of a philosophy of religion that engages with themes beyond the specific discussion of sex and gender. If women *really are* ‘full human beings’, the reflections they develop should be capable of informing what it means to flourish, not just as a woman but also as a human being.

As I develop my feminist philosophy of religion, a number of problems must be addressed. A central contention of womanists and black feminists² is that ‘white feminists’, benefitting from the structures of western liberal societies, consistently ignore the power of collective action and thus the possibilities of religious community for shaping the lives and resistance of oppressed peoples. The concern of white feminists with personal autonomy does not allow space, it is claimed, for an understanding of religion as a collective endeavour shaping political action (Grant 1989; Armour 1999). Tina Beattie’s (2004) critique of

² For discussion of ‘womanist’ and ‘black feminist’, see Patricia Hill Collins (1996). Collins cites Alice Walker’s four features of womanism: i) a womanist is ‘a black feminist or feminist of colour’; ii) womanism resists separatism and is committed to the survival and wholeness of men and women; iii) a womanist loves music, dance, struggle, spirit, food, her people, her self; and iv) the connection with feminism: ‘womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender’. ‘On some basic level, Walker herself uses the two terms [womanist and black feminist] as being virtually interchangeable’ (Collins 1996, 10).

feminist philosophy of religion likewise draws attention to the problems of individualistic feminisms, framed by an unacknowledged Protestantism concerned with establishing ‘right belief’. Analysing the work of Jantzen and Anderson, Beattie identifies an implicit liberalism beneath their apparent differences. The emphasis on the critique of belief and the attention given to individual liberation limits, Beattie claims, the significance of the feminist approach for the philosophical investigation of religion. For Beattie, both Anderson and Jantzen fail to address the aesthetic and communal aspects of religion and its practice: a lacuna her Catholic approach attempts to fill.

In what follows, I build upon the foundation provided by Anderson and Jantzen, while taking seriously the force of these criticisms. My feminist philosophy of religion is defined thus:

Firstly, I understand feminism as a political and practical movement. It is a way of thinking and – crucially – acting, requiring liberating forms of praxis extending beyond the concerns of the self towards a collective response to (primarily but not only) sex-based forms of injustice.

Secondly, I offer a feminist philosophy of religion that recognises its relationship to feminist theology. The critique of religion influenced feminist theological enquiry from its earliest days (Stanton 1895; Daly 1986 [1973]). For feminist theologians like Daphne Hampson (1990; 1996; 2002), the critique of ‘patriarchal’ forms of religion reveals that, far from being an innocent phenomenon, religious systems of belief, and the institutions that support them, provide tools that, over the centuries, have been highly effective for the oppression of women. Not all agree with this analysis (Ruether 1983; 2012; Coakley 2002; Haynes 2014a), and I suggest something of the possibilities of religion for shaping liberating forms of life as we proceed. Recent work in the philosophy of religion suggests the need to reflect upon ‘living religion’ (Hewitt and Scrutton 2018), locating analysis of religion in the lived experience of religious communities (Burley 2020), rather than solely in assessment of accounts of God that can appear overly abstracted from the living out of a religious faith. The desire for more nuanced engagements with the phenomenon of religion is, similarly, reflected in what follows, and, here, the reflections of black feminist and women theologians are most helpful for the development of a feminist philosophy of religion.

Drawing upon both negative and positive strands in the feminist analysis of religion, I recognise the problems of patriarchal history for religious traditions, but also the possibilities of reclaiming the power of collective action felt in religious community. The account of ‘the religious’ that I pursue enables the kind of diversity and pluralism that political theorists like Hannah Arendt (1998 [1958]) deemed necessary for human flourishing, and that has possibilities for

shaping a more just world. Religious practice allows for the development of a changed perspective on the world and the place of human beings within it. Here is the possibility of renewed connection with others and the world that makes possible richer forms of living: an aim that connects liberating forms of religious practice with the preoccupations of feminists.

1 Rethinking Feminism

1.1 The Disappearance (and Re-emergence?) of Feminist Philosophy of Religion

Writing a feminist philosophy of religion in 2021 requires some explanation: not least because an impartial observer might note the lack of titles announcing themselves in this way, concluding that this ideological starting point is no longer relevant in the Brave New World of (fluid) gender identities that proliferates in the intellectual scene of the second decade of the twenty-first century.

An historical overview proves illuminating. The appearance of Anderson's and Jantzen's monographs in feminist philosophy of religion at the end of the 1990s set in train a series of exciting developments. New collections were published (Anderson and Clack 2004); designated panels were convened at prestigious international conferences;³ textbooks and guides to the subject routinely included reflection on feminist approaches (Taliaferro and Griffiths 2003). It was impossible not to conclude that addressing the role of women in the sphere of religion, and the significance of gender for framing philosophical accounts of religion, was opening up new vistas for philosophy of religion.

The breadth of the approaches offered by Anderson and Jantzen suggests something of the richness of the field as it developed during these years. Anderson's book supplemented traditional methods of analytic philosophy of religion with sources drawn from the 'Continental' intellectual tradition. Kant, and Anderson's extensive knowledge of his ethics (Anderson 1993), sat alongside the theories of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Michèle Le Doeuff. Anderson's method of expansion created a place for desire and the emotions in the philosophical discussion of religion (Anderson 1998, 171–6). She pointed out how the habitual connection between women and desire led to a model of religion where the emotions were routinely excluded. Bringing together reason and emotion, philosophy and yearning, suggested a different way of shaping the conversations philosophers could have about religious beliefs and practices (1998, 165–206). Acknowledging the place of emotions in religious sensibility was as important as subjecting beliefs to rational analysis.

³ The American Academy of Religion Conference at Philadelphia (19–22 November 2005) included the first panel dedicated to Feminist Philosophy of Religion.

Jantzen's approach appears more radical, not least because she rejects 'mainstream' philosophy of religion. She describes a discipline shaped by values identified historically with the male and masculinity. 'Necrophilia' (1998, 8) is at the heart of analytic philosophy of religion: death as the destroyer of human agency may be feared, but it is also desired. Faced with a philosophical practice that is life-denying, and that excludes those aspects of life identified with the female, only a radically new philosophising will do. Jantzen turns to Continental philosophies to develop her approach. The weight they are made to carry is significantly more than is the case in Anderson's work. Anderson remains a Kantian when it comes to her ethics; Jantzen's chief conversation partner is Luce Irigaray. Employing psychoanalytic categories derived from Irigaray's work enables a feminist philosophy of religion that seeks to transform not just the discipline, but the practitioner, and, moreover, the world itself. The questions shaping Jantzen's enquiry shape philosophy as a transformational practice: What does it mean to flourish as a human being (Jantzen 1998, 156–70)? What do we need to establish trustworthy community (1998, 227–53)? What role should birth play in philosophy (1998, 144–54)? Whose problem is the 'problem of evil' (1998, 259–66)? The answers she proffers suggest as much the need for practical engagement with the struggles of human life as new theoretical frameworks. This aspect of her analysis more than almost anything else shapes my concern with developing a practical feminist philosophy of religion: ideas shape how we live.

This brief outline of Anderson and Jantzen's respective projects suggests something of the energy accompanying the early years of feminist philosophy of religion. It *felt* as if there was a fertile future for the feminist philosophical investigation of religion. So why the absence in 2021 of works in 'feminist philosophy of religion'? What went wrong? Alternatively, what went *right*? The use of feminist themes in philosophy of religion not declared as explicitly feminist suggests an implicit acceptance of many ideas driving the Analyses of Anderson and Jantzen during this creative period of philosophical exploration.

An article by Michelle Panchuk suggests this might be the case. In a collection that considers 'the lost sheep' of philosophy of religion – disability, gender, race and animals – Panchuk addresses the question of wholeness in tones that echo Anderson's love of life and Jantzen's flourishing. Panchuk's piece is not explicitly feminist, although she draws upon aspects of feminist work (not, though, the work of either Anderson or Jantzen). Panchuk envisages the body as the site of lived experience: a term peppering Anderson's text (1998, 99–100; 115; 179–80). Panchuk questions the supposed 'gender-neutrality' of analytic philosophy of religion, a crucial aspect of Anderson and Jantzen's critique (Anderson 1998, 16; Jantzen 1998, 28–32). Moreover, Panchuk

develops a powerful argument for a philosophy of religion that engages with ‘wholeness’, a word resonating with Anderson’s and Jantzen’s projects for the cultivation of human flourishing. Panchuk’s challenge, like theirs, is directed at the failure of analytic philosophers to engage with lived experience. Her article opens with her experience of presenting work on trauma to a conference of philosophers of religion:

The prospect of discussing the sadistic abuse of a friend as if it had been inflicted on the abstract entities that populate philosophical thought experiments, rather than a flesh-and-blood child, made me feel sick – even morally suspect. I had exposed the wounds and souls of my friends and myself to being poked by those for whom analysis was merely an academic exercise, for whom nothing of import hung on the conclusion of the argument. These weren’t bad people. They weren’t even the source of my trepidation per se – disciplinary norms were. My project was philosophical. As such there was a tacit expectation that we would treat it as if it were neither personal nor political. (2019, 55)

The sense that there is something fundamentally wrong with the model of the human subject habitually used in philosophy of religion is apparent in Panchuk’s painful words. The presence of challenging works like hers suggests it is no longer necessary to *foreground* feminist claims: these are taken as read. Anderson and Jantzen thus achieved their goal of creating a context for new and creative forms of philosophising.

Much can be said for this conclusion. ‘Mainstreaming’ feminism suggests that what matters is furthering the feminist commitment to justice in philosophy and philosophising. I have much sympathy with this claim, not least because it informs aspects of my approach. As noted in the introduction, feminism is that which promotes ‘the full humanity of women’, and as Pearl Cleage notes, women are thus ‘capable of participation and leadership *in the full range of human activities* – intellectual, political, social, sexual, spiritual and economic’ (in Collins 1996, 12; my emphasis).

Yet the dangers of ignoring sex- and gender-based discrimination are starkly illustrated in the experience of feminist activism. The suggestion that feminism had achieved its ends was embraced in the ‘post-feminist’ discourses of the 1990s (Haraway 1991; Gamble 1998). Old group identities and ‘Grand Narratives’ that previously shaped understandings of human life and experience no longer enabled liberation. The focus shifted from addressing the collective oppression of women to understanding liberation as required by *all* people in order for individual desires and hopes to be freed up (Hekman 2014, 113–46). Viewed from 2021, the shelving of an explicit feminism seems somewhat premature. The rise of populist politics worldwide, accompanied by conservative social agendas, has returned the question of women’s liberation to the table.

In Poland, access to abortion was effectively banned by a ruling in October 2020 that terminations on the basis of foetal defects were ‘unconstitutional’. In the USA, the election of Donald Trump as President in 2016 shocked many, not least because this occurred despite the production of a tape during the campaign of Trump boasting of his methods as a sexual predator. In the wake of this political earthquake, feminist activism saw something of a revival, the ‘Me Too’ movement exposing women’s common experience of sexual harassment and violence in ways not so clearly articulated since the heady days of the 1970s and 1980s Women’s Movement.⁴

If the shoots of a new feminist politics are emerging out of this febrile political scene, might there be a future for a feminist *philosophy of religion*? Can feminist philosophy of religion be reimaged through a connection to the everyday, encompassing modes of philosophising that have as their goal political and social transformation? To make such a move requires further investigation of feminist philosophy of religion’s past. Excavating this past suggests something of what went wrong, while holding out the possibility of a renewed vision for a contemporary feminist philosophy of religion.

1.2 The Perennial Problem of Feminist Philosophy (of Religion)

My concern is to develop a *practical* feminist philosophy of religion. Immediately this raises questions of what it means to practise philosophy and, moreover, to engage as a philosopher with matters of religion.

A criticism long-levelled at feminist philosophy is that it is not ‘real’ philosophy. Feminists, it is claimed, are insufficiently objective when they engage in the work of critical analysis. To start from a feminist perspective is to locate one’s philosophical investigations within a particular, politically determined space. One’s philosophy is shaped by explicit identification of historic and continuing injustice against women; one’s practice as a feminist philosopher aims at challenging this.

The history of feminist philosophical investigation reveals this political framing. Feminist philosophers consistently challenge the notion that there could be a way of philosophising that eschews one’s ideological commitments and/or one’s lived experience. A key feature of the so-called ‘second wave’ of feminist theorising was to draw attention to the ‘masculinising’ of reason.⁵ A central text for this critical history is Genevieve Lloyd’s *The Man of Reason* (1984), where ‘Woman’ emerges as a key category for western philosophising,

⁴ See key texts from this period: Brownmiller 1975; Dworkin 1981; Cameron and Frazer 1987.

⁵ The depiction of ‘waves’ of feminist enquiry is somewhat misleading. The past does not ‘disappear’, and we do well to remember this when considering the diversity of feminist approaches populating the contemporary scene (Browne 2014, 19; Nicholson 2010).

acting as a cipher for that which (masculine) Reason rejects. Language borrowed from ecofeminist theorising captures the resulting gendered binary perfectly: ‘Woman’ is to Nature as ‘Man’ is to Reason (Ortner 1972; Plumwood 1993). ‘Woman’ is connected with the body and the processes of reproduction, with feeling and emotion: features that exclude ‘Her’ from the attributes of rationality and dispassionate reflection routinely associated with ‘Man’.

This construction continues to be felt in claims that feminist philosophy is ‘too partial’. Dismissals of this kind implicitly accept the attributes of reason and detachment as central to the practice of philosophy without understanding the gendered history that shapes them. ‘These’ modes of reflecting are, apparently, general and impartial, while feminist philosophy is ‘merely’ partial and subjective. Explicit misogyny might be hard to find in contemporary philosophical publications, but Jennifer Saul’s (2013) work on unconscious gender bias suggests how this dichotomy continues to operate in the construction of philosophical argument and the structures of the discipline itself. Men look and act like philosophers; women, it seems, don’t.

This observation goes some way to explaining the dearth of women in the history of philosophy and its contemporary practice. Defined as that which is opposed to rational reflection – or, at the very least, as less capable of such reflection than the male – women have been excluded by their very ontology from the practices shaping the intellectual history of humanity. For feminist philosophers, it is not possible to engage with philosophical work without paying attention to the history of misogyny underpinning claims for apparently neutral philosophical positions.⁶

At the same time, feminist philosophy emerged from the historical struggles for women’s rights and equality with men. Important thinkers in that history such as Gabrielle Suchon (1632–1703), Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97) and Simone de Beauvoir (1908–86) cannot be understood without an awareness of the political struggles for women’s dignity and equality that helped form their ideas. This historically grounded reflection means the feminist cannot ignore the meshing together of ideas and practice. There is an *interdependence* between thought and action (Collins 1990, 29), and feminist theorising makes this explicit. Adopting a feminist viewpoint requires more than taking on an ideological perspective: it shapes and informs the whole of one’s life.

As a result, feminist philosophies are intimately connected to practical questions about how best to live in the world. This raises questions about the relationship between feminist enquiry and truth-claims. Can a feminist

⁶ For examples of misogyny in the history of western philosophy, see Clack’s 1999 anthology.

philosophy ignore questions of truth or objectivity? What happens if feminist ideas fail to cohere with matters of fact? Is there a way of framing the commitment to the liberation of all women – central to its historical formulation – that does not misrepresent the variety of perspectives possible for women, and the diverse ways in which the flourishing of different individual women and groups of women might be attained? Questions like these necessarily thread their way through the themes we will encounter.

At this point, the second theme of this Element comes into view. This is not simply about feminism, though that story and its possible futures are a necessary part of it. It is, rather, a feminist engagement with *religion*. If analytic philosophy of religion concerns itself with possible justifications for religious belief, the feminist approach to philosophy of religion directs attention to the constraints patriarchal religion places on women's lives. Like philosophy, the discussion of religion cannot proceed without understanding the way it has developed out of a history that enshrined male power through institutions and ideas, and where women's opportunities to shape political and intellectual life were as a result severely curtailed.

Feminist theology and philosophy of religion share deep roots: many of the ideas framing feminist philosophy of religion are drawn from earlier analyses by feminist theologians. The ideas of Mary Daly, a feminist theologian trained in philosophy, helped shape the first feminist philosophies of religion. Daly describes at length the uses of religion for constraining women's lives (Daly 1986 [1973]; 1978). Religious doctrines offer transcendent justifications for the exercise of earthly power: 'If God in "his" heaven is a father ruling "his" people, then it is in the nature of things and according to the divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male-dominated' (Daly 1986 [1973], 13). Deconstructing the all-too-human qualities of religion and its role in maintaining patriarchal society opens up a different set of questions for feminist philosophers of religion to those shaping the investigations of their colleagues. One of the most important concerns the extent to which being a feminist is – or is not – compatible with practising one of the religious traditions developing out of the patriarchal history Daly is at pains to expose.

While this suggests something of the distinctive path feminists take in their investigations of religion, there is common ground between feminist philosophers of religion and their apparently more neutral counterparts. With the analytic philosopher of religion, the feminist philosopher of religion engages in the analysis of religious beliefs, though with an emphasis on the way belief shapes action. In itself, this is not peculiar to feminism: RB Braithwaite (1971 [1955]) makes a similar connection in an intervention that remains influential (Hick 1989, 193–209). What makes the feminist perspective distinctive is the

emphasis on gender: *masculine* theological language makes possible the maintenance of sexist perspectives.

This emphasis explains Hampson's (1990; 2002) rejection of religious traditions shaped by patriarchal history. Traditions formed in social contexts that enshrined sexual inequality perpetuate a sense of female inferiority: 'For a feminist to be a Christian is indeed for her to swallow a fishbone. It must stick in her throat' (Hampson 1996, 1). This trenchant claim has not gone unanswered, as Sarah Coakley, Julie Hopkins, Janet Martin Soskice, Jane Shaw and Nicola Slee make clear (Hampson 1996). For many women, the traditions Hampson wants them to reject provide liberating narratives for the framing of their lives.

The diversity of feminist religious perspectives highlights the malleable nature of religion. Religion is a multifaceted phenomenon. Rituals, rites and communal practices have just as significant roles to play as belief, a fact not lost on Amy Hollywood (2004), who, like Beattie, suggests the importance of attending to the practices of religion.

Here is a connection between feminism and religion not always identified by feminist critics of the latter, possibly because the secular framing of feminist politics does not make space for considering the ground shared with the religious. *Neither feminism nor religion can be reduced to ways of thinking, for both are grounded in and require specific forms of action.*

Explaining this oversight, Amy Newman suggests that feminist scholars have adopted an uncritical acceptance of the Marxist critique of religion. For Marx, religion acts as a justification of unjust power structures, providing a sop for human suffering, as well as pacifying feelings of outrage that might lead the oppressed to revolt against their masters. This rendition of the *effect* of holding to a set of religious beliefs informs feminist identifications of religious justifications for patriarchal social structures. Power and its exercise becomes a necessary part of the discussion of religion. If turning the gaze to the role of power is a helpful aspect of Marx's critique, Newman is not convinced by the adoption of his generalised account of what 'religion' is. Marx's definition of 'religion' is shaped by monolithic readings of Judaism and Christianity (Newman 1994, 20). Claims that there is only one way of reading Jewish or Christian texts or one form of religious practice in these traditions is far from the reality of religious diversity, and fails to engage with the lived experiences of those practising their faith. Newman hopes that feminists will challenge these inaccurate representations and 'turn from abstract and ideologically instigated constructions of "religion"', considering, instead, 'the actual self-understanding of particular persons or groups' (1994, 32).