Engaging the "Forbidden Texts" of Philosophy

Pamela Sue Anderson Talks to Alison Jasper

AJ: In reference to your work in feminist philosophy of religion, Tina Beattie implied that you were perhaps less willing to explain the "particularity" of your "own religious positioning" (Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism* 76–80), or I might say, feminist genealogy than your critique of "male-neutral" would seem to require (cf. Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy* 13, 142–48). Would you be prepared to say something about your own background and the relationship of what you see as your philosophical project to, for example, Christianity?

PSA: Yes. In the course of this interview I will position myself in relation to my own religious background, or if you like, my "feminist genealogy." Yet, if you don't mind, it is important to admit that over the years I have found theologians who object to the lack of any explicit religious positioning given to my own yearning, very frustrating! Generally, this objection has seemed to either misunderstand or dismiss the nature of my feminist struggle. In particular, this has obscured my struggle against an intransigent epistemological obstacle which blocked women's claims to think, to know or—simply—to have ideas of their own in philosophy.

For example, Beattie recognizes that the heart of my feminism is philosophical; and yet she challenges my philosophical method for being blind to my own religious positioning (Beattie 78). Her challenge is clear: it is that I do what I accuse male philosophers of doing when I employ philosophical methods as if these methods are neutral of my own presuppositions and, in particular, my religious positioning. Beattie also recognizes my determination to uncover and to struggle with the myths of gender identity embedded in the texts of philosophy of religion; and yet she objects to my bracketing off the specificities of my own religious desire, in order to explore the resistance to gender-oppression within other religious traditions, notably in Hindu practices of *bhakti* (Beattie 77; cf. Mukta, *Upholding the Common Life*).

After having been trained to read philosophical texts in the 1980s with the hermeneutic insight of Paul Ricoeur, I began to see the vital need

in the early 1990s for more than Ricoeurian hermeneutics. The need was for a method which enabled feminists to learn from the gender practices of other cultures, especially through the religious matters of texts. While Ricoeur's hermeneutics had already made me a thinker sensitive to damaging presuppositions, or "prejudices," in philosophical and theological thought, I became explicitly aware of the serious and generally hidden obstacle to recognizing oppressive gender-bias not only in reading Hartsock's "The Feminist Standpoint," but in both reading and discussing Sandra Harding's "feminist standpoint epistemology" (Harding, *Whose Science?*). As a result, I worked to develop an epistemological method, employing Harding's "strong objectivity" and "self-reflexivity" explicitly for a feminist philosophy of religion (Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy* 70–80).

Harding argued that objectivity in epistemology remains "weak" as long as we are unaware of our own privileged positions in making claims to knowledge but, equally, of our reasons for action and religious practices. We can only acquire more objective knowledge by "thinking from the lives of others" who occupy positions on the margins of the dominant epistemology (Harding, *Whose Science?* and "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology;" cf. Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy* 67–87). The feminist task is not thinking that we have neutrality, but instead is struggling to see ourselves reflexively and less partially; that is, to see an alternative account of oneself as another. We gain less partial knowledge both of ourselves and of others not by claiming absolute objectivity but by working towards the engaged vision of a feminist standpoint.

In the first instance, of course, Hartsock and Harding were articulating the standpoint of women in philosophy. But to uncover gender oppression in the social and epistemic relations of philosophy, each of these feminist philosophers sought "a feminist standpoint" which was not simply that of being born a woman. Questions of sexually specific desire were not generally raised by the feminist standpoint epistemologists. Instead such questions were often left to feminist psycholinguists (like, for example, Luce Irigaray who was read by Beattie) and to queer theorists. As a feminist philosopher of religion, I gained much from considering these different sorts of feminist questions, while working to avoid contradictions. However, my readers did not always agree with, or follow, this ambition.

AJ: Perhaps, nevertheless, readers might be as interested in the context within which you have come to this philosophical position as in its nuances.

PSA: I grew up in the Lutheran "mid-west" of the United States,

in a suburb of Minneapolis. I won a scholarship to study Mathematics at St Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota. In fact, by the time I arrived at St Olaf, my real passion was French language and literature, but I was told that I needed more than "French." When I arrived in Oxford, having spent some time in France, my plan was to combine my interests in French with Philosophy by working on the French philosopher, Ricoeur, whose hermeneutic philosophy I've already mentioned.

In the 1980s, Ricoeur was very little read by Oxford philosophers, and I had to struggle to persuade my tutors in Philosophy to take my interest in his writings seriously (while today international societies for Ricoeur studies flourish). On the one hand, Oxford analytic philosophers were suspicious of Ricoeur's apparent sympathies with theology and literature; on the other hand, Christian philosophers of religion did not see Ricoeur's philosophy meeting the rigorous standards of philosophical argumentation for Christian theism.

To make matters worse for my dual interests in French and in Philosophy, many of those people close to me within the Lutheran tradition which linked St Olaf College (as a very highly respected Lutheran liberal arts college) and Mansfield College (as the only Oxford college which had a Fellow's post in Lutheran Theology) would never recognize my intellectual passions as suitable for "a girl" from Minnesota, suitable for the heartland of Lutheran Protestantism! Looking back what made this negative judgement of unsuitability clear to me were dismissive comments about my enigmatic behaviour, puzzled expressions, teasing, general lack of understanding of, or conversations about, my goals. I became used to expecting disapproval and accepted the lack of support I found from the religious authorities in the colleges which, in turn, obscured other personal and intellectual support.

In the light of this religious background, you could say that I came, eventually, to feminist philosophy of religion via my consistent experiences of resistance to having "ideas of my own" as a woman who sought to think philosophically rather than conform to the mid-western Lutheran image of theology and of Christian gender stereotypes; for example, being "a good girl" as both a wife and a mother was never my gender ideal. Even if this ideal could have been combined with a career, I did not see things that way. The attraction of French language, culture and literature provided me with the freedom to question my upbringing (perhaps, another language or culture would have served a similar purpose). Confronting cultural differences provided an opportunity to think beyond the perspectives which had been imposed in being brought up Lutheran in Minnesota. It could not be true that the best life was to

be Lutheran and to "settle down" in the Twin Cities (i.e., Minneapolis-St Paul, Minnesota and Mansfield). The attraction of philosophy lay in the possibility of thinking for myself, while also reflecting on life together with other people.

So, in reply to your question and Beattie's request to be honest about my religious positioning, I admit that this background has been an obstacle and a problem for me as a woman and a free thinker. Philosophy and European culture provided a framework for the reflexivity of both my philosophical and my personal thinking. Feminism added to the intellectual task of philosophical self-reflection the possibility of empowering women (including myself) to not accept epistemic injustice; that is, to not exclude subjects on the grounds of gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity or religion. Feminist philosophy continues to offer an antidote to certain kinds of dishonesty and self-deception, especially to excessive piety.

AJ: So what was it like for a young woman philosopher in those student and early career years?

PSA: I would say, in the philosophical terms of Michèle Le Doeuff, "the primal scene"[1] of my education as a woman in philosophy arose in resisting the Lutheran norms of piety which I found burdensome at St Olaf and Mansfield Colleges. My primal scene came when a voice inside my head paralyzed my well-warranted confidence, saying, "Lutheran girls don't have ideas of their own, they are respectful of (male) authority!" To silence this inner noise, I fled that "sacred" scene to a different place, even though I would find other forms of patriarchy in philosophy. Yet the oppositional voice in my own head would keep me running defiant of the gender norms of a pious upbringing, ". . . and girls don't 'go off' to European cities, foreign institutions and other cultures, searching in libraries and hiding away in impenetrable books."

Nevertheless, some sense of belief that I could think for myself and make a valuable contribution in life to women and men in philosophy (of religion) remained. My desire to make a critical contribution as a woman in philosophy would grow gradually stronger. But I have never had an easy relation to the branch of philosophy to which I am most often associated: that is, to the philosophy of religion. I am constantly uncovering problematic norms such as the omni-attributes of the traditional theistic God which still dominate the field. The world of Oxford

[1] For my more detailed discussion of "the primal scene" in Le Doeuff, see Anderson, "Michèle Le Doeuff's 'Primal Scene:' Prohibition and Confidence in the Education of a Woman."

philosophy had prepared me for the resistance I would continue to experience in the search for my first permanent job in teaching philosophy. I gave tutorials in modern philosophy at Mansfield, but to appease my parents I went on the job market at the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division meetings in 1990 and 1991. In retrospect, it is predictable that I would have been competing with other philosophers of religion and especially, in the USA, from Notre Dame University where philosophers are trained in the Anglo-American tradition of philosophy of religion; that is, trained specifically and rigorously in the Christian philosophy of religion which remains the privileged tradition in Oxford.

An ongoing failure to be recognized as a woman philosopher—and not merely as someone from St Olaf College doing Christian philosophy of religion—was palpable and predictable. In any event, it was, then, a matter of the very highest significance to me at the beginning of my career that I defend myself and succeed from the beginning in this world which remains not only highly competitive (and elitist), but often very hostile to women. There was a need to convince these men and myself not only that as a woman I could be "up there" with the very best of philosophers, but that my choice of Ricoeur, with his, to some, unconventional literary, theological and scriptural interests, was fully worthy of the philosophical attention men were lovingly devoting to a canon of dead male philosophers who, in comparison with Ricoeur—to say nothing of Hartsock, Harding and Le Doeuff—had far less to say to me at that point.

Already during those early years in Oxford, I learned to compromize my passions in order to achieve my goal of becoming a professional philosopher. For instance, Ricoeur as a living French philosopher could not be studied on his own, but only with the legitimation of the canonized figure of a dead male philosopher: Kant who would—and ironically to my mind—become a highly contentious figure, courting the disdain of all postmodern theorists, as well as that of the radically orthodox, the conservative and the neo-Barthian theologians. However, if the Oxford tutor's intention in having me study Kant was to curb my ambition or demonstrate that I wasn't up to the task of philosophy, his aim failed: and I took on Kant with a will to prove any philosophical doubters wrong!

It was this sort of academic climate that did eventually facilitate my encounter with feminism; first, through Harding during the short period of time I spent teaching at Delaware and second, through Le Doeuff for years right up to the present time. I was a woman in philosophy, engaging the "forbidden texts" of the male philosophers, but also going beyond this to read and un-

derstand the critical work of women like Harding herself who introduced me to the writings of Alison Jaggar, Seyla Benhabib and the early work of Judith Butler on issues of the self. The latter two feminists, along with Harding, gave me a first taste of the debates over the postmodern "death" of the self, of metaphysics and of history. The timely question was: can feminism be compatible with postmodernism?

Le Doeuff would become more significant as I continued to read and be shaped by the subtle and witty insight found in her *Philosophical Imaginary* and *Hipparchia's Choice*. From her texts, I've gained many skills as a philosopher but in particular Le Doeuff's incisive readings of the history of philosophy gave new confidence to think and have ideas. Her third book, *The Sex of Knowing*, offers additional ground to discover those women whose ideas have been "disinherited" by the tradition of philosophy excluding women. The image of the female Alexandrian philosopher and astronomer, Hypatia, who fell victim to a murderous Christian mob for celebrating her knowledge and intellect too publicly as a woman, was first introduced to me by Le Doeuff (*The Sex of Knowing* 112–14). Le Doeuff's text on female disinheritance in philosophy appeared well before *Agora* became a popular film about the female philosopher and martyr Hypatia in the cinema of Europe and the USA. In spite of many similar cautionary tales, none of the inspiring women uncovered by Le Doeuff in the history of philosophy are daunted by the task of challenging men on their own intellectual turf.

AJ: In 1993 you took up a post at Sunderland University. How did you find working in a new university in the NE of England?

PSA: My particular approach to philosophy—through Kant and Ricoeur—marked me as unconventional and difficult to place before I went to Sunderland. My goal in working in the NE of England was to gain the freedom to write, teach and publish in feminist philosophy. It was also to work on that personal positioning and feminist philosophical consciousness that your opening question about Beattie's criticisms of "my [non-neutral] standpoint" raised. I still owe a debt to Sunderland for that freedom and that self-reflexive work! It was a new university and not hidebound by conservative traditions in philosophy—there was scope for more radical thinking—which was good for feminist scholars generally and also for me as a woman in the field of philosophy. So, for my scholarship, this period was liberating and productive, giving me the opportunity to respond to Harding's suggestion that there had never been a feminist critique of the philosophy of religion; I published my first major

monograph, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (1998). Sunderland also gave me my first opportunity to invite Michèle Le Doeuff to speak to my colleagues and students. And this became a tradition which I've carried on in Oxford, inviting Le Doeuff regularly to inspire feminist and non-feminist philosophers alike with her political wit and philosophical scholarship.

AJ: *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* was your first manifesto as a feminist philosopher (of religion); this monograph presented a critique of and challenge to Christian male epistemic privilege.

PSA: Yes. *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* aimed to expose the weaknesses of building male knowledge on the self-aggrandizement of the male philosopher who is propped up by the blind infatuation of the student and/or lover. Le Doeuff's critique of the Héloïse complex[2] helped me to expose the weakness of both the (female/male) lover and the (male) beloved: the one lover lacked confidence and the other suffered from over-confidence. Le Doeuff's critique supported my view that knowledge as "male" could never be anything but "weak" as long as blinded by false confidences. Moreover, the false consciousness of both the lover and the beloved not only applied to the pattern of disciple and master, female and male, but to human and divine. This implicit critique of apotheosis—or, self-deification as self-aggrandizement—became even more central to Le Doeuff's later critique of sexism in *The Sex of Knowing* and in her Weidenfeld Lectures (Le Doeuff, "The Spirit of Secularism;" cf. Anderson, "Liberating Love's Capabilities").

AJ: *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* also brought you into relationship and often contention with a number of other feminist theologians and philosophers of religion, including Grace Jantzen, Tina Beattie, Luce Irigaray, Sarah Coakley. Some of these relationships seem to take on a rather adversarial character. Would you agree and how would you explain that?

PSA: This is a very good question. Immediately, after its publication I did not understand terribly well why these feminist theologians and feminist philosophers of religion seemed to misunderstand the arguments in *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*. I have been frustrated by their failure as feminists

[2] "Héloïse complex" is diagnosed by Michèle Le Doeuff (*Hipparchia's Choice*, 59–60 and 162–65) as the tendency of women in philosophy to idolize either a male colleague or teacher (as did Héloïse and Beauvoir). This idolization could be of a "great" living or dead philosopher whose name they carry, e.g. "Kantian," but the Héloïse complex benefits the man who is named and destroys the woman by removing her intellectual independence and ability to create philosophy herself.

to understand my text. Perhaps this should have been expected because my academic formation as a philosopher had not been with other women (neither with female theologians nor female philosophers of religion). This formation had not been typical in terms of either my context or my background. Yet my greatest perplexity was with other feminist philosophers of religion not following my lead to Harding and to Le Doeuff.

In addition to feminist theologians asking for clarification of my religious desires, a common thread in their impatience with my text is an assumption, roughly, due to Irigaray and other psycholinguists that "feminist" thinking equals expressing "feminine" language and values; sexually specific self-expression is thought to be possible in becoming a woman or becoming divine as a woman. But female apotheosis had never been my vision for feminist philosophers or for women generally, especially insofar as suiting patriarchal idolizations of femininity. Instead I hold an Enlightenment view of philosophical thinking as rational and embodied, but not a psychological or theological view of women as generically different from men.

A Feminist Philosophy of Religion is a provocative and contentious text on two counts for those feminist theologians and psycholinguists who were advocating a "feminism of sexual difference;" the latter is unlike either the Marxist or the liberal feminists who had influenced my own feminist struggle to transform philosophy in order to include women as equals. First, the text does not equate feminist with being or becoming a woman and especially not with self-expression in feminine language. Second, the text does not advocate any particular conception of God or theology which, in 1998, I left explicitly to theologians. Perhaps, though, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* reads (to some) as if I am ambivalent about psychoanalysis and theology, generally. Ironically, I am more ambivalent about the Lacanian preoccupations of many contemporary, sexual-difference feminist theologians than Freud or Lacan themselves. I tried to give other feminists the benefit of doubt when it came to their theology. But I was not and can never be in agreement with feminine psycholinguistics enabling Christian women to become divine. I remain a philosopher and an equality (rather than sexual-difference) feminist, but not a psycholinguist or strictly speaking a theologian interested in sexual difference, or sexually different desires as the way to (knowledge of, or intimacy with) God.

A Feminist Philosophy of Religion treats religion as both an academic subject and a socially constructed reality. I never equate religion with desire for or knowledge of God. Nor do I equate feminist philosophy of religion with feminist theol-

ogy or feminist spirituality.[3] I don't think that for the sake of women themselves feminists can allow "religion" to play on women's own insecurities about inordinate desire—or, roughly, on "Eve's sin"—without generating epistemic injustice. Reassuring women of their own separate sphere of spirituality as, for example, in Coakley's intimacy with God (Coakley, "Feminism and Analytic Philosophy" 516–20) may enable a gendered (or, a woman's) way of doing theology. Yet the constant danger of this different sphere for women's intimacy and desire will be to reinstate gender injustice and patriarchal forms of sexist oppression. Feminist philosophy and women's intellect address this critical danger.

AJ: *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* proposes a rational passion, or yearning, for justice, employing mimetic reconfigurations of our mythic inheritance in the west as a form of imaginative variations. This imaginative form of mimesis, or "philosophical imaginary," aims to be compatible with thinking from women's lives. But is it incompatible with a psycholinguistic—feminine—imaginary?

[3] To qualify this claim, I must agree with Dorota Filipczak's conception of "divining a self" which is a significant alternative to a spirituality of "becoming divine." In contradistinction to the latter, divining a self aims to locate and reclaim the autonomous female self in her own political and religious context, see Filipczak 210–12.

PSA: Yes. Here it is crucial to be clear. After discussing Le Doeuff and Harding, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* brings in Irigaray and Julia Kristeva to raise the question of female desire—as a fundamental dimension of that which has been excluded by male social, material and epistemic privileges in philosophy of religion. I also look at how a mimetic strategy has to be disruptive and criticized Ricoeur's threefold form of mimesis for not being disruptive of patriarchal myths. However, I never give up my alliance with Le Doeuff's conceptions of the philosophical imaginary, of reason and of "a feminist" as a woman who "allows no one to think in her place."

AJ: In an extended review of *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, Sarah Coakley criticized the Kantian account of reality you tried to align with forms of feminist standpoint epistemology as drawn from Harding (Coakley, "Feminism and Analytic Philosophy"). Her critique, interesting though it was in some ways, was also clearly framed by her own desire to legitimize a distinctly more realist (less Kantian) account of God. Where do you feel you now stand on this debate?

PSA: Allow me to try to explain what may be meant by this alignment. I am a Kantian and I see Kant as both an empirical realist and a transcendental idealist. I am

also a feminist philosopher who has criticized Kant and Ricoeur on the grounds of gender bias from a feminist standpoint. But this critique is not decisive or a rejection of Kant and of all Kantians. Instead it reflects the influence of feminist Marxists and such post-Hegelian Kantians as Jurgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib. To understand my own position on Kant today, my readers can turn to *Anderson and Bell*, *Kant and Theology*; this co-authored book is especially useful for understanding (my) Kantian views of realism and of God.

I also argue that feminist standpoint epistemology derives from a feminist Marxism which has strong affinities with Hegel's master/slave dialectic. But this argument is in Harding and in my discussion of Hegel (Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy* 87–92). It is essential to understand the social and material reality which is Harding's concern. To gain this understanding, it helps to read such post-Marxist rationalists as Hartsock, Habermas and Benhabib.

So, my reply to your question about "reality" suggests an apparent lack, amongst contemporary Christian theists, of any firsthand understanding of the history of Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy and, in particular, philosophical knowledge of the history of Kant, Hegel and Marx. In contrast, a feminist standpoint epistemologist would have read the Frankfurt school philosophers whose post-Hegelian Kantian philosophy is German analytic Marxism. Their view(s) of reality would have to include social and material dimensions and not just a naïve conception of empirical sensations and "evidence," or, even, of more profound psychological and spiritual intimacy with the divine. Making the naïve empiricist view of "reality" less naïve by encompassing a personal encounter with the theistic God is highly problematic for philosophers, including contemporary feminist philosophers. Claiming to find knowledge of the divine in deeply subjective, sexual and spiritual encounters with a personal God does not necessarily reassure a philosophical realist.

Otherwise, there is no better way to understanding than for readers to explore the debates about feminist epistemology, Hegel, Kant and so on for themselves. If they merely go by Coakley's account of my position, then they should be aware of her distinctive theological prejudice against socialist or Marxist feminists which inhibits careful understanding of post-Hegelian Kantians and of feminist standpoint epistemology. The danger is to reduce "reality" to a false "purity" of religious experience grasped with a naïve empiricism or psychologism. A falsely conceived real or pure experience would ignore the material and social dimensions; in turn, this obscures the possibility of a reflexively informed gender

perspective on reality. Without the latter, gender can hide unjust empirical and psychological relations.

Coakley writes as a philosopher of religion in the analytic tradition of Christian theism, but she does not explicitly and fairly assess analytic philosophical debates about reality which are more wide-ranging than Christian theism or Christian mystical experience (Coakley, "Dark Contemplation" 292–95, 311–12). Lamentably she leaves out textual analysis of debates in feminist epistemology, Marxist feminism and Frankfurt School philosophies. The highly substantial socialist debates in philosophy cannot be ignored or dismissed by feminist theologians without their missing decisive issues in feminism.

For example, I have in mind the debates of Benhabib as a feminist political philosopher and as a Habermas scholar, but also those of Angela Davies as a feminist and militant philosopher shaped by Marcuse; and the issues of Nancy Fraser as a feminist political philosopher shaped by both Foucault and Habermas. Such feminist philosophers confront political culture, issues of social justice and debates over recognition which necessarily inform our conception of reality. Feminist realists may claim different things about (the same) reality, but this is not necessarily incoherent in a debilitating sense. Instead this sort of disagreement reflects the democratic nature of the growth of knowledge—for example, as found in Harding's feminist standpoint epistemology—through a struggle for truth. The range of feminist challenges to what we know about reality forces us to ask whether those who believe in "God" are themselves in touch with "reality," especially the reality of social injustice. Without a hermeneutic of suspicion and a self-reflexive critique, feminist claims about reality and God run the danger of their own theological mystification (Anderson, "Feminist Philosophy and Transcendence" 37–44; cf. Hollywood 173–241, 329–45).

AJ: Coakley criticized your feminist challenge to analytic philosophy of religion. She acknowledged with some approval your continuing commitment to truth, objectivity and rationality, even though you and, to be fair, she as well—were critical of past definitions of these terms. However, Coakley was a good deal more confident than you had been that analytic philosophy was capable of cleaning up its own act in relation to gender consciousness (Coakley, "Feminism and Analytic Philosophy" 517–19; 2005, 282–95).

PSA: Let me break in at this point and respond to make things more clear; and then, I will pick up on the rest of this question about Coakley and analytic philosophy (below). Yes. You are correct Coakley and

I agree on a continuing commitment to truth, objectivity and rationality. But you are not correct in believing Coakley is right in everything she says about what I think. I have never dismissed analytic philosophy or its method: I teach it to my students and employ analytic tools in my conceptions of truth, objectivity and rationality! What you are picking up is a reduction of "analytic philosophy" to "Christian philosophy of religion" as written by Richard Swinburne, William Alston, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Alvin Plantinga and Caroline Franks Davis. But an analytic philosopher could easily think that "Christian philosophy of religion" is a mere game of logic with nothing to do with reality—let alone God as (a) reality. The problem for Christian philosophy of religion is, then, how to demonstrate philosophically that their "God" is real. In other words, it is not clear to me either how Coakley can "align" herself "with" analytic philosophy without far more qualification in the analytic terms of her theological position and of philosophical realism.

AJ: It was clear too that Coakley wanted to defend the possibility of a conventional view of metaphysical reality that could not be dismissed as the simple outcome of masculine epistemological privilege (Coakley, "Feminism and Analytic Philosophy" 514, 519). In her view, to some extent, you had conformed to this secularizing trope, by laying your emphasis on the material reality implicit within power relations between women and men as the lynch pin in an argument under the title of the philosophy of religion. In any case, she was circumspect about your materialist account of standpoint epistemology, arguing that the account of truth and objectivity it proposed was ultimately incoherent (Coakley, "Feminism and Analytic Philosophy" 507–09). In soliciting all perspectives—marginal, privileged and everything in between, truth and objectivity are necessarily ruled out.

PSA: Yes. You are correct that Coakley picks up something about metaphysical reality and defends it as more than a masculine privilege or projection. But the problem is that her argument(s) against the specific critique of Feuerbach and against the many other feminist and philosophical critiques of the concept of the omni-attribute God are not explicit enough. Coakley proposes an alternative to "the more anthropomorphic or explicitly Feuerbachian projectionism" in which "divine reality" is "encountered" in an intimate or deeply "feminine" way (Coakley, "Feminism and Analytic Philosophy" 518–19); the latter takes up subjectivity and direct perception of the divine as the "feminine" alternative to the objectivity and indirect perception of the divine of the dominant "masculine" conceptions

of the theistic God in philosophy of religion (517–18). Yet I simply don't see this as a "feminist" project—and certainly not a "feminist standpoint" which would reject the feminine and masculine binary of Christian theism as hierarchal, exclusive and so, oppressive for those excluded and/or subordinated.

Moreover, it is not enough to simply accuse me of picking up something "secular." How do we know what aspects of reality are secular and what aspects are sacred? I may agree that personal reality as we encounter it is sacred. But then, I would not be able to separate off easily what in reality could be secular. Is physical matter, or certain aspects of the sensible world, secular? Basically, my philosophical reasoning does not divide reality into secular and (Christian) sacred, or think that secular is an aspect of reality to be avoided. "Secular" is more likely to function as a local or culturally relative term which has been inherited from certain Christian forms of oppositional thinking.

Note, however, that my points about the term "secular" do not imply that philosophical reasoning is neutral and non-local. But they do mean that philosophical arguments must be expressed clearly enough that we know what terms are being employed and what metaphysical baggage is being assumed in any discussions using such terms as God, reality, Christian, secular, analytic and so on. From my philosophical position and personal background, the danger for those seeking to put an end to domination and oppression is to be trapped inside a box, the outside of which is secular and the inside is Christian. If we claim to live in such separate worlds, then we are in any case not seeing reality.

As for my account of "points of view" being incoherent, admittedly I face a philosophical danger in saying that feminist subjects are "multiple" and "diverse" due to living in different locations. However, my position is not ultimately meant to be incoherent as long as the goal of feminist standpoint epistemology is "less partial" knowledge and not "absolute" knowledge. I am not trying to bundle up incoherent positions and then claim to have coherent knowledge of reality. The process of gaining knowledge never achieves its ultimate goal, that is, never complete or absolute knowledge of all aspects of reality as a whole. It is impossible to achieve absolute truth or absolute objectivity. Instead, we can only seek to achieve less partial knowledge, doing so on democratic grounds (those inclusive of many perspectives) which aim at justice, goodness and at as much truth as we can fairly and honestly expect.

AJ: James Carter has recently argued that Coakley seems to confuse the aspiration towards universalism with an idea of uniformity that still fails to take into account her own epistemic privilege as western Christian theologian and senior Cambridge academic. In defending your per-

spective, Carter reads your view of strong objectivity as the struggle itself continually to represent subjects of knowledge that are unavoidably multiple, heterogeneous and complex (Carter 17).

PSA: Thanks for the second half of your point (above) about Carter on Coakley. James Carter is very insightful—and he does understand the argument concerning "a feminist standpoint," in *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*. I also agree with what Carter says about Coakley, since it is based on the facts of the reality of our material and social perspectives. These are crucial.

Basically I continue to build on *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*—both clarifying what is there and developing what is now more than a prolegomena to feminist philosophy of religion—that is, my project claims to be a "gendering" (Lovibond 151–58) of philosophy of religion. This gendering gets away from some of the confusions of the label, "feminist," in order to tease out what actually is assumed as the gendered identity in philosophical conceptions of human being or humanity. Thus, I would hope more people would read or reread *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* before merely accepting the various kinds of theological criticisms of my position which we have discussed today. Moreover, I recommend my forthcoming replies in *Gendering Philosophy of Religion: Reason, Love and Our Epistemic Locatedness*.

AJ: In relation to feminist and women's scholarship apart from Harding, Le Doeuff's work has figured even more strongly in your recent projects than the early one, and you have in many ways tried to promote her work here in the UK. How would you characterize the particular appeal of this thinker for you?

PSA: As already suggested (above), Le Doeuff informs me as a brilliant reader of texts. Meticulous in her scholarship she has an extraordinary ability to uncover fascinating and significant asides that have been missed in conventional readings, and so, to see things in a different way. The breadth and intellectual grasp of her scholarship is also inspiring. In her three main books—*The Philosophical Imaginary*; *Hipparchia's Choice*; and *The Sex of Knowing*—she shows a profound understanding of topics from Gabrielle Suchon, Shakespeare, Bacon, Locke and the early Enlightenment, through the nineteenth century with Harriet Taylor and Kierkegaard's abandoned fiancée, and into the twentieth century with Beauvoir, Bergson and Deleuze to mention only a few of her favourite philosophers. In each period of philosophy, Le Doeuff goes to the heart of cultural myths about women that colour the most intellectual seeming of scholarly texts written by men.

Highly significant for my perspective (as indicated above) is that Le Doeuff demonstrates how women come to lack confidence in their ability to argue and debate alongside

men but rather than retreat to any sphere for women, bracketed off from the world of men, she leads the way forward, speaking out clearly and defending women's cases always to be included as equal partners in philosophical and political debates. I applaud her—and wish that each of us could be as subtle, witty and confident a woman in philosophy as Le Doeuff is. In addition, the distinctive virtues of ethical confidence, firm calmness and just the right amount of relational charm would be crucial features of an engaged vision for doing feminist philosophy today!

AJ: To conclude, would you like to say something about the work which you have done to carve out a new space in the field of philosophy of religion for feminist philosophers who are raising new and distinctive questions?

PSA: Yes. I am grateful for this opportunity to reflect on my own struggle to open new space for other women and men in philosophy. I have worked hard to generate space for conferences and ongoing research since I published *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*. This work began with a lively "Author Meets Critics" day conference at Sunderland University on 18 April 1998; that experience was formative not only for me but for other philosophers of religion who gave critical responses to what I had written. It was a sobering experience to have my book criticized, but also an energizing time. I went on to co-edit with one of my critics, Beverley Clack, *Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Critical Readings*. Later with the help of postgraduates, "Transcendence Incarnate," the first-ever Continental Philosophy of Religion conference at the University of Oxford took place on 10 September 2007 (Somerville College). Several of the papers delivered at that conference were revised and published, along with other commissioned essays, in *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Contestations and Transcendence Incarnate*. The feminist dimension in the field of philosophy of religion continues to be open to contestations—but this is not my only philosophical area of research and publication.

Overlapping with this feminist work are the research activities which I have developed and carried out in contemporary French philosophy with Le Doeuff, and before this, with Ricoeur whom I first met in Oxford in 1980 and whose legacy now results in invitations to a wide-range of international conferences. Last but not least, the moral and religious texts of Kant continue to challenge my conception of a feminist standpoint. In the end, the texts which matter most to me in philosophy have come together to create the person I am today. It is great to have been able to review my personal and philosophical formation with you, Alison, in this interview. Thank you!

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